

"The life and times of Dr. Cheddi B. Jagan: 1918-1997"

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Stabroek News

March 3, 2005

The month of March marks the birth and death anniversaries of the late Dr Cheddi Jagan. In this three-part series, attention is focused on his life and times.

Introduction

In the post-colonial period, third world countries began to experience the need to establish their own set of creditable heroes. This is particularly true of the Caribbean region which emerged out of the exploitative systems of slavery and indentureship. In the first full blush of administrative freedom, they therefore displayed a tendency to pronounce almost precipitately on a new pantheon of local heroes.

Some of these new heroes because of popular creditableness achieved national acceptance while others, because of a selection process that was questionable at best, endured painful obscurity in the full glare of public illumination. In Guyana, despite our obvious differences, our heroes perhaps, because of the exercise of greater prudence, have enjoyed popular acceptance.

The late Cheddi Berret Jagan is undoubtedly a national hero who through the crucible of time had enjoyed, while yet alive, a popular appeal that set him apart from and above the ordinary. Emerging from the bound-yard of a Corentyne sugar plantation and being the son of East Indian indentured labourers, the anti-colonial rebel waged a highly successful fifty-four-year crusade against the worse excesses of British colonialism, western imperialism and its local manifestations, be it plantation colonial oligarchy or neo-colonial authoritarian rule.

He experienced the wrath of the Anglo-American alliance and local reactionaries in the 1950s and 1960s and with remarkable patience and persistence he endured twenty-eight years in the political wilderness while never once doubting the righteousness of his cause and with the firm belief that time and history were on his side. With a wave of new consciousness and vigorous steps for the restoration of democracy there came the inevitable vindication of this great son of Guyana, Cheddi Jagan, as the legitimate representative of the popular will of the people when in 1992 he swept the polls and emerged as President.

He immediately started a re-building and re-healing process with emphasis on national consensus. His eventual passing in March 1997 was a mortal blow to the nation as was evidenced in the spontaneous overflowing of national grief which swept the land of his birth. Indeed, Dr Cheddi Jagan was an extra-ordinarily gifted man, the Father of our Nation, the likes of whom we may never again see in our lifetime.

His formative years

Dr. Cheddi Jagan, son of East Indian indentured labourers, was born at Port Mourant, Corentyne Coast on March 22, 1918. His parents were staunch Hindus and he himself

acknowledged attending many Hindu festivals as a little boy. He received his primary education at the Port Mourant Primary School and Rose Hall Scots School respectively. He pursued his secondary education at R.N. Persaud's private secondary school, Port Mourant, the only secondary school in the area at the time, and at the age of fifteen he continued his secondary career at the prestigious Queen's College in the city of Georgetown. This was the colony's premier secondary school and entry to that institution at the time was the almost exclusive preserve of the urban social upper class. There he had a distinguished academic career culminating in successes at both the Oxford and Cambridge Certificate Examinations. This was certainly no mean feat by a 'country boy' in a big city at that juncture of our colonial history.

It is important to understand the socially fragmented nature of the colonial British Guiana of Jagan's formative years. The colony was rigidly segmented into two distinct social groupings. One was European and white-oriented and which enjoyed immense social, economic and political privileges and the concomitant hegemony.

The other was largely Afro-Asian and in the main, identified with "poverty, ignorance, limited opportunities and systematic powerlessness." Fundamentally, both groups evolved from the plantation economy which determined their respective social-economic and political consciousness.

Colonialism imposed the institutions of slavery and indentureship in Guyana thereby provided the impetus for, and shaped the development of both the economy and society. For a long time the cultivation of sugar-cane and the manufacture of raw sugar for export completely dominated rural life. According to Jagan himself "Everything revolved around sugar, and the sugar planters seemed to own the world. The plantation was indeed a world of its own. Or rather it was two worlds: the world of exploiters and the world of the exploited: the world of whites and the world of non-whites."

Emerging from this stultifying rural environment with its social impositions and restrictive opportunities and his outstanding academic achievements at Queen's College, the young Cheddi Jagan, in his quest for excellence, sailed to the United States of America in September, 1936. There he successfully completed a two-year pre-dental course at Howard University. In 1938 he gained entry to North-Western University for a four-year dentistry programme.

Simultaneously, he pursued studies in the Social Sciences at the YMCA, Chicago and in 1942 he secured both the Degree in Dental Surgery (DDS) and his Bachelor of Science Degree (B.Sc.).

Jagan's sojourn in the United States of America was not limited to classroom activity. It exposed him to the contemporary ferment of a tormented American society and he departed America as one committed to the liberation process and to anti-colonialism.

Entry into politics

During December 1942 and while Dr. Jagan was still in Chicago he met his wife, the former Janet Rosenberg. They got married in August of that year at a simple ceremony at Chicago City Hall.

In October, 1943 Dr. Jagan returned to his homeland. He set up his dental surgery at 69 Main Street, in the heart of the Garden City. There he quickly established himself as a leading dentist and at the same time he got increasingly interested in trade union activities and also in the roles of organisations like the League of Coloured People and the British Guiana East Indian Association. The Carnegie Library soon became the centre for weekly stimulating discussions involving young radicals and intellectuals and Dr. Jagan's contributions were also pertinent. At this stage it was clear that the young dentist was emerging as a prominent socio-political advocate.

Dr Jagan rose to the position of Treasurer of the Man Power Citizens Association (MPCA), the then recognised union in the sugar industry, but he was eventually disappointed in the union's performance in terms of effective representation for its membership. The union was widely seen as a 'company union' with union leaders more or less collaborating with the planting interests of the day.

In 1946 Dr. Cheddi Jagan, Janet Jagan, H.J.M Hubbard and Ashton Chase formed the Political Affairs Committee (PAC), the forerunner of the People's Progressive Party (PPP). At the 1947 general elections Dr. Jagan, as an independent candidate, and with the full backing of the Political Affairs Committee, contested the Central Demerara constituency under the first past the post system and was victorious in spite of the limitation of the franchise due mainly to high property and income qualifications. In his victory speech he quite modestly declared "We the people have won. Now the struggle will begin." Indeed, his long, hard and dedicated struggle for his people and nation really began then. At the age of 29 he was the youngest representative in the Legislative Council at the time. The stage was therefore set for Dr. Jagan to emerge as the architect of Guyana's Independence Movement.

The Enmore Tragedy of June, 1948 in which five sugar workers were killed (The Enmore Martyrs) and several injured by colonial police, had a lasting effect on his life. On this issue Dr. Jagan himself revealed, "At the graveside the emotional outbursts of the widows and relatives of the deceased were intensely distressing and I could not restrain my tears. There was to be no turning back. There and then I made a silent pledge. I would dedicate my entire life to the cause of the struggle of the Guyanese people against bondage and exploitation."

In the ensuing years this remarkable man did exactly that - he devoted his entire life to the cause of all Guyanese and the working class in particular. Indeed, that fire, the affinity with the oppressed, the exploited and the down-trodden was to burn brilliantly for approximately half a century until his death in March, 1997.

In the Legislature

In his early years in the Legislative Council Dr. Jagan established himself as a champion of the working class. As their chief spokesman he was critical of the planter oligarchy and other exploitative elements in society. His militancy and robust advocacy won him international recognition as a fearless anti-colonial fighter. It also won him the reprobation and reprimand of the local conservative elements and their expatriate allies.

Most importantly however, was the fact that his fearless intervention on behalf of the working man, the unemployed and the dispossessed, made him the leading political figure in the colony. As to his radical outlook he assessed: "I brought a new dimension to the politics of protest, a continuity between the legislature was brought to the streets and the streets to the legislature."

As a matter of fact, his motion in the legislature to electors of every constituency to have the right to recall representatives after elections, tremendously improved his stature and popularity among the Guianese working class at that stage of the country's history.

In 1949 Dr Jagan emerged as president of the Sawmill Workers Union and the following year (1950), the People's Progressive Party (PPP) was born with Dr. Jagan as Leader, Forbes Burnham, a young barrister, as Chairman, and Janet Jagan as Secretary. From then on Cheddi Jagan was kept busy on the legislative front. Political consciousness of the working class was increased and at the same time significant gains were realised in terms of workers welfare.

From this early stage it was recognised that the PPP's eventual objective was the attainment of political independence. Towards this end attention was focused on moderate advances under the Waddington Constitution and the attainment of universal adult suffrage.

Under this new constitution and with universal adult suffrage Dr. Jagan led the then nationalist movement, the PPP, to a landslide victory in the 1953 general elections with the party capturing 18 out of the available 24 seats. Unfortunately, the PPP's term in office was only short-lived.

Setbacks

Her Majesty's Government highly influenced by the local conservative elite and under heavy pressure from the American State Department, suspended the constitution and overthrew the legally elected Dr. Jagan's government "ostensibly to prevent the establishment of a communist state in the only British colony on the South American continent."

An interim government comprising entirely of nominated members many of whom were rejected at the 1953 polls, was installed in spite of mass protests. This development was indeed a tremendous blow to Dr. Jagan and his nationalist movement, the PPP. After all, he was unceremoniously deposed after only 133 days in office and this was followed by intense harassment and detention of Dr. Jagan and his leading activists.

In 1955, the Party, Dr. Jagan and the nation at large received a further setback when the nationalist movement was fractured into two groups, a Jaganite and a Burnhamite PPP. In spite of this split Dr. Jagan continued the arduous task of nation building. This charismatic leader, with determination, and persistence, led his party to successive victories at the 1957 and the 1961 general elections and for a time he seemed certain to lead the country to political independence from Great Britain.

Unfortunately, his administration and country at large were gripped with violent demonstrations, riots and racial disturbances surrounding the 1962 Kaldor budget and the 1963 Labour Relations Bill which led to the loss of several lives and much destruction to property.

In the political wilderness (1964-1992)

At the general elections of 1964 Dr. Jagan lost power largely through the Duncan Sandys' newly imposed proportional representation system and a coalition of the PNC and the United Force (UF) even though his party polled the most votes. The UF was led by business magnate Mr. Peter D' Aguiar. According to Rose the circumstances surrounding the December 1964 elections was "one of the grossest acts of political betrayal in the history of British Imperialism."

Thus began a dark period of this nation's political history, as Dr. Jagan was to remain in opposition for the next twenty-eight years through circumstances beyond his control. He was the victim of successive highly controversial elections during this time. But it would seem that those long years in the opposition brought out the best in him in terms of commitment, grit and determination. To a large extent, despite tremendous odds, he was able to keep his party intact and even solidify it. For a long time he was almost a lone voice "defying the debilitating autocracy which rigged successive elections to retain political power and party paramountcy."

At the same time flawed economic policies and managerial inefficiencies took its toll on the national economy while the migration rate of Guyanese to North American, the Caribbean and neighbouring territories rose alarmingly. Dr. Jagan used every available opportunity and forum: grass-roots, legislative, university, international and global to analyse the social, economic and political injustices manifest in his country at the time.

He truly believed in unity as a means of attaining peace, progress and prosperity and he unceasingly sought to find novel ways and means of moulding a race and class alliance to effect national liberation. In pursuit of these objectives Dr. Jagan was instrumental in the formation of the Patriotic Coalition for Democracy (PCD). The activities of this organisation, the trade union movement and other liberal forces and individuals along with international support, eventually led to numerous electoral reforms which paved the way for the restoration of democracy in Guyana.

Return to power

In October 1992 under free and fair elections, internationally supervised, Dr. Jagan made a triumphant return to office, having been once more successful at the polls. This was indeed a remarkable comeback and ample reward for the long years of unending sacrifice, struggle, courage and determination. In almost fairy-tale fashion he became Guyana's first democratically elected president at the head of an innovative PPP/Civic government which began in earnest a process of restoration and reconstruction.

No other political leader in this modern world of ours has successfully re-emerged to power after such a prolonged period in the political wilderness. On this achievement Dr. Jagan wrote. "Our victory at the polls was greeted with nationwide rejoicing. The Guyanese people welcomed the new air of freedom and enthusiastically moved to support the new Government's drive to rebuild the country".

Dr. Jagan is widely regarded as the Father of Our Nation. He moulded our political consciousness from the late colonial period. His life was one of unswerving dedication to the Guyanese people. In the face of grave difficulties he championed the cause of national unity, social justice and economic development.

He was a model of consistency and was a nationalist, regionalist and internationalist in every sense of the word. While some did not understand his ideological message they all understood and respected his honesty, sincerity, integrity, humility and abiding concern for the needy and oppressed.

In his later years Dr. Jagan was in the forefront of the just call for a New Global Human Order and debt relief where poverty stricken Third World countries are concerned. It was his conviction that "massive poverty is hindering the path to sustainable human development" and he further stressed that "economic growth is necessary for human development just as much as human development is essential for economic growth". This call has of late received much sympathetic hearing from both lending agencies and donor countries. There has been a substantial reduction in the pre-1992 international debt of US 2.26 billion dollars. What is even more reassuring is the fact that several other third world leaders are today intensifying this debt relief campaign on the international front. Foremost in this campaign of debt write off and debt relief is our current President, His Excellency, Bharrat Jagdeo.

Dr Jagan was also deeply engrossed in the formulation of a National Development Strategy, a model for National Development of Third World Countries in his attempt to eradicate socio-economic imbalances in society. He saw the world of the 1990's as a "global village" and advocated a new global human order to fight poverty worldwide. His death on March 6, 1997 came at a crucial time in Guyana's history.

An attempt to assess the life and times of Dr. Jagan shall be the focus of the third and concluding part of this series.

An Assessment

The political career of Dr. Jagan spanned three distinct periods: (a) The 1940s to 1964; when he lost power, (b) The post 1964 to 1992 period when in opposition he struggled against PNC rule and the post 1992-1997 period when he regained power and began the process of national reconstruction and re-healing. In each he had a different role and that role coincided with the different manifestation of the dilemma he and his country had to grapple with. Throughout it all, he remained the same Cheddi Jagan, highly focused, determined and dedicated.

It is a supreme test of a man's character to overcome the prolonged trials of adversity and disaster. This, Dr. Jagan understood too well. His life was one of struggle, whether as a child, as a student, as a trade unionist, as a nationalist, and even as a beleaguered statesman.

In a hostile colonial environment in which the natural progression of his country was first frustrated through local reactionaries and an Anglo-American alliance, he suffered in despair but was forever optimistic noting prophetically that "History and time are on our side."

He had an abiding quest for national unity. He was always convinced that the task of nation building demanded the committed energies of all Guyanese irrespective of race, class, and religion or political persuasion. This belief informed and activated his political and administrative orientation right from the very beginning of his political career. The 1948 Political Affairs Committee (PAC) was a unique multi-social organisation and the PPP and the 1953 PPP Government were similarly composed and focused. Throughout the turbulent 1950s and 1960s the bitter days of political betrayal and setbacks, he never lost faith in his ability to weld together

a truly unified nation and for a while in the 1980s the PCD offered excellent prospects of a successful embryo for nation building but political opportunism and crass selfishness betrayed that promise.

His all too brief association with the Guyanese Action for Reform and Democracy (GUARD) and the eventual PPP/Civic of the 1990s are the present manifestation of this genuine concern and the abiding commitment.

Dr. Jagan was not only an exceptional political leader with attributes of sincerity, integrity, humility, respect, tolerance and unity but an incredible political historian in his own right. His major works, *The West on Trial*, *Forbidden Freedom*, *The Caribbean Revolution*, *The Caribbean, Whose Backyard?* and a host of other publications bear ample testimony to this. These sources are essential for the study of the modern political history of Guyana, the Caribbean and Latin America and the Third World in general, as well as in the area of biographical history.

One of the big ifs of our contemporary history is what our country might have become had local reactionaries and the Anglo-American alliance not betrayed the nationalist movement in 1953 and again in 1964. Perhaps, we would have been the first to achieve political independence in the British Caribbean under the leadership of Dr. Jagan. What about our economy? Between 1953 and 1964 the Americans steadfastly refused to provide economic assistance to a colony they perceived as destined to become a Communist State. The British for their part denied Guyana access to economic development funding for those projects they deemed ideologically incorrect.

But undoubtedly the most important if is what would our race relations have been had this nation retained the 1953 national unity that the original PPP enjoyed under Jagan and Burnham. Imagine the national landscape had the Guyanese Indian and African coalition of 1953 and that of the working class not been subverted. We are still to fully recover from this tremendous setback.

Dr. Jagan's death on March 6, 1997 at the Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington D.C. came at a crucial time in Guyana's efforts to rebuild and consolidate democracy. His loss is immeasurable. Perhaps, at this stage it is worthwhile to reflect on the words of his wife. Her Excellency former President Janet Jagan who said: "He was not given the time to complete his plans to fulfill his dreams...to eradicate poverty, to build a strong and independent nation, to consolidate the democracy he had struggled to restore and above all to unite the nation".

Only days before his death Julie Dulude. Research Associate at the Washington based Council on Hemispheric Affairs had this to say of this remarkable man: "Jagan has maintained his position as Latin America's most admired political leader and the one most attuned to the suffering of the bulk of his country's inhabitants."

Indeed Guyana is much poorer for this passing. There is need to foster his legacy of Oneness, Togetherness, Humility, Racial Tolerance and Accommodation.

In the annals of modern history Dr. Jagan's career would certainly elicit comparisons with that of other great twentieth century leaders such as:-

1. Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatama) Gandhi for breaking the yoke of the British Raj and for gaining India's political independence.

2. Dr Martin Luther King for pursuing the path of non-violence in his Civil Rights campaign and for being the father of American Civil Rights.

3. Nelson Mandela for returning from prison to establish democracy and breaking the back of apartheid in South Africa.

In addition he could be compared with other great leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru of India, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Gamel Nasser of Egypt. The name Cheddi Jagan lives on.