

# Cheddi Jagan - Man of the People

March 2006 by Janet Jagan

March is the month when we pause and reflect on one of the most important men of the 20th century in Guyana. It is the month of Cheddi Jagan's birth and the month of his death.

Much has been said, both good and bad, about him all through his adult life and after his death. That is to be expected as all truly great men, with new ideas, with a vision of the future, with integrity, complete honesty and with modesty are bound to offend those whose own ideas differ or whose own life styles and attitudes permit jealousy and vindictiveness. We've seen enough of it to know that most societies contain people who have failed to succeed in life and put the blame on others, or as Dr Dale Bisnauth put it in a column on this page: "It is as if mediocrity cannot live with greatness unless it reduces it to its own size: mediocrity."

However, leaving aside the "naysayers", the reality is that most Guyanese recognize the worth of Cheddi Jagan, and irrespective of ethnic, religious or political considerations, respect and love him as a Man of the People and the man who dedicated his life to their well being.

Before Cheddi Jagan became completely and totally involved in the political life of his homeland, he worked as a professional, a dentist. Those years, also, should be recorded, because they show the measure of the man. I worked as his dental assistant for ten years. He was a perfectionist, a genuine professional who refused to allow any second rate treatment. If a denture, a filling, a bridge, a root canal was not perfect, he did it over. This I witnessed many times. Also, like in politics later, he was an innovator. He refused to extract a tooth before he determined if it could be saved, and if so, he insisted on filling the tooth. Even today we have dentists who just yank out a tooth a patient points out as hurting. He also urged his patients to bring in their children and recommended the best dental care for them, which was not being done in those days. Also, he broke the back of the gold tooth trade, when good teeth were covered with gold crowns for "beauty" purposes. He refused to encourage that practice which destroyed good teeth. Also, he annoyed his dental colleagues by having the lowest fees. He said he was there to help the patients, not exploit them.

His surgery was used for the early political developments. The Political Affairs Committee (PAC) which began in 1946 used to meet at his office on Charlotte Street. His office continued to be our meeting place until an office was later found.

Cheddi's parents were poor sugar workers. He had ten siblings, still living at Port Mourant when he returned after his studies. Another aspect of his character that is not well known, as he never boasted about it, is that he took over responsibility for the family from the parents. He brought his siblings to Georgetown, one by one, for education and most were sent overseas for training in the fields of medicine, dentistry, law, nursing, technician and optometry.

But his greatest contribution came as he grew closer and closer to the problems of the exploited - the sugar workers, the waterfront and bauxite workers, the small farmers, the unemployed, the plight of women and children. His intellect was challenged to find solutions to these problems. He read voraciously

and visited many areas of the then British Guiana. He sought answers and ways and means of tackling the problems.

He consulted with others - soon to become the hallmark of his being. Up to his death, he never ceased consulting people and never stopped searching for the best solutions.

With others, he arrived at the necessity of tackling the larger issue of exploitation - colonialism and as early as 1945, enunciated the need to break from colonial rule. He helped found the Political Affairs Committee which set as its aim, the establishment of a political party and four years later, the People's Progressive Party was formed with the major objective of achieving independence.

From then on, the struggle he and his Party led was not easy. It was one challenge after another - one hard blow after another. The machinations of the cold warriors led by the USA used every device to frustrate the PPP from holding on to office after legitimately winning it. That process seems to have never stopped - certainly we are witnessing it again and again and frequently fuelled by the old guards of the former cold warriors.

Why is it that today some 60 years after the advent of Cheddi Jagan into the nation's political life that he is so revered by the people and no matter how virulent the attacks, he still retains the love and respect of most Guyanese as well as an unstained international reputation?

I attended the launching of the 6th edition of *The West on Trial* last year at the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre. The feature address was given by Kellawan Lall, whom he appointed as his Political Adviser when he became President in 1992, finally restoring democracy to a nation beaten into poverty and hopelessness.

Lall said this and it says a lot: "And so when Dr Jagan came on the scene and later wrote his book, people began to see themselves differently and became more self-confident. Dr Jagan had put them at the centre of his world - a world where there was freedom and freedom from want. It was the first time they got that feeling of not being just a statistic and a poor cane cutter or rice farmer. Dr Jagan had now put them on a pedestal and allowed them to see themselves as human beings who can be masters of their destiny.

It was that sense of hope that as a young man I saw all around me. And that is what I consider to be the most lasting impact of *The West on Trial*. The masses did not have to read it. They knew that this man Jagan for the first time in history saw them as people, went into their shabby homes, ate their plain foods and forever wearing his trade mark smile, and put them as the main players in a book that was being read not only in Guyana but overseas."