

Cheddi Jagan, Communism and the African-Guyanese

by Clem Seecharan

One hundred years ago today Cheddi Jagan (1918-97) was born at Plantation Port Mourant on the lower Corentyne Coast. This sugar estate, its resident population virtually all Indians, was the seminal source of his radicalism. A narrative of ‘bitter sugar’, and the arrogance of the white ‘sugar gods’ inhabiting a different universe, encapsulated the plantation culture of deprivation. But Port Mourant, owned by two Anglo-Indian brothers, was probably the most progressive plantation in the colony because J.C. Gibson, the manager from 1906 to around 1936, exerted greater autonomy than, say, the managers of the powerful Booker conglomerate. And though paternalistic, Gibson was inclined towards reform: better housing; watered land on the plantation for supplementary rice farming by his workers; access to the estate for fishing and the gathering of wild vegetables; conveyance of the workers to the backdam by locomotive; a community centre that privileged cricket, with a few skilled workers managing the rising Port Mourant Cricket Club, (later) the nursery of several West Indies Test cricketers. Moreover, this district was one of the healthiest, least malarial, in colonial Guyana. The people of Port Mourant were energetic, generally more robust in body and (as they were inclined to proclaim) sagacious of mind.

Cheddi’s unprecedented courage and pertinacity in challenging colonial society were shaped by an environment of ample promise – not despair. He posed a profound challenge to the old order in the late 1940s-early 1950s. Having graduated in dentistry in the United States, he and his Chicago-born wife, Janet Rosenberg (1920-2009), settled in British Guiana in 1943. Theirs was a remarkable political partnership of over 50 years. They were both communists although Janet, a formidable organiser, was not nearly as ideological as Cheddi. She was reticent and did not wear her Marxism on her sleeves; yet she was no less resolute than Cheddi in her belief in the superiority of communism – and the inevitability of its fulfilment universally. Janet was also committed to the creation of a Leninist party, tightly controlled and guided by ‘democratic centralism’. After the rather anarchic predilection of the pre-1953 PPP, she would have harboured no reservations on the necessity for such approach to governance of the party.

Cheddi and Janet were two of the most abstemious politicians anywhere in the world – people of integrity, who did not steal and never construed the political vocation as a means of amassing wealth. This is possibly their greatest legacy.

Cheddi recalled for V.S. Naipaul in 1991 his discovery and enchantment with Marxism-Leninism: ‘It was Janet who, when she came here in 1943, brought me Little Lenin Library books. It was the first time I had read Marxist literature...And then I began reading Marxist books like mad. I read *Das Kapital* after the Little Lenin series. And that helped me to have **a total understanding** of the development of society. Until then, all the various struggles had been disjointed experiences. To put it in a way that was **totally related to a socio-economic system** came from reading Marxist literature. For instance, the women’s question **was dealt with** in Engels’s book, *The Origins of the Family*. The Marxist theory of surplus value brought a **totally** new understanding of the struggle of the working class...a whole new world opened to me, **a total understanding of the world** [emphasis added].’

Therefore, Cheddi genuinely believed that Marxism-Leninism would eradicate the racial incomprehension between Africans and Indians in Guyana – prefigured by the supposed prevailing concord among the diverse nationalities of the Soviet Union. He placed unconditional faith in a putative utopia, the USSR. But the unpromising ethnic underpinning of Guyanese politics was already discernible by 1947, when Cheddi (aged 29) was first elected to the Legislative Council. Indians were already perceived by Africans as the ascendant segment in British Guiana, economically and demographically. The latter’s fears were exemplified memorably in the venerable labour leader, Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow’s (1884-1958) voting against adult suffrage in the legislature in 1944 – a measure he had advocated all his life. Guyana’s journey to Independence and beyond would be haunted by ethnic susceptibilities and the failure to begin to shape a coherent Guyanese nationalism. It wasn’t enough to hate the British. Yet Guyanese, with rare exceptions, have been unable to confront their ethnic prejudices – their racism. It is conceivable, therefore, that the principal political parties in Guyana (the United Force apart) eventually all espoused a variant of Marxism-Leninism primarily because it provided a rationale for sweeping the imponderable race issue under the carpet.

Moses Bhagwan (like Eusi Kwayana [formerly Sydney King]) was one of the few who gave the ethnic question the attention it merits: 'Dr Jagan was not creative ideologically. He persevered with his Marxist/Leninist approach believing that if he made the economy right and put poor people into jobs, he would eliminate poverty and all social problems. It's a point of view I never shared because of the underlying ethnic problem which, I thought, had its own dynamic distinct from the circumstances around it. In other words, the problem of race would persist in Guyana whether people were poor or rich. It is a major failure of the PPP, in its early days, that it did not regard the Indian/African racial problem with due seriousness'.

The sugar plantation in Guyana is evocative of immemorial suffering; yet despite the enslavement of Africans for over two centuries, by the late 1940s that hurt was more palpable among Indians because memories of indentureship were fresh and many still lived in derelict ranges on sugar estates. In 1913, 1924, 1939 and 1948, at Plantations Rose Hall, Ruimveldt, Leonora and Enmore respectively, Indian workers were gunned down by the colonial police: milestones in their tradition of resistance. The founding, in 1937, of the Manpower Citizens' Association (MPCA), the first trade union by an Indo-Guyanese, Ayube Edun, canalised the insurgent outpouring of Indian sugar workers at the end of the 1930s. Permeating Edun's philosophical promptings was a utopian strand that would be replicated, more robustly, in Cheddi Jagan's Marxism.

The conception of indentureship as 'a new slavery' and the sugar planters/'sugar gods' as ineluctably exploitative, bred a messianic reflex for deliverance among Indo-Guyanese – the root whence sprang, and nourished, Jagan's politics. But the mantra of 'bitter sugar', as Cheddi popularised it after 1947, did not strike a chord with African-Guyanese, most of whom had long left the plantations; only task-gangs, from the villages, were inclined to seek periodic employment there. Moreover, the perceived ascendancy of Indians and anxiety over their impending hegemony had militated against the anti-colonial instincts of Africans. As Eusi Kwayana, a loyal servant of Jagan during his fledgling political endeavours in the late 1940s, recalls: 'I lived among very poor African people all of my life...They were very political...But I know also that they **did not** have strong feelings against colonialism – they had no strong feelings against colonialism – or against Booker because of their monopoly [of the sugar plantations] or their treatment of people. **The whole idea of rejecting the British was not very firm among Africans.** Indians had it a lot firmer because of the Indian nationalist movement [led by Gandhi and Nehru]'.

But Jagan's crusade against 'bitter sugar', his hard work and selflessness, in addition to his known frugality, would sustain his political mission for over 50 years. He retained his Indian support-base, despite the mass migration of whole families, virtually entire villages, to the capitalist North. He was an attractive and incorruptible man – an indefatigable gadfly. But his anti-British/anti-Booker master narrative that captivated Indo-Guyanese, evoked little resonance with his African compatriots. Jock Campbell (1912-94), the reformist head of Booker, did meet Cheddi more than half way: in August 1953 he offered to recognise the PPP-supported union, the Guiana Industrial Workers Union (against the MPCA), as the bargaining agent for field workers, the overwhelming majority of sugar workers (the MPCA would remain the representative of the minority factory workers). Campbell also offered Janet Jagan (the Minister of Labour) the framework of a pension scheme (around 1959) for all sugar workers. Twice, in 1958 and in 1960, Campbell proposed to Cheddi a scheme by which the state could take over 51% of Booker: it got nowhere.

These overtures were all unpalatable to him – mere palliatives, discordant with a fundamental Marxist tenet: the control by the state of the 'commanding heights of the economy' (as in the USSR), not by rapacious foreign capitalists. Cheddi's intransigence notwithstanding, Campbell initiated a culture of reform in the sugar industry that was far-reaching; it is still recalled fondly by the dwindling body of old sugar workers. Yet Cheddi deserves much credit for these reforms, although loyalty to his communist creed precluded co-operation with Campbell, a potentially crucial ally (certainly after 1957). As Jock said to me in 1992, shortly after he had what was his last phone conversation with him: 'Cheddi and I could have worked miracles'.

Yet Jagan's passion and sincerity for redressing the evils of 'king sugar', in conjunction with his campaign for universal adult suffrage, were seen by Africans as measures towards the consolidation of Indian domination of an independent Guyana. So, too, were two of his other major achievements, in the late 1950s-early 1960s: the Black Bush Polder Scheme (primarily for rice cultivation); as well as his procuring a secured and quite lucrative market for rice in Castro's Cuba.

Therefore, the elevation to leadership by Africans of the most talented African in the PPP between 1950 and 1955, Forbes Burnham (1923-85), was deemed imperative in order to arrest Indian political and economic ascendancy. African trust in Forbes was sustained by an enduring sense of disenfranchisement: loss of portions of their ancestral land to Indians; the idea of an 'Indian Colony' in Guyana, advanced by J.A. Luckhoo, C.R. Jacob (senior), Dr Wharton and others; Indian commercial and agricultural mobility after the First World War; their cultural dynamism (rooted in Hinduism and Islam), and a triumphalist identity with an India seen to be in revolt against the British, the bleak trauma of partition notwithstanding. Astounding educational advances by Indians after the Second World War exacerbated the dismay of Africans that the last repository of their mobility was being threatened: the professions of law, medicine, teaching and the civil service. No less ominous for them was the demographic leap of Indians (with the eradication of malaria in the late 1940s), and the granting of universal suffrage by the British shortly thereafter, in the early 1950s.

Jagan's Marxism was arguably inherently limited in its potential for moderating the deep-seated racial incomprehension between Africans and Indians in Guyana; moreover, his apparent inability to comprehend or empathise with African insecurities probably exacerbated it. On the eve of the first general elections under adult suffrage, in April 1953, the People's Progressive Party (PPP), led then by Cheddi Jagan and Forbes Burnham, a lawyer of formidable oratorical skills – fortified by his self-assurance in his intellectual and political mastery over Jagan – was really a weak alliance of the two main ethnic groups. This fragile condition had prompted Eusi Kwayana (supported by Martin Carter, the poet) to move in the executive committee of the PPP that they should face reality and contest only eight seats in the general elections. If they fielded candidates in all the constituencies, Kwayana argued, they would surely win the elections and therefore have to precipitately face the trauma of being in government. He did not believe that the PPP was ready for office because 'it was a kind of coalition...[some] racial unity was there but it was not well-grounded; it was tenuous'. He adds: 'I told Jagan and Burnham we would win the elections. They didn't believe me. They thought we would win about 8 seats [out of 24]. I moved a motion that we fight about 8 seats and try to do, in a multiple of eight, what Jagan had done alone [since 1947, in the legislature and in his constituency of Central Demerara], and really try to unite the country'.

Kwayana's reservations were soon justified – the PPP won 18 seats. And as soon as the Party's 'victory' was declared, Burnham challenged Jagan for sole leadership of it. After only 133 days in office, the British suspended the constitution, invaded the colony and removed the PPP from government, alleging that they were pursuing a communist agenda, aimed at taking the colony into the Soviet bloc. However, Burnham was never considered a communist, so the British sought to prompt and to seduce him (they deemed him a 'socialist': moderate) into breaking away from the communists, the foremost identified as the Jagans, Sydney King (Eusi Kwayana), Martin Carter and Rory Westmaas. Burnham quit Jagan's PPP in 1955 and formed his own party (known from 1957 as the People's National Congress [PNC]). As Forbes contended in May 1957, before the general elections, when his party was also called PPP: 'I am for unity not domination or liquidation. Jagan must convince me of a change of heart and approach...The national movement whose aim is political independence will not benefit from unity with adventurers – dogmatists whose aim is communism and who abuse everyone with whom they do not agree'.

It should be added that as early as 1947, British intelligence (MI5) had been intercepting Jagan's mails and phone conversations with people in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), particularly Billy Strachan (1921-98), the Jamaican-born communist, Secretary of the Caribbean Labour Congress (London Branch), and a leading light in the CPGB. (MI5's surveillance of Cheddi and Janet never ceased throughout the colonial period.) For nearly 50 years, there were few things Cheddi and Janet did without Billy's knowledge: they confided in him as they did in possibly no other person. It is noteworthy that among the people Billy recommended to them were Forbes Burnham (around 1948) and Ranji Chandisingh (around 1957). The latter was Billy's protégé, a brilliant young Harvard-educated communist, and editor of his monthly paper, *Caribbean News*. This secret, total devotion to Billy was fatal because he was a hard-line, pro-Moscow communist, as was Ranji Chandisingh (1930-2009), who defined his role in the PPP thus: 'My task is to help develop cadres with a communist outlook, loyal to Marxism-Leninism and the principles of proletarian internationalism [world revolution]'. This engendered ideological inflexibility – the proscribing of rigorous internal debate within the PPP that could have accommodated a healthy pluralism while conciliating differing perspectives. Ironically, Chandisingh himself would defect to Forbes Burnham in 1976 – testifying to the latter's belief in Marxism-Leninism! This absurdity is totally congruent with splits and defections within communist parties: the firmer the orthodoxy, the more

abundant the scope for contraventions of it. Another prominent disciple, B.H. Benn (1923-2009), as loyal to the Jagans as Chandisingh, had quit earlier, in 1968, espousing a heresy: a Maoist stance.

But the haemorrhaging had started in 1955 with the ‘moderates’: Burnham, Jainarine Singh and J.P. Lachmansingh. The following year, the so-called ultra-leftists, Eusi Kwayana, Martin Carter and Rory Westmaas, also left the PPP, on grounds that Jagan was subordinating Marxism to racial pragmatism (his Indian constituency). Jagan’s PPP would henceforth be regarded by Africans as an Indian party; yet he seemed incapable of grasping the primary problem that would gnaw away at his political stature – the bedevilling issue of African insecurities. His unreconstructed Marxist assumption of the transcendent powers of the class struggle posited race as a false question. As early as 1947 Jagan asserted: ‘Labour [a short-lived ‘party’ of that name]...will have to solve the question of race. This it can only do by **replacing** the question of race by the one of class. The rich and the poor of one particular race do not have the same interests. It is the poor and exploited of all races who have a common interest...[emphasis added]’

Eusi Kwayana, himself an austere, incorruptible man, disagreed with Jagan deeply, despite their common roots in Marxism. Eusi’s early recognition of African apprehension of potential Indian domination became central to the vagaries of his politics after he left the PPP in 1956. Racial insecurities could not simply be ‘replaced’ (that is, conceptualised as ‘epiphenomenal’ or ‘superstructural’, according to the Marxist jargon) by the notion of the primacy of class relations and the liberating powers of the class struggle.

Kwayana’s judgment of Cheddi’s lack of empathy for racial susceptibilities is as valid today as when I interviewed him in Georgetown, over 25 years ago: ‘Jagan never dealt with things at the subjective level, although he had a lot of rage against Imperialism. That problem was never dealt with; that’s one of the reasons why I left the PPP. **The psychology of the leader is crucial. We had to fight to get Africans to accept an Indian leader [Jagan]. He didn’t have that problem. He never had to accept a leader of another race, so he didn’t know what it is. He talks about revolution, but the personal revolution – nothing!** Cheddi had a cultural problem. Having rejected colonialism and its intellectual and cultural baggage, he had to take something from somewhere else [Soviet communism]; he didn’t rely on his own personality [cultural foundations]. If he had...[some] Hinduism, it could have made him a different person [emphasis added]’.

Moreover, Cheddi’s tortuous *modus operandi*, during the colonial period, to obviate scrutiny of his Marxism, alienated key potential allies, as did his doctrinaire promulgation of Marxism-Leninism in later years. His declaration of admiration, in 1960, for Fidel Castro’s and his revolution in Cuba would provide President Kennedy and the CIA with the rationale and the resolve to destroy him, despite British commitment to giving British Guiana independence by 1962. The Cuban issue provided more fodder than any other to the anti-communist crusade against Jagan, at home and abroad. Shortly after Jagan’s meeting with Kennedy in October 1961, the Americans decided that Burnham was their man. They proceeded to subsidise the PNC and the United Force (UF) in fomenting violence against Cheddi, making the colony ungovernable in order to delay Independence. They also put inordinate pressure on the British to change the electoral system to proportional representation; this was rendered remarkably easy through a subterfuge (by Colonial Secretary, Duncan Sandys, a Churchillian Tory) that entrapped Cheddi, in London in October 1963. Thus he was finally defeated in the elections of December 1964.

His local enemies had been enraged and subsequently galvanised by the PPP’s triumphalist victory parade across the country in August 1961, when the elections symbol of Burnham’s PNC (the broom) was dragged on the road behind Indian cars, trucks, buses and tractors. In addition, myriad unconscionable acts of racial arrogance were exhibited. Jagan was at the head of this mammoth, all-Indian motorcade from the upper Corentyne Coast to Georgetown, including through numerous African villages, disconsolate at the defeat of their leader and fearful of Independence under Indian rule. It was a tawdry display that left a deep wound in the soul of Africans. Rupert Roopnaraine (aged 18 at the time) recalls the bitter taste the PPP victory parade left in his young mind: ‘It was an act of the most extraordinary insensitivity...The 1961 elections produced a situation where victory in democratic elections came to mean the victory of one race over another. It was actually one tribe conquering another’. A bitter legacy!

African faith in Jagan’s stature as a national leader was already undermined because the PPP, tactically, decided not to contest six seats in 1961 – paradoxically, in order to help Peter D’Aguiar’s pro-capitalist, rabidly anti-communist UF against Burnham’s PNC. Several of these seats had a significant majority of

African voters, but the Indian minority vote that would have gone to the PPP was decisive in the UF's victory in two of these seats (both in Georgetown). To Africans (that apart), Jagan was really making a statement that he did not need their suffrage in his pursuit of victory and Independence. Therefore, they could expect no empathy from him as the head of government. But the PNC had the last laugh: they polled 41% of the votes (11 seats) by virtue of the PPP's not contesting those six seats; the PPP got 42.6% (20 seats). This glaring disparity energised and accelerated the PNC's campaign for proportional representation. It was adopted in 1962 by President Kennedy, who prevailed upon Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to impose the new system in British Guiana in order to pre-empt it from becoming 'a second Cuba'.

Jagan's ideological inflexibility and his limitations of statesmanship (particularly during his meeting with President Kennedy in the White House on 25 October 1961), eventuated in the Americans saddling Guyana with the increasingly dictatorial regime of Forbes Burnham, from 1964 to his death in 1985. In the 1970s, as his nation's economy faltered and its institutions were weakened, Burnham (with Machiavellian dexterity) affected a radical posture in order to consolidate and prolong his rule. With the support of the PPP, he proceeded to nationalise 80% of the economy. By an affectation at embracing Marxism and Fidel Castro's Revolution – at the core of Jagan's creed – he stole the latter's thunder, leaving him with the crumbs of doctrinal purity. Thereafter, Jagan would endeavour to rescue his political marginalisation (or 'irrelevance', as Burnham pronounced it) by claiming sole custodianship of the authentic Marxist tenets. He termed this 'ideological implacability'. But Burnham, recognised all along that general elections in Guyana are ethnic censuses stacked against him, so he rigged them all: in 1968, 1973, 1980 and 1985 (the last by D. Hoyte, his successor).

Yet Cheddi survived! The three quotes below testify to his conviction that his Marxist creed was bridging the ethnic divide in Guyana; and, infinitely more grandly, that his political mission had ramifications for a universal communist utopia. He was irrepressible. With the USSR on the verge of disintegration, he even offered an explanation for what must have been a soul-wrenching experience – an unimaginable personal tragedy. The first quote is from 1975, on the 25th anniversary of the PPP; the second is from 1984, as he approached 20 years in opposition; and the third, in 1990, was in response to *Stabroek News*, which (on the eve of the demise of the Soviet Union) had asked him if communism was dying:

Jagan [1975]: 'The main burden of their attack is that we should not have espoused Marxism and given support to the Cuban Revolution. What they fail to note is that had we not taken a firm patriotic position, a world-view [communism and 'proletarian internationalism'] we would not have been able to win over the masses [presumably Africans as well] from the traitors and collaborators [Burnham's PNC, by then an ally of Castro and the Soviet Union]'.

Jagan [1984]: 'I am not only fighting for the people of Guyana. I am fighting for the people of the world. I am contributing to that struggle. That struggle is winning. That is why the United States is so hysterical at the moment, because of that very fact, that what I stand for is winning'.

Jagan [1990]: 'In Eastern Europe it was not communism (from each according to his ability, to each according to his need) but its first phase, socialism (from each according to his ability, to each according to his labour), which ran into trouble. Communism, as a system, has not been tried in any country as yet, and remains a highly moralistic and humanistic ideal and destination. Even for the most advanced socialist society, it will remain an ideal or goal of the 21st century, as admittedly distortions and deviations have forced the USSR to literally start all over again on the path of socialism...The goals of socialism and the virtues of Marxist doctrine must not be confused with the failures of those who tried to implement socialism'.

In 1991, the year before the PPP was returned to office (because of Jimmy Carter's intervention), Cheddi Jagan told businessmen in Georgetown that his party rejected 'winner-takes-all politics and intends to form a plural democratic government to tackle the tasks of reconstruction'. Yet, this noble aspiration remained elusive after the termination of the PPP's rule of nearly 23 years. Even as we mark the centenary of the birth of this honourable man, the insecurity of all ethnic segments remains the Achilles heels of Guyana. It will remain so even when the oil begins to flow because the main political parties are not committed to fundamental constitutional reform to entrench a 'winner-does-not-take-all' political culture – the only valid means of shaping a genuinely inclusive polity.

I conclude with a reflection by Eusi Kwayana on the failure of the PPP in 1953 because it remains relevant today: ‘Burnham’s entry in the PPP [in 1950] as its first Chairman sent waves of relief among Afro-Guyanese. He played a leading role in persuading...[some] sections still omitted from the mass movement that a common agenda had arrived. But a certain...[lack of] depth marked the campaigning of both leaders in 1953 [Jagan and Burnham] to whom an anti-colonial victory was more urgent than consolidating a deep non-racial understanding...**The main area of education [by the PPP] should have been the racial question, and arrangements should have been made inside the party for power-sharing** [emphasis added]’.

As we celebrate the centenary of the birth of Cheddi, a great, yet humble and incorruptible man who shook up the old order in colonial Guyana, we could do well also to ponder this monumental error in our history, as identified by Eusi. It remains an indispensable task.



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