

The Racial Politics of British Guiana

(From a Correspondent in Georgetown)

TWO emergencies in less than one year. Nearly 50 people already killed. A whole village of over two thousand inhabitants completely burnt. An un-accounted number of women raped and men beaten up during the past four or five weeks. A whole family of a highly placed civil servant of Portuguese descent destroyed. And finally over thirty politicians detained, including the Deputy Prime Minister.

These are all the symptoms of the disease that festers the body politic of British-Guiana, a country which in the early fifties appeared so far ahead of the rest of British Caribbean territories in terms of political advancement that everyone expected British Guiana to be the first to gain complete independence. But Jamaica and Trinidad have already attained independence; the rest of the British Caribbean islands should gain theirs soon. The delay is not on the part of the British so much as on the part of these islands which hope to forge a small federation of their own without the bigger of the islands, Jamaica and Trinidad. The terms 'big' and 'small' are, as ever, used in relative sense. Jamaica, the biggest of these islands, geographically as well as in population, has a population of just about two million and Trinidad and Tobago have yet to reach the one million mark.

Racial Composition

British Guiana has a population of just over 600,000. East Indians, so called to distinguish them from American Indians, are the largest single group in the country. Next to them come the negroes who came to British Guiana in the 17th and 18th centuries, as to the rest of the Caribbean, as slaves to work on the plantations. With their emancipation and flight to towns, the problem of plantation labour was solved by importing indentured labour mainly from India. Indian immigration started in the 1840's. It is a matter of history "how farmers from India were brought to the West Indies, lured by false promises. If the plantation owners stood by the terms of their contract, most Indian labourers would probably have gone back to their country of birth because they found the conditions of work in the plantations absolutely intolerable. The Indian plantation workers were forced to stay on and

made their home in these new lands. They raised families and provided an over-increasing labour force for the plantations, thus enabling the plantations to keep the wage-rates low. Education too was deliberately denied to the children of the plantation workers. In this respect, the plantation owners and the Christian missions made common cause, as it were. The few Indian children who gained access to education in the mission schools could do so only if their parents agreed to become Christians or at least gave consent to the conversion of their children. To say the least, the British Government did nothing to improve their position. The nearest analogy to the conditions in India would be that of the untouchables and other depressed classes several of whom became Christians in the hope of bettering their economic prospects and social positions, a hope not always realised.

Indian: the Underdog

Of course, most Indians remained what a local analyst describes as 'un-Christian' and being Heathens, besides being uneducated, were decidedly of a lower cultural and economic order in the popular colonial conception.

The fact that the Indians remained for long in the backwaters is evident even to this day. The civil service in British Guiana (as also in Trinidad) is almost entirely manned by the non-Indians, largely Creoles. In racial terms, there is hardly a pure negro in British Guiana, for that matter in the Caribbean. Most coloured people other than East Indians are Creoles, a product of the racial inter-mixing between Negroes, Europeans and also American-Indians. The Creoles live mostly in towns; Georgetown is a predominantly Creole town with a sprinkling of Portuguese and the East Indians. Since the Creoles controlled the services, were educationally far more advanced and culturally almost completely westernized, they formed the elite, and regarded themselves as natural successors to the British. In the rest of the British Caribbean territories, this is what was the right thing to happen. But what about Trinidad and British Guiana, the two territories where the Creoles did not enjoy absolute majority? In fact, in British Guiana they are outnumbered by the East Indians, whereas in Trini-

dad the latter are a very close second.

The major reason why in the early fifties, hopes ran high about the pace of political advance in British Guiana was the fact the Indian and Creole leadership had made common cause in their fight against the British. Moreover, the leadership of both the racial groups appeared to be informed by high economic and social objectives. Both Forbes Burnham and Cheddi Jagan spoke as socialists and promised largescale social reforms. So theirs was not a mere coalition of racial groups. It appeared to be a much closer coming together and more strongly founded.

Jagan-Burnham Split

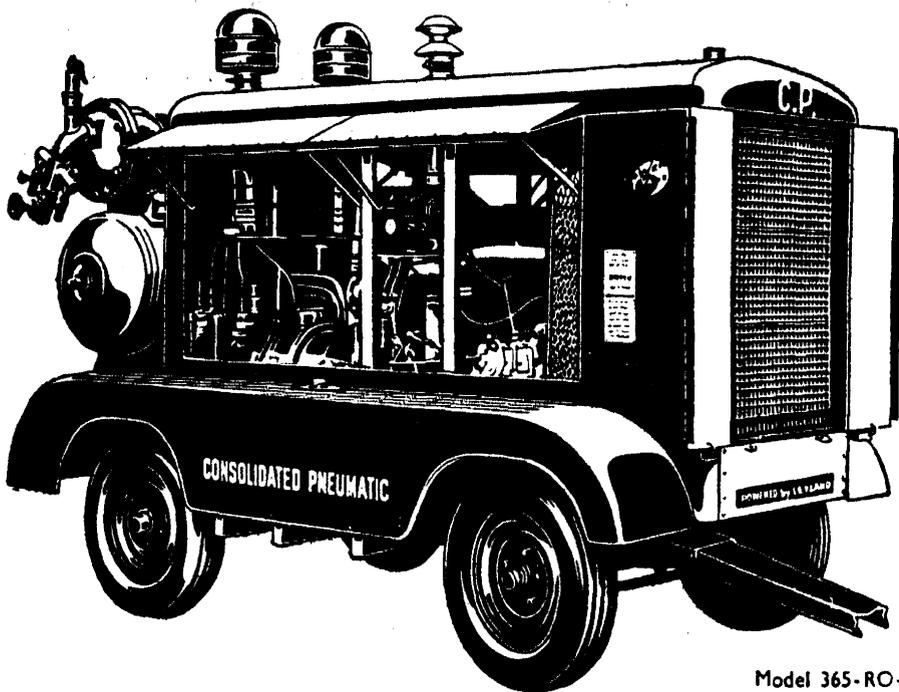
But that was not to be. Between Burnham and Jagan there were differences from the very beginning. These were differences not on objectives as over strategy. But there was, in addition, a clash of personalities. As Raymond Smith puts it in his book 'British Guiana', "it was unfortunate that this difference of opinion over tactics should run partly along racial lines, and introduce a strain between Dr Jagan and Mr Burnham that was naturally aggravated by their very human competition for leadership of the party."

The most unfortunate part of the current story is that the two top-leaders of the country, Jagan and Burnham, draw their support on entirely racial basis. Jagan is the hero of all East Indians, not because he is a socialist and his ideology appeals to his Indian supporters but because he is Indian. And there is no other Indian who matches up to Jagan. Talk to any of the wealthy Indians in British Guiana and they will laugh at the suggestion that Jagan is a communist and that they stand to lose under his rule.

On the other hand, the biggest stick with which Burnham beats Jagan is anti-communism. "Jagan is building himself up as a second Castro. Don't let Jagan assume power after independence or else British Guiana is bound to become another Cuba". Of course, these protests are meant more for foreign ears, especially American ears. And Burnham is a very shrewd politician, easily the shrewdest of all in British Guiana to-day. He knows how over-sensitive the Americans are to Castro. It is impossible for them to



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think of another Castro springing up, in what the Americans call, the Western Hemisphere, Burnham has very successfully aroused American suspicions and fed their fears of Jagan. To American foreign policy, the most important objective in British Guiana is to prevent Jagan from becoming the first Prime Minister. And that is precisely the objective of Burnham.

Internally, Burnham, like Jagan, derives his entire support from his own racial group. The Creoles put their full faith in him and, they depend on him to avert the possibility of Indian domination. Whether his social reform programmes also draw his negro supporters or not is hard to say. But the fact remains that his strength, like Jagan's, is primarily racial.

Why Only in Guiana?

One question that outsiders are prone to ask: How is it that things have taken such a bad turn in British Guiana Trinidad where, too, and not, the East Indians and negroes are more or less evenly balanced in number? Well, there is no simple answer to this question. Let us make an attempt, all the same. In Trinidad, negroes outnumber Indians though by a small margin, and at the same time the civil service, including police, is almost entirely manned by negroes. In British Guiana, Indians outnumber the negroes, by a small margin again, but the negroes control the civil service and police. A negro government in Trinidad gets almost all the support it needs from the services. In British Guiana, on the other hand, the services are, to say the least, indifferent to the Indians at the helm. There is a constant tug-of-war between the two wings of the government. In Trinidad too, the parties are split on racial lines but the situation is not out of hand as in British Guiana. If there too, negro politicians had to work with services manned largely by Indians, the situation might have been just as bad.

Of course, there are other factors which complicate the situation, the most important being the role of the British Government who are under constant pressure from the Americans to oust Jagan from power. Then there are the strongly entrenched business interests, predominantly white, which, unlike the wealthy Indians, are fully convinced that Jagan is a communist and are naturally apprehensive. They would spare no effort to bring about Jagan's downfall. To them of course, even Burnham is only the lesser of

the two evil because he too has often spoken of himself and his social and economic programme as socialist and is reportedly disposed favourably to the nationalisation of the plantations

Let us, at this stage, ask ourselves another question. How serious is the danger of a communist take-over under Jagan? That Jagan's dialogue is often-times revolutionary is, no doubt, true. But is he a communist by ideology at least? Jagan himself has never confessed that. Supposing for a moment, however, that he is communist but is not prepared to say so for tactical reasons, what are the chances of his translating the communist dialogue into action? The parallel with Cuba is fallacious. A radical homogenous society in Cuba could and did rally behind Castro. The conditions in British Guiana are different. No radical programme can succeed in this country, unless both the major races are behind it. If Jagan attempts it without first assuring himself of the creole majority support, he is doomed to failure. But if he is not a sworn communist and is just a radical social reformer, it should be possible for him and the negro leadership to agree on a common minimum programme of social and economic reform. So far Jagan has not been able to introduce the most modest reforms, for no other reason but lack of creole support.

The Way Out

Finally, where does the solution to the present *impasse* lie? Not in the ouster of Jagan which the Americans and the British hope to engineer through the most ill-advised system of proportional representation planned by Duncan Sandys; nor in the permanent exclusion from power of Burnham.

But let us be clear about the Sandys plan. A system of proportional representation is not necessarily bad. In fact, one can argue, and quite justifiably, that it is more democratic than the rule of simple majority. But to argue about the merits and demerits of proportional representation is to miss the whole point about the Sandys plan. The Sandys plan cuts at the roots of democracy in giving absolute precedence to parties over the individual representatives. Under this plan, people vote for the parties and not for individual representatives. Parties do publish their lists but that is of little consequence. The essential difference between the Sandys plan and the communist election procedure is that the latter permits only one

party to put up candidates whereas the former allows any number of parties to enter the arena. This is an important difference, no doubt. But one should not ignore how closer the two systems are than, say, the British or American election procedures to the communist ones. It is a shame that the British political leadership has to resort to such a short-sighted measure which they will have reasons to regret later. It will not solve the problem of British Guiana. The signs certainly are that it will aggravate the situation. But it will have set a wrong precedent.

A word or two should be said about the general feeling of disappointment with India's foreign policy that one encounters among the East Indians, particularly in troubled British Guiana. Can India not undertake to represent our legitimate case to the world? Is it prepared to abandon us altogether for fear of being accused of racial bias? Is it right for India to abandon even its professed principles of secularism and democracy to appear to be non-racial? These questions are raised very often and it is not possible to answer them to one's own satisfaction, much less to the satisfaction of the East Indians of British Guiana who feel that there is a sort of international conspiracy afoot to deprive them of their just rights. They have given up hope that India will take up their cause in the forthcoming Commonwealth Prime Minister's conference. But if India will not who else will?

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