

CONTACT

FEBRUARY 1956

INDIAN SOUTH AFRICANS

BEFORE the Coloured voters stole the limelight the people to receive most publicity in South Africa this year had been its Indian citizens. Suddenly they had found themselves involved in one of those periodic anti-Indian outbursts which seem to satisfy some deep-seated psychological deficiency in many white South Africans. The SABRA conference in Port Elizabeth, having apparently noted a debate, calm, reasonable, informed and constructive, which took place in Durban under the aegis of the Institute of Race Relations, found a ball of contention to set in motion. From SABRA the ball was kicked into and about the Senate: the game was on.

It would in future be foolish to hope for either dignified discussion or responsible action from the Government's racks of rubber stamps in the Senate, but one is entitled to expect something of value to come from SABRA. It is now some weeks since its meetings were held and the initial fire and fury which greeted some of the statements made at its conference have died down. How do these statements look, when examined in the calm induced by a month's consideration?

Some of the more important, and more highly-publicised, points made at Port Elizabeth were these. It was contended that India had imperialist ambitions in Africa and that the Indian population of Africa was the "wooden horse" which would help to see these ambitions realised. It was contended that a disproportionate number of Indians were engaged in commerce and that Indians constituted a "parasitic" element in the population. It was contended that Indians were unassimilable, a branch of a foreign nation, and therefore not entitled to political rights in South Africa. It was finally contended that "repatriation" remained a possible solution to the "Indian question" and it was suggested that Britain, as one of the parties responsible for the original immigration of Indians to South Africa, should be asked to help in providing for them elsewhere.

These were important points made by prominent speakers at the SABRA conference. How do they square up to the facts? What evidence, for instance, supports the view that India has imperialist aims in Africa?

A study of India's professed foreign policy and her statements concerning Africa could hardly be used as a basis for such a conclusion. India's foreign policy is expressly anti-colonial and anti-imperialist. Mr. Nehru himself has told Indians in Africa categorically that they need expect no support from him if they hope to maintain a privileged position in the continent at the expense of Africans. Could this all just be a colossal bluff behind which the wily Indian government subtly plans the slow infiltration and eventual conquest of Africa? To say the least, it seems unlikely. Not only has no real evidence been produced to support such a contention but, if it were true, it would involve complete reversal of India's repeatedly expressed aims in the international field and would amount to an abdication from that position of prestige which her policies of neutrality and non-aggression have slowly won her.

Is it true that an abnormally large percentage of Indians is engaged in commerce? Of course it is, and the reasons are not far to seek. The most important is the great difficulty Indians have experienced in gaining entry to other avenues of employment. In all directions they meet legal and conventional bars. And so they stick to commerce. But even if *all* Indians were in commerce, would there be any justification in labelling them parasitic? An economist would not think so. He would regard them as providing an essential service, demanded by the public. And we would do well to remember that in many remote areas of

the Transvaal and Natal it was only the Indian businessman who was willing to run the risks involved in providing his scattered clientele with this service. It is also interesting to note that, while an Indian in commerce may be regarded as a parasite, an African or an Afrikaner or anyone else who follows the same line of business is almost invariably regarded as a fine, respectable fellow, an asset to the community. What logic is there here?

An extension of this idea of Indian "parasitism" is the commonly-heard remark that Indians only came to South Africa to make what they could out of it and that they only stay here because they know they are much better off than they would be in India. We quite concede that most Indians came to South Africa because they hoped to be better off here. Who didn't? Did the advancing Bantu tribes, or the Free-burghers, or the Huguenots, or the 1820 Settlers, or the Trekkers not consider that the risks they expected to face would be amply rewarded? Of course they did, and they looked for a better future ahead. So did the Indians. Why should what is regarded as adventurous virtue in others be treated as avaricious vice in them? And the main reason why Indian South Africans would not, under any circumstances, consider returning to India is not because they would be worse off there but simply because they are part of South Africa, it is there home, and they have come to love it.

Are Indians unassimilable? Can it seriously be claimed that they are still "temporary guests" in this country, when they have already been here for nearly a hundred years? Would it not be truer to say that, over the years, Indian South Africans have become more and more attuned to a Western way of life? Why, while one SABRA speaker was emphasising the "unassimilable" nature of Indians, another was admitting that many Indians were "European in all but colour".

Finally, we come to the suggestion that "repatriation" is the only acceptable solution to this ticklish problem and that the British Government should be asked to help in carrying it out. The truth is, of course, that the British Government bears no responsibility for the presence of Indians in South Africa. They were brought here because of the insistent demand of the Natal settlers and despite considerable opposition from the British and Indian Governments. So to try to blame the British Government for the present position is nonsense. Even if Britain had encouraged the demands of the Natal settlers it is idle to suppose that she would now assist in removing over 300,000 people from their long-established homes. Nor has a South African government the faintest hope of getting co-operation from either India or Pakistan for this sort of plan. Repatriation is not only an idle dream, it is an evil one. It cannot be emphasised too strongly or too often that the Indian people of South Africa have every right to be here. This is their home and they have contributed in no small way towards its prosperity. No amount of specious argument can alter these facts. Talk of "repatriation" is simply a device to justify the denial to Indians of their rights in this country.

SABRA occupies a position of considerable prestige. Its personnel and its claim to be an impartial and scientific body, pledged to the study of South Africa's racial problems, entitled it to that position at its foundation. It is, therefore, disheartening and disturbing to find it dealing in the sort of catch-phrases, half-truths and wishful-thinking, which were so evident at Port Elizabeth. One gains the impression that SABRA decides first on its solution to a problem and then devotes itself to producing a rationalised argument which will justify its conclusions. In the process it provides nourishment for those whose prejudices threaten to bring the whole structure of our society crashing down. It is to be hoped that the Port Elizabeth meeting will not set the standard for its future discussions.

PARTY NEWS

NATIONAL AND CAPE

As from Monday, February 13th the National Office of the Party started to operate from its new headquarters at 240 Church Street, Pietermaritzburg. Some branches of the Party's activities will continue to be run temporarily from Cape Town, so members and friends are asked to put up with any slight delays they may meet with in having their letters answered, until the change-over is complete. The financial side will continue in Cape Town until the books have been audited.