

# Cheddi Jagan - The Dentist

by Janet Jagan

Cheddi Jagan returned to Guyana (then British Guiana) in mid-1943 and I arrived in December 1943.

We rented the second and third floors of 69 Main Street, Georgetown, two buildings south of the Main Street, Roman Catholic Cathedral where he opened his dental practice on the second floor and had bedrooms on the top floor. We had our dining room/sitting room and kitchen behind the separating walls of the surgery.

Dr. Jagan taught his brother Naipaul and cousin "Kootch" to do the dental laboratory work while I performed as his dental assistant. My 2½ years as a nursing student helped me to be a useful dental assistant.

He had a few patients in the beginning and this grew larger as his reputation as a good dentist, not charging high fees, brought him a rather comfortable practice in the early days and later, a larger practice.

Dr. Jagan was a very meticulous person and could not stand anything second rate or not of the highest standards. In the beginning, he was very stern with his two laboratory assistants and would send back their works – bridges, dentures, inlays etc, until they reached the perfection he demanded.

These early proceedings were mere examples of the character he had and indication of the man who would later lead his country to its independence and become known as the Father of the Nation.

He refused to accept second-best. He demanded the best from those who worked with him and gave the best to his patients – whether poor or rich, and he had both. He never 'short-changed' anyone and was always totally honest. If he did something, whether it was in his profession as a dentist, or later as a political leader, he gave the best that he could.

In dentistry, as in his later life devoted fully to the political life of his country, he excelled. His dentures, for example, looked real. Even today with more advanced technology, I see prominent dentists giving their patients dentures which I can immediately detect as being false. Not his! He would spend long hours being sure that the colour and shape of the false teeth were correct, and if they did not look good, he would start all over again.

There are not enough professionals today who try that hard to meet perfection. But that was part of his unusual character.

The other dentists were annoyed at his low fees, but he felt he could not exploit his patients.

Also, he refused to ruin good teeth by gold crowns, which then were in fashion. He was responsible for ending the gold crown craze that existed and destroyed good teeth.

While his dental practice was growing and he had enough money to begin the education of his brothers and sisters, it was evident then, back in the 1940's, that wealth and status were not his goals. He was not

interested in money as the accumulation of money. In fact we never had much, since most of his income in those days went to his family. We lived frugally with just the minimum of clothing, the most inexpensive household furniture and goods and in rented houses until 1967 when we finally built a house in Bel Air, on land we had purchased in 1957 for \$3,000.

During this period which was the beginning of Dr. Jagan's political career, we began visiting workers on the sugar estates, at their request. But more on that later.

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