

# Black Brother and White Master

By : Juggernaut

If there is any country in the world with so many races living in harmony, it is Trinidad. And yet there are hidden tensions that come out particularly during elections and cricket matches when Indians (from India) come to play with West Indies.



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By

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Patricia or Patsy for short was a native of a small Caribbean Island known for volcanoes and is situated near to the island of Trinidad. She was of mixed race with white skin, curly hair and thick lips. While studying in England, she married Keith, a short, dark skinned native of Trinidad of African decent with a physique of a boxer. They both returned to Trinidad after receiving bachelors' degrees in England. Keith spoke with a typical Trinidad accent while Patsy spoke with an accent of Queen's English that baffled everyone including the British students at the campus. She continued using her acquired accent as a symbol of her overseas stint.

On the very first day at the university, she inspected the laboratory with authority and made comments about its untidiness. Then, she pasted little, neat notices everywhere in the lab that read "Keep the lab tidy," "Clean up the desk after you finish work," "Put all the pipettes on the rack," "This is an analytical laboratory not a pigsty," "The lab refrigerator is not for your personal use," and so forth. These notices gathered much attention, and became the object of fun, and ridicule. After few days, Patsy removed the notices when she noticed obscenities written on them. She suspected the two East Indian lab technicians for the nasty scribbles on her notices.

One day with no expression on her face, Patsy casually said to me "did you know, there are lots of Indians in England, mostly shop keepers?"

"No, I did not know that, I never visited England, I would like to visit one day," I said as if I was not paying too much attention to her comments.

"Indians are everywhere, they spread fast like fig trees popping up roots everywhere."

"There are lots of fig trees in India, but I didn't know they could spread all the way to England," I said, trying to be funny.

Patsy perhaps came across for the very first time a wide variety of immigrants in England, including scores of Indians from East Africa and India. These Indian immigrants in England were relatively self-reliant as traders, shopkeepers, professionals, and some even occupied affluent positions in the society. Back in Trinidad, the East Indians, native sons of the Island are self-reliant as small traders. Patsy came across as a person who never had the opportunity to observe this trend of self-reliance among the Indian diaspora, and perhaps this made her to remark about Indians spreading like fig trees.

Patsy couldn't put up with the two East Indian technicians in the laboratory as they mocked her phony British accent. She moved to an adjacent laboratory to continue her work. I saw her husband Keith several times on the campus, and he looked at me suspiciously as if I were responsible for his wife's move from the laboratory where I worked along with the East Indian technicians.

With her educational training in England, Patsy could have contributed more to the society in her small-impooverished Island nation. Instead, with her husband she chose to settle in prosperous Trinidad. On the

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Campus, she was more at ease with white students than native Trinidadians particularly of East Indian descent. Her remarks on Indian merchants in England and Trinidad, and her treatment of East Indian lab technicians showed that she considered her fellow blacks, and few whites - the former masters as true native inhabitants of Trinidad, and the others such as East Indians as transients interested in only making money.

Tommy Towamba and his wife were happy to be in Trinidad as graduate students from an East African Country. They both were from an East African country ravaged in internal turmoil.

Tommy behaved with utmost respect towards me, I was not sure whether it was because I was senior to him as a graduate student.

â You know, Indians work very hard,â Tommy started a friendly conversation with me one day.

â Not me,â I said.

â I see you in the lab from morning to evening.â

I thought Tommy was trying to butter me up.

â We had a few Indian traders in my village back home, you know,â said Tommy.

Tommyâ s conversation was following a familiar pattern now, I thought.

â An Indian family that opened a grocery store in my village several years ago brought their relatives to work in their store, and then their cousins joined the business,â Tommy continued his story.

I kept listening to his story-type conversation.

â You know, Indians follow each other like ants, family after family, they opened small stores through out our country,â Tommy said with a smile as he looked at me helplessly as if I were responsible for all those Indians owning the shops back in his country.

â Just like in my country, I also see plenty of Indian owned grocery stores here in Trinidad,â Tommy tried to equate the position of Indian traders in his native country to East Indians in Trinidad, the native sons of the Island.

I was dragged into a one sided conversation with Tommy whom I initially thought a friendly looking African. After several months on the campus, he quit attending the classes, and started selling encyclopedias. After some time, he changed his student visa to a work visa, and started working somewhere else. I never saw Tommy nor his wife, a slender, dark woman with a perpetual beautiful smile.

Unlike Tommy, John Roland was totally different, a West African came to Trinidad via the United States for a short stay on a research project. He was â Go lucky Harry typeâ , and laughed at his own jokes all the times. I liked his easy-going attitude towards everybody in the department. One day, during an informal chat, he expressed his views on Indian traders back in his native country and in Trinidad. Surprisingly, his comments were subtle and yet clear along the same lines as Patsy and Tommy. The message was an acceptance of black brotherhood, and tolerance towards the whites to a certain extent. These feelings were not universal or overt among all West Indian blacks but shared among some of them.

While I was vacationing in New York, the comments of people from the various islands in the Caribbean followed a similar pattern. A cab driver mentioned that he heard that the East Indian people in Trinidad were

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creating trouble for the President of the Country, a person of African descent. Another cab driver, a black person from Haiti suggested that it would be better for East Indians to leave Trinidad for India for good.

A black man from St. Lucia, a tiny Island nation in the Caribbean joked that he would vote (through an absentee over-seas balloting) for any black candidate in Guyana or Trinidad, countries with both black and east Indian population, though he was not a citizen of either of these countries in the Caribbean.

These men of African descent I met casually in New York had no experience of living with east Indians in Trinidad, and yet their perception about east Indians as foreigners in their own native island nation was hard to understand. Surprisingly, none of these men made any mention of whites living luxuriously on these Islands.

The majority of West Indian Blacks in the United States live in segregated West Indian black neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Bronx in New York, and unlikely to integrate ethnically with white Americans or even African Americans. Chinese Americans for decades were living in China Towns across the United States. In Trinidad, both blacks and East Indians live in areas that are of their own race predominantly. The complaint over lack of willingness on the part of east Indians to integrate with blacks in Trinidad was hard to rationalize.

The two African students studying in Trinidad, and Patsy the West Indian of African descent who acquired Trinidad nationality by virtue of marrying a Trinidadian black have all perceived the east Indians as minorities in their own native country of Trinidad. The perceived minority status was not based on numerical or economic terms since, numerically the Indian population is equal to that of the black, and economically, the Indians were perhaps in better position than blacks. The perception of minority status of East Indians in Trinidad was largely due to the domination of black culture; the colorful carnival, the steel band, and calypso music that eclipsed anything Indian except curry goat and roti. Even curry goat and roti, the original Indian culinary dishes have lost their ancestral roots in recent times. In the Unites States, these dishes were served in the West Indian black restaurants as Trinidad dishes with no mention of East Indian origin.

The blacks consider the east Indians as unwilling partners in ethnic integration. But the integration at ethnic level should be voluntary. The unwillingness of Indians to openly embrace the blacks culturally could have contributed to their own isolation to some extent. Though culturally East Indians sit on sidelines, they sustained and prospered economically because of their frugal life style. East Indians would thrive on simple, and less expensive diet consists of roti, tomato chokka, bigan bajji (eggplant curry) etc. Their inherent saving habits even performing meager jobs such as driving cabs, collecting crabs or selling vegetables at roadside kiosks made them economically self reliant. While some people might consider east Indians as miserly or cheapskates, precisely these habits made them a force to reckon with when it comes to survival.

The blacks in Trinidad address each other âhello brotherâ or âcool brother.â These expressions were considered as solidarity of friendship and kinship. Very few blacks would address Indians as âbrother.â For some reason, they have deep down suspicion about East Indians, and this feeling was mutual. Trinidad blacks treated me with respect and trust perhaps because I was a foreigner. I wish they addressed me as âbrother.â

In East Indian vocabulary in Trinidad, it seems the word âbrotherâ did not exist. I hardly noticed Indians address anybody whether black or fellow Indian as âbrother.â It always puzzled me. The only East Indian who called me âbrothersâ not âbrotherâ was Mahabir, an East Indian lab technician.

For few months, in Trinidad, I shared a concrete house with a local East Indian couple in a shanty town area near the University campus. To enter the premises, I had to cross an open drain on a shaky 4-foot wide wooden plank. The young Indian couple, sub-rented one bed room to me, and kept two rooms to themselves. Just outside the concrete house were few wooden shacks that housed few black families. A black couple with

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two or three young children lived a few yards on the other side of the drain. The man was a truck driver, I saw him once in a while since he came home late in the night. His wife, a rotund woman with large arms was always washing clothes or dishes outdoors.

One night, somebody knocked on our door. I opened to find a black girl in her 20s. She introduced herself as sister of Jensen, the truck driver living next door, and asked if I could help open her brother's front door, since it was locked and nobody at home. I did not know the woman, so I woke up Narad and his wife Premathi, the East Indian couple to see whether we could help the young woman. With all the effort, we couldn't open the door to let her into her brother's wooden shack. I looked at Narad and his wife hoping they would let her sleep in one of the empty bedrooms in our house. Instead, Narad and Premati went back to sleep. I couldn't leave the young woman alone throughout the night outside her brother's wooden shack, I offered the young woman to sleep in my room, and I slept on a couch in the family room that night. Sometime during the early hours of next day morning she went back to her brother's shack since they were at home by that time.

The girl's brother expressed his gratitude for my help particularly for allowing his sister to sleep in my bedroom. From that time onwards, whenever he saw me, he addressed me as "brother." I was disappointed with the East Indian couple who was reluctant to shelter the woman just for one night. The families of Narad and Jensen were neighbors for some time, and knew each other, I had moved there just a only few weeks before this incidence took place. In that neighborhood, there were other shanty homes where blacks lived, most of them started addressing me as "brother," I was sure they might have heard about my gesture towards the black woman. I really felt proud and admired whenever somebody addressed me "hi brother" or "cool brother."

In Trinidad, with few exceptions, the majority of East Indians hardly participate in carnival events. Very few could play steel pan, or aspire to be calypsonians. It is a cultural thing. This would not make them less of Trinidadian or less of any thing. Irrespective of numerical status, either majority or minority, the cultural differences should not be a determining factor for dominance as seen in Trinidad. Bob Marley, a philosopher, songwriter, and singer from Jamaica once said, people could pretend to be somebody else but eventually they would filter it out. I was not sure in what context he said that, but I believe what he meant was that to be equally treated, one does not have to either dominate others, or pretend to be others.

In the United States, people of African descent (from Africa, South America, Caribbean), South Asian descent (India, Pakistan, Bangla Desh, Sri Lanka) or East Indians from Caribbean and Fiji; were all considered as minority groups, and do not culturally dominate each other, but demand equal recognition and justice as immigrants or naturalized citizens.

The philosophy of black brother or white master in the Caribbean and particularly in Trinidad originated from black cultural domination. Without steel band, calypso or spectacular carnival events, which are largely Black cultural events, there wouldn't be black domination of the society. Perhaps, more cultural integration or fusion of Blacks and Indians to produce something unique which is neither black nor Indian may reduce the tensions. During national elections, the voting pattern along purely racial line shows lack of integration between East Indians and Blacks even after co-inhabitation over one hundred and fifty years.

The attitude of East Indians towards blacks as perpetual fun seekers; the blacks perception of East Indians as profiteers, and their subtle demands on Indians to integrate willingly or unwillingly would only lead to more separation, and facilitates the black brother and white master mentality to continue.

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