

HOW I CAME TO KNOW LENIN

by CHEDDI JAGAN

My acquaintance with Lenin was not the kind which developed from childhood days. Nor was it one of a dramatic, sudden character. Rather, it was a stage by stage development.

I was born in 1918, at the beginning of the new era for mankind that the Russian Revolution a year earlier had ushered in.

Without realising it at the time, my early experience on a sugar plantation prepared me for a later understanding and acceptance of the ideas of Lenin.

The British monopoly, Booker Brothers McConnell and Co. Ltd., owned plantation Port Mourant where I was born and grew up. Here the class struggle was at its sharpest. The sugar plantation was a world of its own. Or rather it was two worlds: the world of exploiters and the world of the exploited: the world of whites and the world of non-whites. One was the world of the managers and the European staff in their splendid mansions; the other, the world of the labourers in their logies in the 'niggeryard' and the 'bound-coolie-yard'. The mansions were electricity lit; the logies had kerosene lamps. It was not unusual to hear it said that the mules were better treated than human beings, for the stables had electric light. It was not that electricity could not have been taken to the workers' quarters and residences. The owners could easily have generated more electricity at very little extra cost to satisfy the needs of all. But electricity, like so many other things, was a status symbol.

Between those white and non-white worlds there were distances - social (inhabitants of these two worlds did not associate) and physical (the mansions were out of bounds). There was also a psychological distance.

Between the worlds of exploiters and exploited was the middle stratum of shopkeepers, pandits, parsons, teachers, dispensers, bookkeepers and drivers, who all depended for their status and social position on the patronage of the manager. They could all have been penalised at any time if they lost favour with him.

In the United States, as a universal student, the first thing I became very conscious of was the question of colour. This was an entirely new experience.

Washington, D.C., and Howard University comprised a world with Washington as the capital, but to me as a student, it was two cities of Whites and a city of Coloureds. And there was little contact between the two.

Washington, D.C., Harlem and Chicago taught me and impressed deeply on my mind the problems of the American Negro, his fears and his plight.

In Chicago, I lived on the borders of the slums, but I worked on the

fringe of the Gold Coast at 211 East Delaware Street. Here, middle-class white Americans lived - small businessmen, shop girls and others who wanted a fashionable and respectable address. Sometimes two or three girls would live together in a fairly small apartment ~~or share a small flat~~, because they could not afford a high rent. Also, my 'graveyard shift' permitted me to observe other sides of life - quite a few of the girls were being kept in 'respectable' quarters by wealthy businessmen. I was actually living through my sociology course; one of my texts was called Gold Coast and the Slugs.

My room at 19 West Chestnut Street bordered the slums. I often ate meals in Clark Street, costing twenty-five or thirty cents, and there I came into close physical contact with urban poor white Americans. In 'Rughouse' Square nearby, I listened to speeches reflecting their miseries and sufferings.

My experiences were rich, but my formal education was limited. To a large extent, it reflected the poverty of the US and western educational system. That's why I can fully understand the present-day revolts of the students.

Now that I look back, my formal university education, which armed me with the degrees of Bachelor of Science and Doctor of Dental Surgery, was not a real education. I was professionally trained.

The most I can say is that my interest in the Indian political struggle against British colonialism and my social science courses brought about a kind of an awareness of what was going on around me.

From texts by the historian Charles Beard I had learnt about the American War of Independence and the American Constitution. In my 'Economics for Consumers' course, I had come to realize the powerful role played by advertising. Nehru's autobiography, Towards Freedom, inspired and fired me; The Robber Barons explained how the powerful in America had made their fortunes; George Seldes's weekly, In Fact, had given me a new perspective of America and of the world, and a peep into socialism.

But something was still lacking. The picture was not quite clear. I still had many illusions. Like many others coming from depressed and undeveloped colonial countries, I was greatly impressed with the material achievements of the USA. I, too, had imbibed the propaganda that the United States was a land of unlimited opportunity, that with hard work success was assured.

Not having a proletarian world outlook, I had applauded the incorrect decision of the Congress leaders, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, in support nor to embarrass the British government during the world war fascism. I had also silently applauded Subhas Chandra Bose for his decision to join the German and Japanese fascists in the hope of achieving his objective to free India from the British Empire.

It was only after I started reading Lenin that the picture began to become clear. A few of Lenin's pamphlets from the Little Lenin Library Series came

into my possession, not while at the university, but after graduating. My wife had brought them after a brief visit to the USA after we had returned to Guyana in 1943.

I read avidly. Lenin's ideas began to shed light on the dark corners of my thinking. My experience on the sugar plantation in Guyana and in the ghettos, "slums" and "the Gold Coast" of the USA began to take on a new meaning. The struggle of classes, I began to see with Lenin, was "what lies at the bottom of events". I began to relate politics, economic race and culture from the Leninist postulates that the economic structure formed the basis, the foundation upon which was built the political and ideological superstructure; that the political superstructure, in turn, exerted a reciprocal influence on the economic basis.

The functioning of the State and its coercive apparatus, the difference between capitalist democracy and socialist democracy; the necessity to forge an alliance between the working class and the peasantry, the role of the intellectuals, the role of the national liberation struggle - on these and many other questions Lenin gave answers that were not only exhaustive but also simply put and easily understood.

Lenin's ideas not only fired the blood of the exploited workers and peasants in the days of Czarist tyranny. They conditioned them for the sacrifice necessary for the building of the Soviet Socialist State. Above all, they have helped to liberate other areas of the world and to instill hope and create confidence in those remaining countries where colonialism, neocolonialism and imperialism still hold sway.

Note 1 - "Bound-coolie-yard" - Immigrants from India each contracted to serve a minimum of five years on a Guyana sugar estate before he or she could be repatriated to India.

There were separate 'yards' for the 'free' African workers and the indentured East Indians.

Note 2 - "drivers" - Not car or cab-drivers, but drivers of men; usually East Indians who had qualified by serving to be in charge of a gang. My father became one.