Excerpt from ‘Plantation Port Mourant and the arrival of Indo-Guyanese cricket after the war’, to be published in Brij Lal (ed.), *Girmitiyas: Making of Their Memory-Keeper*s (New Delhi: Primus Books, forthcoming)

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A SEMINAL INFLUENCE: GUYANESE FUTILITY AT THE END OF EMPIRE AND THE FALL OF CHEDDI JAGAN

A significant component of my work as a historian has been on West Indies cricket. In fact, since my ‘retirement’ in 2012, most of my writing has been in this area. My first cricket book was a co-authored one, *Indo-West Indies Cricket* (1988). Since then there have been several others: *Muscular Learning: Cricket and Education in the Making of the British West Indies at the End of the 19th Century* (2006); *From Ranji to Rohan: Cricket and Indian Identity in Colonial Guyana, 1890s–1960s* (2009); *Hand-in-Hand History of Cricket in Guyana, 1865–1897*, vol. 1. *The Foundation* (2015) and vol. 2. *A Stubborn Mediocrity* (2018). The latter

two are parts of a four-volume study on cricket in colonial Guyana, from 1865 to 1966, the year of Guyana's independence. I have also compiled, edited and annotated 100 essays on sport (mainly cricket) by the poet and distinguished public intellectual, Ian McDonald, *An Abounding Joy: Essays on Sport by Ian McDonald* (2019).

This essay focuses primarily on the origins of this passion that, I am sure, will stay with me to the end of my innings. But I have also written on Indians in Guyana, Jock Campbell's 'Booker' and sugar; and I've just finished a study of Cheddi Jagan (the Guyanese Marxist leader) and the Cold War. The book on Campbell, *Sweetening 'Bitter Sugar': Jock Campbell, the Booker Reformer in British Guiana, 1934–66* (2005), was awarded the Elsa Goveia Prize by the Association of Caribbean Historians. Brij Lal's classic, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (1983), has been a seminal force in shaping my writings on Indian indentureship and on ideas of India in the making of the Indo-Guyanese. But it is the foundation of my writing on the history of cricket that is my principal concern here: cricket and politics are interwoven in Guyanese and West Indian social history.

It was a few weeks before Guyana's independence, in May 1966, that I came upon the Guyana Independence issue of *New World Quarterly* (edited by George Lamming and Martin Carter), the radical journal of the New World Group of intellectuals. It is the product of an inspired idea, conceived, monitored and funded by David de Caires and Miles Fitzpatrick (editors of the highly respected 50 issues of *New World Fortnightly*, 1964–6, published in Georgetown). As David, who became a good friend, told me decades later, the independence issue was fraught with a multitude of problems at every stage: from conception to composition and its completion, in conjunction with its unresolved financial implications. But I have no reservation in identifying this special issue of *New World* as a ground-breaking document in my intellectual formation. It comprises articles by an impressive range of thinkers and writers, most of whom I had not encountered previously, but who were germane to the shaping of my eclectic – and tortured – intellectual vision.

Foremost among them is C. L. R. James (CLR) from whom two articles were accepted, one of which I read several times. I had bought this special issue of *New World Quarterly* from the Graphic Bookshop on Robb Street, Georgetown, around April 1966, as I did shortly thereafter the autobiography of Cheddi Jagan, *The West on Trial* (\$5), and that of our Indo-Guyanese cricketer, Rohan Kanhai, *Blasting for Runs* (\$4.60). Both Cheddi and Rohan were my heroes from the same sugar plantation, Port Mourant (in the county of Berbice), a dozen miles from Palmyra, my home village. I devoured these three publications in a matter of a few weeks. It was a time of considerable gloom for me. I had gone to the elite school, Queen's College (in Georgetown), in January 1966 to do my A-levels in arts, but I was, absurdly and painfully, counselled somehow to switch to O-level science. A journey that should not have been made! I had done no science whatsoever before at my previous high school. Incredibly, it was not taught there. My Queen's College sojourn (January 1966–July 1968) was largely an agonising and a depressing time for me. It left a mental scar that lasted years.

For the two terms I endured my fatal misadventure with science in Georgetown, I had to find diversions. I missed classes routinely, yet no one seemed to notice it at the school. I often went to the cinema during class time, watching Indian movies at the Empire Cinema on Middle Street, which started at 1 pm and cost just 15 cents in the aptly named 'pit' section. I frequented the Michael Forde Bookshop and the Guardian Library, both run by Cheddi Jagan's People's Progressive Party (PPP), where I read leftist literature for hours. I also went to the Georgetown Public Library regularly, where I discovered many fascinating old books on British Guiana, and became absorbed by the peerless *Timehri* journal. At the British Council Library (in Georgetown and in New Amsterdam), I read the British weeklies, such as the *New Statesman*, the *Guardian* and the *Listener*. I read widely and eclectically, yet stubbornly – perhaps wilfully – I would not touch the texts prescribed for the science O-level syllabus. Most, I recall vividly, were never opened. It is no exaggeration to deem my fear of science and numerous practical chores a phobia.

This was when I encountered Dr Cheddi Jagan (1918–97), who had been from my earliest recollection the hero of my entire extended family and most Indians in my ancestral village, Palmyra, in East Berbice. It was like magic that I was able to chat with him on several occasions in his office at Freedom House about some book or another, including (as I recall vividly) one by a British-born Marxist writer on Latin America, Cedric Belfrage (1904–90), whom Cheddi knew well and I had come to like. Belfrage's radical weekly, the *National Guardian*, was published in New York City, and his articles were reproduced in the PPP's *Sunday Mirror* which first appeared around 1962. I was also an avid reader of *Granma*, the organ of the Communist Party of Cuba and in late October 1967, I turned up at Michael Forde Bookshop to be told, unprecedentedly, that the copies for that week were sold out. The reason was that Fidel Castro had made a marathon speech a few days before (18 October 1967) on the killing of 'Che' Guevara in Bolivia. That entire issue of *Granma* was devoted to Fidel's speech. I recall telling Cheddi, who knew 'Che' well, that I could not procure a copy and he immediately delegated a young party worker to ensure that a copy was found for me. It materialised in a few minutes.

Yet while I was enthralled by my warm exchanges with Cheddi, his generosity of spirit and his captivating smile, the ease with which he shared aspects of his Marxist beliefs with me (a boy of 16 or 17) – no condescension whatsoever on his part – I was still inconsolably tormented by his fall in December 1964. I was a very young canvasser (not yet 15) in my area for his PPP during the fatal general elections of that year. It rankled: his subversion by the Americans and the British who unabashedly engineered Forbes Burnham, the African leader, into power, in coalition with Peter D'Aguiar, the Portuguese leader (a rabid anti-communist). We had internalised Jagan's defeat as a racial catastrophe. Consequently, by late 1966 several young men from my district in Berbice were already making their way to the United States and Canada (New York and Toronto in particular), driven by foreboding over their future in Burnham's Guyana. By the early 1970s this trickle had become a veritable Niagara. Guyana's independence, in

May 1966, was not embraced by most Indians as their freedom; it was perceived as contrived purely for Africans. They had stolen 'our' prize with the collusion of the American and the British 'imperialists', as Cheddi termed his nemeses.

I felt as if our great leader, whom I was taught as a boy to place on the same pedestal as Gandhi and Nehru in our pantheon of Indian heroes, now had feet of clay. So, while I still revered Cheddi, an agonising apprehension possessed me: that he was in collision with forces too formidable for him and us (midgets) to negotiate – 'American imperialism and the Cold War', as I had learnt from him to characterise this behemoth in the political firmament of the universe. Consequently, while I did absorb Cheddi's every word in *The West on Trial* (471 pages) and admired his early iconoclasm, daring and resilience, it was the slim *Blasting for Runs* (128 pages) by the other Port Mourant man, the Indo-Guyanese master batsman, Rohan Kanhai, that really did help to ease me out of my slough of despond. Rohan's arrival as a cricketer of world stature had retrieved something ineffably important for me. It lessened my despair in the aftermath of Cheddi's fall. It eased my own consuming sense of futility that I was wasting my time and, worse, that I was squandering my parents' trust and limited funds, by being at Queen's College and doing absolutely nothing – my eclectically wide reading notwithstanding. I had discarded my science textbooks without even trying (they did not resonate with me – they depressed me), but a new world of a radically different kind of learning, supremely more stimulating, had presented itself to me.

I approached the intellectually challenging Guyana independence issue of *New World Quarterly* before I turned to Cheddi's and Rohan's books. While this sequence of my reading was probably random, it makes sense in retrospect, as that comprehensive special issue was the first publication that gave me a feel for the complexity of Guyanese society. It offered a varied body of thought (historical, political and literary) – however exploratory or embryonic – that sought to engage with the daunting, fragmented social organisation of this

tempestuous colony, on the ‘threshold of Independence’, as Cheddi had framed it for us. But scarred by recent racial violence in a society bereft of a coherent unifying narrative, political parties were (and still are) essentially instruments for aggregating the irreconcilable self-interest of their respective defining ethnic constituencies.

Guyanese instinctively apprehended the other racial group as their principal enemy, not Jock Campbell’s Booker (whom Jagan censured as the ‘sugar gods’) or the British colonial rulers. It became virtually a racial war, between Africans and Indians, bred partially by a virulent anti-communist crusade (fomented with unflagging passion by the Portuguese leader, Peter D’Aguiar’s United Force and the Catholic Church) against Cheddi Jagan. It was energised by Jagan’s fatal meeting with President John F. Kennedy at the White House on Wednesday 25 October 1961, which established Cheddi’s communist credentials in the eyes of the President. It precipitated the blatant intervention against Jagan by Kennedy and the CIA (in 1962–3), obsessed with preventing a second Cuba in the hemisphere following Kennedy’s Bay of Pigs fiasco of April 1961, and exacerbated by the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Kennedy prevailed upon Harold Macmillan, in the summer of 1963, to change the electoral system to proportional representation in order to get rid of Jagan. That came to fruition in December 1964 (Seecharan 2005: 488–601).

The impact of the two men from Plantation Port Mourant – Cheddi Jagan and Rohan Bholalall Kanhai – is seminal in much of what I have written.

BEYOND A BOUNDARY AND THE SHAPING OF MY INTELLECTUAL VISION

By early 1966, when I was attending Queen’s College in Georgetown (after a fashion), Jagan was already on the ropes. Forbes Burnham (the African leader and America’s man) was about to be awarded

the gift of independence on 26 May 1966. So, even in those early days, a scintilla of disenchantment was creeping into my perception of Jagan. Although, I did retain tremendous respect for him as a man of widely recognised integrity and for being our Indo-Guyanese leader who had shaken up colonial complacency. However, my confidence in him was vitiated by the CIA-funded riots against his government in February 1962, perpetrated primarily under the leadership of Peter D'Aguiar's anti-communist United Force, then decisively by Forbes Burnham's People's National Congress and the TUC in their bruising 80-day strike in the first half of 1963, also financed by the CIA. 'No Independence under the communist Jagan' was their mantra.

In the circumstances, it was the superb Indo-Guyanese cricketer, Rohan Kanhai (b. 1935) who had become my unsullied hero. Most Indo-Guyanese saw Rohan as a world-class batsman who gave them immeasurable pride, despite his likely indifference to, if not rejection of, his designation as an instrument of Indo-Guyanese self-esteem – a medium of urgent redemption after the calamitous fall of Jagan. I thought a lot about Kanhai, both within and beyond the boundary. He had become virtually indispensable to the West Indies team and his performance in Australia in 1960–1 and in England in 1963 (both under Frank Worrell's captaincy) confirmed him as one of the most elegantly gifted batsmen in the world, arguably among the top three. For many Indo-West Indians, a batsman of Kanhai's universally acclaimed stature, manifesting flair and exuberance congruent with the distinguished tradition of West Indian batsmanship, was the ultimate source of racial pride. Kanhai was comparable with such luminaries as George Headley (1909–83), Everton Weekes (b. 1925), Frank Worrell (1924–67), Clyde Walcott (1926–2006) and Garry Sobers (b. 1936).

Rohan was therefore eminently endowed to carry – symbolically and opportunely – whatever burden was thrust upon him by his Indo-Guyanese compatriots. Yet he probably considered this incomprehensible and insufferable. He was increasingly saddled with an

unconscionably monumental responsibility, that of a redeemer. This was because of Jagan's political debacle after 1961: his failure to lead Guyana to independence, supposedly a walk in the park until his fatal meeting with President Kennedy in October 1961. Kanhai arguably never did accede to this popular designation in identity affirmation by Indo-Guyanese; yet his success evoked triumphalism while his failure was precipitously disclaimed as evidence of decline, if not fall. But unlike Cheddi Jagan, he could redeem himself, quickly, by excelling in his next innings. It is important to note, however, that it was not necessary for Kanhai to acquiesce in the psycho-political role thrust upon him even as early as 1958–9 in India. His art was appropriated and politicised by his people. That was enough. Against the backdrop of the subversive CIA-funded anti-Jagan strikes in 1963, Kanhai's batting in England that summer proved somewhat cathartic to many Indo-Guyanese, as was his performance against the touring Australians in early 1965, in the aftermath of Jagan's fall to Forbes Burnham in December 1964. No one sought to explain the Kanhai enigma in the context of a racially turbulent and polarised British Guiana. However, I could not view him in purely cricketing terms. He could not be isolated from what Indo-Guyanese had made of him beyond the boundary.

C. L. R. James had two articles in the Guyana independence Issue of *New World*: 'Tomorrow and Today: A Vision', and 'Kanhai: A Study in Confidence'. I found the latter more compelling. Apart from being timely, it was the first piece I read that celebrated Rohan Kanhai's skills in the context of the dynamic West Indies team of the early 1960s, as well as within the wider society. James revisited the West Indies tour of Australia in 1960–1, captained for the first time by a black man, the versatile leader and statesman, Sir Frank Worrell. He probably could not fully appreciate the magnitude of the racial burdens thrust upon Kanhai, yet his assessment of the man's cricket did adumbrate a framework for looking beyond the boundary, for clues to the deeper foundation of Rohan's cricket. But James cautioned it was Rohan's play essentially on which one

must focus, although he did seek to extend some preliminary feelers suggestive of ways of looking at Kanhai and the personality he had become by 1966, on the eve of another tour of England. The Guyana independence issue of *New World* had thrown this strangely erudite and unconventional writer on the game, C. L. R. James, into my volatile intellectual universe at a time of painful uncertainty not just about my academic future, but about my mercurial self. I could not have known (by any stretch of the imagination) that CLR was already shaping my way of thinking on matters within and beyond the boundary.

In 'Kanhai: A Study in Confidence' CLR identifies Rohan as representative both of the 'East' Indian's contribution to West Indian pursuit of freedom, as well as his being an authentic West Indian, thereby validating such a claim for all Indians in the region. Rohan, therefore, was at the centre of the regional enterprise, not merely a key instrument of Indo-West Indian identity construction. CLR explains:

A great West Indies cricketer in his play should embody some essence of that crowded vagueness that passes for the history of the West Indies. If, like Kanhai, he is one of the most remarkable and individual of contemporary batsmen, then that should not make him less but more West Indian . . . [I]n Kanhai's batting what I have found is a unique pointer of the West Indian quest for identity, for ways of expressing our potential bursting at every seam [emphasis added]. (James 1966: 26)

Recognition, indeed!

CLR recalled a seminal innings by Kanhai aged 19, a foretaste of the pedigreed batsmanship he crafted all over the world over many years. It was only his second first-class match, British Guiana v Australia, in April 1955, at Bourda, Georgetown. The colony performed ignominiously, losing by an innings and 124 runs. In a fragile display, just 177 runs in their first innings, Kanhai and the great Barbadian and West Indies batsman, Clyde Walcott (working for the

Sugar Producers' Association in British Guiana since 1954), made 51 runs each. Kanhai did amplify on his innings in this match against the Australians and I will come to it shortly. But it is true, as CLR observes, that Clyde Walcott (1926–2006) and Robert Christiani (1920–2005) coached on the sugar plantations – an aspect of the far-reaching reforms pursued by the progressive head of Booker from the early 1950s, Jock Campbell (1912–94). CLR identifies Christiani as the inspiration for the compelling (even suicidal) dynamism in Kanhai's approach to batting: 'Christiani was one of the most brilliant of the brilliant West Indies school of batsmen . . . The burgeoning Kanhai inherited not only the universality of Barbados batting [from Clyde Walcott], but was able to absorb also the individualism of one of the most brilliant of West Indies individualists [Christiani]' (James 1966: 26). Robert Julian Christiani's Test career was a failure: 22 matches, 896 runs at an average of 26.35, with just one century. But what Neville Cardus said of the supreme Australian batsman before the Great War, Victor Trumper (1877–1915), applies to Christiani also: he was an 'artist-cricketer'. He was endowed with style in abundance. The Corentyne District (the home of Jagan and Kanhai) is an area where Indian rice and cattle farmers have thrived, because of their access to rich land conducive to rice growing and for grazing, as well as the salubrious micro-climate of this part of the coastland. Its wind-swept coast bathed with Atlantic salt air rendered it less susceptible to the dreaded malarial scourge that ravished most of colonial coastal Guyana until the late 1940s. But there were also peculiarities regarding Port Mourant that arguably contributed to the prolific flowering of the cricket culture on that plantation after the Second World War.

Throughout my boyhood the phenomenon that was Plantation Port Mourant enchanted me, triggering a multitude of reflections, many surely implausible. Even into my young adulthood and beyond, the passion lingered. Consequently, my immediate environment always seemed to me a legitimate, and necessary, area of study, although most exponents of my formal colonial education

appeared indifferent to subjects that captivated me. They were, of course, irrelevant to the imperial syllabus.

Back to the British Guiana v Australia match of April 1955 at Bourda! CLR did not mention it, but three players from Plantation Port Mourant represented the colony: Kanhai, Basil Butcher, another gifted batsman, and Ivan Madray, a leg-break bowler. The British Guiana batting was mediocre, as they succumbed to the leg-break/googly bowling of J. C. Hill: 10 for 65 in the match. Kanhai made 51 and 27; Butcher 8 and 46; in Australia's single innings of 476, Madray's analysis was: 23 overs, 0 maiden, 122 runs, 3 wickets. It was not a propitious encounter for the Guyanese, yet there was something to be discerned in 19-year-old Rohan Kanhai's approach to the game that CLR apprehended and with which I readily empathised. Moreover, Rohan's own recollection of that innings evoked a marvellously defiant impression in me when I first read it in 1966, during the dark initial period of my Georgetown sojourn. It was Rohan's slightly subversive and iconoclastic disposition, permeated by a compelling innocence, 'hitting across the ball', and executed against the unconquerable Australians of 1955 that resonated with me.

Kanhai writes:

I've had no coaching whatsoever from the day I was born on a little sugar plantation called Port Mourant in British Guiana . . . The way I see it, I'm paid to hit any and every bowler as hard and as far as I can. Nobody said anything about how I have to do it. Keith Miller [1919–2004], Australia's world class quickie [fast bowler], got a bit upset at the way a green 19-year-old was making a fool of the cricket manuals during the Aussies triumphant tour of the West Indies back in 1955 [they won the series 3-0, by huge margins]. I was a relatively new boy in the British Guiana side that tackled the Aussies at [Bourda] Georgetown that day [20 April 1955].

Miller was bowling his big out-swingers [from leg to off] and I was clouting them regularly to the square leg boundary. Nobody told me that I shouldn't do it – that I was committing the batsman's biggest sin by hitting

across the ball. This was my favourite shot and it brought me a heap of runs. Big Keith was completely flummoxed. He knew every trick in the book but I wasn't playing by the rules. The madder he got, the more I innocently pulled him to the fence. I piled up ... 51 to top score with the great Clyde Walcott [51 run out] and saved us from being completely wiped out.

At a party after the match, Miller came up to me with a rueful grin, wagged an accusing finger, and said: 'The next time you play a shot like that kid you'll be in trouble'. Perhaps I should have taken his warning, but I felt it was a pity to change when I was getting a few runs. And I haven't changed, you know. (Kanhai 1966: 11–12)

Kanhai would draw on his mastery of the vagaries of the bounce on the notoriously ill-prepared, hazardous 'sticky dog' pitches of his youth, with primitive gear offering virtually no protection from the terror of pace bowling. It was an apprenticeship that clearly served him well wherever he was tested around the world, especially on mercurial pitches presenting one lifting awkwardly followed immediately by another that crept, the shooter or 'ground dog', as we used to call it. Rohan was equipped for such eventualities; and he never shelved his flair, his sense of theatre, whether he was playing Brisbane, Bridgetown, Bombay or Birmingham. It was an aspect of his cricketing narrative to which my boyhood friends and I related instinctively. We felt that Rohan's stature as a batsman of world class belonged to us; we could claim his genius as a reflection on ourselves. Very few of us could emulate the compelling excellence he had reached, yet we could still be aspirational: driven by our pride in his universal acclamation to strive for a measure of attainment in our own lives. It was a high bar he had set, but it had the magnetic force to draw us all in, to endow us with ambition 'to go beyond boundaries'. Hence the relevance of C. L. R. James, of whom the biographical sketch in *New World* of 1966 had noted:

He was born in Trinidad [in 1901] where he lived until the age of 30 [31]. His working life has been dedicated to the political and cultural liberation of

colonial peoples; and he has probably had a greater influence than any man alive on the intellectual classes of two generations of West Indians. (Lamming and Carter 1966: 152)

Five of his books are listed, one slightly misnamed: *Beyond the [a] Boundary*.

So, it was *New World* that led me to *Beyond a Boundary*, CLR's book of 1963 (published to coincide with the West Indies tour of England that summer). But it was over three years later that I learnt of the book; no one had mentioned it to me. I have read the book or portions of it virtually every year since late 1966, and I am continually finding new insights about cricket and everything else. And the fact that the book is titled *Beyond a Boundary* and **not** *Beyond the Boundary* suggests that the lives of the cricketers crafted with rare power and empathy within could be seen as casting a light beyond 'a boundary' – any boundary – challenging even the most humble and constricted to dare to dream: to cultivate the resolve to approach *all* boundaries as transient hurdles to be transcended.

CLR, a Marxist theoretician and irrepressible activist, a historian of the Haitian Revolution (his *Black Jacobins* was published in 1938) and a Pan-Africanist, was arguably driven by the notion of world revolution and the perfectibility of humankind under communism. Yet I relate to *Beyond a Boundary* in less grand, substantially less universalistic, terms. I recall arriving early at what remains for me the kernel of truth in this superb work. James's location of W. G. Grace, Learie Constantine, Wilton St Hill, George Headley and Frank Worrell in a wider social frame has enabled me to appreciate the magnitude of the interrelationship between sport and racial/national identity – sport as an aspect of, hence germane to, social history. *Beyond a Boundary* has given me the notion of Shannonism, the spirit of resilience of the indefatigable cricket club of lower middle-class blacks (in colonial Trinidad) that included two eminent families, the Constantines and the St Hills – aristocracies in the making of West Indies cricket. James concedes that he should have gone naturally to this black club (Shannon), given the

race, colour and class instincts that were the guiding principles of social organisation in colonial Trinidad of the early 1920s. However, he was disloyal to his racial group; he went light, to Maple, the club of the brown or 'coloured middle-class', people who historically defined themselves as racially superior to the lower middle-class blacks. Lightness (as in India) was highly prized in West Indian societies.

But James acknowledged his pragmatic (if conceivably selfish) motive for going light, in opting for brown Maple over black Shannon, which apparently had made overtures to him to join them. He explains:

the social milieu in which I had been brought up was working on me. I was teaching, I was known as a man cultivated in literature, I was giving lectures to literary societies on Wordsworth and Longfellow. Already I was writing. I moved easily in any society in which I found myself. So it was that I became one of those dark men whose 'surest sign of... having arrived is the fact that he keeps company with people lighter in complexion than himself'. (James 1963: 53)

CLR retrieved the latter quote from his little book of 1932 on the white (French creole) Trinidadian labour leader and politician, Arthur Andrew Cipriani (1875–1945), published in Nelson, Lancashire, in 1932, when he was lodging with the great West Indies cricketer, Learie Constantine (originally of Shannon, then of Nelson in the Lancashire League).

CLR concedes that, in the long run, his rejection of Shannon cost him dearly, both in terms of his relationship with some of the accomplished players of that team, as well as his own political development. He had, in the process, moved to the right:

My decision cost me a great deal. For one thing it prevented me from ever becoming really intimate with W[ilton] St Hill, and kept Learie Constantine and myself apart for a long time [arguably never fully reconciled]. Faced with the fundamental [ethnic and class] divisions in the island, I had gone to the right and, by cutting myself off from the popular side, delayed my political development for years. But no one could see that then, least of all me. (James 1963: 53)

I think I was struck, from my first reading, by CLR's preference for the light; I readily drew parallels with my own Indo-Guyanese community. Growing up in the 1950s–1960s, I was aware early of the Indian's consuming preference for lightness of skin. Time and again I would reflect on how the privileging of lightness permeated our imagination, the crudity of the idioms in assessing the dark – routinely and ferociously in the case of Africans and things African. Besides, among Indians, the tendency for light people to marry light was axiomatic. This was reinforced most powerfully and perniciously by the potent instrument of Hindi movies, where all the heroes and heroines looked, or were made to look, virtually white. I could see clearly the similarity of the promptings that had determined James's choice of Maple over Shannon in Trinidad in the early 1920s.

Yet CLR had no reservations that black Shannon spoke for most black people; this, in turn, inspired many of them to subvert the limitations on possibilities engendered by ascribed colonial definitions. The Shannon men could never settle for half measures; their cricket was uncompromising and expressed with a disciplined intensity that reflected their pursuit of perfection. This inculcated in many of their devotees the will to aspire and achieve; to go beyond boundaries. Shannonism's supremacy, in its psychological dimension, could therefore carry the aspirational vision and the angst – 'the social passions' – with which their black players were continually encumbered: their people's burdens! This evoked for me identifiable parallels with the Rohan Kanhai enigma and the Indo-Guyanese narrative of the late 1950s–60s. CLR speaks!

The Shannon Club played with a spirit and relentlessness, [and] they were supported by the crowd with a jealous enthusiasm which even then showed the social passions which were using cricket as a medium of expression... It was not mere skill. They played as if they knew that their club represented the great mass of black people in the island [of Trinidad]. The crowd did not look at Stingo in the same way [several equally gifted, but lower-class blacks – some unemployed]. Stingo did not have status enough. Stingo did not show that pride and impersonal

ambition which distinguished Shannon. As clearly as if it were written across the sky, their play said: here on the cricket field if nowhere else, all men in the island are equal, and we are the best men on the island . . . No Australian team could teach them anything in relentless concentration. They missed few catches and looked upon one of their number who committed such a crime as a potential Fifth Columnist [emphasis added]. (James 1963: 54–5)

CLR never could get out of his mind the unfaltering effort, the resolve to be second to nobody, permeating the ethos of Shannon. But he, who had gone light (to Maple) and rejected their invitation to join them, had learnt a lesson in self-respect, single-minded commitment to excellence, an iron will to succeed. It was etched on his soul. So, his marvellous work of 1963, *Beyond a Boundary*, one of the magnificent literary achievements of the twentieth century, came out of his arguably enduring angst – choosing brown Maple over black Shannon. It constitutes a remarkable scholarly endeavour in atonement, not just to slighted people like Learie Constantine and Wilton St Hill, but to broader values CLR deemed inviolable: excellence over mediocrity; egalitarianism over an ascribed hierarchy; pushing back boundaries in every sphere to accommodate the free development of the human spirit. In short, the breaking down of all boundaries that inhibit the cultivation of the intellect and the freedom to choose. Even his excesses, as the eternal Marxist theoretician of one sort or another, came out of this angst, even guilt, ‘to right grave wrongs’, as he put it in his dedication in *Beyond a Boundary* (reproduced below). Shannonism was the animating principle that drove CLR – the imperative to place contentious issues on a broader canvas, thus prompting him to ask, ‘What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?’

To Learie Constantine and W. G. Grace for both of whom this book hopes to right grave wrongs, and, in so doing, extend our too limited conceptions of history and of the fine arts. To these two names I add that of Frank Worrell, who has made ideas and aspirations into reality.

Reviewing *Beyond a Boundary* for *Wisden* 1964, John Arlott described it thus: 'it is the finest book written about the game of cricket . . . There may be a better book about any sport . . . if so, the present reviewer has not seen it.' I did not see Arlott's review until several years later, but James's book had already cast its spell on me, explaining not just what cricket meant to us as West Indians but much more – the seminal role of sport in the human odyssey (beginning in ancient Greece), engendering the transition from barbarism to civilisation. This was especially pertinent and timely to me as an Indo-Guyanese, emerging from the backwoods plantation culture. It was magical that four cricketers from a sugar plantation, just a dozen miles away from me, had made it into the West Indies Test team. Moreover, that three of these, Rohan Kanhai, Basil Butcher (African) and Joe Solomon (Indian), were at the core of its batting, was of monumental significance. This was elemental in shaping the mind of that boy of 10 or 11, following virtually ball-by-ball what the trio were doing within the boundary. I have written before of numerous domestic chores being ignored or done in a fashion because my boyhood imagination was permeated by this exceptional achievement – basking in reflected glory that must have enhanced my self-esteem and the sense of possibilities in the long run.

James's article in *New World* on Rohan Kanhai, and my engagement with *Beyond a Boundary*, in late 1966, enabled me to make sense of the enigma of Port Mourant – this home of a spate of great cricketers in addition to our inviolable hero, Cheddi Jagan. I soon saw this phenomenon, at the centre of my life, as synonymous with Shannonism. Port Mourant could not be just a passing reality; it was, like the magisterial Shannon Club of Trinidad, an eternal 'star to steer by'. James made the magnanimous statement that the seminal prompting of his book was the unconquerable will and racial pride of the dark men of the Shannon Cricket Club of Trinidad in the 1920s:

The old Shannon Club of those days is a foundation pillar of the book. *A man's unstated assumptions, those he is often not aware of, are usually the mainspring of his thought.* All of Constantine's fierce and sustained attacks against the way West Indies cricket is managed stem from his Shannon experience. He believes that the real West Indies team should be a team that would play with the spirit and fire, the spontaneous self-discipline and cohesion, of Shannon [*emphasis added*]. (James 1963: 57)

I have gone back to Rohan's book many times over the last 50 years, as I have Cheddi's *The West on Trial* (also published in early 1966). Both Rohan and Cheddi, like me, are from the county of Berbice (Berbicians), and our Georgetown sojourn was trying for us all. But the fact that they did overcome and proceeded to reach great heights in their respective fields must have fed my determination to stay the course, although it meant my relinquishing the fiction that I could study science. I will cite a few excerpts from Rohan's and Cheddi's books that resonated (and still do) with me in some fundamentally therapeutic way. Rohan's book has slight literary pretensions; he had 'worked closely' on it with young John Gibson, the famous football journalist from the north-east of England. Often the idioms obtrude incongruously, alien to the Guyanese social context which it tries to simplify. Some of the slang, obviously designed to appeal to the least common denominator, is quite appalling. Nonetheless, *Blasting for Runs* conveys Rohan's resolve to succeed and his attainment of mastery – evocative of the spirit of James's Shannonism. Rohan's world-class excellence spoke for me: it imbued me with a measure of self-belief and resilience to counter, if not eliminate, my despair – my sense of rudderlessness in Georgetown. I belonged neither to Georgetown nor Queen's College.

It should be noted that, strangely, although both Cheddi and Rohan came from Plantation Port Mourant, on the lower Corentyne Coast (Berbice), Rohan does not mention Cheddi even once in his book. I believe he was repelled by his communist creed and his slender grasp of *realpolitik*. However, he does celebrate the

fact that their atypical plantation had produced five Test cricketers by 1958: John Trim (1915–60), a pace bowler who played in four Tests for the West Indies between 1948 and 1951, taking 18 wickets at 16.16 each; Rohan (b. 1935) himself who made his debut in England in 1957 (79 Tests); Ivan Madray (1934–2009), a leg-spinner, who played two Tests against Pakistan in 1958; Basil Butcher (1933–2019) (44 Tests) and Joe Solomon (b. 1930) (27 Tests), the latter two being outstanding batsmen who made their Test debut in India in 1958. Of course, Alvin Kallicharran (b. 1949) (66 Tests) also is from Port Mourant and, though 13 years younger than Kanhai, he joined him in the West Indies team in Rohan's last two years as a Test cricketer, 1973–4, when he was the captain in a series against Australia and two series against England. Rohan's recollection of his own trauma in finding his way resonated with me; but he does not account for the magical cricketing supremacy at Port Mourant. His is a prosaic statement of the fact, the bare bones, yet it still astounds. Kanhai writes:

I made my grand entrance on Boxing Day [26 December], 1935 – perhaps that is why I've been a fighter all my life... My earliest recollections are of playing cricket with my friends Basil, Joe, and Ivan in the backstreets of Port Mourant where my father worked in the sugar factory. Often 'Uncle' John [Trim] would join us in the game and give us a bit of advice.

Years later these same pals, Basil Butcher, Joe Solomon and Ivan Madray were to play Test cricket for the West Indies with me. Uncle John Trim was to find his slice of glory too – he opened the bowling in Test matches against England, Australia and India in the late 1940s [early 1950s].

Port Mourant is a closely knit community and I'm proud to think that we reared five Test cricketers in a short space of time. John Trim [1915–60] who died while we were in Australia on the 1960[–1] tour, lived next door to us; Basil Butcher 200 yards down the road; Ivan Madray 100 yards further on; and Joe Solomon half a mile away. Our careers have followed the same path through school, club, and colony [British Guiana] into the [West Indies] Test side. (Kanhai 1966: 17–18)

Overcoming adversity! This was Rohan's tale. I was able to relive virtually every step of his first match (a trial match), at the Bourda Ground. His emotional path to the venerable ground (of which I dreamt often as a boy but did not see until I was 15) felt as daunting as my insecurities at Queen's College in Georgetown. I'm not sure if Rohan had ever been to the capital before that trial match in November 1954 to prepare for the inter-colonial championship in Barbados in early 1955. Rohan tells of the anxieties precipitated by that first match in Georgetown; even the method and circumstances of his selection were bizarre:

It was late 1954 . . . A feature [trial] match was due to be held in the capital, Georgetown, with stars like Clyde Walcott and Bruce Pairaudeau . . . There were three vacancies in one of the sides, and the British Guiana Cricket Board asked Berbice, our county, to fill them. 'Cobra' Ramdat [from Plantation Providence], a left arm spinner who struck with the swiftness of his namesake, was an obvious choice. The other two spots were allocated to Port Mourant . . . The club reckoned that three players – Basil Butcher, Ivan Madray, and me – all had equal claims. The haggling went on and on . . . until eventually someone came up with the bright idea of drawing names out of a hat. You can guess who lost.

That Thursday night I was nearly in tears. To a boy of 18 a break like that takes on enormous proportions. It was like the end of the world to me . . . [But] next morning Mr Duncan Stewart [Stuart], the Berbice [Cricket Board's] President, knocked on the door to tell me that 'Cobra' had twisted an ankle. 'Would I go to Georgetown?' he wanted to know . . . I'd have walked the whole 90 miles if he had asked me to. (Kanhai 1966: 18–20)

But the trauma for Rohan must have been consuming: a poor boy from the sugar plantation appearing at Bourda (the historic, prestigious – and elitist – home of cricket in British Guiana) with legendary Test players Clyde Walcott (1926–2006) and Bruce Pairaudeau (b. 1931). Then the yawning social chasm! I could feel the apprehension that must have possessed

Rohan. This was exacerbated by his having to travel to Georgetown from Port Mourant on the morning of the trial match. He caught the bus to New Amsterdam, crossed the Berbice River by ferry to Rosignol, where he took the train to Georgetown stopping every few miles, in order to get to the match starting at the Georgetown Cricket Club ground (Bourda) around 11. It entailed getting up at 3 am, at least, on that Saturday morning. This was late November 1954 and at this stage Rohan had never *seen* a first-class match; in fact, the first he would witness was the one before his maiden first-class match, on the British Guiana tour of Barbados in February 1955:

Inevitably, after the first excitement, the rot set in. I began to feel nervous and couldn't sleep. By the time I caught the bus with Basil and Ivan at four o'clock on the Saturday morning my heart was pounding like a tom-tom. What a journey that was – 15 miles by bus [on a poor brick road] to New Amsterdam [on the eastern bank of the Berbice River], across the ferry [to Rosignol], then a long, hot train ride into Georgetown, all the time clutching my old tattered cricket bag to me and trying to look outwardly calm. None of us wanted to show any sign of emotion... But, beneath all the nonchalant expression we were dead scared... I had never seen a first-class match before [this one was not classed thus]... Names like Walcott and Pairaudeau belonged to the newspapers and radio, not real everyday life on the sugar plantation. (Kanhai 1966: 20)

Bourda did not present Rohan, Basil and Ivan with propitious conditions. A monsoonal deluge had left the outfield saturated. Rohan realised straightaway that it would be difficult to hit boundaries across such a soggy outfield. But he did not have to confront that problem. He was dismissed in the blink of an eye, caught in the slips off Richard Hector, the British Guiana pace bowler, for 0. Rohan's trauma was thereby doubly compounded and he was inconsolable. Yet, by having another string to his bow, he had the means of a potential reprieve:

The next morning I picked up five catches behind the stumps and surprisingly won myself a place in the British Guiana trials to be held on the same ground the following week. My reputation as a wicket-keeper/batsman was beginning to spread and with it my flair for the unorthodox. (Kanhai 1966: 20–1)

Kanhai adds that Joe Solomon, another Port Mourant batsman of merit, ought to have been an automatic choice for the trials, but he was strangely overlooked. There were already three Berbice players in the squad; in the eyes of the ‘czars’ of Georgetown that was probably enough. It was the norm, before Clyde Walcott became cricket organiser on the sugar plantations of British Guiana in 1954, for talented Berbicians to be routinely overlooked by the British Guiana Cricket Board. Hitherto, they rarely sought to ascertain the calibre of play beyond the accessible clubs in Georgetown. Without Walcott’s colony-wide evaluation of skills and his authority at the highest level of the game, these brilliant backwoodsmen from Port Mourant, despite their cricketing pedigree and abundant potential, could conceivably never have taken that train to Georgetown towards the end of 1954, culminating in four of them (Kanhai, Madray, Butcher and Solomon) playing Test cricket for the West Indies by 1957–8. And less than five years later, Kanhai, Butcher and Solomon were, indeed, the numbers 3, 4 and 6 batsmen respectively throughout the five-Test series in England in 1963, which West Indies won 3–1 under Frank Worrell’s astute leadership – arguably one of the best Test teams of all time. We had emphatically gone beyond the sugar plantation.

This was a stupendous achievement that made me feel I was somebody. These local heroes, grassroots in origin, contributed immeasurably to whatever self-worth I did eventually garner. It was this ground-breaking Port Mourant enigma that shaped my obsession with the game, as it did my curiosity in its astounding place in the social history of Guyana and the region as a whole. It is also the principal prompting that shapes my books on the history of the game in the West Indies.

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