Diamond in the Rough and Mining Civil Liberties: The Rupununi Music and Arts Festival and Guyana’s Distinguished Speaker, Prof Clem Seecharan

End of the Rupununi Music and Arts Festival National Cultural Centre, Georgetown, Guyana, Feb 18, 2014. (PHOTO: GRETCHEL GALASSI)

If you don’t have a life of the mind, you can’t go anywhere,” claimed Professor Clem Seecharan at his talk “To Write Is to Learn,” which followed his prestigious Guyanese Lecture “El Dorado Complex in the Shaping of the Indo-Guyanese: A Revisionist Perspective.” Seecharan began this year’s Distinguished Lecture Series, established in 2011, by identifying himself as a revisionist historian who challenges orthodoxies. He would look, he said, at Indians’ conceptions of blackness and challenge the idea that all Indians were swindled into coming to Guyana.

For Seecharan, Indians who came to Guyana brought with them notions that lighter skin was superior (based on inherited ideals and self-hated) and, strapped by a caste system in which they could never own land and due to horrible realities, like frequent and alternating floods and famines, people came in search of possibilities.

In order to interrogate the lack of known history about the lives which the Indo-Guyanese had lived in India, Seecharan explained that “the history of indentured labourers to Guyana is a drop in the Indian Ocean.” He also noted that people were escaping situations too difficult to remember and that, instead of passing on historical remembrance, they adopted mythological stories which became interpreted/accepted as history they were comfortable sharing with their descendants. “As exiles, you can do that,” he said.

Seecharan’s rich discussion served a larger aim. “We must not be afraid to dig into our archeology of prejudices,” Seecharan advised. “We have to have the courage to face these issues.” Seecharan also noted that “Guyana has not moved beyond a sectarian stage of development and needs to promote a culture of integrity and accountability.” Seecharan condemned corruption but underscored the importance of cultivating the mind. “Cultural development is still an ongoing process in Guyana,” he noted, pointing to its archives which are falling apart.

Sitting as an observer who cannot comment with any right or authority on Guyana’s politics and history but who can comment to some degree on the role and state of the arts, I thought of the recent Rupununi Music and Arts Festival. The branchchild of organisers Colin Edwards and Bab Ramdhane, it took place February 14-16 at Edwards’ Rock View Lodge in Aurora (North Rupununi, Guyana) and finished at Georgetown’s National Cultural Centre. There appeared to be nothing sectarian about it. Arguably billed as a “multicultural experience,” it included such international artists as Namvula (UK/Zimbabwe), Keith Wathe (UK/Guyana), Iryna Muha (UK/Ukraine), Raman Dooze (UK), Marc Mathews (UK/Guyana), Poxel Van (Czech Republic) and local Guyanese artists, including Ras Camo, Indus Voices & Dance Wongs, Drew Consolvo (Canada), Surama Cultural Group (Guyana), Buxton Fusion and Tessa drummers. All Amerindian peoples and communities were given free admission.

At Georgetown’s finale, it was apparent the idea of this festival, the spirit in the room (carried from the Rupununi), the mixture of artists (seasoned and amateur) and, most importantly, the mixture of countries/cultures and different musical styles had the potential to be a tour de force. This was an attempt to feast the life of the mind and to bring cultures together with the sake of the arts - one of life’s most liberal and equalising forces, if applied correctly.

On February 20, Seecharan spoke about another liberalising force when he summarised a cross-section of his writings. He spoke about the role of newspapers at different points in Caribbean history. Seecharan highlighted Dr Robert Love (Bahamian), who founded the Jamaica Advocate and espoused using the free press to ensure civil liberties, and the late David DeCaires, who started Guyana’s Starbuck News and challenged, in Seecharan’s words, “the dictatorship of his time”. Editing issues of the Advocate, Love had cultivated such things as Edward Wilmot Blyden and Theophilus Edward Samuel Scholes (Jamaican), both of whom, Seecharan claimed, must be read to truly understand the development of Caribbean intellectual thought and Garveyism.

Seecharan also focused on Indian intellectual Becku, who published in Guyana’s papers in the 19th century and was the first Indian in the Caribbean to appear before a Royal Commission.

I thought back to the Rupununi festival. As an arts organiser, I wanted to give everything involved a standing ovation. But like the archives, the organisation had fallen apart. The Georgetown show began 45 minutes late. There were technical difficulties. The audience was meagre. There was no encore and no printed programme, and I had no idea who I was listening to. I had travelled to the Rupununi earlier in the week ready to attend the full festival, witnessing the communal spirit and anticipation at Rock View (with the entire community helping out the organisers, whom they obviously respected). However, I couldn’t get my head around crashing in the open air with no locked room or crashing off site where I would have to walk a dirt road with no lights back and forth throughout the three-day festival. Trained in Kingston, Jamaica (where I have lived and studied) how to operate safely and as a woman travelling alone, I bolted (incidentally, and by all accounts, I missed a magical and safe time).

I also wanted to be as eager at Moray House as I was the first night I heard Seecharan speak when he discussed the strong Indian women who, often widowed (and, thus, with no options in their misogynist worlds), had come to Guyana with fierce independence and self-respect. But Thursday night, in his one-hour summary of his various works, Seecharan did not mention one woman’s name. I sat there as the former Louise Bennett Exchange Scholar (UWI, Mona) with several rows of Guyanese schoolgirls behind me and wondered what was so revisionist about Seecharan’s history lesson.

I also saw gender disparity at Georgetown’s Rupununi concert with a disproportionate number of male acts, though there were numerous female dancers in the Surama Cultural Group. My colonial education robbed me of an equitable study of women, and only one of the civil liberties of this newspaper today. I am abashed in suggesting the festival’s organisers and Seecharan consider becoming more revisionist. It would not be difficult to represent women equally in the 21st century. And if cultural voices can be reclaimed from “unconventional” sources like newspapers, certainly women’s voices (even in periods which effaced their conventional representation) can be reclaimed from other unconventional sources.

Now, that said, I do only respond to events which have worth. The Rupununi Festival is well worth the trip. In particular, a young boy from the festival’s last act at the NPC, Buxton Fusion (a drumming group from Guyana’s East Coast), stood out. He knew he could be as good one day as amazing violinist Keith Waite and consistently took centre stage to highlight his performance.

There were four other young men with great confidence — an American group called Filtigar. They were a lot of fun, some kind of grunge-influenced nod towards the Monkees or Beatles. But what I also saw was how money can sometimes buy confidence, how much can buy training and production and recording and marketing. While there was no programme for the Georgetown concert, there was a very expensive promotional poster for this American band handed out at the door on behalf of the American Embassy. Hopefully, governments and others can give the life of the mind an even greater hand in the future. With the right help and appropriate infrastructure, a kid from Buxton, after all, can make it to the top just like a band from Los Angeles.

I know one guy who did pretty well coming from Trench Town. And Seecharan’s scholarship is worth feeding, too, but maybe with a little more tinkering in reverse.

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