

A Short Reply to Seecharran

by Janet Jagan

I don't often indulge in this type of writing, but in this particular matter, I felt that a comment was necessary. I refer to criticisms expressed by Mr Clem Seecharran in his recent book "Sweetening Bitter Sugar; Jock Campbell, the Booker Reformer in British Guiana 1934-66."

Seecharran refers to the late President Cheddi Jagan as a person who "had no literary culture" and that he possessed only "slight intellectual gifts."

There are harsh words for one least deserving of such criticisms. I can only wonder if Seecharran ever read "The West on Trial" and in case he has, I recommend that he re-read

the first two chapters in particular. Chapter one deals with the subject of Cheddi Jagan's childhood, entitled "Growing Up" and chapter two with "My People's History." Both chapters are beautifully written and although Dr Jagan's writings were mainly political, it would not be difficult to detect the almost poetical aspects of his writing skills. For example: "... I found that Georgetown was different in other aspects as well. There were not so many simple pleasures as in the countryside. Looking at my own and other city children, I have always felt that they miss so much. Poverty had been intense at Port Mourant, but simple pleasures were many. Country life was full of rich experiences: perching on the

fork of a tree at the centre of the kharian (threshing ground), prodding the oxen to urge them on their seemingly endless tramp-mashing (threshing) of paddy; sleeping on paddy haystacks under starry skies, even with clouds of mosquitoes buzzing around; watching cows grazing in the reaped paddy fields; catching fish with hook and cast nets; thrusting one's hands into holes along the banks of empty trenches to find sometimes not fish but non-poisonous water snakes; shooting birds with slingshots; walking barefoot and pitching marbles in muddy puddles; burning the Holi heap and playing "mud" and "abir" at Phagwah time; and attending the August races."

The second chapter

of his book which deals with Guyana's early history is rich in his descriptions of the slave trade, the slave revolts, the resistance. For example: "... the prevailing pattern during the time of slavery was a vicious circle of punishment - escape - capture - punishment This vicious circle proved profitable neither to the slaves nor to their masters. 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, passive resistance. But indolence and passive resistance soon gave way to sabotage and revolt. The slaves were not content to sit and wait for their emancipation to come from above by evolutionary stages. On many occasions

they revolted. Each time they were brutally treated and subdued by whipping, mutilation of their limbs, burning over a slow fire or execution on the rab rack...".

And in a similar vein, he recounts the beginning of the indentured labour system from India, the agonies of these sugar workers and their resistance.

While a student in the USA and enrolled at Northwestern University Dental College, Dr Jagan recognized the limitations of his studies. He wrote in "The West on Trial": "I became conscious that I was being trained to become nothing but a glorified technician and craftsman..." He enrolled at the YMCA College in Chicago and attended classes in social sciences during the

summer recess and evening classes - to round out his studies. Thus, at that time he was a full-time dental student in one of the USA's most prestigious dental colleges, studied for a Bachelor's degree at the YMCA College and held a full-time job, as he had no other source of income. At the same time, according to his book "Forbidden Freedom": "I found time to read economics, sociology, philosophy and political science." He read voraciously, particularly the writings of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

To suggest that Cheddi Jagan possessed "only slight intellectual gifts" can only be regarded as snobbery, the rantings of an "ivory tower" academic.