

CHEDDI JAGAN -- THE YEARS 1943-48

by Janet Jagan

When Dr Cheddi Jagan returned to the then British Guiana in 1943, he was a young man of 25 years. His first task was to establish his dental surgery, which he opened in 1944 at 69 Main Street. He soon had a fairly good practice. In the two years up to the formation of the Political Affairs Committee in 1946, he began to move around, meet people and lay the basis (even though unaware of it at the time) of what was to be his lifetime career.

He was to the people of his home estate, Port Mourant, a phenomenon, the first to reach professional status. A doctor's degree at that time was unusual and people then paid great respect to anyone with a degree, especially one who came from a sugar estate. (These were the days of 'doctor' politics). There was a pride that one of their own had reached such great heights. Fortunately, this never went to his head and he was little affected by the esteem in which he was held for achieving his professional status.

Dr Jagan was, however, concerned about conditions of sugar workers in the estate in which he was born and soon was being called in by workers for advice on how to fight various issues. The two unions at the

time failed to gain the confidence of the workers and were known to be puppets of the planters.

Workers in other estates in Berbice also called him in for discussions. I accompanied him on these trips and began to see and understand the country and its people. He joined the MPCA for a short period, hoping to provide representation to the workers, but he soon found this to be futile because of the nature of that union, which was in fact a company union. All of this came to the fore a few years later when the workers of the East Coast Demerara sugar estates went on strike, which culminated in the Enmore shooting and the death of the five workers, now known as the Enmore Martyrs.

While he was learning first hand about the real problems facing sugar workers, the largest group of workers in the country, he was starting to have a view of the dismal political situation. There was no organised political party to enunciate national issues. There was an antiquated Legislative Council dominated by the Colonial Office which, due to the war, had not had members elected for a number of years. It was not until 1947

that elections were again held. Political groups sprang up at election time, but did not continue on a permanent basis.

Both of us attended a discussion circle at the then Carnegie Public Library. These were thought provoking and doubtlessly led to his ideas about finding a solution to the barren political situation. By 1946, we had met two people who seemed also to be concerned about the need for political action and a political vehicle to express demands for representative government and to address the needs of the people in a colonial environment. Further, we were influenced by the anti-colonial struggle of the post World War II period and in particular, the way the Indian Independence struggle was proceeding.

It was in November 1946 that Ashton Chase, H.J.M. Hubbard and the two of us formed the Political Affairs Committee which gave a specific commitment that we would strive to lay the foundation for the formation of a political party based on the concept of socialism and dedicated to achieving improved social and economic conditions for the people.

Two years later, June 1948 was Enmore and the brutal slaying of five sugar workers. Dr Jagan led the funeral march of the workers from

Enmore to La Repentir cemetery in Georgetown. This event had a deep effect on him and furthered his belief that he had a role to play in the liberation of the Guyanese people from tyranny, exploitation and colonial rule. In his book "The West on Trial", he expressed this more decisively when he wrote that he had made a silent pledge at the graveside of the five Enmore Martyrs that he would devote his life to freeing his people from exploitation.

Another aspect that would become part of his political outlook was his strong belief in internationalism. This would be expressed later in his life for his intense campaign to bring about a New Global Human Order.

During this early period of his political life an event took place which gave expression to this concept. The Canadian Seamen's Union had a strike of the seamen on all the Canadian ships throughout the world. Two of the ships were in Port Georgetown when the strike was called, and all the seamen went on strike. There was no one to back them so we did our best. That included providing the ships with water and food which we would carry late at night in a small boat to the ships, as the authorities were trying to force the men off the ship by denying them supplies.

Later, when they had to leave the ships, we helped by providing accommodation, legal aid and by making arrangements for their return to Canada. It was a good example of international solidarity, something he felt strongly about all his life.

While he continued his dental practice, eventually moving to 199 Charlotte Street in the heart of the city, a practice which was growing due to the exceptionally high quality of his dentistry, he was devoting more and more attention to his political activity.

He had another responsibility, to his family, and from the very beginning after his return from studies in the USA, he began the systematic education of his younger brothers and sisters, sending them abroad for studies in dentistry, law, medicine, optometry and nursing. Unlike many in his professional class, he was little interested in the accumulation of wealth and living in style. We lived frugally in simple rented houses for some 25 years before building our home in Bel Air.

It was in 1947 that Dr Cheddi Jagan entered the hurly burly of politics when he ran for the Central Demerara seat as an independent labour

candidate. He won office and was a popular candidate, his well-known charisma coming into full view of the electorate (restricted as it was without universal adult suffrage). He confounded the old guard in the Parliament of the day who didn't know quite what to do with this young man who came from the bowels of the sugar estates. They were concerned and hostile to his radical approach of most issues and his determined efforts to get to the truth, as he did when he exposed the control of the media, newspapers and radio, in the hands of interlocking directorates of those who also controlled the political and economic life of the country.

They were accustomed to bombasts who came into the Legislature and made a lot of noise; the noisier they were, the higher the pay-off. But while Dr Jagan made a lot of noise, he was not for sale.

To appease their chagrin at this upstart who seemed to know too much and wanted a lot for the people, they began to say that his white wife was the one who had all the brains and that he was just doing her bidding. This slander which aimed at denigrating his intelligence and his worth continued through the years and one still hears it said. It was in fact, a

racial slur, that a 'coolie' boy from the estate could not have an intellect of his own.

It is a great pity that later this year, we would have celebrated Dr Jagan's 50th year in Parliament, a monumental record of achievement which expresses what he has done, and what he has meant to the people and the nation he served.

During this period before the formation of the People's Progressive Party in January 1950, it was a very important stage in the life of the man who was to become President of Guyana after waging a 28 years battle to restore democracy and end the despotic regime of the PNC led by Messrs Burnham and Hoyte.

These distinct characteristics of Dr Jagan were emerging at this time of his life when he was in his 20's and 30's. The internal discipline that permitted him to do so many things and to carry such heavy loads of responsibility was emerging as a distinct aspect of his character.

His ability to concentrate in the presence of many diversions was also becoming apparent. For example, after he and his government were catapulted out of office in 1964 following the CIA intervention and all the horrific events of that period, he sat down and wrote "The West on Trial". His toughness of spirit which allowed him to take an objective view of situations despite unusual, excessive and persistent attacks and obstacles was now becoming evident.

Also emerging as his character was further developing, was an aspect of what was to become a life-long love and commitment - studying, reading and writing. He read extensively. He enjoyed reading and then discussing, arguing, persuading and the general cut and thrust of debate with friends and opponents alike.

Later in life, writing articles, pamphlets and books were very important to him as were speaking engagements, lectures and the political platform when he could teach as well as campaign on issues and for elections.

His unpretentious dignity and humility were part of his being. His stately posture, his gracefulness and his famous warm smile were part of

the aura, the charisma of this outstanding man. (He exercised daily, ate moderately and did not smoke or drink).

A very important part of his character was his love of people, his humanity and his unswerving desire to make the lives of people better.

His enemies have always accused him of 'race politics' but this is so far from the truth that it is an abomination. He never saw people as belonging to one race or another; he saw them as the exploited or the exploiters. He always, without exception, saw people without any regard to ethnic origin. He was in fact 'colour blind'. His goal was always national unity.

In my view, Dr Jagan's formative years were during this important period of his life, 1943 - 48.