

# His 79th Birthday

SPEECH BY CHEDDI JOEY JAGAN AT  
ESSEQUIBO ON 22 MARCH, 1997.

HONORABLE PRIME MINISTER, MR. VICE PRESIDENT, REGIONAL CHAIRMAN, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, BROTHERS AND SISTERS.

Today, we come to this place to pay tribute to my father. This day represents not only his birthday celebration but it also mirrors seventy-nine years in the life of a son of our soil.

But before reminiscences are commenced let me first thank all those good people throughout this Essequibo region for their heartfelt sympathy and condolences on my father's death.

On behalf of all the Jagan family, I must thank you all! March 22, 1918 is indeed a date when the history of our country was indelibly altered in a little house in Port Mourant which was occupied by hard-working and loving parents. On that day of my father's birth, the people of Guyana still lived under the colonialism of the British – a colony in an empire stretching from the Indian Ocean to the tip of South America.

By 1918, the full essence of Gandhi's struggle in South Africa and India were apparent and as Cheddi Jagan grew up under a colonial imposition, he clearly saw the inconsistencies of that system and the lack of opportunity unavailable to all Guyanese.

The essence of his life and his struggles against all forms of tyranny and undemocratic regimes remain our true collective memory of Dr. Jagan. His character was a humble one. I recall on independence night in 1966 when my father appeared to huge applause in the stadium and had to endure the changing of the flags and the beginning of a new era without being in the driving seat where he belonged. But his endurance allowed him to be there even though he led the struggle against colonialism.

I remember the simple celebrations of his birthday we had when growing up. His simplicity and humanity overwhelmed all those around him and his life experiences influenced generations of Guyanese to follow him to whatever

mountain top he chooses. I remember many times on his birthday being in a quandary as to what to buy him and nothing extravagant was ever picked – we always gave him simple things.

He loved the shortwave radio because it allowed him to keep in touch with events around the world; and one birthday I presented him with such a device. He loved the hammock and always had one in his



study, even at statehouse. His simplicity always determined his approach to life.

March 22 is a day in the life of this nation which will always be remembered and should be celebrated officially for it represents the birth date of a great fighter for democracy. My father believed in democracy and the freedom of the human spirit in Guyana. He believed in the future of his people and the nation. He believed in the will of his people to exercise their rights under a legitimate constitution. He believed in the rights of all Guyanese to a better way of life, especially those living in the mire of poverty and on the margins of despair.

But March 22 1997 represents something more to us now. It represents the end of an era with the death of President Jagan. His death gave us a mirror to our collective

soul as a nation. The outpouring of grief and sorrow at his untimely death mirrors something deep in the psyche of the nation. His death made us understand that as a nation we must create real unity in order for our lives and future to be secure. Even on his death bed he fought not just for his life but he gave the nation a period of inner reflection in order that the process of progress must go on and he prepared us for a new reality.

The end of an era must proceed to something new, creative and eventual – a new meaning and new definitions of our march forward as a united people. My father's life was about peace, goodwill and honesty. Integrity was his watchword and he made sure that the 'buck' stopped at his desk. He left no (personal) material things but he left a legacy of sacrifice for this nation.

March 22 1997 and the celebration of his life's work make us understand that looking back is not the way to go. On that March night of his death my son, Cheddi II and I saw a shining star, the only one in sight, and my son told me that Grandpa Cheddi was there in the sky and the future looking down at us. We have to look forward and upward to the sky.

As Abraham Lincoln said on his presidency, "We must deal with the next bend in the river of development as we move on. We have traversed the last bends in the river and experience is accrued, but the next bend is the important bend."

Nelson Mandela himself said that leadership is like a shepherd and a flock of sheep. The shepherd has to let the nimble and agile sheep go to the front and lead the flock. The shepherd should stay at the back and let the flock find its way forward to new grazing grounds. Just so, we are the flock looking for new pastures and new opportunities opened up to us by Dr. Jagan and his struggles – we have to show a new nimbleness now that he has departed our lives.

Let a new dawn of progress descend on this land and let the new ideas of cultural, political and economic reform saturate this beautiful country to create a true legacy to my Dad. Again, thanks to the people of Essequibo for all this outpouring of sympathy to our family.

Happy Birthday Dad.

I love you  
God bless you.