

## **CHEDDI JAGAN AND GUYANAISATION OF EDUCATION – SOME INSIGHTS**

*“...My dear comrades, it would be time well spent if the academic community, during this conference or subsequently, were able to contribute further to this question: how can the goals of Caribbean Unity be meaningfully advanced without destroying them in the process? Not an easy question, but a real one...”*

[Address President C. Jagan, IRR; University of the West Indies, St Augustine, Trinidad & Tobago, 28/2/1994].<sup>1</sup>

To the majority of Guyanese events leading to the establishment of a national university in 1963 would be relatively vague at best and even nil for the purpose of recall.

During this historical phase the PPP Administration of Dr. Cheddi Jagan was under siege. The colony's domination by the executive power of the English governor (Grey?) was decisive. (See interesting pamphlet; “Facts You Should Know”, PPP, published, Public Relations Committee PPP, 13/8/2003; p.6).

To address serious challenges reproduced by the Burnham PNC and its allies and Western political elites, particularly at the level of high-level infrastructural capacity, Jagan most likely would have been advised by solidarity forces, regionally and elsewhere within the world revolutionary process.

The objective being to develop a base of technical and academic friendly cadres as well as equally important, administrators and a science-based local sub-elite that could over time replace expatriate leverage over decision formulation.<sup>2</sup>

As a concept the decision was unprecedented as the government had limited access to budgetary funds for the installation of a university as an institution for producing graduates.

As an alternative a start-line was identified and the local Queen's College classrooms were utilised for after tuition or evening sessions and scholastic endeavours.

In fact, a model of sorts also existed in the form of the Government Technical Institute (GTI). Then there was the precedent of the Working People's Art Class, founded by the late great art historian, instructor and artist E. R. Burrowes, that was installed in a densely working-class section of Lacytown, Georgetown at a secondary school known as Alleyne's High.

It was with that kind of background and national political culture that the Cheddi Jagan Research Center (CJRC) sponsored a Symposium under the theme 'The Contribution of Cheddi Jagan to Education in Guyana'. An event held at the University of Guyana, Turkeyen Campus, Education lecture annex on Thursday, April 24, 2005.

*“The establishment of the University in 1963 was one of his (Cheddi Jagan's) monumental achievements...”*  
[B.H. Benn, “Legacies of Cheddi Jagan, 2004: 14”].<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Selected Speeches, Cheddi Jagan, 1992-1994; ed., David Dabydeen, Introduction by John Gaffar La Guerre; Hansib, 1995; p.126.

<sup>2</sup> Selected Speeches; Chp. XXIII

<sup>3</sup> Caribbean Labor & Politics; ed., Perry Mars and Alan Young; Part 1 & 2.

In delivering Welcome remarks, Professor Paloma Mohamed- Martin, Vice Chancellor of the Turkeyen Campus focused on amongst other aspects, her own impressions of the depth of Dr. Jagan's concern for the learning cognitive process.

Alluding to her own student experience at the university, the Vice Chancellor drew parallels between what was traditional and perhaps customary in terms of perception of an Ideological construct – a reality that emerged during a panel (?) event on the theme <Perestroika>, and there the then PPP General Secretary extended his analyses to students.<sup>4</sup>

The institutional basis of high-level manpower has developed significantly since the formative decades.

Education departments are normal for the Tain (East Berbice) Campus. More recently, President Irfaan Ali announced henceforth university tuition and education will be free of cost.

(re: Guyana Times 23 April, 2025; p.15, "Free UG Education takes full effect for new academic year (2025-2026)' i.e. diploma, bachelors, masters and doctor of philosophy programmes.

Both former president Donald Ramotar and Dr. Esterine Adams (Head of History Department, University of Guyana, faculty of Education), outlined the evolution of what was described as 'dual-controlled schools' (DCS) that prevailed during the late colonial period.

Ramotar observed that Jagan was the first political leader to advocate free education as a Right for all Guyanese. Indeed, it was this working class-friendly policy that irked privileged sectors in society.

He noted that during these years Christian prayers were the norm in virtually all the primary and secondary units of the then system.

The government (PPP 1960s) had opted to restrain such a religious bias given the multi-religious composition of pupils; and even teachers to a certain extent.

To have a situation of prayer catering for the country's diversity would have meant that the entire initial segment of classroom learning would be taken up with prayers.

It was also observed that the practice of religious bias still prevailed in terms of pre-qualifications required to render students eligible for (final) examinations if not test assignments. (Dr. Adams).

**To summarise the input afforded by the Vice Chancellor as well Donald Ramotar it could be observed:**

- That Cheddi Jagan was if anything an intellectual<sup>5</sup> political figure.
- That the legacy he bequeathed has had a continuum
- That the interaction between the University and the broader society has provided a niche (?) in the pursuit of academic standards.

These aspects were further elaborated on by former PPP General Secretary and President of the Republic Donald Ramotar, who reminded that tertiary endeavours and higher education meant that quality goals were indispensable for the struggle for **Independence**.

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<sup>4</sup> Selected Speeches; Jagan, op cit., p.129

<sup>5</sup> As in Caribbean Labor & Politics; Pt.1:3 for essay "Cheddi Jagan – the making of a Movement Intellectual, Maurice St. Pierre; pp.18-39.

To illustrate this point Ramotar cited articles written by LFS Burnham as well as (then) Sydney King (now Brother Eusi Kwayana) in the pre-1966 period when the sentiment and public support for a sovereign Guyana were critical at the level of the masses of working people.<sup>6</sup>

*"I attended the centenary celebration for Kwayana... and he is as lucid as one could expect...I wish I had the same (mental) powers..."* Ramotar.

As a close confidante of both the Jagans Donald Ramotar perhaps remains the most erudite of an earlier generation whose political acculturation developed tremendously commencing from the struggle for Independence, and continuing our transitions - free and fair elections and the Restoration of Democracy.

This political and cultural development has a praxis of trade union workers organisation engagements.

The following excerpt from a theoretical perspective is worth attention, in early 2021 with the Covid pandemic still very much a public health issue nationally and the attempt to steal 2020 GRE uppermost in the People's minds Ramotar wrote

*"It is true that in the twenty-four years that have elapsed since Dr Jagan passing a lot have changed. Therefore, it is not every speech that he had made or all his writings will reflect the reality of today. However, what has not changed is the direction in which societies are going which Dr Jagan spoke about His principles remain sound and worthwhile to emulated..."* ( ex Thinker Vol 4/ Jan-June 2021, pop.1,2 of article, "Cheddi Jagan's ideas continue to illuminate our Path."

During his April 24 presentation he did not overlook the scientific social class and socialist philosophy of Dr Jagan, stressing that in the transitional towards the launching of the First Queen's College classes the PPP utilised many creative ideas with the recognition that education in reality equated for a vast majority of citizens Human Capital.

These included the development of improved health services; the support for a more reliable riverain transport structure coupled with other measures that had been drafted into its Elections Manifesto/s.

### **Education Expansion and the Role of the Tain campus**

There are several other features of Dr Jagan's vision for Education commencing from the demands that flow from decolonisation and the foreign rule that must be explored.

These include the need to systematically reduce the gaps(?) between the towns and villages, or urban rural polarisation.

It has been recognised at other fora that Dr Jagan from the early days of his career as a dentist provided for the education of his brothers and other family.

Over the years stereotypes describing Berbice as the **Ancient County** have largely been debunked.

However, given the demographics of Guyana coupled to the ravages imposed by the PNC dictatorship for 28 years the democratisation of local authorities specific say to the policy leadership of Regional Education Officers have reflected imbalances and inadequacies.

This problem was recognised and reforms introduced by in 1992 PPP/C Administration when amongst other recommendations, the opening of the Tain East Berbice University campus was implemented.

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<sup>6</sup> As set comprehensively in West on Trial, Jagan C., Seven Seas, 1966

The role of Dr James Rose, who served in an important position linked to Guyana's academic community as a facilitator, was highlighted by Dr Dennis Gill. As a lecturer in the Education and Humanities department at Tain Dr Gill informed the event that the Tain UG has provided remarkable opportunities for socio economic transformation whilst affirming that a stereotype may well have been only partially dissipated.

Dr. Gill's contribution at the symposium could well be viewed as a comparison with the research endeavour of Dr. Tota Mangar whose primary focus during recent years has been on the role of Workers Struggles along the Essequibo Coast as well as internal to Demerara (Enmore).

Hydar Ally highlighted some of the issues that posed challenges to or for Dr. Jagan's plans for a local University. Amongst these were the efforts made by at least two delegations from the Eastern Caribbean who travelled to Georgetown ostensibly to convince Dr Jagan not to proceed with such an ambitious educational reform.

As a former Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education, Ally has garnered a wealth of political experience dating from the mid-1960s. He has been involved in <Accabre> format training for an entire duration serving also as a regular contributor to the Mirror newspaper. As is the experience of many PPP 'seniors' Hydar emerged as a youth recruit—a Progressive Youth during the turbulent 1960s.

Highly regarded for his candor and pragmatist approach, he reminded to audience that Jagan was the only political leader in the English-speaking Caribbean to have devoted his entire life towards the compliment of all the Oppressed regardless of ethnicity.

He revealed that the (Cold War) years one priority of Dr Jagan was to develop and reinforce all national eco- political structures.

Similar to Dr. Al Creighton attention was drawn to the contradictions and problems encountered by several Guyanese students who were discriminated against by the then ruling PNC elite; or denied awarding targeted students the academic qualifications they quite rightly deserved. Among these were prominent poet M/ss Mahadai Das and one Harry (?)

The symposium also was significant in that there was a conscious realisation (Creighton) of how radical Jagan would have been to create an institution that was not under the aegis of the University College of the West Indies and its various regional extensions in the Eastern Caribbean.

(A process that has been criticised by the late educationist Professor Roy Augier, Guyanese pioneer historian Elsa Gouveia and several others).

Additionally, and subsequent deliberations have revealed that the contemporary reality or expectations of what such an institution should be in the Millennium has placed a re-focus not only on academic performance and grades but just as important there has to develop a break with routine graduate output.

Students according to Vice President Dr. Jagdeo must be enablers, creative and resilient whilst divergent from the routinist tendency inherited from the trends that were near normal in a different era of competitive grades based on examinations and Final designation in the various spheres of academia.<sup>7</sup>

## **Lawrence Rodney**

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<sup>7</sup> As a sequel to the process of transforming education in terms of <building out> a digital-influenced youth future see following items; DPI, <https://dpi.gov.gy/young-people-helping-to-change-mindset-culture-toward-development-vp-jagdeo/>. Also, items Guyana Chronicle, May 1, 2025; 'Jagdeo commends youth for forward thinking mindset at UG student forum (ACCC).