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IMPRESSIONS OF GUADELOUPE

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GUADELOUPE is a French Department which basks in the Caribbean Sea. It is part of France and this creates problems for its inhabitants. They benefit from very considerable advantages which at first sight must outweigh any disadvantages that might accrue from being so far away from the rest of the country. For example, salaries and wages are the same in Guadeloupe as they are in France. Indeed, senior civil servants in Guadeloupe, be they French or local, are paid 40% more than their counterparts in the metropolis. What began as an expatriation allowance given only to metropolitan personnel sent overseas was, as Guadeloupe formally became a French Department, incorporated in the pay of those who work in Guadeloupe and have always lived there, making a nonsense of the reason for which this 40% was granted. The minimum wage level applies in Guadeloupe and social charges for employees are also in force although in the case of the minimum wage it is somewhat smaller than in metropolitan France. The result is that life is exceedingly expensive in Guadeloupe because productivity is very low and wages are very high. Moreover, there is practically no incentive for people to work since they get well paid for doing damn all, with the result that practically everything has to be imported from France. There are no industries worth the name and the tropical crops on which Guadeloupe should rely to make both ends meet — sugar cane and bananas — are uncompetitive and dwindling so that metropolitan France has to subsidise the Guadeloupean economy. It is indeed ironic to think that in the hey day of the imperial expansion of the great powers France traded for Canada Guadeloupe.

The population of Gaudeloupians in the island is just over 300,000 people, but more than another 100,000 live and work in France where presumably they are more energetic than they are at home. I would not have believed that it could be possible for me — used as I am to watching people working in India at a somewhat slowed down pace due to the climate, poverty and malnutrition — to get as irritated as I did by the slow motion activity of people in Guadeloupe who are neither poor nor malnourished, although the climate is admittedly not very different from that of, say, Kerala. Abundance of natural produce in the island is such that coconuts, for example, have no commercial value, they are not picked, they just fall to the ground and are not always consumed. I am sure

that any reader from southern India will find it difficult to believe that such a valuable source of nutrition can go wasted.

So much for agriculture. When it comes to 'industry' it is truly pathetic, the taps for hot and cold water tend to be placed the wrong way round and wherever we went the locks had been so placed that one had to turn the key the wrong way to lock or unlock the door and usually, in addition, the lock was upside down. I had the doubtful privilege of watching a 'carpenter' fix a lock to the door of the bungalow in which we stayed. First of all he made an unholly mess, leaving all the waste chippings strewn about. Secondly, he hacked a hole much larger than required for the lock, which he placed askew and loosely fitted in the wrong door, the one which already had a lock, leaving the door where the lock was broken, and which he had been called to repair, unattended. I made him come back and pointed out that the lock was on the wrong door and asked him to repair his mistake. He then tried to remove the lock with pliers, obviously not realising that screws have to be removed with a screwdriver. After I showed him how to unscrew the lock he proceeded to fit it on the right door hammering the screws in as if they were nails without getting anywhere because the wood of the door was fairly hard. After he had broken two of the screws I showed him the difference between nails and screws and got him to fix the lock which somehow under my supervision he managed to fit askew and the wrong way round. Obviously one cannot generalise on one example, the reason I am going into such detail about this carpenter's handiwork is that I was repeatedly told by everybody I met thaht such workmanship is to be expected and is typical.

In addition, there is an extraordinary unwillingness to work, artisans go off at midday when their day is over, and since they only start working at 7.30 or 8 in the morning it is a short day's work.

We visited a vegetable producers' co-operative which is one the local Chamber of Agriculture takes a great deal of interest in and spends a lot of time in providing with guidance. I bought some of the produce that was on sale only to find that its quality was considerably inferior to what was available in the open market.

Waste was staring one in the eye everywhere, be it in the shape of cast off broken equipment, equipment which could have been repaired, or in unnecessary gadgets on display for reasons of status. "We are a nation of consumers," was practically everybody's repeated boast. For instance, our landlady brought me a deck chair which, had I sat on it would have collapsed because the canvas was torn at one end. All it needed was a few stitches to repair it and when I suggested this she looked at me with undisguised contempt and said, "we are not menders, we are consumers," and to prove her point she threw away a perfectly good deck chair and rushed to the nearest supermarket to buy a new one.

The atmosphere in Guadeloupe is one of great ambivalence. On the one hand, Guadeloupians are very keen on asserting that "they are as good as anybody, in fact perhaps better than anybody," while at the same

time stressing that they are a new nation, which is indeed perhaps true since two generations back there were hardly any educated Guadeloupians unless they be Creoles or Frenchmen settled in Gaudeloupe. Indeed, in a sense it is true that Guadeloupians are as good as anybody else because there is a considerable amount of democracy in the relations between people. For example, the president of the Rotary or the chairman of the biggest sugar company treat waiters and workmen as equals. Everybody seems to be on pally terms with everybody else and class distinctions are very muted indeed. The extent to which people talk to each other as if they were almost siblings is quite astonishing, especially when one remembers that the education is French and not American.

Looking at Guadeloupe I got the feeling that things would have been much better for the people themselves if they were not part of France so that they could not rely and lean upon metropolitan resources so heavily. The Caribbean islands which are independent have to struggle much harder to survive and their people show much more initiative. In addition, they are more dynamic although, of course, they are worse off. Perhaps the anecdote which best throws light on the differences which prevail between Guadeloupe and independent Caribbean islands is that of the Guadeloupe doctor who went to Haiti on holiday and was jeered at by a local who called him "slave", to which his answer was, "I may be a slave but you are an illiterate." Slavery has of course been abolished in Guadeloupe a long time ago and there is no trace of the slave mentality in the people who are if anything somewhat abrasive and prickly. Shouting as between Guadeloupians is all right but for a Frenchman from the metropolis to raise his voice would be a very grave error because, like so many people, the Guadeloupians are quite ready to bite the hand that feeds them. And so I have been reluctantly drawn to the conclusion that the worst thing that could have happened to Guadeloupe was to become part of France, not because Guadeloupe is exploited but because Guadeloupe is spoilt. If the French government did as much for backward regions in metropolitan France it would produce miracles, in Guadeloupe it produces parasitism and that is very bad for the people.

It may be interesting to *Opinion's* readers to be told that the only people who work hard in Guadeloupe are, as always, the Indians. They come from the ex-French possessions in India and unlike Kenyan and Ugandan Indians, have forgotten their mother tongue and speak only French.

THE REASON WHY

JAI NIMBKAR

THE bus had broken down and, as a constructive way of spending time, I was exchanging life histories with the man who shared two seater bench.

After he had obtained what he considered the most important p

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of information about me, he popped the inevitable question, 'When you had the chance to settle in the United States, why did you decide to come back?'

By now the phrases 'second-class citizen' and 'cultural roots' and 'a sense of belonging' had worn smooth and become meaningless. Also, frankly, I had become skeptical about their validity. I cast about for a more credible reason and suddenly hit upon the real one.

'Life is more exciting here,' I said.

He gaped. 'But I thought—'

I cut him short. 'Now just for example, take a bus journey like this. Would you say that the road is monotonously smooth?'

'Of course not.'

So the driver has to try to dodge potholes the best he can. Often he doesn't succeed. You never know at what moment you will be rudely awakened from your doze by what feels like an earthquake. Then look at the traffic. Everyone uses the road as if there were nobody else on it, and there is no telling when your driver is going to run into a buffalo or a pedestrian or a motorcycle or a bullock cart. Then suppose it has rained, and two vehicles have to pass each other, think how carefully each has to manoeuvre on to a soft shoulder, taking care not to skid on the mud, and inch forward. Think of the tension and the tremendous relief which follows when you feel all four wheels gripping the tarmac again.

'And that is not all. These days, when it has become the fashion to demonstrate against everything from police brutality to the price on onions by closing roads, you may suddenly find your way blocked by telephone poles or tractors or bullock carts. You may be forced to wait there for a couple of days.'

'I'd find that infuriating,' my fellow traveller said.

'That's what I mean,' I said. 'And if everything else fails, the bus can break down, as it has today, and the drive may announce that he does not have the tools required to repair it, and you may be held up until some kindly soul at the depot sends you a substitute bus.'

(To be concluded)

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