

The essence of Dr Cheddi Jagan was completely ignored

By Stabroek News
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Dear Editor,

I would not normally comment on a piece such as 'Re-imagining Cheddi Jagan: Cultural Moorings and Political Recklessness' (SN, 28 November, 2021), but feel a duty to do so.

I met Cheddi Jagan in 1977, when he came to present a petition to the UN and, as Special Assistant to the Head of the human rights secretariat, I was one of those who received him at the UN in New York. Two years later, he came to Geneva to petition the UN Commission on Human Rights. After he had done so, he stayed on in Geneva for a private visit with me and my wife Lily for a week, and we had extensive conversations. He was such a simple and caring person. We subsequently corresponded with each other regularly, and I have his letters to me.

Dr Jagan had an essence that is nowhere to be seen in the article under reference.

Whatever personal journey he had travelled, he came to believe deeply in the dignity of every human being, in the equality of human beings, and in the entitlement of every human being to equitable life chances. This explains why, when he returned to power in 1992, he championed, at the UN, the initiative for the establishment of a New Human Order. This was his essence.

The defence of human rights was a theme that ran throughout his life. At the 1950 Caribbean Conference in Curacao, he moved a motion calling for the implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Dr Jagan's address to the 24th PPP General Congress, in 1991, contained the following article of faith by the freedom fighter:

"As regards political and economic rights, we will honour and guarantee them. We will go one step further than the PNC. They have paid lip service to the two United Nations Covenants on civil and political and economic, social and cultural rights. They have implemented neither and they refused to sign the protocols attached to them. We propose to sign the Optional Protocol to those covenants and to give everybody the right to invite the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to come at any time to Guyana."

One of his early acts as President was to ratify the Optional Protocol.

The article under discussion prompts the question: how do we determine the essence of a person: through snippets from commentators or through observation and study of a life lived. The method of philosophy is the latter: observation and study. I have had that privilege.

There are some features of the article under discussion that bear comment. Can one really say that Guyana has an "endemic tribal curse"? What about, historically and currently, the innumerable acts of kindness and generosity of spirit between people of different races?

How can one speak of "political recklessness" in respect of a leader passionately seeking political, economic, and social justice and rights? One is certainly entitled to disagree with the decisions of a leader, but does that make the leader reckless?

The author of the article writes that Dr Jagan's "rigid and inflexible Marxist ideological disposition was his original political sin," and that he had "a cultural flaw." He refers to "a lostness of culture" in Dr Jagan. These are extraordinary claims on no evidence. This was not the man I saw and conversed with at close range for a week in my home. This was a humanist, deeply wishing to improve the living conditions of poor people.

To surmise, as one of the commentators cited in the article does, that Dr Jagan had "a massive void created by his

estrangement from his Hindu-Indian frame of reference” is, to put it charitably, far from the man I saw at close range and observed for a week. Dr Jagan had a kindness of spirit that clearly sprang from his origins and his life’s journey, including at Howard University. I have met people who were at Howard with him and who spoke of his kindness and his passion for justice.

It surely is a travesty to write that Dr Jagan was “devoid of Indian culture”, and that his Indian culture and Hindu religion had been ‘vitiating’. How can anyone make such a claim? On what evidence? I saw this man close up over a week. There was no ‘cultural flaw’ in him, as the author asserts. When he passed away, the tributes paid to him by people from all walks of life attested to the fact that this man had a deep cultural connection with his people.

The author concludes his article with a quote from V.S. Naipaul to the effect that Dr Jagan “ conspired against both the interests of his supporters and his own political success.” Naipaul, a great writer indeed, often had no feel for situations or people about whom he wrote from his cloistered life in England. He never spent a day in struggle for justice for poor people.

Dear Editor, I have written out of respect for a great patriot of Guyana whom I knew rather well. After I became a Director in the UN Political Department in New York he came to see me on different occasions and we spoke often of his vision for a better life for the working people of Guyana – of all ethnic backgrounds.

One can certainly disagree with some of his stances or decisions. But to paint him, or Guyana, in the terms used in the article under reference has no basis in objective fact. “Endemic tribal curse”, “cultural flaw”, “devoid of Indian culture”, “political recklessness”? Please.

This was a man who had a passion for justice. The nation recognized this when it mourned his loss in a way not seen for any leader before, or since.

Yours faithfully

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