

THE NATAL INDIAN CONGRESS, 1972

by F.M. Meer

The opposition to the Government on the part of Indian South Africans since 1894 was spearheaded by the Natal Indian Congress (N.I.C.) and later by the South African Indian Congress. However this rich heritage of opposition was silenced in the last decade leaving Indians very much a voiceless people. In its place was created the South African Indian Council with nominated members to speak for the Indian people. In this way the Government has attempted to make Indians accept its policies through persuasion, compulsion and intimidation. In spite of these attempts the spirit of the Indian was not completely vanquished and in October 1971 the N.I.C. was formally revived at a convention held appropriately at Phoenix, Natal. The tremendous significance of this revival is the fact that the N.I.C. has become the only surviving wing of a once powerful alliance dedicated to the creation of a United Democratic South Africa. All the activities of the N.I.C. flow from its deep-rooted belief that humanity is one man and each man is mankind; what is valid for one is valid for all.

The belief held by the Ad Hoc Committee that the time was ripe for the revival of the N.I.C. was borne out by the tremendous political awareness and identification shown by the people at the October Convention, at subsequent mass meetings and by the controversy in the Press.

In the 10 years preceding the N.I.C. revival, South Africa passed through an extremely repressive phase largely as a result of apartheid legislations and a systematic dislocation of long established bonds among the Black peoples. For this reason the new Congress cannot depend wholly on previously formulated policies, methodology and organisational machinery. It was the need to adapt to this changed set of circumstances that has led to much of the seemingly irreconcilable conflict within the "new" Congress.

CONFERENCE

The first conference of the revived Congress was held at the end of April 1972. Congress once again proved that it is the only Black political organisation in existence with an open and fearless voice, quite unlike the Government sponsored bodies such as The South African Indian Council and the Local Affairs Committees which prefer to hold their deliberations in camera. Reports on Economics, Education, Trade Unions, sport and culture, housing and health were tabled. These reports do not constitute Congress policy as such but are working documents from which Congress policy will emanate. Apart from this, three important policy matters were debated:-

- 1) The Congress attitude to Black consciousness.
- 2) Congress opening its membership to all Racial groups.
- 3) Congress participation in the South African Indian Council.

1.) BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS:

The recurring theme of Black Consciousness has involved the members of the Natal Indian Congress in a great deal of discussion and argument. We can now discern a consistent pattern emerging from the various viewpoints and this may well determine our policy towards this concept.

We believe that in the course of the long, sad history of colonialism the White man developed a sense of White superiority. The rejected, alienated and frustrated Black was consigned to a nothingness and a negation of human values. The rise of the Black man from this limbo of non-being, his assertion of his true worth, and his freedom from

years of painful bondage, are essentials in the make-up of Black consciousness. It is in plain terms a reaction to White oppression.

RE-DEFINE

Black consciousness seeks to re-define the Black man in fresh terms. It explores new avenues in relating all aspects of life to the Black man. It rejects all established White values. Our ideas in the N.I.C. differ. We cannot agree that education can be re-orientated to Black values. Education needs to train young minds to think clearly and analytically. If education in South Africa fails to do this for the Blacks it is a subtle strategy of the Nationalists. All that needs to be done is to make our education as enlightened and objective as possible – geared to the needs of a Non-racial South Africa. It is not "Black Education" we want but true education.

Similarly we can see no reason for the creation of "Black Theology". If Christianity as practised in South Africa has racist overtones it is not the fault of the religion but of the "White Christians". The object therefore is the spread of Christianity as taught by Christ and not "Black" Christianity.

Our fundamental difference with the proponents of Black consciousness is our view of the relation of culture and consciousness to freedom. We believe that these two determinants of life reflect the socio-economic circumstances of a people. We believe you cannot talk to the discredited and deprived of culture and consciousness when socio-economic circumstances remain unchanged. These facets of life will reach their rightful position in society after and during the struggle for liberation. True culture is related both to the socio-economic circumstances of a people and its search for freedom. We believe it is less related to peripheral issues like racial affinity and a common religion. We have pointed out time and again that the history of groups fired with a narrow and parochial ideal is the history of political opportunism. There is a genuine danger of Black consciousness leading to Black racism. The safeguards against this eventuality seem to us to be very tenuous.

Black consciousness has failed in Africa. Leopold Sedhar Senghor – The father of Negritude – illustrates our viewpoint that this concept serves a limited purpose in trying to realise a national awakening. It fails once independence is achieved. Black consciousness is not sufficient as a political programme.

2) CONGRESS OPENING ITS MEMBERSHIP TO ALL RACIAL GROUPS.

There was a strong feeling amongst delegates that Congress should have an open non-racial membership. In their view if Gandhi was alive to-day he would have definitely identified the Indian people with all the oppressed groups in South Africa. It was felt that by going non-racial a new National conscience would be created to resist the evils of apartheid, and above all it would give verity to its underlying principle of non-racialism and its belief in a common society.

The majority view prevailed that it was not practical for Congress to open its membership to all races. The implementation of the Group Areas Act has resulted in residential separation and social contact between the various racial groups has been virtually non-existent. This could create practical obstacles in the creation of a non-racial body. It was felt that just as Mr. Knowledge Guzana in the Transkei was challenging apartheid and Mr. Sonny Lion and his Coloured Labour party were doing the same, the Natal Indian Congress could effectively mobilise the Indian people towards the goal of a common society. In the interim period Congress should forge an alliance with any body dedicated to the cause of a United democratic South Africa. The recent past reveals that non-racial organisations do not enjoy mass support. By far the most significant and most powerful of the liberatory movements in South Africa was the Congress Alliance. It was this alliance, consisting of organisations of the African, Coloured, European and Indian people that was able to move masses of people of all races into action.

LOSE FOLLOWING

There was also the fear that if Congress went non-racial not only would it fail to win a broad membership but that it would lose as well its Indian following. The Indian community would once again be without the type of leadership that Congress itself was trying to provide and instead would be represented by the un-representative South African Indian Council, an organisation whose hallmark thus far has been inept leadership, representative of the Government and certainly not the Indian viewpoint. The Natal Indian Congress therefore, though open only to Indian membership, remains wedded to the ideal of a non-racial united democratic South Africa, prepared to work in close alliance with all persons or organisations believing in this ideal. It views its present racial character as a temporary arrangement dictated by practical considerations.

3) PARTICIPATION IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN INDIAN COUNCIL:

Three viewpoints emerged

- (a) A wait-and-see attitude; the proponents of which felt that as all the facts surrounding the election of members were as yet unavailable and since in any case the South African Indian Council elections were not due till 1974 it would be wiser to take a decision at the appropriate time.
- (b) Those who felt that Congress ought to participate in the S.A.I.C. made it quite clear that association with an apartheid institution did not necessarily imply acceptance of apartheid. It was felt that by using an apartheid institution to attack apartheid itself a certain degree of immunity from intimidation might be gained and that rather than allow "stooges" to represent the community elected Congress officials could, within the Council, clearly expand its policies of Non-racialism. Mr. Sonny Leon's Labour Party had adopted such a stance; and even Buthelezi has not been afraid to state clearly that the Bantustan Policy is not one of his own choice.
- (c) The third viewpoint which was accepted by Conference, was that the Indian Council was a creature of apartheid and was intended to entrench the economic and political power of the ruling class. It was designed to maintain the status quo and was a mirage which would divert the energies and stultify the political aspirations of the people. In any event, the South African Indian Council was ineffective and had no powers of any kind. The main objection to the Indian Council was that it was a body established on a principle which was completely contrary to the basis on which Congress was established — a non-racial democracy. It was argued that immediately one compromised with one's principles, and if these principles were basic to one's existence, then the entire fabric would be destroyed. One would be submerged in the "baasskap" system, resulting in the Black people being forever subservient.

If Congress found the policy of separate Development abhorrent, how could it flirt with this policy?

This viewpoint prevailed and at the moment is the official Congress policy vis-a-vis the South African Indian Council. □