

Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked this earth. These words of Albert Einstein were part of the eulogy paid to Mohandas (Mahatma)

The Emergence Of Cheddi Jagan

As A National Leader

By Basdeo Mangru

Gandhi on his death in January, 1948. They apply equally to our beloved President, Dr. Cheddi Bharat Jagan, who emerged as the champion for the oppressed a few years before the death of the Mahatma.

Dr. Jagan was an indefatigable, energetic, charismatic leader who devoted his entire life to fighting colonialism and championing the cause of the Guyanese working people against exploitation and brutality. He was an inspiration to all Guyanese and has never for one moment betrayed the trust and confidence Guyanese placed on him. He fervently sought unity, to move Guyana forward, and never cared for the material things of life for himself.

This redoubtable fighter was an honest, sincere, humble man and a genuine friend of the less fortunate. For over fifty years he fought passionately for democracy, political freedom, social justice and fair play not only for Guyanese but for all humanity. His inspiring leadership, his overwhelming humility and selfless devotion to the cause of humanity will always be embedded in our hearts.

Cheddi Jagan was the son of indentured Indian workers who migrated to Guyana in the indenture period (1838 - 1917). These workers landed under a variety of disabilities, the most glaring was the lack of leadership. In fact, throughout the indenture period no Indian leader of stature emerged on an all-estate or national level to articulate the manifold grievances of sugar workers.

Several factors tended to stymie effective leadership during this period. The plantation system was geared primarily to stifle initiative in the immigrant camp, rendering workers helpless and dependent on their employers. The 'pass' system and the labor and vagrancy laws circumscribed workers' movements, isolated them on the plantations and prevented any form of labor

potential Indian leaders became part of the estate establishment through lucrative jobs and various perquisites.

It was not until the Enmore strike in 1948 when five sugar workers were gunned down that an Indo-Guyanese emerged as a national leader of stature and foresight in Dr. Cheddi Jagan. The Enmore incident was not the first time that Indian sugar workers were killed while protesting against exploitation and oppression. At Plantation Devonshire Castle, five were killed in 1872, six at Non-Pariel in 1896, five at Friends in 1903, one at Lusignan in 1912, fifteen at Rose Hall in 1913,

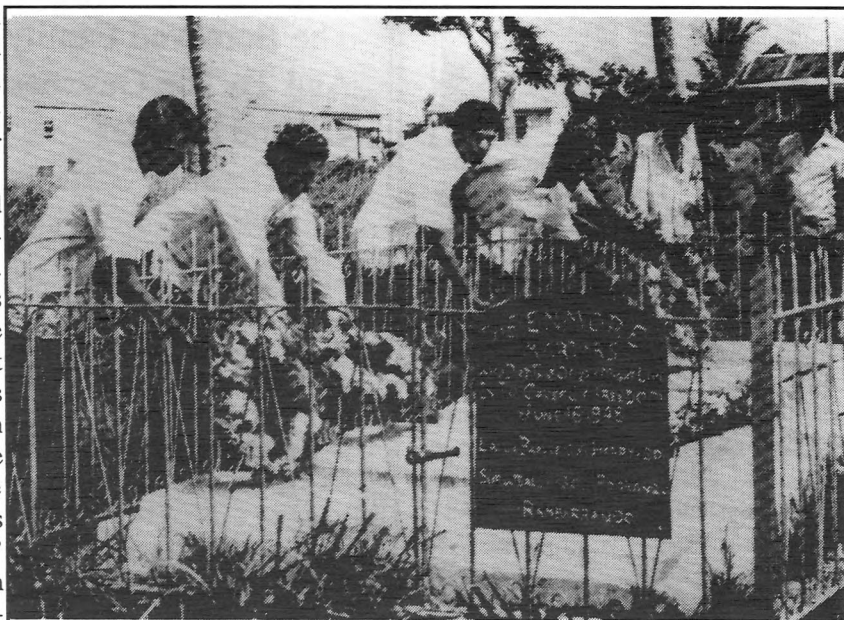
thirteen at Ruimveldt in 1924 and four at Leonora in 1939. But the Enmore incident stood out as protests were more articulate, prolonged and widespread. It was a working class protest, involving both Indo- and Afro-Guyanese and it witnessed a unity which was only seen on three previous occasions - in 1905, 1924 and 1939.

From his emergence, Dr. Jagan was destined to leave an indelible imprint on the politics of the region. In 1943, after qualifying as a Dentist in the United States, Jagan returned to Guyana and within two years became Treasurer of the Man Power Citizens Association (MPCA), the then recognized union in the sugar industry. His objection to the

high level of allowances and the tendency of the union leadership to collaborate with the planting interests resulted in his removal from the MPCA executive.

In 1947, Jagan was elected a Member of the Legislative Council for the Central Demerara constituency and now had direct contact with sugar workers on the East Coast, Demerara. His motion in the legislature to electors of every constituency the right to recall representatives after elections tremendously improved his stature and popularity

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The Resting Place of the Enmore Martyrs

among the working class. But it elicited "almost unanimous opposition" in the Legislative Council. The First Political Report on British Guiana showed considerable disquiet in the Colonial Office over Jagan's activities. Both he and his American-born wife, Janet Jagan, were considered "a dangerous couple who wield no inconsiderable influence" in the colony.

Consequently, Jagan's movement were monitored and circumscribed as the authorities considered him a "political danger". Trespass notices were served on Dr. Jagan and others to prevent their entry into strike-bound estates. But with "sacrifices of their time and pockets" they continued to address issues affecting sugar workers. At a public meeting at Grove on the East Bank, Dr. Jagan launched a scathing attack on Governor Charles Woolley: "This Colony has two Kings - King George and King Sugar - the Governor supported the latter."

At Vryheid's Lust, he vociferated the demands of sugar workers - adequate medical treatment, proper sanitation and water supply, a balanced diet, "not rice and dhol and a little salt fish". He urged worker to be resolute: "Remember Mahatma Gandhi gave everything he had to see India get her independence. It did not take him a day or two but years."

The Political Affairs Committee (PAC) formed by H.J.M. Hubbard, Ashton Chase, Janet and Cheddi Jagan produced a bulletin which attacked the pitiable pensions granted to sugar workers who must show "dire poverty" to qualify. One of its issues read: "Colonial peoples give the best of their lives to the support in some form or other of an antiquated economic system which exploits them a few years after they left the cradle and offers the \$2.40 a month a few days before they reach the grave."



H.J.M. Hubbard, Ashton Chase, Janet and Cheddi Jagan

The Enmore shooting thus propelled Dr. Jagan into national politics. It produced a silent pledge: ". . . I would dedicate my entire life to the cause of the struggle of the Guianese people against bondage and exploitation." That fire, that affinity with the oppressed, the exploited and the down-trodden burnt brilliantly for over half a century.

Dr. Jagan, like the Mahatma Gandhi, was a guiding light and a beacon of hope for Guyana. Like Gandhi, he identified himself with the poor and the oppressed. He was a visionary, a man of integrity, incorruptible, generous and kind, amazingly simple, a patriot, a champion, a hero, a stalwart in Caribbean politics and an accomplished author. Dr. Jagan truly belongs to a rare breed of humanity who walk this earth, and his memory will live on. ■

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