

## YESU PERSAUD: AN EXEMPLARY LIFE WELL LIVED

- Ramnarine Sahadeo.



Namaste

It was the late sixties. Guyana had just achieved political independence in 1966. Guyanese celebrated the idea that they can now determine their own system of government; choose how they dress and which religion or way of life to follow. But internal struggles surfaced to continue the pre-independence divisions. Academic qualifications and experience took a back seat to party membership which determined employment, promotion, demotion or even dismissal from government departments.

A few "freedom fighters" decided that wearing a tie to work was an unnecessary appendage of the "white masters". After all they lived in a cold climate while we reside near the equator and have summer all year long. Why should they impose their cultural dress on us as they did with their religion? However with all the zeal of inspector Javert in Victor Hugo's classic *Les Misérables*, men and women of all colours threatened government workers from all races that they will be disciplined and would be considered improperly attired if that yoke did not hang around their neck.

Enter Yesu Persaud who had just qualified and returned from England immaculately clad in a black pin striped suit with tie and even a black umbrella. The contagious smile was omnipresent. Another Englishman, the boys whispered. It was not long before the "revolutionaries" and their colonial henchmen reached a compromise as suggested by one who would become a master negotiator. "Make it optional not compulsory, there will be no need for enforcement and more will comply". A short while thereafter all male government workers sported shirt-jacks.

Thomas Paine in his *Common Sense* described government as a "necessary evil." It can stifle initiative in any country anywhere on the globe. This may be one reason why Yesu ji quickly departed, joined private enterprise and never looked back. Hundreds of thousands choose to leave the country to find security, employment or escape persecution but he remained to make an indelible impression that should find a prominent place in the history books.

About four decades later we met again at Saraswati Vidya Niketan, the private Hindu school which considered him "family". The school was in its infancy and there was a need to encourage enrolment and assist those who needed financial assistance. The Jung Bahadur Singh scholarship was one of the first to be set up and then others followed. At an event prior to the first CXC results Yesu ji announced a similar scholarship in the name of his grandson and spoke to those in attendance. "Whatever you achieve, wherever you go, whatever you own, BE HUMBLE." He made it his duty to assist that school but also to be present at every event and graduation. When he was not seen in the 2021 virtual graduation ceremony current administrator and former student, Kamanie ji, anticipated our curiosity and explained that he was not well. Anyone acquainted with him and the Bhagavad Gita would recognise that this devotee not only practiced humility but also lived a life free from LUST, ANGER and GREED. (Gita: 16-21).

He achieved both material and spiritual success. One would have to struggle to find anything he needed or a gift that he appreciated. However about 2016 on his birthday which was being observed at the Peter's Hall temple, my friend and host Narine Das (Suresh) insisted that we attend and gave him a copy of my book "**Mohandas k. Gandhi and his inspiration, the Bhagavad Gita**". On receiving the book he blushed briefly commenting "Good work on a great man...you will put your birth place Leguan on the world map by connecting it to this global icon". While he treated people of all races, religions and social groups with equal respect and practiced the golden rule he never hesitated to let the public know that he was born a HINDU and has remained one throughout his life. He was always active in promoting the values inculcated from childhood. His early days were not different from anyone who was born and grew up in a logie or sugar plantation. The distinction is the path he followed and choices he made to reach the pinnacle as a businessman and humanitarian. His life can be compared to that of the lotus with roots in mud, stems pushing through dirty water but blossoms into a beautiful flower that is adorned by all as the seat of the goddess Saraswati.

His departure leaves a huge void particularly in the Hindu community and it would be a challenge to find a substitute. There can be no replacement for one with such an impressive record of activity and generosity. Those who are remnants of colonial hegemony and who continue to follow inimical practices of cultural and religious superiority now need to re examine their views. Is it still too difficult to admit that Yesu ji was one of those exemplary persons produced by every religion and that any attempt to convert others is unnecessary and downright disrespectful?

Yesu ji has achieved much in his life, a fact well documented. His business interests will no doubt be passed on to those he trained and trusted. However his admiration for Mahatma Gandhi inspired a request to have a street named after this venerated soul. This has not yet materialised and the suggestion has generated some conflict as to location. After listening to all the well deserved accolades by countless friends and relatives since his passing it should not be a difficult task to fulfill his wish. It would take only a tiny fraction of those he assisted and influenced. Surely it is time to show our appreciation beyond words and leave another legacy to this TRUE SON OF THE SOIL.

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Ramnarine Sahadeo

*Editor of the pocket sized Gita by Gandhi, with quotes and comments*

*Author: Mohandas K. Gandhi: Thoughts, Words, Deeds: His Source of Inspiration: Bhagavad - Gita Bhagavad*

