

Address by Dr. Cheddi Jagan at Conference  
and Festival on the Occasion of the 150th  
Anniversary of the East Indian Presence in  
the Caribbean, York University, Canada  
July 6 - 10, 1988.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

As we meet to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the Indian Presence in the Caribbean, most of us are conscious of one common denominator in our lives. And that is sugar. It is there that our history is rooted with blood and brutality. And bitter it has been.

As Dr. Eric Williams, in his Capitalism and Slavery aptly put it: "strange that an article like sugar so sweet and necessary for human existence should have occasioned such crime and bloodshed".

One of my first pamphleteering venture was "Bitter Sugar". It was related to the gunning down of the Enmore Martyrs in June 1948. But it was not the first time <sup>that</sup> ~~an~~ sugar workers were shot and killed by the bullets of the plantocracy. Our history is replete with crimes against humanity.

Under slavery, there was a vicious circle of punishment resistance, escape, capture, punishment. The masters acted in the only way they knew: more cruelty and more punishment; the slaves reacted in the only way open to them: sullenness, non-cooperation, escape, suicide and passive resistance which alternated with sabotage and revolt.

Attempted rebellion was drowned in blood; and escape was treated brutally. Rodway's History of British Guiana tells us that after the Demerara East Coast slave revolt "most of the bodies of the rebels were hung in chains, in some cases, the heads only being stuck on poles".

It was deemed "a disposition of sugar."  
Indentureship was slavery in another guise. A graphic picture of the sugar plantation with its "bound/coolie yard" for the

Indian immigrants was painted by Edward Jenkins. In his The Coolie : His Rights and Wrongs, he wrote:

■ Take a large factory in Manchester, or Birmingham, or Belfast, build a wall round it, shut in its work people from all intercourse, save at rare intervals, with the outside world, keep them in absolute heathen ignorance, and get all the work you can out of them, treat them not unkindly, leave their social habits and relations to themselves, as matters not concerning you who make the money from their labour, and you would have constituted a little community resembling, in so small degree, a sugar estate village in British ~~Gu~~ Guiana.<sup>1</sup>

Immigrants were not always imported because of a shortage of labour. Large numbers were brought whenever the price of sugar went down.

The planters were less solicitous about the conditions for their workers than they were about their profits. Indentured immigrants were subjected to very severe penalties. Their homes could be invaded at any time and they could be forced out to work. Their place was either at work, in hospital, or in jail.

The immigrants were forced to answer a daily muster roll, and failure to attend made them liable to a penalty not exceeding £5 or imprisonment with hard labour up to one month. For not performing five tasks per week for which five shillings were paid, they were liable to forfeit one month's wages to the employer or to to serve with or without hard labour for any term not exceeding 14 days in jail.

A Royal Commission in 1870 pointed out that the indentured Indian immigrant was trapped by the law, "in the hands of a system which elaborately twists and turns him about, but always leaves ~~hi~~ him face to face with an impossibility."<sup>2</sup>

Stoppages of wages were "everyday occurrences". Severe penalties were imposed for absenteeism.

Absence from work for seven consecutive days was regarded as desertion. To prevent "idling" and desertion, immigrants had at all times to carry passes and certificates of exemption. Any immigrant found more than two miles away from home during working hours was liable to be arrested without a warrant and taken to the police station nearest to the ~~police station~~, *estate*

And punishment was severe. Elizabeth Taylor, a worker of Plantation Vreed-en-Hoop, told a Commission of Enquiry:

The coolies were locked up in the sick house and the next morning they were flogged with a cat-o-nine-tails; the manager was in the house, and they flogged the people under his house; they were tied to the post of the gallery of the manager's house; I cannot tell how many licks; he give them enough. I saw blood. When they were flogged at the manager's house they rubbed salt pickle on their backs.<sup>3</sup>

On 9 January 1839, the BRITISH EMANCIPATOR<sup>OR</sup>, the official organ of the anti-Slavery Society of Great Britain, reported that "the British Public has been deceived with the idea that the coolies are doing 'well'; such is not the fact; the poor friendless creatures are miserably treated".<sup>4</sup>

As a result of ill-treatment, including corporal punishment, 236 of the 396 immigrants who arrived in two ships in 1838 in British Guiana, returned to India in 1843, whilst almost two-thirds of the remainder died. The slave-like conditions led to the temporary cessation of Indian immigration from 11 July 1838 until it was revived under pressure by the planters in 1845.<sup>5</sup>

I recall my mother, who slaved for 8 cents a day in the canefields and never had a chance of going to school, remarking:

-Bhaya, abee prapa punish, meaning: Brother, we greatly punished.

Sir Willian Des Voeux, a former stipendiary magistrate, attacked the indenture system and categorically stated that he disliked "extremely the task of enforcing its draconic laws". Another such exceptional person was James Crosby, Immigration Agent

General. For many years he fought a running battle with the planters, with whom Governor <sup>H</sup>Pincks always aligned himself.

The unrelieved misery of the sugar workers frequently led them into ~~extreme~~ <sup>nichtant</sup> action. Strikes, disturbances and ~~re~~ "riots" became the recurrent patterns. In the century preceding my entry into politics there had been sixteen major eruptions involving, in most cases, loss of life. Of these, all but two were on the sugar plantations.

Sugar workers were, gunned down, ~~They paid~~ <sup>paid</sup> with their blood -- at Devonshire Castle (September 1872) - 5 killed and 6 wounded; at Non Pariel (October 1896) - 6 killed and 58 wounded; at Friends (May 1903) - 5 killed and 7 wounded; at Lusignan (September 1912) - 1 killed; at Rose Hall (March 1913) - 15 killed; at Ruimveldt (April 1924) - 13 killed; at Leonora (1939) -- 4 killed; at Enmore (June 1948) - 5 killed and 8 wounded.

Objective conditions generally favoured struggle and <sup>and revolution</sup> rebellion. But subjective factors <sup>had not yet crystallised</sup> were underdeveloped. The ruling class, constituted by the planters, the commercial magnates and the colonial administrators, practised well the methods of divide and rule. Their plunder and accumulation was based not only on coercion but also on racist ideology and subtle methods aimed at creating and perpetuating competition and conflict.

Racist ideology depicted white as superiority and non-white as inferior. At first, cultural traits <sup>equated with</sup> heathen, pagan ~~to~~ were the badges of inferiority. Later, physical features -- skin colour, mouth, nose, hair texture -- were linked to alleged innate inferiority in intelligence, initiative and morality.

The hierarchical plantation structure was white at the top mulatto or mixed at the middle and black at the bottom. The permanence of the system depended not only on the superior attitude of the white overlords but also on the black slave's feeling of inferiority. ~~A culturalisation and~~ Cultural whiteness ?

did not remove him from this predicament; all it did was to confer some benefits like being allowed to become a headman or a house slave.

As non-white, the Indian immigrants also were subjected to ruling class racist ideology. They too inherited an inferiority complex. Unlike the white immigrants who came and were integrated into Northamerican society, they came at the bottom in the form on indentured labour to do lowpaid, unskilled work which native Indian or Black labour could not be induced to do.<sup>6</sup> They were not only exploited but also despised -- despised because they brought a culture alien to Western customs and values. The epithet coolie depicted their plight.

Differential treatment <sup>and unequal burdens</sup> by the plantocracy towards the subordinate groups were also conducive to <sup>the creation of</sup> ethnic <sup>divisions</sup> boundaries and racial conflict.

Indian immigrants were relegated to field work as weeders at 25-45 cents per day as compared with Blacks as cane-cutters at 60-85 per day; they were also debarred from skilled work such as <sup>mechanics and pan (sugar) boilers. On the other hand</sup> ~~engineering and pawn-bribery pawn-boiling.~~

Credit was extended to Portuguese <sup>and Indian</sup> retailers but denied to Creoles and Coloured.

The African gang generally had an African as a driver; it was most common for a Chinese to have a Chinese. But the Indian immigrants had an African driver.

Attempts by the freed ex-slaves to establish themselves as an independent peasantry were frustrated either through the overdraining or flooding of their lands, or by the merchants being permitted to import cheap food, with which they could not compete.

In time certain ruling class racial stereotypes were established. According to Dennis Bartels:

... ruling class racist ideology allowed for distinctions

between different non-white ethnic groups. Many accounts by plantation owners, plantation managers, colonial officials, and Christian missionaries characterised East Indians as (1) Industrious and hardworking; (2) thrifty to the point of greed; and (3) lacking in Christian morals..... On the other hand Afro-Guyanese were often characterised as (1) physically strong, but lazy, carefree, irresponsible, financially improvident, and intellectually dim; (2) physically repulsive because of their facial features, skin colour, and hair type; and (3) child-like, trusting, and easily misled by more intelligent, unscrupulous people.<sup>7</sup>

Rivalry and confrontation developed at the middle class level. The Indo-Guyanese emerged historically later as a middle class; they were still bottled up in the plantations when the Afro-Guyanese had migrated to Georgetown, the capital, where they occupied working class positions in the docks, transport, postal services, stores and middle class positions in the professions lower ranks of the civil service.

According to Leo Despres:

... the public service in Guyana has been a most important source of employment, particularly for urban Africans, during all of this century and much of the last. In 1891, for example, Africans and a few Europeans made up almost the entire teaching profession. As early as 1900, Africans comprised an overwhelming majority of the unpensionable staff in practically every department of the public service. In 1940 they represented 67 percent of all pensionable public servants. And by 1960, they ranked second only to Europeans among departmental heads in the public service. By way of contrast, in 1931 only 12 percent of all Guyanese professionals and public servants (6,202) were East Indians. Also in 1931, East Indians contributed only 7 percent to the 1,397 Guyanese employed in the teaching profession. As late as 1960, East Indians comprised but 16 percent of all pensionable civil servants, and only six Indians, compared to twenty six Africans, could be counted among the fifty-seven departmental heads.<sup>8</sup>

Middle class competition for scarce resources particularly jobs in the Civil Service led to different tendencies. Among the Afro-Guyanese, there was simultaneously a conservative and radical tendency : conservative in wanting hegemony of the lower ranks of

the bureaucracy and radical in wanting the removal of the colour bar in administration, commerce and industry.

The Indo-Guyanese middle class also had dual tendencies : conservative as landlords, businessmen, money lenders and rice millers in relation to the Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese working class and peasantry; radical in relation to the Afro-Guyanese middle-class.

Politically, this complex situation led to contradictory political stances. Some Indo-Guyanese, as part of the petty-bourgeois class, assumed a position of junior partner to the British ruling class : a sharing of the spoils. While the British expatriate dominated the sugar estates and commerce, they had a dominant position in the rice industry and retail trade. Indeed, it was the Indians who mainly later purchased the abandoned sugar estates and as landlords, rice millers, money lenders and shopkeepers made Essequibo/into the feudal coast. In this sense they wanted the maintenance of the colonial status quo.

On the other hand, those middle class Indo-Guyanese who felt culturally oppressed and were shut out from the civil service or were denied promotional opportunities wanted changes. These centred chiefly around literacy and properly qualifications for the franchise and for entitlement to stand as a candidate at elections -- qualifications which debarred Indians from obtaining seats of influence in the legislature. For this reason they agitated for adult suffrage and limited self government.<sup>9</sup>

Afro-Guyanese who were not affected by literacy tests had filled seat in the legislature long before the Indo-Guyanese. At the 1947 elections with a restricted franchise, MPCA and East Indian Association leader, Ayube Edun, lost the predominantly East Indian-dominated East Berbice constituency to Dr. Consalves of the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP).

The Afro-Guyanese middle strata, like his Indo-Guyanese counterpart also assumed contradictory political positions ":

on the one hand, conservatism as with the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP) opposing adult suffrage in 1948, living with foreign vested interests in bringing down the PPP government of 1953, and later opposing independence with the PPP in government; and on the other, radicalism as in support for the Garvey movement for the removal of the colour bar and Black second-class status.

Apart from class status, other factors contributed to Indo-Caribbean political leadership. These pertain to historical development and ideology. *A person shapes circumstances as*

*much as circumstances shape a person, as much a person shapes circumstances.*

In Guyana, as compared with Trinidad and Surinam, economic and political power was more concentrated. The plantocracy exercised hegemony. For a long time, British Guiana was called "Booker's Guiana", Booker McConnell and Co. being to Guiana what United Fruit Co. was to Central America. In order to secure a cheap and abundant supply of labour power in and around the sugar plantations, the planters frustrated the development of an independent peasantry.

The Land Code of 1839 not only set a high price for land but also stipulated that only a minimum of 100 acres of Crown Lands could be acquired. It was only on 14 January 1890 that Crown lands, which had cost ten dollars per acre, were reduced to one dollar. According to Malcolm Cross, it was only after the first change in 1890 and the subsequent one of 1898, when the sugar industry was in decline and the battle to retain labour became, for a brief period, of lesser consequence, that the planters acquiesced to the possibility of a landed peasantry.

Even then the settlements which could be opened up, and the encouragement given by the Government, were almost solely for rice growing - an occupation peculiarly suited to the Indians but one which was regarded as anathema by the blacks.<sup>9</sup>

Conditions in British Guiana thus tended towards a more aggravated form of class struggle.



In Trinidad, the ruling class pursued a more liberal land policy. Fertile land, which did not free problems of drainage and irrigation as in British Guiana, were earlier and more readily made available to ex-slaves and ex-indentured immigrants for sugar cane and cocoa farming. This facilitated the growth of a large petty-bourgeois class. A similar situation developed in Suriname.

The petty bourgeois class from which leadership generally came, what someone described as "doctor politics" has a dual tendency - working class need capitalist. The higher the economic ladder the petty bourgeois ascended the greater the tendency towards capitalism. This ~~accounted for~~ accounted for a reformist approach -- the fight for changes within the existing system of capitalism. In this context trade union struggle also took on the character of "economism", namely, the struggle for improved wages and working conditions and not for the revolutionary overthrow of the existing socio-economic order. This was the position of leaders like Madase Sagan Maraj in Trinidad and Tobago and Ayube + Edun and C.R. Jacob both at the political and trade union levels. Edun was enamoured with British liberal democracy, although capitalist and imperialist; his ideology was rational practical idealism, and in his espousal of meritocracy, the rational use of manpower and a supreme council of the intelligentsia, he seemed to have been influenced by Plato's elitist concepts and Brahminism.

Then there were those like Rudranath Capildeo of Trinidad who were influenced by the ideology of social democracy, particularly the British variant. They were unhappy about the misery and inequality of capitalism, particularly in its imperialist/colonialist manifestations. However, their approach was reformist ! to attain democratic socialism by working for reforms within the capitalist system.

Other Indo-Caribbean leaders like # Cola Rizonzi of Trinidad, myself and others based ourselves on the ideology of the working class, Marxism-Leninism and saw that capitalist/imperialist exploitation and oppression could come about by

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