

PEOPLE PERCEPTIONS AND PARANOIA IN CALYPSO

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Wayne Hayde, "The Watchman", said to me recently that perception is 100 per cent reality. As I accepted the opportunity to speak, I find this particular dictum to be a very useful theme around which to build my contribution at this symposium on Carnival, Calypso Chutney and Society in Contemporary Trinidad and Tobago. My presentation under the heading Chutney and Chutney-Soca; Indian and Creole Perspectives, is entitled "People, Perceptions and Paranoia: A Personal Perspective".

As someone who not only has a beautiful East Indian wife, but a slew of Indian and *dougl*a blood relations; and someone who has penned several songs on National Unity, from Drupatee's "This Land is Mine" to Colleen Ella's "Declaration", Dennyse Plummer's "One Love" and Anne Marie Inniss' "Lifeline", I often fluctuated between nausea and amusement at the reactions that have come from the Indo-Trinidadian community to Mystic Prowler's "Vision of T&T in 2010", which I composed. I find it very significant that several Afro-Trinidadian persons and organisations which were lampooned in the calypso have all taken the humour in stride, and have not found it necessary to protest in any form whatsoever. These include Abu Bakr, Jones P. Madeira, Morgan Job, the National Joint Action

Committee (NJAC), Pam and Brother Marvin. What is even more painful is that the calypso is now being accused of perpetrating the same creeping dilemma which the calypso attempts to highlight, using exaggeration as a literary technique.

Also of interest is the fact that my calypso "Jahagi Blues", which won me the Young King title 1997, and propelled me into the Dimanche Gras, was seen by one Indo-Trinidadian journalist as the only blot on my otherwise brilliant calypso-composing career. The fact that at least fifteen (15) other calypsonians, without any collaboration whatsoever, instinctively responded in the same way to some careless sentiments in Brother Marvin's third verse, of Jahagi Bhai seemed totally irrelevant. What did "Jahagi Blues" and "2010" have in common? They both dealt with issues that were "Indian", and for some people, this is taboo. It was the same kind of hyper-sensitivity, akin to paranoia, which made an innocuous newspaper headline, "Chutney Rising", generate the furor that it did. As the composer who also gave the world "Pan Rising" and "Calypso Rising" and from which "Chutney Rising" must have been a natural linguistic follow-up, I am left to wonder how the two preceding titles were accepted by everyone without objection.

Reverend Daniel Teelucksingh's statement in the Upper House recently to the effect that it was not enough to say that one group of people were too sensitive, is indeed very curious, to say the least. My favourite pastor on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, Pastor Rod Parsley, recently explained that the four letters of the word "fear" mean "false evidence appearing real". In the Trinidad and Tobago context, this phenomenon of "unreal perceptions" may easily explain the unfortunate lobby for refugee status in Canada [in 1987 - 1988] under the pseudo reasoning of Afro-Trinidadian persecution, [it might] likewise explain the ridiculous "Indesh" suggestion, or even the senseless protest over Ras Shorty's calypso "Om Shanti", which simply attempted to give praise. Twenty years later, David Rudder has succeeded in achieving the identical purpose. Fortunately for him, however, he leaned more towards Catholic and Christian idioms in his "High Mas."

In the area of radio, there is a creeping, crippling dilemma which disturbs me personally, especially as a student of Mass Communication who understands the power of this particular medium to shape public opinion. I have had the pleasure of penning songs for Sundar Popo, Drupatee Ramgoonai and Ricki Jai, among my many other clients. In so doing, not only was I able to quote singers like Lata Mangeshkar, Mukesh, Mohammed Raffee and Suman Kalia pour; I was also able to sing several lines in Hindi from their hits, as well as those of Kanchan, Babla and Atiya who came afterwards. This wider knowledge and appreciation of Indian music came naturally to me as a result of listening to the mixed programming which was available on one of our radio stations programmes like "Melodies of India",

"Geetanjali", and my personal favourite, "Sutno Kardesh".

Unfortunately, thanks to niche marketing and what appears to be an ethnic grab for cultural space, we now have Indian Radio Stations which play neither pan nor calypso, and which by extension are effectively eroding the chances for greater exposure to, and assimilation of the diverse cultural streams in our society - which is the key to understanding, tolerance and respectful co-existence. Perceptions of alienation during the 30-odd years of black PNM rule [People's National Movement] do little to stem the trend towards parallel lines. Interestingly, those who choose to focus on thirty (30) years of black rule somehow never mention the fact that Eric Williams had three Deputy Prime Ministers, two of whom were of East Indian descent and emerged as economic demi-gods under the very PNM.

A quick look back at our respective histories will help to underline at least one of the major issues which lies at the root of the present crisis bearing in mind the words of Marcus Garvey that those who do not heed the past are doomed to relive it. The African continent, from which most Afro-Trinidadians came, is one which has always been characterized by protest of the masses at all levels of the society. Entrenched in the Trinidadian psyche is a natural and spontaneous penchant for confronting oppression, especially in song from which the calypso was born. The very names chosen by the early calypsonians - "Spit Fire", "Viking", "Terror", "Tiger" and "Roaring Lion" are a clear testimony that calypso is in essence a protest artform.

The East Indian historical experience is distinctly different, having emerged out of a caste system which was itself to become an oppressive and emasculating tool. Swami Narendranath Vivekananda, whose statue stands on the Divali Nagar site, is a modern-day Indian reformer who campaigned against the oppressive caste system in India which produced a kind of voiceless individual in many of its descendants. Indeed, many of the cries of alienation which have sounded from the corridors of power are more prescriptive than they are descriptive, and in my view psychologically address an ancestral cry for redress more than they reflect today's reality. Swami Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission, which taught, in a Vedanta framework, the message of a "Brotherhood of all men and the equality and validity of all roads to salvation". This message holds tremendous value for us in Trinidad and Tobago today, as we attempt to hurdle the quirks of our respective histories and forge a collective identity.

We likewise need to remember the works of Kwame Ture who, on his historic return to his homeland, reminded us that unity will not come by accident; we have to work for it. As a people, we must understand, accept and respect our differences, taking the same pride in each others' achievements in the context of a shared national vision of a binding oneness. We so not have to propagate the myth of a careless clash of civilizations on a collision course. What needs to be displaced is not people, but the paranoia of racism and untouchability, so that everyone will maintain a respectful market share in the social and political milieu that is Trinidad and Tobago.

We must all be very cognizant of the

fact that this passing wind of racism and ethnicity may be imaginary, but that the waves that it create are real, and these can lash the shores of our reality and reduce the mountains of our progress down to wasted sand. It is the responsibility of our leaders to steer the ship of state away from the shallow reef of racial hypersensitivity into the deeper waters of understanding and mutual respect.

Let me close by quoting from my calypso "2010" which has been heavily and conveniently quoted from at several levels, and by many people since it has been sung. Let me quote you the entire fourth verse, which represents the *raison d'être* of the work.

A VISION OF T n T IN 2010

4th Verse

*The Year is 1998 and ah just wake up
Mih body still trembling; thank God
the vision stop*

*Ah fell asleep after hearing some
racist talk on T.V.*

*And mih mind multiply de nonsense
for me to see*

*That racism is an empty chasm
To be avoided at all costs cause it is
poison*

I rest my case. God Bless Trinidad and Tobago.