

by Tota C. Mangar

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 Jagan is undoubtedly a national hero who, through the crucible of time, has enjoyed, while yet alive, a popular appeal that sets him apart from and above the ordinary.

Emerging from the backyard of a Corentyne sugar plantation and being the son of East Indian indentured labourers, the anti-colonial rebel waged a highly successful 54-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 28 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 rebuilding and rehealing 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 extraordinarily 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. 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 15, he continued his secondary education career at the prestigious Queens College in the city of Georgetown. This was the colony's premier secondary school and entry to that institution was the almost

Dr Cheddi His life

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 time 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 socio-economic and political consciousness.

Colonialism imposed the institutions of slavery and indentureship in Guyana and thereby provided the impetus for, and shaped the development of both the economy and society. For a long time, the cultivation of sugarcane 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 academic achievement at Queens College, the young Cheddi Jagan, in his quest for excellence, sailed to the United States of America in September, 1936. He successfully completed a two-year pre-dental course at Howard University. In 1938, he gained entry to North-Western University for a three-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.

During the spring of 1943 and while Dr Jagan was still in Chicago he met his wife, the

former Janet Rosenberg, former President of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana. 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 always pertinent and intrusive. 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 was eventually disappointed in the unions' 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.

Entering Politics

In 1946, Dr Cheddi Jagan and 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, 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 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.

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



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Cheddi and Janet Jagan on their wedding day

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 about half a century until his death in March, 1997.

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 this fearless

intervention on behalf of the working man, the unemployed and the dispossessed, made him a leading political figure in the colony. As to his radical outlook he assessed: "I brought a new dimension to the politics of protest, a community between the legislature and the street corner; 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 Guyanese 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 who born with Dr. Jagan as Leader, Forbes Burnham, a young barrister, as Chairman, and Janet Jagan as Secretary. From then on he was kept busy on the legislative front and political consciousness of the working class was increased and at the same time significant gains were realised in terms of workers welfare.

Under a 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 term in office was only short-lived.

Her Majesty 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.

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, in spite of the setbacks, 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 the 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 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 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."

This began a dark period

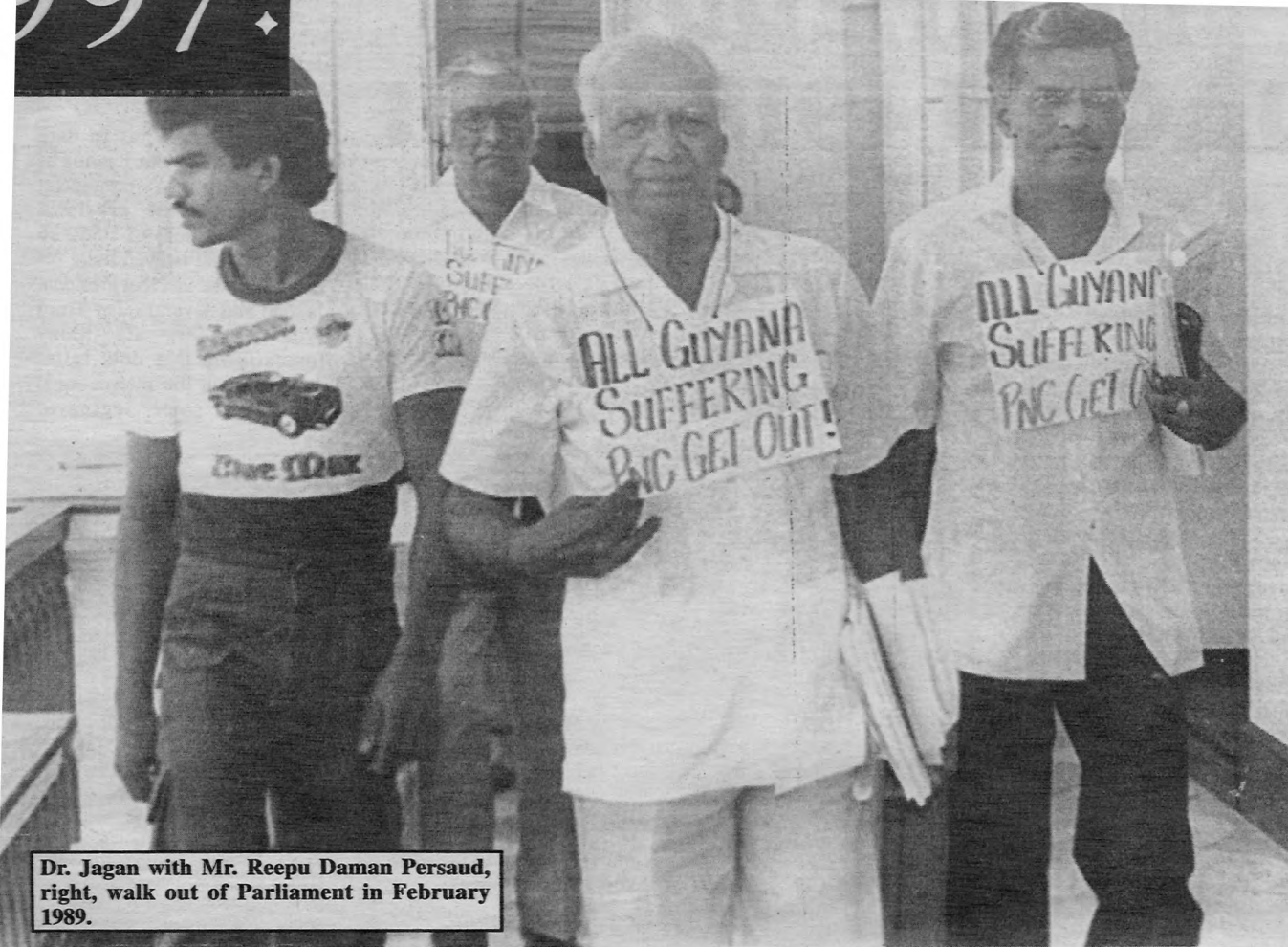


Dr. Jagan with right, walk out 1989.

of this nation's politics as Dr. Jagan was to opposition for the next through circumstances his control. He was to successive highly contested elections during this would seem that those in the opposition to the best in him in commitment, determination. To a despite tremendous



Dr. Jagan leaves the Georgetown Hospital for the Walter Reed Hospital in Washington D.C.



Dr. Jagan with Mr. Reepu Daman Persaud, right, walk out of Parliament in February 1989.

of this nation's political history as Dr. Jagan was to remain in opposition for the next 28 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 to solidify it.

At the same time flawed economic policies and managerial inefficiencies took their toll on the national economy while the migration rate of Guyanese to North America, the Caribbean and neighbouring territories rose alarmingly. Dr. Jagan used every available opportunity and forum, grassroots, legislature, university, interna-

tional and global to analyse the social, economic and political injustices manifest in this country under PNC rule.

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 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 eventual restoration of democracy in Guyana.

In October, 1992, under free

(Please turn to page 10)



Dr. Jagan at the Georgetown Mother Reed Hospital

DR CHEDDI B. JAGAN 1918-1997:

(From centre pages)

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 his long years of unending sacrifice, struggle, courage and determination. In almost fairly 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 in 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 this 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 latter 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 firm conviction that "Massive

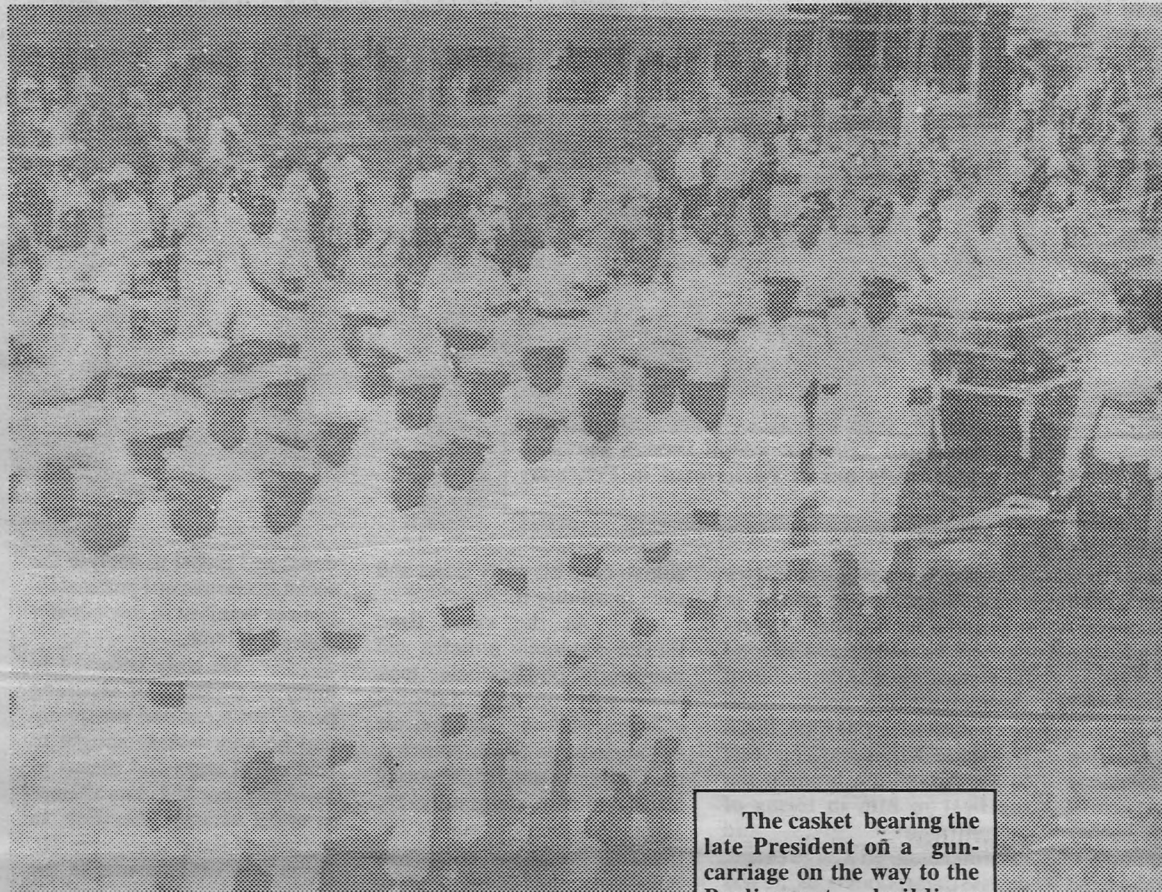
poverty is hindering the path to sustainable human development" and he further stressed that "economic growth is necessary for human development just as much as human development is essential for economic growth."

This call has to date received sympathetic hearing as there has been a substantial reduction in the pre-1992 international debt of US\$2.26 million. What is even more reassuring is the fact that President Jagdeo and several other Third World leaders are today intensifying this debt relief campaign on the international front with some degree of

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Dr. Jagan was also engrossed with 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. This document is now nearing completion.

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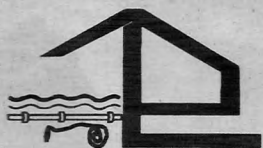
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An Assessment

The political career of Dr. Jagan spanned three distinct periods (a) The 1940s to 1964; (b) The post 1964 to 1992 period when he was in the political wilderness and the post 1992 to 1997 period when he began the process of national reconstruction. 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.

It is a supreme test of a man's character to overcome the

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, religion or political persuasion. The belief informed and activated his political and administrative orientation right from the very beginning of his political career. The 1964 PAC was a unique multi-social organisation and the 1950 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 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 is the present manifestation of this concern and the abiding commitment.

Dr. Jagan was not only an exceptional political leader

The casket bearing the late President on a gun-carriage on the way to the Parliament buildings funeral ceremony.

success.

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trials of adversity and disaster. This Dr. Jagan understood too well. His life was one of struggle, as a child, as a student, as a trade unionist, as a nationalist, and as a beleaguered statesman.

In a hostile colonial environment in which the natural progression of his country was first frustrated through local reactionaries and Anglo-American alliance, he suffered despair but was forever

with attributes of sincerity, integrity, humility, respect, tolerance and unity but an incredible political historian in his own right. His major works, *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 modern political history of

(Please turn to page XII)

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DR CHEDDI B. JAGAN 1918-1997:

(From page X)

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 Americas 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 from 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 the original PPP enjoyed under Jagan and Burnham. Imagine the national landscape had the Indian and African coalition of 1953 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 President Jagan who said:

"He was not given the time to complete his plans 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."

Indeed, Guyana is much poorer for his 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 20th century leaders such as:

1. Mohandas Karainchand (Mahatma) Gandhi for breaking the Yolk of the

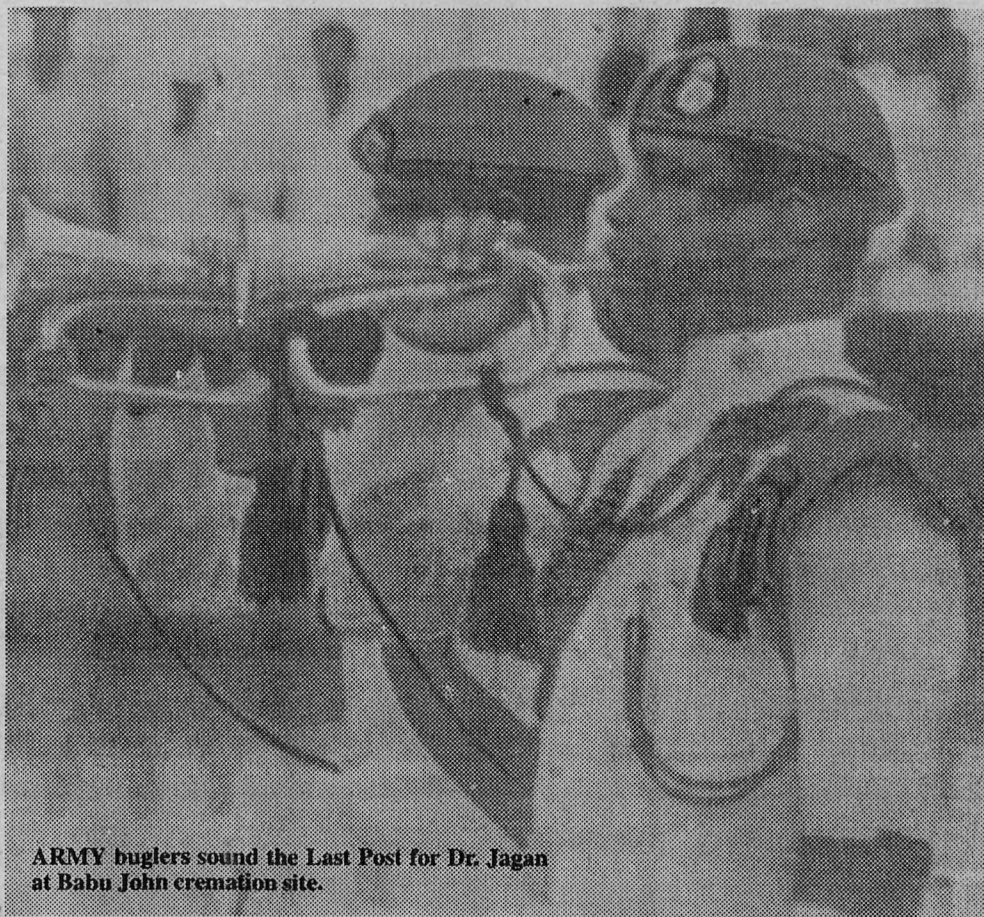
British Raj and for gaining India's Independence.

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 the other great leaders such as Jahawarlal Nehru of India, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Julius Nyrere of Tanzania.



ARMY buglers sound the Last Post for Dr. Jagan at Babu John cremation site.



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