

THE STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE

"WE WERE CLOBBERED, JAILED, DETAINED AND RESTRICTED"

TEXT OF RADIO AND TELEVISION BROADCAST TO THE NATION BY HIS EXCELLENCY DR. CHEDDI B. JAGAN, PRESIDENT OF THE COOPERATIVE REPUBLIC OF GUYANA.

SATURDAY, MAY 15, 1993

My dear fellow Guyanese,

Greetings!

Independence Day is around the corner. For the first time in many years, May 26 will be celebrated in an appropriate and many faceted way.

This is how it should be. Not only because it is the most important day in our history, but also because 5th October 1992 has brought a new spirit of independence and freedom. You can now feel it in the air.

In the past, emphasis was placed on Republic Day with Mashramani, which we will continue to celebrate. Now, we want to emphasise also Independence. Now, we want to rediscover ourselves and our lovely country.

I want to say something about these two concepts - **Independence** and **Republic**.

When the American fought for their freedom, they produced a Declaration of Independence, based on a break from the monarchical system for a republican system, and successfully fought a war to attain their objectives.

In a monarchy, the King/Queen is sovereign, and his/her power is absolute, based on "divine right". That's why the phrase: "the King can do no wrong". Incidentally, in the course of the struggle for democracy, a King of England was beheaded, and the absolute monarchy was changed to a constitutional monarchy.

In a Republic, power comes from the people: the people are sovereign.

We took our cue from the Americans in the early days of our struggle for freedom. At the Independence Talks in London, the PPP called for immediate independence and the Indian form of a Republic, where the Queen is head of the Commonwealth but not head of the country, as was established here in the 1970-1980 period.

The PNC's position was different. In 1960, it opposed immediate independence; in 1962, it tied independence with a call for a change of the voting system. And on republican status, it said that it was in favour of it, but for a later date. That PNC position peeved the British Government's delegation, which stated: if you want a republic, you might as well have it from the beginning.

Why did we fight for independence? Because life was hard and conditions were abominable. Sugar was "King", and British Guiana was called Booker's Guiana - Bookers meaning Booker Bros, McConnell and Co., which monopolised the political, economic, social and cultural life of the country.

The sugar plantocracy was buttressed in the Essequibo county by a semi-feudal aristocracy - an octopus combination of landlord/ricemiller/shopkeeper/moneylender, under whose grip the tenant/farmer started and ended his crop in debt.

We had a typical colonial economy: the production and export of food and raw materials [sugar and bauxite] and the importation of manufactured goods - the same pattern as in the days of slavery, except that the slaves were not being brought from outside; the wage slaves were already here. Their sweat and labour assisted an overseas aluminum magnate to leave on his death a personal fortune of \$200 million; it also helped to build an overseas Booker's empire.

Outside of the sugar belt, cattle and sheep, according to the Moyne Commission, were living an amphibious existence like alligators - meaning no drainage, so as to prevent the emergence of an independent farming community.

As a result a sugar worker in 1945 told the British Royal Commission, headed by Lord Moyne, that he had to walk five or six miles to the backdam everyday and to work from dawn to dusk; further, that he had no rice field, no cow and no money. When he was asked by the Chairman: "How much did you earn last week?" he replied: "one can earn from \$5.00 to \$10.00 a week but as I am an old man I cannot earn more than \$5.00 to \$7.00, which is not sufficient. The week I buy clothes I cannot buy rations."

An official survey in Georgetown in 1942 showed that the cost of living was 60% higher than in 1938, just a few years before; that the working class family's expenses were greater than its income; that an average family of five persons earned \$7.41 per week but spent \$8.23; that women had to do domestic work to augment the family income; and as many as nine persons were living in single tenement rooms.

A Nutrition Committee report disclosed that 25% of school children were necessitous.

Material hardships were linked with the denial of civil and political rights.

There was apartheid in the sugar estates, the bauxite town, McKenzie, and on the bauxite river boat, R.H. Carr.

As a youth, I experienced apartheid at the Port Mourant sugar estate; as a dentist, I experienced the same at McKenzie. I had gone there in answer to an advertisement by the Demerara Bauxite Company for a part-time dentist. After all the formalities, the company officials faced a dilemma - where to accommodate me and my wife overnight. Since it was inconvenient to put us up in the fenced Watooka compound for whites only, we were given a room at the hospital!

There was also a kind of apartheid at the exclusive Georgetown Club and the Park Hotel. And Guyanese of colour could hardly be seen working in the banks and insurance companies. And in the Civil Service, there was almost a colour bar against which the Junior Civil Service Association agitated.

An exclusive few in the Gulf Club enjoyed a lease to a large area of land in Georgetown. The PPP Government cancelled the lease and converted the land into the National Park for the many to have recreation.

The right to vote was restricted. There were also restrictions on who could contest a seat in parliament. At the same time, we were faced with abominations like this one: the head of the "sugar gods" had lost his seat at the 1947 elections, yet he was nominated to the Legislative Council by the Governor.

But that was not all. Pamphlets and books which could be bought in the streets of London were banned in Guyana. Several crates of books I had imported from England were seized and burnt. Many leaders, including Janet Jagan, were jailed for being in possession of banned, so-called "subversive literature".

Many prominent West Indians and others were banned from entering Guiana. And Ms. Jagan and I were also banned from entering certain West Indian Islands.

Yes, our struggle for Independence was long and bitter because it was linked to change through structural adjustment - not the kind of structural adjustment we hear so much about today. Our structural adjustment was meant to end colonial rule and foreign political, economic, social and cultural domination.

Our Independence struggle was hard and was complicated by the Cold War. We were clobbered, jailed, detained and restricted. Some of our comrades were tried on treason charges. We were removed through force and chicanery from government on two occasions, 1953 and 1964.

Independence finally came on a platter to the PNC in 1966. Since then, under the past administration, it has been 26 wasted years. All we have to show are the symbols of Independence - the Flag, the National Anthem and the Coat of Arms.

For the vast majority, Independence has meant misery, pain and hopelessness. This is not how it could have been.

As for me, I have no bitterness, no recrimination. A big moment in my life was in New York in April 1990 at the editorial office of the liberal American weekly, the NATION. Tears of joy welled up in my eyes as I heard Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. say that he was sorry for what he had done thirty years before, and that a great injustice had been done to me. Schlesinger as Chief Adviser had recommended to President Kennedy in 1962 that Burnham and not Jagan must be supported in Guyana.

Actually, the injustice was not against me, but against our nation and our people - an injustice which led to so much suffering.

As we celebrate Independence Day, let us honour our heroes who, from the days of Cuffy, fought to free our nation. And let our past be a guide for action in the future.

And a special word to the younger generation. I know that much of the significance of Independence has been lost to you. Those who are responsible for this did you a great disservice and injustice. It is up to our educational system, our cultural and academic communities, and the still living heroes of the Independence struggle, to imbue the younger generation with this knowledge and experience. This is very important if the young people are to be the people who will shape our future.

There is an Organising Committee for the 1993 celebrations. I understand that it has planned several activities at the centre and in the regions. I am also aware that the Committee is seeking to encourage voluntary activities at community levels. This is commendable. I urge all Guyanese to get involved. It is only in working together for our country that we can achieve our goals of peace, harmony and prosperity.

On this occasion I want to salute all the heroes of Guyana who played a role in bringing Independence to Guyana. Let us unitedly struggle for national liberation and social progress.

Forward ever, Backward never!

Copyright © Nadira Jagan-Brancier 2000

Cheddi Jagan Research Centre