

N.B.: The parts in **bold** were published by Kaieteur News on Sunday, 26th April, 2008. The parts in *italics* were omitted by KN.

THE ARTS FORUM

The Arts Forum will be offering an occasional page of related topics in the media intended to sensitize students and the general readership to the complex history as well as the rich and diverse traditions that we share.

Ameena Gafoor is a founding Director of The Arts Forum Inc., an independent non-profit platform that emerged out of the need to take stock of neglected aspects of our literary and visual arts and the cultural traditions of Guyana.

Gafoor is editor of THE ARTS JOURNAL, a refereed Journal devoted to bringing fresh critical perspectives on the history, arts and culture of Guyana and the Caribbean region.

The Journal reaches out to the academic communities of the Caribbean, North and South America and Europe, offering space for publishing scholarly articles and manuscripts and also forming a bridge to our scattered peoples.

Gafoor has published in critical Journals in Guyana and North America and her postgraduate work has been on the little-known works of Guyanese writer, Roy Heath.

CHANDR PAUL PERSAUD: Conversations with Ameena Gafoor

Chandr Paul Persaud was born on 2nd October 1913 in the village of Buxton on the East Coast of Demerara. At the time of these conversations Paul Persaud was almost 93 years of age and the oldest working news reporter in the Caribbean and the Americas. We thought that his reflections on the society would be interesting given his phenomenal memory and shrewd intellect.

Paul's father, Pandit Lakshman Persaud, a Brahmin (b. 1859) hailed from Amritsar, home to the Sikhs' holiest shrine, the Golden Temple. In 1898 he was indentured to Lusignan estate. Paul was the fourth child of a family of six children (one girl and five boys).

We asked Paul Persaud:

A.G.: What are your earliest impressions of your father?

C.P.P.: My father spoke no English and eventually I wrote his letters for him. After he had served his contract at Lusignan he went to live at Buxton and practised as a Hindu Priest up to December 27, 1949 when he left for India on the s.s. *Orna*.

A.G.: Why did he choose to leave his family and return to India at age 90?

C.P.P.: His desire was to be cremated and there was no provision for cremations in the colony. However, the ship went to South Africa first and one day after it sailed from there, he passed away and was given a sea-funeral.

A.G.: There was widespread poverty in the colony in the first decades of the 20th Century. What did religious leaders do while Indians smarted under plantation life?

C.P.P.: In 1912, my father was part of a group that collected money for the private prosecution of the estate Manager at Lusignan estate, R.E. Brassington, who was alleged to have shot a male labourer. Workers marched with this labourer to the Public Hospital Georgetown on a *khatya* (narrow canvas bed) and marched back with him to Lusignan where he died. The estate Manager won the case on account of lack of evidence. He was a

Member of Parliament and Mayor of the City. My father was banned (for life) from entering any sugar plantation in the colony.

A.G.: Planters were generally hostile towards Brahmin Pandits whom they saw as rivals for power over the indentured. But Brahmin Pandits were smart enough to realize that caste had to be discarded in the face of aggressive Christian crusaders. The disappearance of caste was part of the cultural resistance against both Christianity and plantation domination and this revolutionary move came from within the religious leadership.

C.P.P.: That is very true.

A.G.: Did Rev. C.F. Andrews come to the colony to study the condition of East Indians?

C.P.P.: Andrews came here in 1929 but did not recommend further indentureship or an increase of East Indians in the colony in view of what he saw as a potentially volatile situation.

A.G.: Did he observe anything else worthy of comment?

C.P.P.: Everywhere he went he saw rum shops and lamented the degradation of the Indian.

A.G.: But nothing has changed today—the suicides, murders, wife beatings and other excesses after rum drinking sprees?

C.P.P.: Very true.

A.G.: How is it that estate management and liquor companies in Guiana never thought of providing counseling facilities and rehabilitation centres for persons hooked on the bottle in view of its widespread negative consequences on family life? Women are also seen to be consuming rum to some extent.

C.P.P.: Who can you convince?

A.G.: Tell us about your adolescent years and the colonial education system.

C.P.P.: I attended St. Anthony's School in Buxton from 1918 to 1929. From 13 years of age I went to day school, worked farm, sold vegetables from door to door in Buxton and Triumph until the flood of 1934 devastated crops. I grew onions in Guyana in commercial quantities. I worked on the Noggins Sea Defence (between Vigilance and Kitty) fetching mud on a tray on my head to put down a concrete wall in 1927. I never attended secondary school. I passed the London Institutes of Commerce and Bookkeeping with private tutorship.

Incidentally, in 1924, when the Budget for British Guiana was being presented to Parliament in London, the Secretary of State for the Colonies recommended that Georgetown be moved to a place more than 60 miles inland to save sea defense expenses. That was 1924!

A.G.: What kinds of books did you read to keep abreast with the world?

C.P.P.: I read only biographies. I still have about 300 of them.

A.G.: Who were your role models?

C.P.P.: When I was offered a trip to India I refused it because I had lost interest in India after Nehru died.

A.G.: What significant contribution would you say you made to news reporting?

C.P.P.: There were no radio news reporters before I came on the scene. They used to cut the news from the newspapers, paste it on a cardboard and read it.

A.G.: When did radio broadcasting begin in Guyana?

C.P.P.: Around 1920, in a building somewhere in the vicinity of Church and Waterloo Streets, where the Astor Cinema now stands. In 1951 ZFY was bought by Overseas Redifussion Limited and renamed Radio Demerara.

A.G.: When did you organize the National News Service (Radio) in Guyana and how did you come to choose the pseudonym “O’Hara”?

C.P.P.: Sometime before the outbreak of the War. A man named Hector Steele, Chairman of Sandbach Parker, picked the name for me to read the news.

A.G.: When did you become a Foreign Correspondent and who were your employers?

C.P.P.: In 1948. I started with Britain’s Daily Express and Evening Standard. And, later, The New York Times, The French News Agency (AFP) in 1953 (I worked for the French 47 years); then the NBC; Press Trust of India (PTI); CBS and the USA’s Time Magazine. The exclusive reports played no small part in putting British Guiana on the world map. This was the year South Africa was created as an Apartheid State.

A.G.: Who were the first Indians to enter the precincts of the city of Georgetown in the movement from the sugar estates? And what was the reception of Indians in the city generally?

C.P.P.: Joseph Jaikaran was the first Indian to erect a building in Water Street – a drug store. I do not recall the year. Percy White defied white-skinned opposition to sell his property at the corner of Lamaha and Main Streets to Mr. Amin Sankar for G\$7,000.00. Similar opposition faced other Indians who tried to settle in the city.

A.G.: You have been described as “a one-man spy institution in the Caribbean.” What is the most extraordinary news you came upon and what did you do with it?

C.P.P.: Information concerning the hiding place, in Argentina, of Nazi War criminal, Adolf Eichman I passed the information to Sir David Rose. That was 1953.

A.G.: The co-incidence of your birth date with that of Ghandi [b. 1869] did nothing to lead you into politics. Yet, you have maintained a keen interest in politics and civic affairs. Do you feel you have contributed to change in your country?

C.P.P.: Yes, I intervened many times and was instrumental in getting many things done and bringing about change at a fairly high level.

A.G.: Is there any remarkable event or occurrence in the political scene in the period before Jagan and Burnham separated that you think is little known and should be a part of our historical consciousness?

C.P.P.: The only thing more remarkable than the separation was the fact that they had come together in the first place.

A.G.: That is a very interesting answer. In what sense was it remarkable? Was their coming together an unlikely event? Do you see it as mere political strategy or a genuine recognition on the part of both men that bringing the races together could be more politically effective in the struggle against the plantocracy?

C.P.P.: In the pursuit of power, expediency is always a possibility.

A.G.: What ideology could Jagan have embraced to face off with the colonialists?

C.P.P.: Ghandi used David Thoreau’s Civil Disobedience (written about 100 years before Ghandi was born) to defy the British and then got the reputation for non-violence.

A.G.: Both Jagan and Burnham were passionate about an independent Guyana, yet some people feel that we have been left a dubious legacy.

C.P.P.: There is no dubious legacy. It is plain as day.

A.G.: Please explain. Perhaps what is left is a fractured society?

C.P.P.: If you go into Stabroek market you’ll see for yourself that Guyana has no racial problems.

A.G.: Is class differentiation as great a factor as racial identity in Guyana today?

C.P.P.: Yes. Some still cling to old privileges. On another note, do you know that some once-enslaved Africans have shown immense social progress? Do you know that Chicago (incidentally, the hometown of Mrs. Janet Jagan) was built by ex-slaves?

A.G.: Do you think Guyana would benefit from the First Past the Post system where citizens know who their Parliamentary representatives are?

C.P.P.: I would agree with that. We had it but it was changed.

A.G.: You say Guyana has handsome annual revenue. Why is it still ranked among the poorest nation within the western hemisphere?

C.P.P.: In the next three years, two phrases will dominate the entire world: the cost of high living and the high cost of living, the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer –but the poor is getting poorer with assets he never had before. This country sells G\$9B in rum and liquors annually.

A.G.: What would it take to reverse the situation in Guyana today particularly in respect of the migration trend that depletes the country?

C.P.P.: Nation-building. The formula was given to Burnham by Lee Kwan Yew.

A.G.: What is one fact in our social and cultural history that would astonish the nation if only we knew?

C.P.P.: When Edward Beharry was Minister of Industry he bought a nuclear power plant to supply us with electricity but the British Government refused it. That same plant was taken to Bristol (England) and worked efficiently. Astonishing.

A.G.: You have witnessed life for the better part of 100 years; which world event touched you most?

C.P.P.: World War 11 and the use of the atom bomb as a weapon (on Japan).

A.G.: What is the most compelling reason that a country rich in natural resources is labeled a HIPIC country?

C.P.P.: Lack of development, much of it rooted in Britain's earlier refusal to provide facilities to develop the country.

A.G.: Did Independence come to Guyana at the right time?

C.P.P.: Not a moment too soon. In 40 years this country should have been developed to such extent that people would not want to leave. You know how many Guyanese are building up other countries? Almost a million. Hundreds of thousands of them very skilled. They should be here ...

A.G.: Name one regrettable event or incident you witnessed in Guyana?

C.P.P.: The shutting down of the East Coast Railway over the refusal to pay a token sum to the Canadians.

A.G.: What significant shifts have occurred in Guianese society in the last 100 years?

C.C.P.: The Africans were the wealthiest people in the society as they were into mining. When Indians began to enter the professions they were not appointed to high Government positions easily. In 1937, there were 1018 civil servants with only 38 Indians.

A.G.: How much has Guyana benefited by being in Caricom?

C.P.P.: It got the Secretariat.

A.G.: What could be the implications of a common passport and a single currency for all Caricom citizens and how would this affect the idea of nation building?

C.P.P.: Barbados regularly sends back Guyanese. Regional integration is contrary to nation building.

A.G.: Would you describe 20th century Guyana in one word?

C.P.P.: A paradox.

A.G.: Some people are clamouring for a change of Government. What does change of government mean?

C.P.P.: Change of privilege.

A.G.: Ideally, the free press is a powerful voice of the people. Can the press in Guyana do more to live up to this expectation?

C.P.P.: Yes. They have to make the effort.

A.G.: What is your philosophy for life and living?

C.P.P.: Not to hurt people.

A.G.: Paul, thank you very much for sharing your reflections on the society with us.

Paul Persaud was the first news reporter to be honoured by an independent Guyana. In 1974 he was awarded the Medal of Service, then, later, the Arrow of Achievement (AA) and, in 1991, the Cacique Crown of Honour (on Guyana's 25th Anniversary of Independence). He was awarded the Guyana Press Association Award (for long and dedicated service to the media in Guyana) and, more recently, The Indian Commemoration Trust Foundation Recognition (2005).

He also received the Paul Harris Fellow Award by Rotary International for "the furtherance of Better Understanding and Friendly Relations among the Peoples of the World." In 1999, he was named The Grand Old Man of the Year by the United Nations and that same year Venezuela presented him with the Order of Francisco de Miranda.

Chandr Paul Persaud passed away quietly on 26th April 2007. This article is a tribute to his life.