

Son of the Soil, Father of the Nation

March 23, 2018

Below in an opinion piece by Attorney-at-Law, Member of Parliament and former Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs, Anil Nandlall:

It is said that some men are born great while others acquire greatness. Dr. Cheddi Jagan defies this proposition. He was both. It can hardly be disputed that no other personality has dominated national life in Guyana over the past century more than Dr. Cheddi Jagan. It is, therefore, impossible to pay tribute to such a towering and dominating personality in a singular column. Whatever I say here about the man is simply a drop in an ocean.

I say that Dr. Jagan was born with greatness because he originated from the logies of a sugar plantation at Port Mourant, Corentyne, Berbice to which his parents were indentured and grew up in those sub-human conditions, in a life of poverty and deprivation, identical to hundreds of thousands of indentured children, born in territories to which Indian labourers were exported at that time; yet, he elevated himself to become, disputably, the most illustrious son of an indentured worker anywhere, and has earned himself a place amongst the top personalities of the world, over the last 100 years. Indeed, he is an enigma.

My greatest fascination with Dr. Jagan has always centered around the source of his vision and perspicacity to dream the dreams, which he did, and the energy and tenacity to be able to work so indefatigably to achieve them. When he returned to Guyana in 1943, from his studies in the US, Dr. Jagan was only 25 years old. At that tender age, he had already read almost every publication by Marx and Engels, was already enamoured by the struggles of Mahatma Ghandi in South Africa, as well as, the struggles of Ghandi, Nehru *et al*, in the Indian independence movement; he had acquired a commendable understanding of world politics at the time. He was deeply affected by the class divisions and color segregation so pronounced in the US during that period. That he was affected by matters of such nature at such a tender age is perhaps the first indicia that greatness was bestowed upon him.

Dr. Jagan could have easily made a good life as a dentist in British Guiana. He was trained at one of the best dental schools in the US and there were less than a handful of dentists in the colony, at the time. However, young Jagan yearned for more.

He, himself, confessed that he did not understand the restlessness, that he felt. He tried a number of social activities to occupy his time. They failed to subside the burning fire; they failed to fill the void that he felt. It was the greatness with which he was born that was igniting. He had brief stints in the major organisations of the time, the Man Power Citizens Association, the British Guiana East Indian Association, etc. but could not remain with them for long. He quickly realized that these organisations were not truly interested in representing their members and constituents. Their leadership was only interested in certain vested interests.

It was during these very formative years, in an environment dominated by the plantocracy, and a very powerful Portuguese, Indo and Afro –Guyanese middle class, that this unknown product of a logie started to canvas, publicly, the interests of the workers and farmers, criticizing the plantocracy and local landlordism and articulating his vision for the working class and independence from colonial rule.

This must have sounded heretic, coming from a person of his socio-economic background, at the time. One can only imagine the contempt and disdain which would have flowed from the political and financial elites. It had to have taken remarkable strength of character, unparalleled self-confidence and an indomitable spirit of unusual magnitude, for him not only to survive but, progressively, moving to greater heights. By 1946, this unknown but enigmatic quantity had already carved a niche for himself in a society absolutely stacked against him and contested for a seat in the Legislative Assembly. Against all odds, he was victorious. He was only 29. It marked the beginning of an unmatched political career in this hemisphere.

Communism

The rest is history and is well recorded. I see no need to reiterate it, except to offer my comments on a few issues on the life of this great man. He was a self-avowed communist. This ideological adherence brought him acclaim, as well as tragedy. In the Cold War World, he was embraced by the East as an ideologue and an ally. In the Proletariat Movement, which gripped the third world, he was a hero. To the West, he was an enemy in the US sphere of influence. The hysterical fear was that he would create another Cuba. As a result, they ousted him from Government twice.

A closer examination of his life and politics illustrates that the West misunderstood him. To communism, he did pledge his unflinching adherence. However, in his own words, he explained that he did not view

communism as a “dogma” but as a “tool” to be used in interpreting and understanding the complex contradictions arising in society. His, was indeed a complex society: multi-class, multi-racial and multi-religion, all converging into one melting pot. The contradictions which arose were naturally varied and various. In this melting pot, Dr. Jagan was unwaveringly committed to racial, class, religious and national unity. This remained one of his ideals with which he fiercely persevered until his death.

Despite his embrace of communism, Dr. Jagan never envisioned a one party state. From the beginning of his political career, he advocated for a multi-party system of Government, where each man is entitled to a singular vote, based not on class and property but by virtue of the age of majority. He was a champion of human rights. In fact, at the Independence Conference, London in 1961, perhaps his most significant input in the Constitution that was then being crafted at Westminster, was the incorporation into that Constitution of the then newly promulgated “*Declaration of Human Rights*” by the United Nations Charter. Today, that remains in our Constitution as the Fundamental Rights and Freedom of the citizens.

Dr. Jagan was also an irrepressible protagonist for democratic culture, institutions, norms and practices. Most of his political life was spent advocating for free and fair elections, an independent Judiciary and a deliberative and representative Parliament. He strongly believed that the masses’ interests must dominate the agenda of Parliament and he envisioned a strong causal nexus between freedom and democracy and development.

Dr. Jagan was not opposed to private investments, either foreign or local. He embraced investors as developmental partners. He favored local over foreign capital. What he was irreversibly against, was the exploitation of workers and plunder of our natural resources, without the nation benefiting in a fair way.

As such, Dr. Cheddi Jagan would have never ever countenance an agreement like the ExxonMobil Contract. His position on private capital can be traced back to his 1957 Government, under which he established the Caribbean’s first industrial estate at Ruimveldt.

When he returned to Government in 1992, he inherited an economy in which the private sector was virtually non-existent. His Government and later succeeding Governments of his party created the environment, which conduce to the establishment of a private sector of such size and vibrancy as never seen before.

The above is by no means exhausted, but it provides a formidable array of glimpses of Dr. Jagan's politics and policies, to demonstrate beyond doubt that the fears that the West harboured about him was absolutely exaggerated, if not misplaced. His approach to Marxism was by no means dogmatic. In 1992, his manifesto promised to build "a national democratic state", which would be governed by the rule of law, where the constitutional rights of the citizenry would be respected, where the private sector was to be the 'engine of growth' and where there would be social and ecological justice for all.

A Man Ahead of His Time

The term "*a man a head of his time*" has been used to describe many. However, that adjectival prescription fits Dr. Jagan more than most. Since the 1950's, Dr. Jagan saw agriculture as the base of our economy. Under limited governmental authority, his Government began to unleash Guyana's agriculture potential. This period saw the establishment of agriculture schemes at Black Bush Polder, Canals no. 1 and 2 and Tapacuma.

It was during this period that surveying and irrigation works begun on the vast mass of land which now fall under the administration of the Mahaica Mahaicony Abary Developmental Authority (MMADA). These mega agricultural schemes were the first of its kind in the Caribbean. This period also saw the bridging of the three rivers by ferry, as Dr. Jagan saw farm to market access, as essential to our agri-potential. It was during this period also, that Guyana was identified as the "*Bread Basket of the Caribbean*". Since then, Dr. Jagan realized the need for cheap and renewable energy. During the 1957 Government, he secured a US \$22M loan to construct a hydro power plant at Malali Falls.

The visionary Dr. Cheddi Jagan recognised very early that education is one of the surest avenues through which a society can exit the cyclical sin of poverty. Thus, he saw scientific methods as integral to our agricultural and industrial advancement. In achieving this objective, he established an agricultural research station and an agricultural school at Mon Repos and established the country's first technical institute. He proceeded to establish the University of Guyana, which commenced holding classes at Queen's College.

The University of Guyana was the first indigenous university established in the British Commonwealth. Such was the vision of the man. I had the privilege of reading certain correspondences between Dr. Jagan and Dr. Harold Drayton, who was assisting with the establishment of the university. Dr. Jagan was so

involved in the process that he even identified areas of study, which he wanted the university to focus on in its Syllabi.

My grandfather, now deceased, was literate but not educated. He once told me, that at the public road at Mon Repos, he joined the PPP 1961 motorcade, which originated from Crabwood Creek and was travelling to Georgetown.

He was armed with a banner which he made with white cloth and on which he painted, in bold red the words "*DR. CHEDDI JAGAN: SON OF THE SOIL, FATHER OF THE NATION*". My grandfather was so correct, so many years ago!