

Racism.

The song of discord

In South Africa, a song by a local artiste, Mbongeni Ngema, is threatening to whip up strong anti-Indian sentiments afresh. EDWIN NAIDU on how the Indian community's sense of belonging has thus come under scrutiny once again.

JUST over 140 years after arriving in South Africa as indentured labourers, Indians appear no more secure about their future in the country than when they first arrived.

Chatsworth ... the largest Indian suburb outside Durban

That sense of belonging has come under intense scrutiny in recent weeks following the release of a song that criticises Indians and their treatment of Africans in the country, particularly Durban in the KwaZulu Natal province.

The man at the centre of the row is a controversial musician Mbongeni Ngema, whose song "Amandlya" (which means "Indians") has sown the seeds of discord rather than promote reconciliation, which the songwriter claims, was his initial intention.

In fact, the tune has polarised the Indian and African communities, sparking fears of a repeat of the most severe racial clash — dubbed the 1949 riots — more than 50 years ago when Indians were attacked in large numbers by Africans in a bloody weekend in January.

Law and order stood still as Africans swept through with their attack on the persons and properties of Indian people. Whites and their businesses and houses were not attacked. Although the official death toll was 142 (87 Africans, 50 Indians, one White and four whose identity could not be established), it is believed many more were killed, raped and Indian women abducted.

South African born Indians have enjoyed and maintained links with India despite the distance between the two countries. Bollywood movies are blockbusters in South Africa. This year, when Amitabh Bachchan visited in April, thousands turned up to welcome him. Annually, religious tours are undertaken to India. During the liberation struggle, India was the first to express support for the African National Congress (ANC), an act reciprocated when Nelson Mandela chose to visit India as his first overseas destination following his

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release from prison in 1990.

In the wake of the song, Indian community leaders have expressed fears of a repeat of racial clashes, although not on the same scale as the 1949 riots. The song says that while Black people are living in shacks, Indians own lots of businesses and oppress Black people. They also "keep coming from India" to South Africa.

In the past few weeks reports in the Indian mass media have shown a distinct racial edge, one story last weekend about an Indian preacher allegedly raping an African girl, and another about Black youths going on the rampage at a shopping mall in Chatsworth, the largest Indian suburb outside Durban.

Attempts by former President Nelson Mandela to intervene and secure an apology from the artist have so far been futile. Unveiling a monument to honour participants in the 1946 passive resistance campaign, Mandela praised the contribution of Indians in the struggle for a democratic South Africa. The sculptures unveiled during the ceremony depicted events such as the 1913 resistance march led by Mahatma Gandhi, the Sharpeville massacre, the Soweto June 16 uprising and Mandela's release from prison.

It is against this backdrop of bridge building; led by the former President that Ngema's song has been released. In the song Ngema criticises Indians and says, "Whites were better than Indians", and calls for "strong brave men to face/confront Indians", adding that "Indians have conquered Durban — we are poor because all things have been taken by Indians".

Amichand Rajbansi, leader of the Minority Front that has an alliance with the ANC, says Blacks who have not been troubled by Indians previously would now obtain a distorted and disturbing view of the community through the song. "Ngema is very popular among Black people in the province and it is dangerous to imagine where this could lead," he says.

Amichand Rajbansi

Rajbansi adds that one of the main reasons for the anti-Indian sentiments could stem from the fact that in the two general elections since democracy, Indians have twice voted overwhelmingly for White parties. "I've heard it on many occasions that Indians should get a thrashing like in 1949 because they're siding with Whites during elections," he says.

"That's why I formed an alliance with the ANC, to get rid of the anti-Indian sentiment," reveals Rajbansl.

The Chatsworth politician admits recent events, such as the attack by Africans at a shopping mall, and the wave of anti-Indian sentiments is cause for gloom. However, he insists he's involved in projects, in partnership with the ANC, to forge better relations.

"Decades ago during a visit to Africa, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru sent a message to Indians that they should work with Africans. The Minority Front and the ANC are attempting to improve relations through joint rallies and public meetings," he says.

Tholslah "T.P." Naidoo, community leader and director of the Indian Academy of South Africa, says Indians were just as disenfranchised as Africans, and worked hard for all they had achieved in South Africa. "Our forefathers built schools on meagre labourers' salaries and put a premium on education. The likes of Ngema should not grudge us for this but learn from us and accept that we too suffered under apartheid," he says.

Still, Naidoo labels Ngema as a "misdirected individual" and says "we give too much credence to idiots", and urges Indians to keep a level head and register with local police stations should there be any hint of trouble. "Some of our African leaders have been guilty of throwing the 1949 riots in our faces. This can only affect South Africa adversely in the future as nobody wants this country to look like Zimbabwe in 10 years," he says.

"Indians," Naidoo urges, "must show maturity and communicate or make friends with Africans. We are guilty of befriending only White people and must learn to stop living in isolation and extend the hand of friendship to Africans as well."

Despite agreeing to withdraw the song, a defiant Ngema says South Africans should accept that there were problems between Africans and Indians. "I believe that it is my role as an artist to mirror society and highlight the plight and tribulations of people on the ground. It is a fact that all the shops in the major towns and cities of KwaZulu-Natal are owned by Indians. It is a fact that Chatsworth and Phoenix get better services than Umlazi and KwaMashu," he claims.

Ashwin Desai, former academic and political commentator, dismisses Ngema's claims that Indians owned a majority of business in the province. "Last year 46,444 Asians (including Chinese and Japanese) applied for visas to come to our country compared to over 3,00,000 from the African continent. The notion that Indians are swamping the country is questionable.

"According to the song, Indians dominate the economy, but a report shows that 40 per cent of business on the Johannesburg Securities Exchange is foreign owned. Around the issue of facts, clearly he is found wanting," Desai says.

He adds: "I agree with Ngema, the situation needs attention, but he is far from being the right person to carry the majority of the Africans' aspirations. We need to honestly acknowledge our prejudices."

Mbongeni Ngema

Earlier this week when Ngema failed to turn up for a radio debate with Desai after initially agreeing to do so, Desai was incensed. "He's a coward because he's not being honest about his intentions. He's a coward because he's not prepared to say there's a problem with unemployment, the government and the economy, and the reasons for this are because he's eating from the hands of government," Desai rages.

Ngema has had a colourful and controversial career. Recently, he received an award in the U.S. for his contribution to music. But it was his role in what became known as the *Sarafina* scandal that threatened to adversely affect his career when there were irregularities found in an R14-million contract he had with the National Department of Health in 1996.

Letters in newspapers and callers to radio station talk shows were divided, and while the song has South Africa talking, it has done little positive for race relations. One Indian, Ms. Sebastian, believes: "More racial crimes will occur because of the song; it fuels hatred."

And Desai concludes: "If the intent was dialogue and if it can be helped by an apology then he (Ngema) should do it."

Yogin Devan, a former journalist, says whatever were the real causes of the attack on the Indian people, the African blamed the Indian because of his life and activities as an Indian. "During the time when the African came into the city of Durban, he saw Indians travelling in limousines and owning large and impressive businesses in Grey Street. When the African wanted to see a movie, he had to patronise an Indian owned cinema. When he wanted to drink and dine in the city, he had to go to Indian owned hotels. He had to buy his food from Indian outlets."

Devan says while the new South Africa affords every citizen equal opportunities in terms of law, however, it would take a long time before the abyss is bridged, or at least narrowed, between the haves and the have-nots, the advantaged and the disadvantaged, the educated and the illiterate. "Already, the present day peaceful co-existence of Indians and Africans in the newly developed parts of Cato Manor is reminiscent of the inter-racial respect and harmony that permeated the area before 1949. This is great," he says.

Unfortunately, Ngema's song threatens to again make bad neighbours out of people who

have been living in harmony.

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(from NRI)

'SA could learn a lot from India'

Source : IANS

Johannesburg, Jan 14: Veteran South African Indian politician Amichand Rajbansi believes that South Africa could learn a lot from India in making education more accessible through partnerships with private schools.

"I think one of the things that are remarkable about India is that it is becoming a powerhouse of IT," Rajbansi said.

"It is among the best in the world and has tremendous potential. What is also amazing is the turnaround on literacy - from 8 percent (sic) around 30 or 40 years ago they have now got about 80 percent literacy.

"In some of the states that goes even higher than 95 percent.

"Their education system and the devolution of power from the national to regional and local government and the partnership between the community and government is fantastic.

"In every part of India where there are 15 children, a well-run school is established by the community.

"Education for street children, adults and rural communities is something that is so remarkable.

"(During a visit to India as part of a delegation last year) I saw three-and-a-half-year-old children sitting on the floor reciting the entire Bhagvad Gita by heart."

Rajbansi said the encouragement of private schools to partner with the Indian government was what led to successes like these.

He said semi-private schools in South Africa, called Model C schools here, were viewed negatively because they often restricted their intake to particular