

“We Have Learned From India’s Struggle”

—Janet Jagan

BRITISH GUIANA today is on the threshold of national independence. A Constitution Committee, not composed of prominent Englishmen and “bekenighted” members of local community, but made up of unofficial members of the Legislative Council, has just completed its task and forwarded its recommendations to London. A delegation is expected to begin constitutional talks before year end.

This stage has been reached following some ten to twelve years of struggle, organization and awakening of the people to their rights. Like all national liberation movements, that in British Guiana has been subjected to its quota of repression, persecution, and acts of sabotage inspired by imperialism. Undaunted, the struggle for national sovereignty goes on.

India has been the greatest example of imperialism, and nowhere else in the world has there been domination of a larger mass of humanity by alien, self-seeking interests. It was natural, therefore, for reaction to colonial rule in India to be greater in intensity than elsewhere. The lessons learned from India’s long, heroic struggle, and her ultimate achievement of *Swaraj* have not only contributed to the shortening of the period of struggle for other colonies, but also set the pattern for many independence movements.

In British Guiana, for example, we derive much inspiration and guidance from India’s gallant fight to end colonial rule. We draw parallels between situations in India before independence and those that exist in Guiana. And, generally, we try to show in our lectures, discussions and public meetings that the struggle for colonial freedom today is no different from that of yesterday. Although the techniques of imperial rule have become more subtle, exploitation still exists.

Racial Divisions. The struggle for Guianese independence is made difficult today by the racial division deliberately engineered by British imperialism. For a better understanding of this difficulty, it is necessary to provide the background.

After this part of Guiana was ceded by the Dutch to the British about a century and a half ago, the latter soon felt the need for cheap labour

on the sugar plantations. They first turned their attention to the Portuguese, brought them from Madeira around 1850. Having proved unsuitable as sugar workers, the Portuguese left the estates, later became shopkeepers and spirit dealers. Even to this day, they still dominate the “rum” trade. Many Portuguese, now men of wealth, ally themselves with the White community, but secretly entertain feelings of frustration be-



The Jagans at home.

cause they are not completely accepted by that group.

Chinese were next brought as indentured labour, but they too were unable to endure the rigours of plantation life. Organized Chinese immigration ceased around 1870.

After the abolition of slavery, freed Africans quit the plantations and took to the villages where they established farms. Later on they migrated to the towns, and today Africans constitute the largest single racial group in the city of Georgetown and the town of New Amsterdam, having left the farms for the bright lights and amenities of an urban environment. Numerically, they dominate the civil service, and many of them practise the leading professions.

Finally, Indians (generally called “East” Indians to distinguish them

Janet Jagan became General Secretary of the People’s Progressive Party of British Guiana soon after its formation in 1950. Chosen Deputy Speaker of the State’s legislature when the PPP came to office after the first election in 1955, she with other leaders was jailed when the Assembly was forcibly dissolved. Returned to the Assembly from Essequibo in the second election, she is now the colony’s Minister for Labour, Health and Housing. She was pitchforked into the colony’s struggle for freedom from the humdrum life of a nurse in the U.S.A. when she married Dr. Cheddi Jagan in 1943.

from the indigenous South American Indians) came in from 1870 under the indenture system. By their toil and sweat, under deplorable working and living conditions, with inadequate wages and little representation anywhere, Indians made the sugar industry the largest and most profitable in the country.

Sugar Industry. Wages were so low on the plantations that women and children were often obliged to labour in the canefields to supplement the meagre earnings of the heads of their large families. Many Indian children were therefore unable to take advantage of the little facilities for primary education which then existed. Thus, literacy in English was poorest among the Indian segment of the population.

Indians were also able to develop an industry of their own—rice—the

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second largest agricultural crop. But here, however, because this is a Guianese-owned industry, it suffers seriously from recurrent droughts and floods. In contrast, the British-owned sugar industry is well protected by the colonial government through an elaborate system which drains and irrigates the plantations.

Here, then, in a multiracial community, is a situation which can be easily exploited for political purposes. Although racialism has never created any real problem in Guiana, with increasingly articulate demands being made for freedom, imperialist agents have been quick to realize that Africans can be made jealous of the Indians' position. Racial differences have been accentuated; facts distorted by insinuating that Indians dispossessed Africans of property which the latter held in villages. The propagandists have even wickedly alleged that Indians want to transform Guiana into a dominion of the Indian Empire.

The P.P.P. and Opposition. It is well known that the People's Progressive Party has been the greatest unifying force ever known in Guiana. Indians, Africans and mixed races account for 45%, 36% and 11% respectively of the population. The almost complete racial harmony that existed at the time of the 1953 General Election caused so much disquiet among the traditional ruling classes that a racial split was engineered in the P.P.P. after the unjust suspension of the Constitution later in that year. But although the 1957 General Election was timed to come off when the racial unity of 1953 was seriously impaired, the P.P.P. still won by an overwhelming majority.

Since the beginning of 1958 a vicious campaign of smear and lies has been directed against the P.P.P. by the pro-imperialist daily press and by the breakaway faction of the Party (called People's National Congress) headed by Mr. Burnham, an African, with the object of inflaming racial passions still further. Even the London Times could not help noting on May 16, 1958, that "Dr. Jagan (P.P.P. Leader) is no racist in comparison with his young African opponent, Mr. Sampson Burnham, who is regarded by many as the more dangerous man."

Despite all the obstacle and traps laid along the road to freedom and social justice, the Guianese people are determined to travel that road. The independence movement has learned much from India and other former colonies, and this knowledge, being imparted to all, is releasing mighty forces which will also carry us forward safely to independence.