

# THE LATE PRESIDENT DR. CHEDDI BHARAT JAGAN

## AN ENIGMA FOR OVER HALF A CENTURY

(My Most Impressionable Encounters With Dr. Cheddi Jagan)

*By Seopaul Singh*

### Prologue

**T**HE YEAR WAS 1961. THE P.P.P. HAD JUST WON THE elections. I was fifteen when my brother, the late Diah Singh, took me on my first "intellectual journey" into politics. I was poised to experience the most unusual close-up encounter with the man whose name was on the lips of every Guyanese then. (My brother Diah then was only twenty one, but had already put in six years of devoted voluntary service to the most honest, fearless and selfless Freedom Fighter I have ever known, the late President, Dr. Cheddi Bharat Jagan). There may never again be a politician of his caliber in the West. He was the founder of the Political Affairs Committee in 1946, and in 1950 organized and led the Peoples Progressive Party. In our times, he was undoubtedly the most enigmatic leader, the "Mahatma Gandhi" of the Western Hemisphere, and he was my idol.

### My First Meeting

As I sat in the meeting room and watched the dignitaries filed in, somehow I knew I was involved with a destiny that would help shape the history of not only Guyana, but eventually the policy of the British Raj. I was awed at the presence of the stalwarts like Dr. Fenton Ramsahoye, Dr. Ranji Chandi Singh, Boysie Ramkarran, Brindley Benn, Miles Fitz Patrick, Janet Jagan, Cedric Nunes, Ashton Chase, H.J.M. Hubbard and C.R. Jacobs (those whom I still remember). Then he entered the conference room at Freedom House in Robb Street and the chills went up my spine.

I was too young to comprehend the depth and dimensions of the dedication of Dr. Cheddi Jagan, the Father and Architect of Guyana's long struggle for Independence and Democracy. He sat in the vacant chair specially placed at the focus of the "round" table, and piloted the discussions. Two years before, when I was thirteen, he did some surgery on my teeth at his clinic in Charlotte Street. Then, I did not see the politician, I only saw the dentist. But there at another kind of "clinic" I experienced another kind of "surgery". That "surgery" was one of the most thorough and authoritative exposition on International (Political) Affairs. I had finally met the politician.

### At The I.A.C.

That close-up encounter was at a meeting of the International Affairs Committee, a prestigious forum of the P.P.P. which met to discuss the politics of other countries. Little or none at all did I realize that that encounter was not only going to change my life, but the lives of untold thousands in Guyana and the world around us. We sat in a round table style meeting in which I was selected to represent the views of the youths on the political situation of the oppressed and emerging nations. There I sat with the champions of

the political struggle in Guyana and in much wonderment at the charisma which emanated from Cheddi, as he was fondly referred to by Janet (now Prime Minister).

He spoke with authority, rattling out facts and figures which blew my mind. He never fumbled on his statistical analyses of the exploitation processes with which the North had plundered the South in the so-called history of industrial development of the North. He referred to "The Sharks and The Sardines" in an in-depth look at the operations of Multi-nationals and Big Business gobbling up the smaller enterprises. He decried repeatedly the whole global issue of the development of Monopoly Capitalism, Cartels, Trusts and Conglomerates.

From him I learned the term "Abject Poverty", the pet phrase he used to describe the condition of the working class (the lumpen proletariat) of the less developed nations of Latin America and the Caribbean. He deplored the impoverishment and the alienation of labor from the fruits and surplus production of their toils. These top-heavy developments, he pointed out, in the ownership of the means of production in society, would inevitably lead to the revolution of the working class, a "leap" in society, which would result in the eventual take-over of the means of production by labor.

### Dr. Jagan's Internationalism

In my own eyes, I had arrived politically. Before I finished High School, I had already gone through the Accabre College of Political Science, and was elected Chairman of the Mahaicony (Branch Road, P.Y.O. Group). I was a candidate for a P.P.P. scholarship also. I had seen and heard him at Accabre College, and among my peers, I was not one to trifle with in the political debates and in defense of Cheddi. I rose to the position of head prefect and student body president of the Ashram High (succeeded by the Novar High founded by Vernon E. Asregadoo). But, at the I.A.C., I was cut down to size. What was most numbing at that forum, I was accorded equal courtesy and rapt attention when my turn to speak came around. Cheddi listened to my views with undivided attention, then added his incisive comments.

We discussed South East Asia, Viet Nam, Cambodia, Malaysia; the Cypriot's problems between the Greeks and the Turks; Sukarno and Suharto conflicts; Latin American situation with Castro's Cuba, and Che Guevara's in Chile; the struggle of Columbia, Argentine, Paraguay, Uruguay and the deplorable poverty of Papa Doc's Haiti. We reviewed issues and events which were making political headlines around the world. There were times when I was not sure whether the title of 'economist' was not more suited to him than 'dentist'. But one thing I was most confident about was that he was a ready politician and our LEADER, our inspiration for the fight for Guyana's Freedom.

### Gun-Blast At Central Mahaicony

The campaign for the 1961 elections was soon going to escalate to the various electoral districts. At one point in the process,

Cheddi was slated to speak at Central Mahaicony, in front Freddie Gonsalves rum shop where we were enlisted to maintain security of the venue. We had the entire perimeter quite "protected" due to the building up of tension. One of our armed security personnel was spread eagle on the Church roof opposite Lallbahadur Singh General Store. Another was stationed opposite at the bridge of Sawh's General Store, while others were deployed in strategic locations.

The instructions were to disable anyone who acted violently towards Cheddi. The Officer-in-Charge at the Mahaicony Police Station was Inspector Chatterpaul, who led his Officers in maintaining order. As the meeting progressed, supporters of the P.N.C. came out to obstruct Cheddi as he took over the microphone. A band of protesters, all women, with brooms in hand (the campaign symbol of the P.N.C.) came out on the red brick road and began to sweep dust into the air. For a while they persisted, as Cheddi continued to speak unmindful of the distraction. The protest was getting closer and closer to him, and the dust was forming a cloud in his face, while the police officers were looking on. Inspector Chatterpaul calmly walked forward and directed the protesters to back off.

But the band grew rowdy and the meeting was heading for an uproar. It was at this point that Inspector Chatterpaul went, personally stood by Cheddi's side and escorted him to his car. As the party drove off all was quiet. The procession continued west towards Bob Hope's gas station, and was passing the Anglican school on the south, surrounded by very large star-apple trees. A shot-gun's blast, above the hum of the cars, shattered the night, as the pellets rattled on the car. But the gunman missed his target. To us all who were present, this was one known attempt on the life of Cheddi which did not get much publicity, because no one was hurt.

### Pre And Post Riots Encounters Of The Sixties

After the P.P.P. victory at the 1961 elections, many Indians and their organizations celebrated with religious functions. During this time my father held a *Katha*, and Cheddi was invited. By then, Diah was on scholarship in Cuba. There, Cheddi spoke with my father and family and friends in a very down to earth manner. He ate some of the vegetarian delicacies prepared, and warmly took his leave. This would mark the last visit to Mahaicony, before the racial violence which ravaged Guyana.

That trouble was afoot was quite clear as Burnham refused to acknowledge the victory of the P.P.P. and the Party's right to govern – as did D'Aguiar. Both men represented polarized political ideology, but they had a common enemy, Cheddi. The 1961 election was crucial in the colony's bid for Independence. With the P.P.P. in the legislature, many wrongs would be put right. Labor would have its say in the union of their choice. The sugar workers would shake off the yoke of the M.P.C.A. and choose G.A.W.U. as their bargaining agent. The Labor Relations Bill would become law.

### The Burnham / D'Aguiar / C.I.A. Conspiracy

The conspiracy to overthrow Cheddi, which was hatched by the C.I.A. and the British Government, made the way for the two most crooked leaders of the day to unite forces to oust Cheddi. The open opposition to the P.P.P. in office was expressed without remorse against Indians. February 16, 1962, marked one of the blackest days in Guyana's history as Burnham and D'Aguiar went

hand in hand in the 'march of mayhem' through Georgetown. Most of the businesses destroyed in Georgetown belonged to Indians. This was only the beginning. Later the entire Indian population (including Chinese) was decimated in the mining town of Wismar. The arson and violence escalated to Mahaicony. (NOTE: Much of the foregoing are already dealt with elsewhere in previous issues of the *Guyana Journal*).

### Detention At Sibley Hall, 1964

The leaders of the P.P.P. were arrested and taken to *Sibley Hall* in Political Detention. My brother Diah was one of the longest detained Party Organizer – almost three years. The P.P.P. had sponsored the FREE THE DETAINEES MARCH in an effort to move the Governor and the British Government to act. During this time Cheddi was in constant contact with our family as the welfare of Diah was engaging the attention of Amnesty International. He arranged for us to make visits to Diah at Sibley Hall. Between Cheddi and Janet, Diah became "their other son".

Later, we marched for the Freedom of the Detainees from Mahaicony to Thomas Lands in Georgetown approximately forty miles. At Thomas Lands, one of the most moving procession converged. Thelma Reece led the West Demerara contingent and L.S.H. Singh led the East Coast contingent. They met at the staging area and embraced in a unity that defied the racists and oppressors of the day. Cheddi let loose the DOVES OF PEACE AND FREEDOM. He never advocated war. I stood there and the tears ran down my cheek as we sang, "Oh! Fighting men".

### 1964 Civil Strife

During the civil disturbances of 1964, Cedric Nunes, then Minister of Education, met with group leaders in Novar Government School. He told us without reservation that reliable sources confirmed much violence was being planned by the Afro-Guyanese against Indian-Guyanese. He advocated prevention at all cost by evacuation. I had already gone through Perth Village and warned Indians to move out. But many were caught off guard by the beating and revenge of one Indian boy from the Creek. The implementation of the X-13 Plan of "Organized Thuggery Centrally Directed" was in progress.

As a result of the widespread arson in Branch Road / Perth Village many of us, young Indo-Guyanese men, sought refuge in Berbice, to avoid the discriminatory arrests which was directed against Indian men in Demerara. In Berbice, I had the opportunity to meet militants who were fired up by the massacre of Wismar and the conflagration of Perth Village, Mahaicony. These men were ready. They were set to march into Demerara and rout all those who would try to stop them. They were talking of seceding Berbice from the rest of Guyana.

### Cheddi Vetoed Retaliation / Violence

My brother, Diah was still in Sibley Hall, when I was taken to speak to militants in No. 72 Village, Corantyne. I was seen as a suitable replacement for Diah by the group leaders, and my views were solicited. I had no other recourse, but to communicate with Cheddi through an established medium. We awaited the instruction from the Leader. The plan would depend on the decision made by Cheddi. Within the same week the word came. There

would be no retaliation, for it would result in too much bloodshed, Cheddi advised. The British soldiers, the Police and the Riot Squad were prepared.

The militants complied with Cheddi's direction. Ever since he kept the faith and the peace. Never have I heard him advocate violence as the vehicle to establish democracy. He fought to the last to eradicate racism, poverty and violence within the rank and file of the Party supporters and the Nation at large. There were times when many became ruffled by his adamant position on retaliation. And there were those who openly criticized him for being weak, and for sacrificing his Indian supporters.

### Cheddi's Assistance To Refugees

Our family went to squat in Vryheid's Lust. Ours was the first house constructed in Broad Street. The influx of refugees was unending. There were several bottom houses under which hundreds of children, who overflowed from Vryheid's Lust South Government School, were taught. My father, Mooni Singh, approached Cheddi to approve the building of a school in the area. I was a special speaker in the 'Displaced Peoples Association'. The Chairman then, Mr. Mahatam Singh, would take me with him to address meetings on the subject of cooperation. We had won mass support for the project.

During the months that followed both approval and materials were given. Under the Trusteeship of my father, the construction of a school commenced. The Food and Agricultural Organization, OXFAM and CIDA were also approached by the Party's leadership to give assistance. The Food For Work program was implemented and my father, in collaboration with Headmaster Vernon Hing, was assigned by Cheddi to supervise the project. This saw the erection and opening of the Vryheid's Lust North Government School. The school was dedicated in a special religious function to which Cheddi was cordially invited, and which he graciously attended.

### In The Public Service

I was recruited by Cedric Nunes through Education Officer Krishna Singh as a Teacher with the Ministry of Education in 1965 for one and one half year. Then I joined the Government Public / Civil Service in November, 1966. During my tour of duty, I rose to the position of Chief Allocation and Distribution Officer in the Ministry of Trade in 1983. Here I was graced by Cheddi in a most down to earth visit in my office. Karshan Arjune, now Ambassador to Suriname, was given a letter by Diah to bring along with Cheddi to discuss a matter with me.

That day was a red-letter day for me, as the staff saw the Leader of the Opposition come as an ordinary member of the public to speak to me. There was much talk and gossip. But I was not mindful of what anyone had to say. I was already discreetly a rebel to the irregular practices in the allocation system of which I did my part to correct. His visit to the Ministry served to further my determination to revamp the P.N.C.'s one sided allocation system favoring the knowledge sharing institutes (K.S.I.'s).

### Pre And Post Election Encounters

Diah had made up his mind long before the election victory (which was already assured) to re-migrate to Guyana. In 1992, we paid a courtesy call of Cheddi at his home in Bel Air, ten minute

walk from my home. It was about 10:00 PM and Cheddi was feeding his dogs. Janet was summoned and we were ushered into their living room. I was not stranger to Cheddi, so Diah just reminded him that I was the brother who was at Ministry of Trade and later Civil Defense Commission. (I had already resigned my position as Deputy Executive Officer at the Civil Defense Commission). Diah spoke of issues which had engaged him in U.S.A. and Canada and the upcoming elections.

Diah Singh was co-founder of the A.C.G. with Karshan Arjune, and a host of others (who had since formed the Guyanese American Association, Inc. due to the influx of known opportunistic elements who dominated the A.C.G.) Then the discussions were focused on me. Cheddi inquired of the five years background experience and level at which I worked in the Ministry of Trade, as Trade Intelligence Officer and Chief Allocation and Distribution Officer, and the Civil Defense Commission, as Deputy Executive Officer. He was interested in what changes could be implemented after elections to see a better operation Ministry.

Then after the elections in 1993, Diah and I made another courtesy call on Dr. Jagan. This time it was at his Office in Freedom House. I was asked to deliver a document which had seriously implicated a former Consulate employee in efforts to undermine the P.P.P. in Government. I had also come with a copy of G.A.A. Inc. Constitution to clarify the position of the Guyanese American Association, Inc. *vis a vis* the A.C.G. and our officially constituted mission and relation to other sister organizations, as a *Not For Profit* Agency. It was then he got the picture of the logic of forming the G.A.A., Inc. which kept together many of the old brigade in solidarity and quietly gave assent to our move. He noted that there would always be those who would attach themselves to the Party now that it was in power. His only advice was to let all come and do their part in the reconstruction which was ahead. These were his last words of challenge at that meeting.

### Conclusion

In the annals of modern history, four unique leaders of color would surface in cyber-space and the Universities of Higher Learning, for their special victories and contribution to the human race. Two of these are of Indian and two of Africans descent. They are:

1. Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi for breaking the yoke of the British Raj and winning Independence for India and for giving the world the challenge of non-violence and the world's largest democracy.
2. Dr. Martin Luther King for taking the route of non-violence in his Civil Rights Campaign and for being the father of American Civil Rights.
3. Nelson Mandela (imprisoned and exiled for thirty years, and returning to establish Democracy) for breaking the back of apartheid in South Africa.
4. Dr. Cheddi Bharat Jagan (denied leadership of Guyana for twenty eight years, yet restoring democracy in Guyana) for his promulgation of the New Global Human Order in championing the cause of the poor of the world.

### Epilogue

Martin Carter wrote, "Spent my tears are spent in crying over

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Guyana's ashes, I will weep no more". If I could borrow this line from Guyana's renowned poet and patriot, who was imprisoned with Cheddi, let me say in my own humbly way, as my own teardrops fall even now at his passing, like Martin Carter, "I will weep no more" for Cheddi has fought and won. He has given his last breath in assurance, "Don't worry, everything will be all right". He has established before his death what Gandhi could not achieve in India, UNITY and DEMOCRACY. He has achieved greatness. AN ENIGMA HAS PASSED ON COMRADES, BUT HIS LEGEND LIVES.

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