ADDRESS BY
HIS EXCELLENCY DR CHEDDI JAGAN
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MULTICULTURALISM IN GUYANA

On the subject of Multi-culturalism Guyana reflects very faithfully the social reality of the wide Caribbean, particularly the Anglo-phone Caribbean.

As you probably know, Caribbean peoples like to say of themselves, "All ah we is wan". Because Caribbean peoples live in the same geographical area and have had similar, if not identical histories and experiences of plantation dominance, colonial exploitation and post-colonial under-development and poverty, the assumption is held that we are a homogeneous mass. Yet, it is possible for a Jamaican to suffer from cultural shock upon landing in Trinidad or Guyana, such as he may not experience in Britain.

In all probability, the saying, "All ah we is wan" is to be understood more as an expression of our aspiration than as a description of our Caribbean reality. Probably, it can be regarded as a slogan under which perceptive and influential Caribbean leaders in social economic, political and religious affairs, can marshal their efforts and mobilise their constituents to foster greater regional co-operation, if not unity.

The creation of a large enough area and interest bloc in trade and development is in the best interest of Caribbean peoples, who live in a world in which economic and political power is organised in a political colossus and in economic conglomerates and cartels which threaten to overwhelm small and relatively isolated units, such as we are.

A condition *sine qua non* for the realisation of a workable degree of integration among its peoples, at local and regional levels, is the recognition that Caribbean societies are pluralistic and heterogeneous in a significant number of ways. Our societies are better classified as multi-cultural rather than mono-cultural. Co-operation and integration must come in spite of this heterogeneity and cultural diversity.

Any drive to achieve integration, of any kind, however urgent and desirable the need for this integration at the regional level, that ignores or simplifies the nature of our plurality, will not only result in self-defeat; it will generate enough suspicion and cynicism that will frustrate future efforts at integration

before these are even conceived. We can at least learn from the break-up of the Federation that integration cannot be forced.

Equally, any such drive at the national level will result only in the alienation of significant numbers of people and further postpone the much desired integration, however much our mottoes entreat us that we are "Out of many one People", that "Together we aspire, together we achieve", and that we are "One People, One Nation, One Destiny".

Social anthropologists and sociologists, like R.T. Smith, M.G. Smith, H.H. Hoetink, Patterson, Despres and others, have explored and articulated the nature of Caribbean societies. They have convincingly demonstrated our pluralism in social and cultural terms. Other scholars have reminded us that closely related to our social and cultural pluralism is another dimension of the problem, as it related to Caribbean societies; that of our religious diversity. The Caribbean region is a laboratory of religions and cults.

Here are to be found four of the major "world religions" - Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Here, too, African religious ideas exert a powerful and pervasive influence - as powerful and as pervasive as African rhythms in music and in dance, and of African themes and motifs in art in sculpture.

But plural as we maybe, we are not discrete societies. Our ability to communicate with one another, our growing appreciation for one another's way of life, music, art, literature, drama, our common love for cricket, for steelpan music, for calypsos in their changing styles, signal that there is a growing unity out of our diversity, and that our cultural differences enhance the richness of our multi-cultural mosaic.

Multiculturalism as a social fact of Guyanese life antedates Independence. It is integrally related to the way in which the country's population was initially recruited. That, in turn, was directly connected to the demands of the sugar plantations. It was to serve the needs of these economic plants that Europeans, Africans and Asians came, or were brought here, as managers, overseers or conscripted laborers. The new "arrivants" joined the indigenous people - dubbed Amerindians - to occupy the same land space.

The intention was not to shape a society. One, nevertheless, evolved. Like Topsy, in Beecher Stowe's <u>Uncle Tom's Cabin</u>, it simply "growed".

The diversity of the Guyanese population and culture has been sufficient to warrant the sociological categorisation of the country as pluralistic, comprising as it does, of several distinct, ethnic-cultural segments - Amerindians, Europeans, Africans, Portuguese, East Indians and Chinese. People of African and Indian ancestry form the two largest racial-ethnic blocs. Each

ethnic group has been shaped by its own internal dynamics as well as by its inter-action with the other groups through time.

However, a degree of commingling, at the interstices of the cultural segments, resulted in the emergence of people who have been described as Mixed. This mixing, in varying degrees, has been across and between all the several segments of the society.

No single symbol emerged with which all Guyanese could identify. They were held together in loose co-existence by the power and politics of a common colonial master.

But a social consensus based on race and colour, class pretensions and snobbery, came to be subscribed to. It was inculcated by education in colonial schools and propagated by missionary religion.

Many Guyanese accepted as normative, the social and cultural patterns of the dominant economic and political "greater tradition:" (to use a Robert Redfield category), and judged themselves and their own traditions as inferior *vis-a-vis* those patterns.

Cultural superiority cane to be identified with a certain skin pigmentation; "European" taste in music, mores and ways; affiliation to some form of Anglo-Saxon Christianity; ability to communicate in Standard English and a preference for things external to Guyana. Inferiority was identified with the opposite of these things.

This subscription to the norms of the "greater tradition" notwithstanding, many Guyanese maintained patterns of life and behaviour that were in keeping with their own traditions and beliefs. The "smaller tradition" (a la Redfield) persisted in such strength as to give the segments their distinctiveness in culture as in race-ethnicity. That persistence was a form of resistance. The subscription to the "greater tradition" allowed for social intercourse at a "national" level.

Independence introduced the symbols of nationhood: flag, national anthem and Pledge, Constitution, monument and motto. It put political power into the hands of the representatives of Guyanese. But it did not create of Guyanese, "One People, One Nation" with " One Destiny".

Notions and practices related to the social and cultural consensus of pre-independent times have persisted. Ethnic groups have maintained their distinctive identities. We cannot be truly described as a "melting pot" of peoples. In fact, it may well be said that the maintenance of our distinctive identities is almost tantamount to an ethnic-cultural encystment.

Political developments in Guyana, since Independence, if not before, have led to a polarization in the relationships between the two major ethnic segments, and to the alienation of many from the process of nation building. Even the symbols of nationhood have been held in suspicion, if not derision, by many.

Today, the challenge to Cultural Development and of Culture to Development is: HOW CAN THE STORY OF OUR DIVERSITY BE INTEGRATED INTO THE LARGER STORY OF GUYANA; HOW CAN THE GUYANESENESS OF ALL GROUPS BE DEMONSTRATED? This is the challenge that multi-culturalism must face creatively. It is only by combing the two - **Unity and Diversity** - together in a single overarching whole can Guyanese recognise who they are as one people, one nation with a common destiny.

To integrate diversity into a Guyanese story, in a way that is not contrived, demands a theme and a framework that is yet to evolve.

Politically, it has been strongly felt that the story of the development of Guyana may be told in terms of class consciousness and class conflict. This argument has its strong merits. Another claim is that that story maybe told in terms of the persistence of social and ethnic factors and of the strength of those factors to influence political choice and determine developmental involvement. The argument runs that social segments have found their racial and ethnic identities stronger than their class roles.

A national cultural policy would have to recognise both class and ethnic factors as important in the shaping of the Guyanese consciousness. There is no need to strain out one set of factors from the others, except for the purpose of analysis.

It will be useful in relation to the articulation of a national cultural policy that will promote multi-culturalism, to conceive of Guyana as a culturally rich mosaic, remembering that a mosaic is a pattern, a whole that integrates and transcends the constituent elements.

Our internal diversity is only a part of our story. After all, each ethnic group has been shaped as well by its interaction with other groups, and with the past that all Guyanese have played a part in shaping. We have been "creolised". We are no longer Indians or Africans, Portuguese or Chinese, Amerindians or Europeans. We are Guyanese - a peculiar people and a particular nation.

But national identity is not only internal, in the sense that it derives from what the nation's history tells its people. It is also **external** in the sense that that history is projected

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Comparison indicates what sets Guyanese apart from other peoples. It also indicates what it means to be a Guyanese; that is, it provides clues as to the values that Guyanese as a people hold, and it shows how those values may obstruct or facilitate the process of development.

Future directions in Cultural Development for Guyana will be mindful of the significance of racial ethnicity. But those directions will have to emphasise the quest for a common path in the development of a sense of community, across racial/barriers, in the interest of the national good.

Future directions will seek to translate the definition of culture as the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise a social group, into similar terms that are of national applicability.

To end on an optimistic note: This translation has already begun. The people themselves have begun it; and why not? After all, a culture, whatever its form or description is a people's way of life, a people's "thing". Government but facilitate what a people develops.

Thank You.

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