

Daily News Friday February 4 2000

Only one race- the human race

While it may be argued that the recent Afro-Indian workshop was necessary to engage people in constructive discussions, what is really required is a "revolution" by individuals. No legislation or workshop will make a significant difference unless, as an old Arab saying goes, the change comes from within oneself to oneself.

I believe that democratic South Africa demands that we are South Africans first, South Africans second and South Africans last with all our idiosyncrasies and cultural and religious diversity. Anyone who places emphasis on ethnicity and is pre-occupied with his or her ethnic roots will inevitably experience at least psychological and social conflicts.

Emerging from an institutionalised, divided society, we have a long and challenging road ahead of us genuinely to embrace fundamental changes. We do not need ethnic organisations to transform society because even anti-apartheid political ethnic organisations, while they played a key role in mobilising people to fight for a democratic and just society, unavoidably entrenched ethnicity. We must accept that the architects and politicians of apartheid attempted to place us in ethnic moulds just as they designed our cities and towns-"whites" at the core and therefore least affected socio-economically, followed by so-called Indians and coloureds, with Africans being the most disenfranchised.

We need, systematically and courageously, to break down these barriers, psychological and social. We must subscribe to the principle that there is only one race – the human race- and we must strive in every way to encourage the humanity in ourselves and in others.

There are political and religious leaders, among others, who need to address areas of concern to their constituencies, to actively desensitise people who were victims of decades of systematic ethnic ("racist") indoctrination.

The political, religious and civic structures are in place to do this. The major businesses need to treat their employees as co-workers, not slaves. In the past money was invested overseas and there were those who built skyscrapers, for example, in the United Kingdom and the United States, instead of investing money in social-upliftment programmes and providing a living wage. If it were possible, all South Africans need to be barred from emigrating or investing overseas to break the "just in case things do not work out here" syndrome. Realistically speaking, every one of us must destroy the bridge to the past and work collectively as we surge forward to build our nascent democracy.

This would require tremendous sacrifices, constructive criticism, sharing our wealth, talents and expertise. Leaders from all walks of life- the traditional leaders, politicians, educators, to name but a few- must free themselves from the shackles of apartheid to restore everyone's dignity.

Our roots must be deeply entrenched in South Africa because we need to believe, think and act as South Africans to tackle social stratification. What our country needs is less talk and more grassroots involvement in every facet of life. It is no easy walk to realising freedom for ourselves.

MR SAYED-IQBAL MOHAMED
Chairperson, Organisation of Civic Rights;
Durban Metro councillor