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U N I V E R S I T Y

WHAT'S IN A NAME?:
SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE NATAL INDIAN CONGRESS

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper we examine recent instances of Natal Indian Congress (NIC) discourse within the context of the NIC's present commitment to a non-racial democratic South Africa.[1] The focus in this paper is primarily on public communications of the NIC, covering theoretical self-descriptions as well as the language of mobilisation. The period examined includes the NIC's revival in 1971, its activities in the early 1980s and its most recent self-reflections as emerge from the 1987 conference. We do not address a whole host of controversial issues which have arisen in connection with NIC policy after the 1987 conference, for example, 'cabalism', the lack of democracy in the NIC, the question of participation in government created structures and the lack of grassroots support for the NIC. We have sought to focus on the NIC's understanding of non-racialism and the ways which it has chosen to articulate this commitment. We have taken this approach in the belief that this is a key issue on which the NIC's role and status in resistance politics can be evaluated within the context of the debate about organisational forms, ethnicity and non-racialism.[2]

We argue that there are different strands in NIC discourse which are in tension with one another and that these tensions threaten to undermine or delegitimate the NIC's broad commitment to a non-racial democracy. Its theoretical conceptualization of its role and strategies, the subject community to which appeal is made and the way in which its interests are defined, as well as contradictory usages of categories like 'people', 'community', 'masses', and the 'oppressed' in their language of mobilization, reflect an ambivalence which makes it difficult for the NIC to shelve all the pejorative implications of an ethnic frame of reference for its political activities. A conceptual, strategic and linguistic reconstruction may be necessary in order to assert the dominance of that strand in NIC discourse which is compatible with its non-racial commitment. This reconstruction could serve to vindicate the emancipatory claims of NIC politics.

We analyse the discourse of the NIC because of the importance of language as a political instrument used to mobilise and organise. Political language contains strategic imperatives which helps to shape, change or maintain identities and, in general, conveys a whole range of intended and unintended, explicit and implicit meanings which contest with one another on the political terrain. State discourses are challenged by oppositional discourses in the attempt to represent the 'true' nature of social and political reality. Language is the medium through

with modes of power are represented and articulated within the political arena. Discourses therefore are not incidental to political activity. They are formalised statements about the world addressed with specific intentions to specific constituencies and they articulate with and are regulated by non-discursive social and institutional practices. JB Thompson in his Studies in the Theory of Ideology shows how analysis of ideology is enriched by reflections on language:

> ... ideas circulate in the social world as utterances ... to study ideology is in some part to study language in the social world. It is to study the ways in which the multifarious uses of language intersect with power, nourishing it, sustaining it, enacting it. The theory of ideology invites us to see that language is not simply a structure which can be employed for communication and entertainment, but a social-historical phenomenon which is embroiled in human conflict (1984:2).

NIC leaders ask for an evaluation of the organisation on the basis of its 'principles, its aims, the content of its politics and its activity' (Carrim, 1987:8). Insofar as the principles and the aims of the NIC are linguistically articulated and convey certain meanings within a specific ideological context, and insofar as the 'activity' of the NIC includes processes of representation and mobilisation using the medium of language, the discourses of the NIC provide valid and valuable material for an analysis of its past role and future potential as an organisation within resistance politics in South Africa.[3]

CONSTRUCTION OF THE 'COMMUNITY'

Before proceeding with our analysis of recent NIC discourse we take a brief look at the history of the category 'Indian community' used by various Indian political organisations and leaders to describe the constituency they represented in the period c1900 to c1960. It is important to realise that this period marked the process of the ideological construction of a political community. Elements from this construction are relevant to an understanding of the later direction of a more radicalised NIC.

The suppression of class issues by the device of community construction along ethnic lines is evident in the case of Indian politics. We argue that one element in attempting to understand this process is to examine the way in which resistance is articulated by the various political and quasi-political organisations which claimed to represent the 'Indian community'.

Marks and Trapido (1987:26-31) characterise the formation of 'coloured' identity as the result not only of the definition of the ruling class and state, but also of the resistance and ambiguous collaboration of the Coloured people in the

specific socio-economio circumstances of the Western Cape (see also Goldin, 1987:156-81). Similarly it would be valid to argue for the formation of a category such as the 'Indian community' as the product of state definition as well as the manner of accommodation and resistance to the state and its agenda, and competition for the support of the various classes and groups that came to be defined as 'Indian'.

Swan has written that 'the history of organised Indian politics from the 1890s to the 1940s is mainly the history of trader politics ..' (1987:182). This is an indication that the nature and discourse of Indian politics since at least the establishment of the NIC in 1894 was not one of a cohesive community in relation to wider social, economic and political issues. In the first four decades of this century the idea of a politically cohesive community was ideologically and organisationally contested by various political and social organisations such as the NIC, the Natal Patriotic Union in 1908/9, the Colonial Born Indian Association (1911), the Natal Indian Association (1913) and the Colonial Born and Settlers Indian Association (1933). Despite the state definition of all emigrants from the subcontinent of India as Indian, the stratification along lines of class, language and religion informed the politics of the organisations of this group.

The NIC in the pre-1914 period invariably emphasised the protection of the economic position of merchants and property owners. This is reflected in their repeated distinctions between themselves and the indentured workers, ex-indentured workers and professional elites, even though they phrased extra-parliamentary protests, petitions and deputations in the context of discrimination against Indians in general. In a petition to the Secretary of Colonies against the Franchise Bill, reference is made to the 'trading community', 'property qualifications', 'respectability' of merchant and educated class of Indians and that it was unfortunate that 'all Indians, indentured, freed and free are attempted to be put on the same scale' (Bhana and Pachai, 1984:81).

Although the trader-merchants and the western educated professional elites sometimes acted together to secure their own position within the colonial hierarchy, the latter soon became frustrated with the merchants' concern with restrictions on their trade practices and their dominance of the NIC. In 1911 they formed their own political organisation, the Colonial Born Indian Association, and in 1913 they combined with elements of the NIC to form the Natal Indian Association. But none of these political organisations had much contact with indentured or ex-indentured workers, and made little or no attempt to organise or mobilise them. The celebrated 1913 strike was not a conscious attempt by the NIC or any political organisation to mobilise the sugar plantation workers, factory workers or mine workers but simply a spontaneous response to a call by Gandhi for mine workers to strike in support of the campaign against the Immigrants' Registration Act of 1907 and the 3 pound tax. The impetus for formin working class organisations among Indian Workers came from outside the community - from the International Socialist League, and Communist Party of

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of South Africa, and other trade unionists.

In the period immediately following the war Indian political organisation lay dormant. Activity revived in response to the Class Areas Bill, the negotiations and conclusion of the Cape Town Agreement (1927) and the recolonisation scheme. During this period the differing political interests already noted once again emerge. Thus for example in 1933, in opposition to the South African Indian Council (SAIC), of which the NIC was a constituent member, the Colonial-Born Settler and Indian Association, was founded. In terms of the political discourse of Indian politics up to this time the notion of community was by no means settled in any hegemonic sense. Although the NIC had organised a Natal Workers Congress of trade unions in 1928, the links with the political leadership quickly grew weak and this body soon faded out of existence (Ginwala, 1974:345, Padayachee et al. 1985:141). The working class as a constituency was not regarded as being important to the politics of traders, merchants and professional elites.

It was only in the late 1930s that dissatisfaction with the conservative nature of Indian politics led to the emergence of a new political organisation, the Natal Indian Association (NIA). Within the NIA a more radical or progressive group under the direct or indirect influence of the Communist Party and the Non-European United Front loosely constituted themselves as the 'Nationalist Bloc' to attempt to influence the direction of Indian politics. In a specially prepared statement issued in June 1940 they comment:

> The basic fact [is] that the struggle of the Indian people in South
> Africa is part of the general struggle of all oppressed people
> throughout the world against domination and exploitation of
> imperialism. It is the non-recognition of this fact in the struggle
> for national liberation that is the cause of so much confusion and
> helplessness in moulding a leadership that will truly speak with the
> voice of the masses (*Indian Opinion*, 1940).

What is immediately clear is that this discourse makes an appeal to 'all oppressed' - nationally and internationally. The Nationalist Bloc also argued strongly that the NIA should

> concentrate its energy in the organisation of mass struggle as the
> only effective weapon to combat the repressive measures in the
> country (*Indian Opinion*, 1940).

The Nationalist Bloc did tend to use the terms 'masses' and 'oppressed people' ambiguously. These terms were used both in an inclusive way to indicate all oppressed people as well as in an exclusive way to refer only to Indian people.

However, the politics of the Nationalist Bloc signified a transition from the older accommodationist politics to a militant politics which incorporated wider sections of the population across class and race lines in the struggle for liberation.

When the NIC and the NIA merged to form the new NIC in 1943 the 'radicals' formed a pressure group, the Anti-Segregation Council (ASC). The ASC, supported by the CPSA, trade unions and other organisations, eventually took control of the NIC in October 1945. Although working class politics was not on the agenda of the NIC in 1945 the notion of community was extended downwards to incorporate workers, thus giving legitimacy to the Nationalist Bloc's 1940 call for an 'organisation of mass struggle'. This call was still made in the context of poltically constructed ethnic groups. The new radicalised NIC as an organisation of mass struggle led the passive resistance campaign of 1946-8 against the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act (Ghetto Act) in Natal.

Despite this 'radicalization', the campaign incorporated a conceptualization of the oppressed people as racially segmented. The failure of the passive resistance campaign[4] was attributed to the lack of co-operation among natural allies - 'the African people, the Coloured people and the progressive European' (Bhana and Pachai, 1984:194-207). This unity of allies was conceptualised as the unity of four separate, autonomous groupings - an idea which was a logical progression in the discourse of the NIC and only a short step to the Congress of the People, and endorsement of the four nation theory.

By the 1950s NIC discourse evolved as a mixture of elements reflecting acceptance of the 'realities' of ethnicity and race, in articulation with liberal notions of equality and democratic rights, combined with more radical strategies of resisting the state by incorporating the support of the 'masses', the 'workers', as well as professional and trader elites. The goals and commitments of such divergent interests produced a discourse which contained ambiguities and contradictions. Nevertheless the period 1939-1950 marks a transition in Indian politics from narrow merchant dominated interests to one which attempts to situate itself within the mainstream of national politics. A recent document of the NIC states that during this period the Congress

> had converted Indians into South Africans first and foremost. It
> had welded all classes of Indians into a coherent whole and its
> programmes articulated the highest aspirations of Indian people in
> this country (Position paper on constitutional proposals, n.d:12).

This claim expresses the notion of community as being a homogenous and unified whole and endows this community with a consciousness which is teleologically expressed in the activities of the NIC. There are no perceived tensions in this notion of community and the class structure of such a population,

with all its limitations and potential, is not expressed.

NATIONALIST POLITICS

On the basis that this homogenous 'Indian community' is the immediate subject of its political activity, the NIC continues to operate in the 1970s and 1980s with the idea already articulated in the mid-1940s that the

> destiny of the Indian people lay not so much in legimitating their
> position vis-a-vis the authorities, as an individual community but
> in identifying their aspirations and their liberation with the rest of
> the black community (History of NIC, n.d: 1, hereafter 'History').

The development in NIC policy of engaging the 'Indian community' in mass struggle with other 'communities' did signify a transition in the NIC from narrowly conceived ethnic politics to broader nationalist politics. But is this the same thing as a transition to non-racial politics? In the 1980s the NIC locates Indian politics within nationalist politics in relation to the goal of a non-racial democracy. However, an examination of NIC discourse from the time of its revival in 1971 up to the present reveals frequent lapses into the images of multi-racialism. This tendency, seen in conjunction with the NIC organisational self-image and its strategies, indicates that a multi-community conceptualisation of politics still underlies the NIC approach despite its stated commitment to non-racialism.

Three major events were to have a decisive impact on all political discourse during the 1970s: the advent of Black consciousness, the rise of the independent trade union movement and the 1976 'education crisis'. Of these only the first two were of any significance to the NIC. As regards the 1976 education crisis the NIC was not active in any significant way during this period. One commentator described it as 'a period of quiescence' when the activities of the branches decreased' and there was 'less mass activity in the form of mass meetings, petitions or protests' (History:39).

In 1971 an ad hoc committee, consisting of M Ramgobin, G Sewpersadh, B Reddy, B Naidoo, R Ramesar, D Budhoo, BD Maharaj, SP Pachy, MR Moodley and N Naicker, was formed to revive the NIC (History:34). A meeting was held in the Bolton Hall on the 25 June 1971 to obtain a mandate from 'the community'. Speakers laid great stress on the NIC's Gandhian roots, the principle of non-violence, and unity of the 'Black races'. However, the revival was not without controversy, with people influenced by the rise of the Black Consciousness (BC) philosophy questioning the wisdom of reviving an ethnic organisation. The ad hoc committee response was to reject any philosophy which 'propagates black exclusiveness' (History:34).

According to Dr Naidoo, a member of the ad hoc committee, the most important aim of the revived NIC was to reinforce programmes of mjtual assistance

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and co-operation among the Black races, and thereby 'to end the hatred and suspicion amongst our fellow Blacks'. At the meeting at the Bolton Hall he went on to say

> we meet today as Indians. We are resigned in this by the realities of power and circumstance. The problem faced is a national one, and not restricted to the Indian or the Coloured or the African. It is not only the Indian, but the whole Black race that must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice (*Leader*, 30/7/71).

At a meeting to establish the Pietermaritzburg branch of the NIC, Mr Budhoo, a member of the ad hoc committee, stated that the revival of the NIC gave working class people 'a new sense of direction under the courageous leadership of Mr Ramgobin' (*Leader*, 3/2/71). However the direction of the politics of the revived Congress was far removed from the concerns of the working class. At best Ramgobin's position could be described as an articulation of liberal values. This is apparent, for example, in the following comment:

> We are going to work towards the re-assertion of our violated self respect and dignity, and towards the scrapping of racism as a way of life; we will lend ourselves towards the creation of a more tolerant and compassionate society - a society where the worth of the individual is not going to be decided by race and colour, but by his qualities as a man (*Leader*, 3/2/71).

At the time of its revival the NIC use of the word 'Black' was not dissimilar to that adopted by the followers of BC. However the definition and political assumption underlying the use of this word by these two political groupings were, and still are, very different. The Durban Central Branch of the NIC, which was influenced by the BC philosophy, submitted to the Convention of the NIC in October that Black be defined as

> all those who are by law or tradition politically, socially and economically discriminated against as a group in South African society, and who identify themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspiration (Memo to Convention:2/10/71).

The NIC did not provide a clear response to the critique that BC directed to the revival of an ethnically based political organisation or its uncompromising denouncement of white liberalism. Apart from the rejection of 'black exclusivness' there is no theoretical consideration of the principle of ethnic mobilization or for that matter the alliance with white South African liberalism in

the struggle for liberation. Indeed there is no re-consideration or historical inter-rogation of the strategies of the past, particularly those of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

From the mid-1970s onwards the issue which dominated NIC thinking was the question of participation or non-participation in government created political platforms for Indians. During the height of the 1976 Soweto crisis the NIC began a discussion on whether to participate in the SAIC and again in 1979 (History:40-43). The whole question of participation was conducted within the context of whether the leaders of the 'Indian community' should participate in apartheid structures. In both cases it has been said that the discussion was premised on the notion that there 'was a lack of political consciousness in the Indian community' and what was the 'best way of remedying it' (History:43). The NIC finally came out against participation, and formed the Anti-SAIC Committee in May 1979.[5] Other such committees were formed in the Cape and Transvaal. This stance was extended to the campaign against the new constitution and the tricameral parliament selections. At the same time that the Anti-SAIC campaign was underway many NIC members became active in various community organisations in such areas as Phoenix, Chatsworth, Wentworth, Sydenham Heights, and Newlands. Here again the NIC was not involved as an organisation, although many of its members and activitists were prominent in these community organisations.[6]

WORKING CLASS ISSUES

During the 1970s the rise of the independent trade union movement placed the problems of the working class firmly on the political agenda. By the late 1970s and early 1980s the new independent trade union movement brought radically new issues to resistance politics. The role of the independent working class movement in the liberation struggle began to emerge as a dominant theme in the 1980s.

Although it has been stated that the NIC gave its 'unequivocal support for the Natal strikes in the early 1970s' (History:38) the NIC's discourse for most of the 1970s ignored the structural existence of the working class and the existence of a struggling labour movement with non-racial and democratic principles based on the strength of its shop floor organisation. In the late 1970s when the independent trade union movement began to make its presence felt at a more national level, the NIC sought to incorporate the notion of the working class in its discourse of resistance to the apartheid state by reference to 'our working people', 'the masses', 'the average man and woman' (see for, example, J Coovadia in *Sunday Tribune*, 11/10/81).

The NIC's response to the independent trade union movement is more clearly represented in a document called the *Charter for Change* (Bhana and Pachai, 1984:285-87). On 10 and 11 October 1981 the NIC, the Anti-SAIC committees of Natal, Cape and Transvaal, and over a 100 other organisations, including trade

unions, adopted a *Charter for Change.* This *Charter* is no more than a summary of the clauses in the *Freedom Charter,* and is largely formulated in terms of a call for democracy.

The interesting aspect of this document is that it denounces 'government created ethnic institutions as divisive of the oppressed people' and sees the situation in South Africa as a non-democratic minority dominating and exploiting an 'oppressed people', and calls for a society where 'democratic control by the people will guarantee the provision of these services [social services] and eliminate the mass removals of settled communities'. However the *Charter for Change* does attempt to appeal to a working class constituency:

> the majority of workers are still denied the right to free association
> and control over their own affairs. Continuing and ever increasing
> worker action reveals national discontent of working people, who
> will settle for nothing less than full participation in free democratic
> trade unions (Bhana and Pachai, 1984:286).

By 1981 many of the issues raised in this Charter had been won independently by the working class. There was the right to free association; there was, since 1973, the rise of 'democratic trade unions', which did attempt to control their own affairs despite the state's attempts at co-option.

The 1987 NIC conference resolution on trade unions welcomes the formation of COSATU only in fairly general terms. In a paper on the conference by Yunus Carrim, an NIC executive member, makes the point that 'the NIC must have a commitment to the working class also because it acknowledges the leading role of this class in the national democratic struggle' (1987:10). However, this commitment is again qualified by reference to the 'Indian working class' as the target of focus for the NIC.

CONCEPTUALISING THE 'COMMUNITY' - RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In this section we examine NIC discourse in the 1980's in order to indicate the continued conflation of ethnic and transethnic conceptualisations of categories like 'community' and 'people'. Reference to 'our people' within contexts which clearly indicate that it is the 'Indian community' which is being referred to or addressed locate such discourses within a conceptualization of South African society as racially segmented.

On the grounds that its goals are non-ethnic but that apartheid history indicates the terrain of its activity, the NIC engages itself politically within the 'Indian community'. It may even argue that it is obliged as a resistance organisation within an apartheid framework to mobilise, conscientise and organise the 'Indian community', and that, in doing so, there is no contradiction involved with its broad goals.

We may be inclined to agree with this position with the caution that working on an ethnically constituted terrain requires a tremendous degree of careful planning and constant alertness in all activities to the dangers of reproducing and reinforcing ethnicity. The language of mobilization for the campaigns mounted and the issues chosen around which to organise are therefore crucial if the intended political effect is simultaneously to subvert the ethnic constitution of subjects on the one hand and foster a non-racial consciousness on the other. Discourses which jumble together intro-community concerns and trans-community commitments may produce the effect that the 'Indian' as an ethnically constituted political subject remains intact.

The NIC has argued that it engages in politics primarily at intra-community level because of the manner in which apartheid society has been historically constructed. While it would be naive to deny the reality and power of the ethnic socialization of consciousness generated by apartheid structures and institutions, it is false to base one's political practice on the total acceptance of a reified social reality. Despite the appeal to history to justify a particular set of practices, the NIC in some of its discourses seems to operate on the acceptance of an ethnic socialization from above as an ahistorical given.

It could be argued that our political identities are structured through determinations of different kinds. Hegemonic discourses and practices generate certain kinds of behaviours, choices and values. To believe these to be naturally necessary, culturally compelling or historically inevitable is to be mechanically determinist. The political attempt to address the subaltern consciousness does not necessarily need to be located within the framework of dominant discourses. Since the latter are not monolithic their 'power' is contingent and therefore deconstructable. Working within the spaces of apartheid reality on the terms of that reality is not necessary or inevitable.

There are frequent indications in the NIC discourse that political mobilization occurs within the terms of apartheid reality rather than as a destabilising of that reality. A more complex view of resistance to apartheid and transformation towards a non-racial society is to act on the basis that certain types of changes can be effected where they are identified as being necessary within the space of apartheid hegemony. A more conscious reflection on political intervention as the active chosing of certain practices and the transcending of those others which are historically dispensable will hopefully produce a conceptualization of transformation which is more than mere resistance rhetoric. Such a discourse of transformation can help to delineate the elements which are necessary in the journey of self-understanding or self-constitution from being primarily a member of the 'Indian community' to being a post-liberation citizen of a non-racial state. A discourse which is ambivalent about the basis of operation within or on behalf of a specific constituency or specific subject community blurs the chances of political effectiveness vis a vis stated goals and intentions.

NIC discourses concerning the anti-constitutional proposals campaign and other NIC communications contain frequent examples of the ambivalence of the conceptualization of non-racialism. In the *Sunday Tribune* of 13 November 1983 the following NIC and TIC advert appeared.

1. Let us protect *our future* now!

2. Ever since we were brought to this country we have faced many problems. Our grandparents worked under harsh conditions on the sugar plantations and mines ...

3. Our achievements in improving *our communities* were destroyed by the Group Areas Act ...

4. Under the banner of Congress we have fought against these problems. Our fight has been for a peaceful just society in which *all people* can live in harmony ...

5. Now the government is forcing a new constitution upon us. This new apartheid creation is going to destroy *our future* in this country.

6. We urge the community to reject the constitution offered to us. Our history and tradition has been a proud one in demanding *equality for all*.

While the beginning of the text is ambiguous as to whom the 'us' refers it soon emerges that Indians are being referred to when placed in the context of the immigration of indentured labour for the sugar plantations and mines. In the next paragraph the reference to 'our communities' achievements is equally ambiguous, and is compounded by the claim that 'our fight' has been for 'all people' not just Indians. Yet 'our future' in paragraph 5 clearly refers to the future of the 'Indian community'.

The demand for equality in the above advert has been a call made by the NIC since at least the mid-1940s. However the formulation here blurs the period of NIC politics as trader dominated and renders it into a tradition which claims that it always supported the call for equality for all people in South Africa. The NIC's opposition to the new constitution in general terms was very clear. However, careful analysis of the language reveals the continuing problematic nature of the conceptualization of the NIC constituency as a separate definable entity.

In response to the idea that voting rights for Indians and Coloureds will oblige them to fight on behalf of the government a NIC executive member said the following:

'Voting for the tricameral parliament is going to cost us dearly. With Indians going to the poll we face the prospect of losing the bond of friendship we have welded with the African people. The world will see us in the role of helping whites against Africans. Voting will mean that we will be giving the government a free hand to draft our men and youths into the army. What does

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conscription mean for us? Our men will be pointing guns at our
own people' *(Sunday Tribune Herald*, 5/8/84)

The ambiguity in the last sentence is very stark. 'Our men', ie Indian men,
will be pointing guns at 'our own people', which could be a reference to Africans
if the war is also seen as including township resistance.

A NIC publication of 1984 which observed 90 years of the NIC's existence
is described as 'A pictorial history of a people's struggle for a united, free and
democratic South Africa.' The cause is depicted as a common one but the strug-
gle is that of *a people*. It goes on:

> *Our people* are committed to the achievement of a united,
> non-racial and democratic South Africa in which *the people* shall
> govern. (Supplement to *Post*, 22-25/8/84)

Even in 1984 there is a constant shift in NIC discourse between exclusivist
and inclusivist notions of 'people'. This is again manifest in a selective reading
of the NIC history:

> ... for 90 years it has represented the interests and demands of our
> people ... It is the NIC now and in the past which has taken up the
> problems of the people. It is the NIC which has democratically
> referred to the people for direction. It is the NIC which has, with
> determination and sacrifice guarded over the interests of the
> people. It is this history of concern and courage which makes the
> NIC the organisation of and for the people *(Post*, 22-25/8/84):2).

The stated commitment to a non-racial democratic South Africa does not ad-
dress the question of how the 'Indian' as an essentialist political category will be
transformed within the context of a de-ethnicised unified South African com-
munity at some future appropriate juncture. The subversion of ethnicity as one of
the constitutive categories of apartheid may be intended by NIC discourse but the
ambiguity of this discourse can in fact reinforce ethnic divisions by addressing
national issues through the prism of community politics and ethnic mobilisation.

In an article by the NIC president G Sewpersadh, where the tricameral sys-
tem is rejected and non-participation is defended, the following is stated:

> The NIC is committed to a democratic way of life. We believe that
> South Africa belongs to all who live in it ... We believe that
> change is urgently necessary in South Africa ... If the necessary
> changes in our society are not made in time, then the racial
> bitterness that exists in South Africa could explode into violence.

> We are deeply concerned about the welfare of the Indian
> community and other people in this country ...

This theme of primary concern for the 'Indian community' is continued in a
NIC pamphlet of 1986.

> Mandela's Release.
> How will it affect us?
> In this time of violence, anger and pain in our country we must talk
> about the future of the Indian people.
> 'Do we go along with Mandela and the majority of Africans and
> Coloureds in South Africa or do we hide behind a falling
> Apartheid government?

This text creates the idea that Indians inhabit some vacuum from which they
can make a choice for either of these options. It is not only Indians who are con-
cerned about their future. All people in this country have concerns for how the
future will turn out. This manner of representation reinforces the idea that In-
dians as a 'community' have something specific or different to be fearful about,
that they are threatened in ways that other people are not. In the 1980s the NIC
has emphasized that it is a non-racial organisation open to all and not restricted
to Indians only (NIC, Pietermaritzburg Branch, 1987; 5, and Carrim 1987:8). The
expression of the above kind of concerns addressed to a specific community
make it difficult to imagine that the NIC will be joined as an organisation by
people who are not deemed to be Indian.[6]

Carrim's paper, insofar as it addresses the question of the NIC's or-
ganisatonal form, its strategies and its existence, signifies an interesting shift
from earlier types of legitimation of the NIC's role. The idea that Indians con-
stitute one of four self-contained communities which are engaged in resisting the
apartheid state underlies many of the public communications of the NIC from the
mid 1940s to the early 1980s. Recourse to the *Freedom Charter* as the basic in-
spirational text often helped to reinforce the idea of the 'Indian community' as a
'natural' political entity engaged in alliance politics with other communities. An
example of this earlier position is to be found in a speech given at the first
general meeting of the TIC on 1 May 1983, by Zac Yacoob, an NIC executive
member at the time, where he argued for the 'rights of national groups to their
culture' (1983:1). In other words, Yacoob's recognition of different 'national
groups' is not merely an instance of political realism vis a vis the historical
reality generated by apartheid society. It is a recognition based on the 'cultural'
singularity of different groups of people and the drawing of political consequen-
ces from this - a position that has different intentions from but common premises
with our pluralist theories of society.

> That there are Indians, Coloureds, Africans and Whites [national
> groups] in our country is a self evident and undeniable reality. It is
> a reality precisely because each of those national groups has its
> own heritage, culture, language, customs and traditions (Yacoob,
> 1983:7).

The four national groups premise which is articulated in Yacoob's paper *Congress Perspectives on the Struggle* is often implied or assumed in NIC discourse. This premise allows for an internal logic or consistency in the NIC's discourse and its insistence on the appropriateness of its organisational form and practice. If one thinks of the 'Indian community' as a unified, culturally homogenous group rather than as a stratified, historically and politically constructed entity, there is no contradiction involved in asserting the need for a political organisation of Indians for Indians. Further such an organisation is seen as necessary in order to provide moral and political leadership and guidance to Indians and to link up with the political leadership of other communities in national struggles. Just as Indians have their own heritage, culture, language, customs, and problems, so too should they have their own political organisation to represent them in their culturally specific way.

In 1984 Praveen Gordhan, a NIC activist, stated in a newspaper interview:

> We have the potential to become the only authentic political body
> representing the Indian community ... We have gauged from our
> fieldwork that generally the community looks to us as the
> guardians of the people. We have been around for a long time -90
> years - and intend remaining in the forefront of Indian politics
> (*Sunday Tribune*, 9/9/84).

The claim appears to be made that if a person is an Indian, the only authentic political vehicle for political expression is through a truly representative political organisation for Indians - the NIC. Authentic political participation, in other words, is to be through one's community identity or definition. Within a multi-race conceptualisation of South African politics, the above position is not anomalous. The problem arises when organisational forms and practices linked to the 'national groups' have to be evaluated in terms of goals of struggle couched in the language of non-racialism.

Carrim's paper is silent on the issue of the reality of the national groupings as the basis for political organisation. A different kind of explanation is put forward as to why there is a need for the NIC to exist in its present form. This explanation is also deemed to be politically realistic but, in contrast to Yacoob's conception, its emphasis is on the reasons connected with the political processes of apartheid society rather than with any ontological or cultural principles con-

cerning the 'Indian community' as a national group. It is argued that the 'Indian community' has become 'alienated' from the 'African community', that it is insecure and anxious about its future and that it has a consciousness that is not 'inherently non-racial'. Carrim further states:

> The NIC's argument is that there is a significant unevenness in the degree and form of oppression, the level of consciousness, and the extent and form of organisation between the different communities to warrant its role. If the Indian community is to be mobilized surely it must be on the basis of its specific oppression and its specific material conditions (Carrim, 1987:7- 8).

In short, the consciousness of the 'Indian community' and its specific material conditions are proferred as the *raison d'etre* on the NIC. In fact the NIC is depicted as being not only legitimate but urgently needed at this particular time by the 'Indian community'. It is useful to examine the question of the 'consciousness of the Indian community'. Despite a greater awareness of the stratified or segmented nature of the 'Indian community' there are serious lapses of rigour in Carrim's paper concerning the use of the word 'community'. This produces rather unhelpful generalisations and it echoes earlier NIC views of the community as a homogenous, unstratified body of people who can be organised across class lines on the basis of the fact that all the addressed members are Indians.[7]

Carrim's paper argues:

> The community, in fact, has a strong sense of being Indian. They do not have an inherent non-racial consciousness (1987:8).

Such statements reflect the NIC's desire to justify its role as the guardians and mentors of a conservative and racially conscious community. But this position also reflects an inadequate awarenes of the complex social processes by which community identity has been generated in this society and the unevenness of this process even within an ostensibly homogenous group of people. In a contradictory vein but in the same generalised way, Carrim later in the paper states:

> ... the community is clearly opposed to white domination ... The community does not support the tricameral parliament, the local affairs committees, and the basic c' ntent of the apartheid system ... There is moreover a moral imperative in the community that cannot reconcile itself with the oppression, particularly of African people, that is intrinsic to apartheid (1987:6).

The difficulties in ascribing these characteristics and beliefs (which are both negative as well as complimentary) to the 'Indian community' as a whole, regard-

less of the different class interests at work, are enormous, especially if taken as a
rationale for political organisation. The NIC's inability to shed the idea of politi-
cal organisation on behalf of the 'Indian community' as a permanent political
reality emerges in the following sentences:

> The community cannot, in the long term, thrive in a violent and
> unstable society. It is therefore in its objective interests to seek a
> non-racial democratic society. It is only in such a society that its
> future will be secured (Carrim, 1987:7).

Why, in a non-racial society one should talk about securing the future of a
community rather than the future of all citizens is inexplicable, unless seen in the
context of the NIC's past and present (and future?) view of political life and
work as inextricably linked to 'national groups'. The content of their concep-
tualizations of non-racialism remains ambiguous.

We now come to the NIC argument that their role is linked to the present
material conditions of the 'Indian community'. This is interpreted by Carrim as
referring to concrete ways in which apartheid legislation specifically affects and
is experienced by the Indian community. It is further argued, quite correctly in
this case, that

> people are most effectively and democratically drawn into struggle
> in their immediate locality and over issues that directly affect them
> (Carrim, 1987:8).

Yacoob had also attempted to highlight the question of issue-orientated or-
ganisational work, although this is unnecessarily linked to the existence of cul-
turally different 'national groups'.[8] The details of low wages, poor housing, etc,
certainly differ among Indians and Africans. However, the issues themselves
have nothing culturally specific about them and do not require an 'Indian' politi-
cal organisation to address them. The question that arises is whether Indians need
to be members of an Indian organisation in order to have their material interests
addressed. Also, the material interests of working class Indians cannot be lumped
together with that of non-working class Indians. Again we see the ambiguities
and problems involved in referring to the material conditions and the material in-
terests of the 'Indian community' as a homogenous unit where the common
denominator of 'Indianness' is the basis on which the NIC has organised and in-
tends to organise across class interests. Carrim recognises the difficulties of
political organisation across different sectors of the community but seems to at-
tribute these to the 'conservatism of the Indian community in general', rather
than to the NIC's problematic conceptualisation of political organisation.

One other point needs to be made in connection with the question of the
'material conditions' of the 'Indian community' in relation to which the NIC jus-

tifies its continued existence and role. Although it makes sound political sense to connect the material conditions of one's constituency to organisational plans and strategies, it is not appropriate in this case to talk about the material conditions of the 'Indian community' in isolation from the material conditions of other constituencies and the myriad ways in which they intersect and overlap. It is shortsighted of the NIC to assume that given the material interests of the 'Indian community' there is only one form of political organisation possible as a response. Political developments in the 1970s and 1980s which demonstrated the possibilities of non-racial organisational work, for example in relation to trade unions, or the concept underlying street or area committees, or non-racial sport organisations indicate that alternative conceptions of political organisation are available in the struggle towards a non-racial democracy.

A serious attempt at addressing the material specificities of the Indian community would require taking into account the way in which differing material interests within the community intersect with interests defined in relation to the country as a whole across the racial divide. Within a struggle towards non-racialism, identifying a political constituency like 'Indian Community' is not as neutral a choice as choosing to organise among women or workers or students or health care workers. In view of the NIC's commitment to non-racialism, its criticism of Inkatha and the House of Delegates as ethnically based, and the changed political dynamics of the 1970s and 1980s, the 1987 NIC conference, as the outcome of a period of self evaluation, would have been an appropriate juncture at which to ditch the 'I' in the NIC and pursue issue based forms of political work (in Indian areas if these are perceived to be politically under-attended to). Such a further radicalisation of NIC politics would give content to the concept of non-racialism and eliminate the crippling contradiction between the NIC's organisational form, discourses and strategies on the one hand and its non-racial commitments on the other.

Instead the NIC has chosen to retain its present form as well as its traditionally defined constituency. In recognition of the demands of a national politics, it has opted for a rather elaborate procedure whereby different sectors of the community will be channelled or directed into national organisations. It appears as though NIC membership will be the basis on which this channelling will occur rather than the NIC urging different sectors of the community to join national organisations directly. The NIC may wish to take on this mediating role on the grounds that the NIC leadership (which believes that it understands the meaning of non-racialism) has the duty to transform the consciousness of an inherently conservative and not non-racial community and then allow them to take their place in national politics. This concept of the NIC being the political clearing house for the Indian community is not only elitist and undemocratic but also unnecessary in view of the NIC's own recognition of the validity of issue and interest based political activity. There is no denying the importance and need for non-racial democracy, and for the existence of political organisations to address this

need. However, the commitment to non-racialism requires that such political or-
ganisations define the issues and interests around which they organise in ways
that cut across racial and 'cultural' divisions rather than reproduce these. This
could make for more effective and more consistent political work in view of the
complex stratified nature of racially demarcated political communities in South
Africa and the trans-race interests which permeate them.

The NIC through its history, its commitments and its position in the struggle
towards an alternative social order wields a specific kind of political power. Its
discourses claim to represent 'truth' in opposition to the utterances of those who
are 'part of the system'. This power of the NIC, as of other resistance organisa-
tions, establishes and reinforces specific kinds of meanings and related political
actions. As such the NIC has a tremendous responsibility in exercising this power
in a way which allows space for and legitimates its broad goals and commit-
ments.

NOTES
1. By discourse is meant all those activities of speaking, writing, advertising and
   representing connected with NIC resistance politics. See JB Thompson,
   Studies in the Theory of Ideology, 1984:1-12, for a brief but useful discussion
   of the concept 'discourse' and its relationship to ideology.
2. Such debates are not new and have taken place, for example,at the time of the
   revival of the Transvaal Indian Congress (see *Work in Progress*, nos. 26 and
   28). The issue also arose, although in a more oblique way, at the time of the
   revival of the NIC in 1971 when Black Consciousness supporters queried the
   revival of political organisations on an ethnic basis.
3. Our critical comments on the discourses of the NIC are not intended to ques-
   tion or devalue the commitment, the sacrifices, the energy and dedication of
   members of the NIC in the struggle against oppression. We are aware of the
   problem of whether it is appropriate at this time to engage in a theoretical in-
   tervention of a critical nature of an organisation which has a long history and
   popularly acknowledged place in resistance politics. At a time when resis-
   tance organisations are being immobilized by the state, it is possible that
   academic critique could render such organisations more vulnerable. Such
   critique, despite its intentions, could be co-opted by a host of reactionary
   politicians both within and outside of a contemporary parliamentary politics.
   Out intervention is made in the spirit that re-conceptualizing political roles
   and strategies to fit them more effectively into a new conjuncture is an impor-
   tant task for political organisations especially at a time when more conven-
   tional strategies of organisation are being severely curtailed by the state. The
   acceptance of self-critique and of critique from outside is a healthy sign in a
   discourse of transformation which the NIC's would claim to be. Such a dis-
   cource, especially since it is committed to democracy, engages not only in at-
   tacking or undermining state discourses but also in continual self-directed

critique. The NIC conference (1987), as a process of self-review and the fact that Carrim's paper about the conference has been 'endorsed for publication by the NIC executive in the interests of wider debate and understanding', places the NIC position firmly on the agenda for public discussion and assessment.

4. For different perspectives on the failure and success of the passive resistance campaign see RE Johnson (1973), F Ginwala (1974), V Padayachee, S Vawda and P Tichmann (1985) and M Swan (1987).

5. The question of participation has once again been raised in the aftermath of the NIC's 1987 conference. It is interesting to consider whether the question of NIC participation in the ethnically structured tricameral parliament would have the same resonance if the NIC's organisational form and ideology were different, ie not conceptualised in terms of and directed specifically at the 'Indian community'.

6. The community organisations such as the Phoenix Working Committee, and the various other housing and rent action committees which formed the Durban Housing Action Committee should not be conflated with the NIC itself. We do not analyse this aspect of NIC politics here, not only becaue of the apparent difficulty in separating out the NIC's role in these organisations, but also because this strategy of infiltrating community organisations to influence them in particular directions such as participation in the SAIC, as suggested by AKM Docrat in relation to the Phoenix Working Committee (*Post*, 27-30/1/88), places the issues of 'cabalism' and democracy at the centre of any analysis.

7. As a further indication of the non-racial character of the NIC, one of their documents, *An Invitation to Join the NIC*, indicates that Archie Gumede and Virgil Bonhomme are vice presidents of the NIC (1987:5). The 1987 Conference elected a set of office bearers who are all 'Indian'. The reasons and procedures leading to the election of Gumede and Bonhomme at some previous occasion and their non-election in 1987 would make for interesting clarification.

8. In this paper Yacoob states:

    If the existence of national groups is a reality and if each national group had its own cultures, traditions and problems, the movement for change is best facilitated by enabling organisation around issues which concern people in their daily lives such as wages, high transport costs and poor housing (1983:8).

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