I cannot ever forget the exhilaration I felt and how captive I was, in witnessing, during the 1950-1953 period, the emotions, energy and power of working people emerging from the dark and Indians and Africans of British Guiana, raising their level of neighbourliness to a dynamic political coalition for a new vision of an independent Guyana.

Some passages of that great historical moment came to life again in the civilian rebellion of the 1970s and 1980's although in dissimilar political circumstances.

The dream of national reconciliation did not fade because Walter Rodney was assassinated or for the reason that his party, the Working People's Alliance, failed to carry on his work, but simply because in 1992 Indians and Africans, under the guidance of their respective ethnic leadership, became united once again in their opposition to each other in one momentous act of self betrayal.

Indians may be excused for returning to communalism in mass in those elections bearing in mind the pain and suffering inflicted by the Burnham and PNC regimes.

Perhaps the political directorate of the Indian masses was taken by surprise, for in the euphoria of that election victory, they failed to take note of the fact that the PNC had successfully regrouped and reestablished-if there was any doubt- its electoral foothold in the African community.

The consequences of the signal failure of Dr. Jagan's and the PPP's leadership in meeting the new challenges of the nineties are a matter of history and not a subject of this article.

Exactly what national reconciliation has to aim at may be a matter of great uncertainty. It involves, among other things, I believe, a challenge to the colonial hierarchical status assigned to us during the colonial period, research into fact and fiction about race and ethnicity in the history of Guyana, reducing disparities, expanding opportunities and setting up a political system that allows stable and peaceful relations among contending groups in the society.

In whatever way Indians of Guyana are to be defined in ethnic or racial terms may also be a matter of some controversy, since there are so many cultural and racial differences within the group labelled Indian. We do know however for practical purposes they are identifiable as a group that has been involved in and subject to conflict in social relations with other groups in Guyanese society.

I do not have to be Indian to be in sympathy with Indians in the deprivation, insecurity, agony and frustration they have experienced over the period of the 50 year war between the two main ethnic groups. Nor do I have to be African to be equally distressed by the turbulence within and the withering away of African communities and Africans' sense of despair and marginalisation.
Nor do I have to be Amerindian to be aware of the historical injustices to these sturdy first owners of the land which we now collectively claim.

From 1963 I began to feel quite uncomfortable "being in office" and in a party objectively fighting to keep black people out and treating them as an enemy. By 1964 I had become settled in my view that nothing short of a new constitutional arrangement will be enough to make peace between the two major ethnic groups.

I was invited by the government of Mr. Forbes Burnham to attend the London independence conference in 1965 and there to present my rather radical views. I did not attend but proposed that the independence constitution should contain a provision that any Government sworn in should command at least 65% support in Parliament.

In 1965 I opted out of the Indian political collective and joined no other and have since been engaged in finding a solution rather than helping to prosecute the war.

Being in that position, I like many others, need to define myself in the face of the ethnic hostilities around us.

Being Indian, it becomes even more necessary to say something to Indians in answer to the question always there: On whose side are you? Or to explicit abuse: You are traitor to Indians (but since the civilan rebellion when we (WPA) did so much for Indian collective security I haven't heard much of this).

None of us is without race or ethnicity. It is inseparable from our being. Therefore an attack against a person’s race and ethnicity is really an attack on the essence of her/his being human.

Ethnicity is not an isolated factor of our social existence. The very term ethnicity speaks of its social nature, that is, the existence of groups that are in some ways different from each other.

We need to consider what race or ethnicity does to us, and to our capacity to deal with this principal challenge of inter group relations. I simply would say in its biological and cultural impact that it enhances or embellishes our distinctiveness in our being human. At least it ought to. When it does there is a condition for relating to other ethnic communities with supreme confidence and conviction and without loss of pride and dignity. And you are not fractured in personality in aiding any ethnic community, your own or another, that is discriminated against or deprived. And then you are not afraid of doing it.

Because, however profound the diversity in and impact of race and ethnicity, the essence of our being is human.

If you are Indian and know the feeling of the misery and shock of being victim of ethnic abuse, deprivation and discrimination, then you should be no stranger to the emotions of another ethnic group that is similarly a victim.

Two great Indians (of India) epitomise this kind of person: Rabindranauth Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. I am surprised how little of their political culture has been in evidence in the Indian collective and their leadership.
The moral argument is not telling in times of conflict, but the argument of necessity is. That necessity is common survival. It is something you cannot run from. Only exceptionally is partition a way out.

Indians will never prosper in Guyana if Africans become impoverished and they will never live securely unless Africans are secure.

The PPP Governments of 1957-1964 were educated to that fact at great cost. (Mr. Burnham discovered the truth in its corollary). The PPP Governments of 1992 to 2006 ignored that fact and the nightmare continues.

Indians are the majority ethnic group. I am of the view that it is a fundamental obligation of a majority ethnic group in a multi-ethnic society to relieve other ethnic groups in the society of the fear of ethnic oppression and insecurity.

Indians are not now culturally oppressed under a colonial power. They have become a power and are in a position now to reverse or reorder the ethnic hierarchical status in the spirit as a colonial power would. Or they could abolish ethnic hierarchies as a liberated revolutionary force would.

Indians, who have been magnificent in their historic contributions to the making of Guyana, should not occupy any inferior position in guarding the integrity of the state and acting patriotically to prevent the dismantling and diminishing of the nation.

Indians are unable to fulfill their role and destiny because they are disabled and paralysed by the dynamics and strictures of Indian communalism in its confrontation with African communalism.

The drive, industry and sense of fairplay of Indians have been neutralised by their overpowering fear of Africans.

Indians are in a pitiable state. They are attacked from within (internal decay and stagnation in population growth) and from without (revolt of the black population and terror of armed criminal gangs involved in ethnic oriented crimes). The rise of brutal, armed, mainly African gangs, is very unsettling to Indians in particular.

They have lost much of their dignity and self assurance and have placed themselves in great peril by remaining silent and tolerant in the face of rampant corruption in the ruling political directorate, the compromise with organised criminality and a resurgence of authoritarianism in governance( evidence of insecurity and moral and political crisis in the leadership).

As the political directorate has grown more powerful in the state, the Indian collective has lost the capacity and will to control the leadership.

This compromise in essence is of the same nature as that of the black population under the Burnham regime. The difference is only a matter of degree. But score one for the black people. Thousands stood up against the PNC regime and during the civil rebellion the three leaders assassinated were all Africans.

This paralysis, however rationalised (don't rock the boat), lowers the quality of the Indian and makes her/him an accomplice and reactionary.
Indians have been led to believe that as black people were "in power" for 28 years it is their turn. Quite an ugly turn in political morality. That's the political case. There is also a constitutional argument. That is that the PPP has won fair and free elections and should therefore not be destabilised in office.

This is a subject by itself. Here are a few positions I have. The stability and strength of a society depends on universal acceptance and support of the fundamental law and constitution. This position does not exist in Guyana. A constitution needs to realistically reflect the contending racial, ethnic interests and social forces in the way its orders the allocation of state power. Many nations went through great historical struggles until they arrived at a consensus on their constitutional framework.

Our independence constitution was imposed by the British; Burnham's constitution was imposed though a fraudulent referendum. The PPP has done a patchwork on Burnham's constitution (and only after intense pressure from critics). The exercise for fundamental reform stands in limbo.

We still are trying to work this out as a fledgling nation. And we should be careful about criminalising legitimate movement for ethnic security. That is what Burnham tried to do Indians during his tenure.

The other factor too as is very evident in Guyana is that political office does not equal political power. The PPP discovered this in 1960's and the PNC learnt their lesson in the late seventies and eighties. Multi ethnic societies present a real challenge and the conventional systems will not work if the races are equal in power even though unequal in numbers. This is not a moral argument, although there is one. This is an issue of making the system durable and stable.

A political system is democratic only to the extent that it allows change, mobility in public opinion and the real likelihood that people may feel free to turn to the opposition as an alternative government.

In democratic systems this is the critical fundamental feature that gives safeguard to the people against oppressive or poor government.

The political culture of fixed ethnic constituencies is the antithesis even to conventional democratic practice. Under the present system any majority ethnic group given entrenched communal solidarity will shut out minority ethnic groups from office. In the present system in Guyana, Africans are condemned permanently to the opposition benches unless they are included in a coalition government and/or there is a new kind of constitution.

Such a situation breeds conflict and revolt and also deformities within the ethnic collective and its leadership.

It is not that it is politically immoral for ethnic communities to unite and vote out of concern for the welfare of the ethnic group- if historically the bases for this exist. But the constitutional instruments need to be tailored to meet the concerns and to have built in a process of conflict resolution.
Or the society must brace itself for chronic disorder, damaging confrontations and possibility of conflagration on a very wide scale.

The space in the middle is far too narrow and elections so far have not yielded any parliamentary results that are significant enough to exert sufficient influence to promote ethnic reconciliation. (There is now a view that the mood has changed and that the mighty ethnic blocs will crack sufficiently to give third parties a "balance of power." )

Indians expect dividends from the guaranteed support they give to the PPP. This in our multi-ethnic society leads to discrimination and is a source of tension.

Indians expect that their party will hold a restive African community in place.

How can they?

The Africans are not persuaded that Messrs Sam Hinds, Lumumba and Jeffrey represent power to black people. At the same time to strengthen their position in Government and to change the political equations in their favour they need to capture control in places within the State structure, government media, heads of departments, committees, security forces, the legal system, etc where Africans have occupied important positions. Another source of conflict.

If Africans protest, demonstrate, revolt, then Indians expect their leadership to suppress them. Another area of conflict. And in the case of the inability of the security forces to control crime and violence, the political directorate makes pacts with criminals and armed criminal gangs of drug barons to carry out vendettas and selective killings. A highly dangerous development threatening the safety and integrity of the state.

So if the Africans want in and the Indians want them out, it is hell for all of us.

The fact is that given such a long conflict both Indians and Africans can make out quite a case in their own self-defence.

However we need to bring a closure to the 50 year old ethnic war and to give birth to a Government that can take hold of things, clean up the mess, protect the citizens, their homes, their business, destroy the armed criminal gangs and organised criminal network of the drug barons, guarantee the fundamental freedoms, unite the people and be fair to all, strengthen our river and sea defences, safeguard our territorial integrity, arrest the rapid depopulation of the country and the debilitating spread of HIV/AIDS, revitalise the communities and implement with urgency a programme of national reconstruction and development.

We cannot afford parliamentary games or business as usual after the elections. Guyana is in a condition of emergency. It needs a government that can act democratically and decisively. If the PPP and PNC continue to establish their hegemony in the two main ethnic communities, then such a Government will need to include them both as a starting point, although ideally a new government will do better if it is more inclusive than that.

I see the immediate political approach as fivefold:
a) Encourage progressive tendencies, reform and reorganisation within the political collective and its leadership

b) Help to lift the ethnic collectives from their isolation and encourage communication between the forces of the contending parties

c) Engage the PPP - being virtually the sole defender of the political and constitutional status quo- in proposals for national reconciliation.

d) Give recognition of the worth of and work for the expansion of space and freedom for people and organisations who stand outside and independent of the ethnic collectives.

e) Make these elections a forum for national reconciliation/constitutional reform, for the emergence of a united decisive Government and a new starting point for reversing the backwardness swallowing up the entire society.

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