Brinsley Samaroo, historian (1940–2023)

Delivered as The Brinsley Samaroo Legacy Lecture, keynote in the annual History Fest of the Department of History, UWI, St Augustine, at the Alma Jordan Library, UWI, St Augustine, T&T, 6 March 2024

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ABSTRACT

This informal presentation seeks to analyze the late Brinsley Samaroo’s major work as a historian. It discusses his pioneering research and writing on labour and political struggles in Trinidad & Tobago in the last century, and his involvement in research on the indentured Indian Diaspora in that country and in the Caribbean more generally. It also notes his work as a public intellectual and cultural activist.

KEYWORDS

Brinsley Samaroo, Trinidad & Tobago, Indian Diaspora, indentured immigration, labour struggles, UWI
He was a ‘country boy’ born in 1940 in the small village of Ecclesville in southern Trinidad, where his parents owned a medium-sized estate. Like many Indo-Trinis he grew up in a Presbyterian household, but Brinsley was always deeply interested in the religions of his ancestral land, both Hinduism and Islam. He won a scholarship to attend Naparima College in San Fernando, and he participated fully in the lively social and cultural life of ‘Naps’ in the 1950s, along with people like Ken Ramchand and Winston Dookeran.

A scholarship from the government of India took him to Delhi University in the late 1950s/early 1960s, where he gained his BA and MA degrees in history. This early exposure to the ancestral homeland deeply influenced his subsequent work on the Indian Diaspora in the region. Brinsley would return to India often to research, lecture and network.

In this talk I’ll focus on his academic work and writings. They can be analyzed as belonging to two major fields or topics. There was his project of illuminating the historical experience of his own ethnic community, in his country and the region; and his focus on labour and anti-colonial struggles in twentieth-century T&T, especially those that tried to forge broad cross-ethnic alliances. There was no contradiction here in his thinking or in his practice as a historian. In this respect, Richard Drayton compares him to his contemporary Walter Rodney, who combined a special focus on African history and the Afro-Guyanese people with a broader commitment to national and regional liberation projects.

LABOUR AND POLITICAL STRUGGLES IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY T&T

From Delhi, Brinsley went on another scholarship to the University of London, where he completed a PhD (1969) thesis, *Constitutional and Political Development of Trinidad, 1898–1925*. This was all of
55 years ago, and it was truly, literally, pioneering archival research and analysis. It was never published as a separate book, I don’t know why, there’s a story there that I never understood. But I can tell you that many historians shamelessly ‘borrowed’ from it over the decades, including me for my book *A History of Modern Trinidad*. However, Brinsley published several important journal articles and conference papers from the doctoral research, on topics like the history of the Trinidad Workingmen’s Association, C.P. David (the first Black man to sit on T&T’s legislature), and the unrest in T&T between 1919 and 1921, all appearing in the early 1970s.

Brinsley was especially fascinated with the political struggles of the 1930s and early 1940s, when several leaders were moving towards inter-ethnic, class-based movements in T&T. This is why he chose to research and write a short book about Howard Nankivell, the colonial civil servant who publicly expressed sympathy for Butler and his strikers in June/July 1937, and paid a high price for so doing – Brinsley called the book *The Price of Conscience*.

And it is why he always admired Adrian Cola Rienzi, whom he had interviewed in the late 1960s/early 1970s. Rienzi, born Krishna Deonarine, emerged as the key man behind the OWTU just after the Butler Riots, and led several unions and political groups between then and 1944, which crossed ethnic lines in a more or less united labour movement. His long-awaited biography, significantly subtitled *The Life and Times of an Indo-Caribbean Progressive*, appeared in 2022/2023. It is perhaps his most important book.

Interestingly, Brinsley had played a behind-the-scenes role, as a young UWI lecturer, in the Black Power Movement here in 1968/1969 and the early 1970s, quietly speaking to and aiding various grassroots groups and trying to defuse Indo-Trinidadian suspicions and fears – Khafra Kambon spoke about this at the memorial service on campus last year. In 2014 he contributed an article on the 1970s events to an edited collection on the regional Black Power Movement.
Of course, the towering figure in T&T’s history since WW2 was Eric Williams, and Brinsley was also fascinated with his life and work. The fact that during his formal involvement in parliamentary politics between 1981 and 1991 he belonged to parties opposed to Williams’ PNM didn’t stop him from researching and writing about him. He published two articles, one about Williams’ career before 1956 (2002) and the other about his response to the 1970 uprising (2020). Then he took on the difficult task of editing and condensing a sprawling manuscript Williams had written in the 1970s but never completed or published. Titled *The Blackest Thing in Slavery Was Not the Black Man*, this appeared in 2022.

Perhaps I can mention here two books which might be justly called ‘popular history’ and which testified to Brinsley’s role as a public historian of T&T. He and I co-authored a book meant for young people and general readers titled *Understanding T&T: Environment, History and Culture of a Nation* (2019). And just before he died, he completed a lavishly illustrated book on the history of San Fernando in the 1900s, commissioned by the City Council under former mayor Junia Regrello.

**INDO-TRINIDADIAN AND INDO-CARIBBEAN HISTORY**

Unquestionably, Brinsley was a leader in a small group of scholars who pioneered the study of this topic, starting in the early 1970s, and he did so much work here it’s hard to know where to begin. With David Dabydeen, he co-edited two important collections of articles: *India in the Caribbean* (1987) and *Across the Dark Waters: Ethnicity and Indian Identity in the Caribbean* (1996). With others, he edited a massive, handsome reprint of a 1945 publication with a lot of new material for the 150th anniversary of Indian Arrival here (1995).

Brinsley wrote many articles and papers about the Canadian Mission and Presbyterian Indo-Trinis, far too many to list – he coined the word ‘Presbindians’ – and edited a small but valuable

In addition to all these publications, Brinsley was a leading member of a network of Indian Diaspora scholars which was held together by many conferences and seminars (in T&T, Suriname, Guyana, Mauritius, Fiji, India and elsewhere), by shared publications, and latterly by online technologies. This is why his death was mourned by so many people from all over the world, but especially all the places where indentured Indians went. Brinsley helped enormously to develop scholarship on the Diaspora, from the appearance of Hugh Tinker’s influential book *A New System of Slavery* fifty years ago, to last year when he died – by then it would be hard for anyone to keep up with the outpouring of publications in the field.

Brinsley’s academic life was based here at UWI in the History Department, where he rose through the ranks from 1968 to his retirement in 2005 (with a break for formal political life between 1986 and 1992). He served as Head of the Department twice, but whether he was its head or not, he was a pillar of stability and strength and a mentor to many, as well as a much-loved teacher. He also served as a Senior Research Fellow at the then-new University of T&T between 2005 and 2010. In the last twenty years of his life, he set up his office here at the Alma Jordan Library (UWI), where he was treated like a staff member. He came nearly every day, reading and writing, and he talked to and helped anyone who approached him (at the memorial service I said he was ‘insanely generous’ with his time and energy).

As so many have said, he was very much a public intellectual who spoke and lectured at innumerable places and for many diverse groups. He was important to the activities of The Friends
of Mr Biswas NGO, and he co-edited a new collection of the journalism pieces of Seepersad Naipaul, which will be launched at the Bocas Lit Fest here next month. He rescued the archives of the Caroni sugar company when it was closed and worked hard to establish a Sugar Museum at Sevilla House (in this he was defeated by the politicians). Just a couple of weeks before he fell ill, he was in Rio Claro, near his birthplace, to speak at the erection of a plaque to honour five people killed during the labour protests of June/July 1937.

Brinsley died in July 2023, after a life well spent and after making a huge contribution in several different spheres – as I’ve tried to show. He combined his work as a professional, academic historian and university teacher with being a public intellectual and an activist for many different political, social and cultural causes over six decades. His work as a historian fed into and informed his public and activist roles – history was alive in his life and practice!