

# Cheddi Jagan...

## In Port Mourant, in Parliament, in prison



longer the hallowed Chamber where "gentlemen" debated at leisure and had their words recorded in Hansard for posterity. The legislature at last became part and parcel of the struggle of the people."

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Of course, an eventual loner in the Council of the Rich, he questioned the 1948 Budget, ALCOA'S bauxite profits, the perpetuation of poverty - related conditions for the working class throughout the country, Civil Service bonuses only for the seniors, etc, etc. He won some but lost many to the

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*The month of MARCH marks BOTH the BIRTH and DEATH Anniversaries of Dr. Cheddi Jagan, undoubtedly a Hero of Guyana.*

*As the month ends, A.A. FENTY offers this compilation IN TRIBUTE to the Late Leader.*

Country life was full of rich experiences: perching on the fork of a tree at the center of the Kharian (threshing ground), prodding the oxen to urge them on their seemingly endless tramp-mashing (threshing) of padi; sleeping on padi haystacks under starry skies, even with clouds of mosquitoes buzzing around; watching cows grazing in the reaped padi fields; catching fish with hook and cast-nets; thrusting one's hand into holes along the banks of empty trenches to find sometimes not fish but non-poisonous water snakes; shooting birds with slingshots; walking barefoot and pitching marbles in muddy puddles; burning the Holi heap and playing "mud" and "abir" at Phagwah time; and attending the August races."

Cheddi recalls the cultural dilemmas of early (Berbician) East Indians who travelled to reside in Georgetown. One "Indian" custom he "endured" was humorous: "For example, it is unthinkable today for an Indian family to have a boy wearing earrings as I had to for a few years. Luckily, one of my brothers ended this practice in my family. In a scramble, he snatched off one of my gold earrings and threw it into the trench. My parents did not bother to replace it; the cost must have been an additional consideration. Another example was the practice of Indians taking Christian names, although they were not Christians. In my own family, the names of Derek, Doris, Patricia and Barbara eventually replaced Indian names. In my own case, in my "teens" I adopted my middle name "Berret", for I thought it a fashionable thing to do.

So now you know! He was never really Bharrat at all! And boys are wearing earrings - just like girls!

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### IN PARLIAMENT

Of course when the re-migrated young "political animal" Cheddi returned to

British Guiana and its politics, Parliament then was the colonial Legislative Council dominated by the Plantocracy, Merchant and British Colonial Interests. I've learnt a few things about my earlier Hero H. N. Critchlow that diminishes him just a few percentage points.

But it is in the Legislative Council (1947-1953) that Cheddi Jagan became a crusader, a champion for the working class. Excerpts from his diary: "My Service in the Legislative Council from 1947 to 1953 was a most rewarding and stimulating experience.

I looked forward to the debates. On one occasion in January 1949, much to the exasperation of my wife, I cut short our holiday in St. Vincent to return for a budget debate.

At first I was rather naïve as a parliamentarian and a debater. I spoke with tremendous enthusiasm and force, thinking that the logic of my arguments would convince my colleagues. My opponents, particularly Frederick Seaford and Frank Mc David (Colonial Treasurer) both of whom were later knighted, were not, however, convinced by mere logic, and frequently interrupted me, on occasions walking out of the Council chamber with cynical smiles."

"Politics, it is said, is the science of "who gets what, when and how". My task was to find out how, in a multitude of ways, overtly and covertly, the sugar "gods" ruled. Mine was the role of "politics of protest". With the weapons of exposure and struggle. If the legislature was my forum, the waterfront, the factories, plantations, mines and quarries were my battleground.

I brought a new dimension to the politics of protest, a continuity between the legislature and the street corner; the legislature was brought to the "streets" and the "streets" to the legislature. The Legislative Council was no

This month of March 2007 is the tenth-year milestone since Cheddi Jagan died in a country he had his initial political grounding in but which he was understandably ambivalent about.

In the decade since his passing I have made up my mind about his status from my own perspective. He qualifies to be one of my national heroes (like Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow - even with his lapses and like Linden F.S. Burnham - The earlier).

To me Cheddi Jagan - like his late brother, Speaker of the House, Derek - never lost his more rustic side and persona. Much travelled, and Internationalist as he was, a country-boy he remained, not in his sartorial standards, but certainly in mannerisms, sound and speech.

He perhaps never quite left his Port Mourant, Corentyne, Berbice, Sugar Estate range and life. Even many modern-day Berbicians, like their predecessors, are extra proud of their "Berbician" origins. Meet Cheddi Jagan, the man, young readers.

### PORT MOURANT

A few descriptions by Cheddi Jagan himself of his Port Mourant boyhood: "RUM drinking, gambling, dancing, horse and mule-racing, and cricket were the principal pastimes of the whites. Cheating - padding of the paylists - was also practised on an extensive scale. Plantation life gave me the opportunity of seeing at first hand the raw deal which the labourers received. No doubt these experiences were the factors which led to my early interest in social and economic questions, and brought me later into political life".

"At Port Mourant I had been a big fish in a small pond, a king in my own kingdom. There I was a leader. Emulating my father of whom I was very proud, I developed leadership qualities very early. I headed my own cricket team and played most of the other games successfully. Kusti (wrestling) allowed me to demonstrate my talents as the best fighter at Ankerville (a section of Port Mourant) and the nearby areas. And prowess at games involving marbles, bows and arrows earned for me the reputation of a banker in buttons, marbles and arrows.

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majority interests. In the face of this appalling situation, I challenged the ruling class at every point and introduced motion after motion in the Legislature. But most of these failed. I attacked the government for abandoning subsidization of salted fish, salted and pickled beef, cocoa powder, split peas, condensed milk and flour; and challenged our rulers for the many other concessions made to the planters and their supporters

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## IN PRISON

Cheddi was sentenced to six months imprisonment for breaking the State-of-Emergency. Travel Restrictions placed on him. Besides heightening the local anti-colonial struggle, it was a "revolutionary" period of incarceration: My prison life started at the

gaol Camp Street, Georgetown. I was given two suits of prison garb made of thick white duck, almost like canvas, and placed in a small cell. The diet was monotonous. Soon after, because of my history as a tuberculosis patient I was put in the prison hospital.

This was a distinct advantage as it gave me the opportunity of meeting and talking to more prisoners and also of having more time to read, particularly after dusk; in the cell, it was impossible to read after one was locked up at 6 p.m.

While in the prison hospital, I listened to the "Uplift Hour" services delivered every Sunday by churchmen and other prominent individuals and was aghast at the utter nonsense told to the prisoners. Soon I was filled with the desire to take the stand.

Prompted by me, the prisoners asked the prison authorities to grant me permission to give an address. When asked what I intended to speak about, I replied, "Thou shalt not

steal". At first they refused, but after a boycott of the "Uplift Hour" by the prisoners, they agreed. I concluded my talk by stating that the biggest thieves were outside of the gaol; that under imperialism and capitalism, the foreigners and local capitalists, landlords, bankers and middlemen extracted surplus value – profits, rent, interest and commission – from the working people; that so long as the system of imperialism and capitalism prevailed, there would always be prisoners, and the gaols would become bigger and bigger.

Sections of the press made this talk the cause of a big hue and cry; I was abusing my privileges, one newspaper cried. And so the prison authorities removed me from the hospital and transferred me to the second floor of the brick prison, to my original cell next to the section which contained "capital offences" prisoners, some of whom had already been condemned to die.

And I was not allowed to take any further part in the "Uplift Hour".

"Prison life (at the Mazaruni Settlement) was a novel experience for me and welcome in some respects. It gave me an opportunity for

real leisure and rest. Apart from scrubbing floors, I developed a hobby in carpentry. Unfortunately, my clumsiness in the use of tools led to an inch-wide gash on my left wrist and a severed tendon. What I enjoyed most was the luxury of almost limitless time for reading and writing. Novels, which I had never had much time to read, constituted the bulk of my reading. Serious books were rare. And in the political field there was very little other than Tory propaganda material; the prison authorities had instituted a thorough screening process. My articles for the party had to be written on toilet paper and smuggled out."

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Now, after those serious snippets from an intensely interesting life, I am left to wonder, light-heartedly: if he had not become consumed by and with politics, would Cheddi have been a top batsman in cricket like his younger Port Mourant neighbours? Rohan Kanhai, Basil Butcher, Joe Solomon, Alvin Kalicharran?

After all, he was a competent batsman when he attended Queen's College!!

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