

Cheddi Jagan's Fight For Drainage And Irrigation

by **Rustic**

Guyana, land of many waters, is really a romantic and exotic description of our country. We have a remarkable number of waterfalls, including the world-famous **Kaieteur**. The overwhelming majority of our people live on the Coast which is below sea level. But like so many wonderful things, the beneficiaries do suffer sometimes as a result of these or some of them.

So, because of inadequate drainage, the country suffers from floods when there is excessive rainfall, as we experienced recently. And when the water on the land is high and the sea level is high and the kokers must be closed to keep out salt water, the land is flooded and farmers suffer.

Sometimes, the country suffers from droughts. There is not enough water for irrigation and if we are not careful our rivers which flow into the sea can draw salt water, and so damage crops.

This is one area in which the activities of Cheddi Jagan was extremely remarkable. As a member of Parliament, he discovered that despite the awareness of these prob-

lems by the colonial office they never seriously tackled them. As far as they were concerned, as long as sugar plantations could be protected and assisted, that was all that mattered.

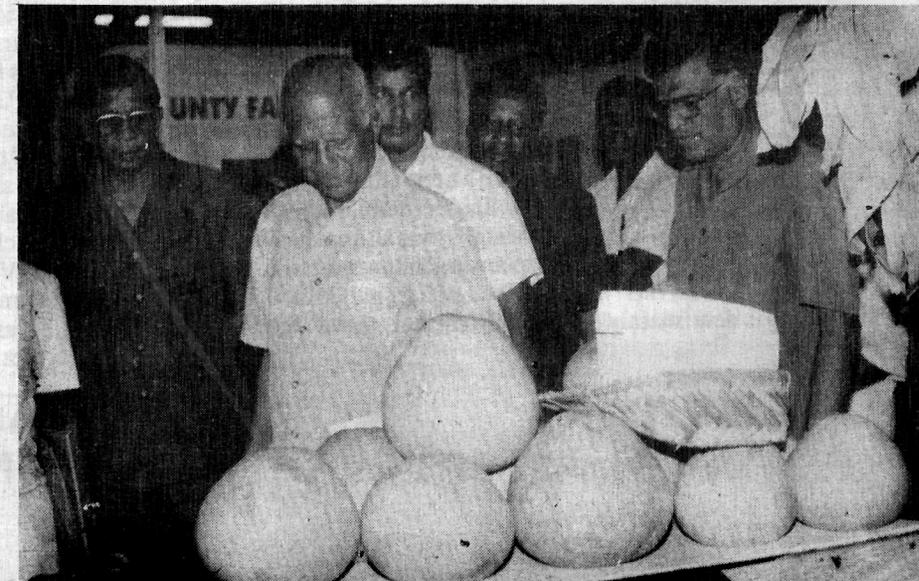
Indeed, as the most consistent working people's representative in Parliament during 1947/1953 for the working masses, Dr Jagan was repeatedly assailed by the representatives of the Sugar Barons for his consistent demands on the colonial Government for water control. Indeed, he declared in the legislature: "no money was spent on drainage which did not directly benefit the sugar plantation. As a consequence, village lands and all lands outside the sugar plantations could not be farmed successfully."

He noted that the British Government was aware of this problem and quoted the Wilson-Snell Commission of 1927 as declaring "all the agricultural associations and delegations which we met in Georgetown and in other parts of the country were emphatic on the vital need for efficient drainage and irrigation."

In 1945 the Moyne Commission wrote "practi-

cally all well-drained land is in sugar, areas devoted to rice and pastures are badly drained."

The year-end rains of 1949/1950 were particu-



Flashback: President Cheddi Jagan and Minister of Agriculture, Reepu Daman Persaud, at World Food Day exhibition, 1994.

larly heavy. The **Daily Chronicle** of January 8, 1950 headlined, "Raging Floods Engulf Essequibo Spring Crops - Cattle and Owners Sleep Together" - says Businessman.

Around the same time Governor Charles Woolley agreed to visit the Buxton area after a deputation led by Dr Jagan complained of the floods. The deputation of the Buxton/Friendship Ratepayers' Association

included Mrs Peters, Rev. SW Crosse and Mr George A. Younge.

As a result of Dr Jagan's persistent campaign in and out of the leg-

islature, Governor Woolley declared in a 'throne speech': "We have never had levels taken for the whole of our coastal belt and we have never had a department or sub-department concentrating solely on this work so vital to this country."

Cheddi Jagan fought for a comprehensive scheme of water control and opposed limited schemes which were designed

mainly to help the sugar estate.

It was as a result of these that there were extensions to certain programmes. For instance, the

Bonasika scheme on the West Coast of Demerara had to be extended for a larger project which could help the farmers on West Coast, Demerara and East Bank, Essequibo. Cheddi Jagan supported the ideas of a British Engineer, Hutchinson, who had recommended the expansion of that scheme. Hutchinson also condemned the East Demerara Conservancy scheme and suggested a

large project, the Mahaica/Mahaicony/Abary Scheme. The Mahaica/Mahaicony/Abary Scheme Phase I was completed at great cost and much delay during the Burnham era. Jagan also campaigned for the building of a greater Canje scheme. This would have provided proper drainage and irrigation for several million acres of land. The British Government had constructed the Torani canal and, as a result of great pressure, the Black Bush Polder scheme.

It should be mentioned also that the Tapacuma Irrigation project providing improved drainage and irrigation for lands on the Essequibo Coast was completed in 1958.

It must be noted that much more has to be done to provide adequate drainage and irrigation in order that people in the countryside and farmers will be rid of the pest of flooding and shortage of water for cultivation. It is clear that without the persistent advocacy of Cheddi Jagan very little would have been achieved in this direction.

Guyanese and farmers particularly are in great debt to Dr Cheddi Jagan.