

# JANET JAGAN: A Pioneer and Revolutionary



African Freedom Fighter Oliver R. Tambo award was presented to Dr. Jagan posthumously for his exceptional contribution to the struggle against racial oppression and colonial exploitation. Mrs. Janet Jagan receives the award from then General Secretary of the PPP, Mr. Donald Ramotar who accepted it in South Africa.

## **Centenary Birth Anniversary**

On Tuesday, October 20, 2020 last, the late Mrs. Janet Jagan would have celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday anniversary. It was an occasion to celebrate the impact she had on Guyana and the world.

Janet Jagan led an exemplary life. Like her late husband, Dr. Cheddi Jagan, she played a leading role in the struggles of the Guyanese people for independence, democracy and social progress. Indeed, since the mid-1940s she stood tall at all the important historical junctures of Guyana's political and social landscapes. Right up to the day she passed she was an active participant in the life of our country.

## **A Remarkable Woman**

Janet had been a positive influence and together with Dr. Jagan, was responsible for the social progress we have made in this country. Undoubtedly, she was a truly remarkable woman. A patriot of Guyana; a true internationalist; and an outstanding fighter on behalf of the working and oppressed peoples in Guyana and the world. From a very young age she identified with the poor and disadvantaged and subscribed to Karl Marx's thesis that it was important to change the world.

## **Early Life**

Born in Chicago, in the United States she grew up during the Great Depression and was inspired to work for the poor. No doubt, she must have witnessed a lot

of sufferings during that period. Chicago was a rapidly growing industrial city in Illinois and the depression had hit it very hard.

Thousands of American workers lost their jobs. The struggle of trade unions and progressive political parties intensified as they tried to protect jobs and to work towards alleviating the suffering caused by the economic crisis. That period made a great impact on young Janet and made her a friend and fighter for working people throughout her life. After the outbreak of World War II, Janet, a trained nurse, contributed to the fight against fascism. She was active in the left movement and was a member of the Young Communist League in the United States. Among jobs she did during that time was proofreading of publications for the American Medical Association.

## **British Guiana in 1943**

In 1943 she married Cheddi Jagan who was studying dentistry and economics in the US. They had a lot in common, particularly politics. Janet joined Cheddi in then British Guiana in 1943. They soon had a good grasp of local politics in the colonies and were convinced that a fight had to be mounted against colonialism.

Like other fighters for national and social liberation at that time, both Cheddi and Janet were greatly influenced



Dr. and Mrs. Jagan with their children, Joey and Nadira.

by the major and leading role which the Soviet Union played in defeating Hitler's fascism. Together with Dr. Jagan, Janet quickly became deeply involved in the social, economic and political life of the colony.

#### **Founder Member of the PAC**

In 1946 Janet along with Dr. Jagan, Ashton Chase and Jocelyn Hubbard founded the Political Affairs Committee (PAC), the forerunner of the People's Progressive Party (PPP). The PAC began publishing a weekly bulletin for circulation in the colony. Janet's journalistic skills qualified her to become the Editor of the PAC Bulletin.

#### **General Secretary of the WPEO**

In that very year, Janet founded the Women's Political and Economic Organisation (WPEO). Winifred Gaskin and Frances Stafford were also founding members. The WPEO was the first political women's organisation in British Guiana and the Caribbean.

Janet became the General Secretary of the WPEO and through dedication and hard work she impacted tremendously on the political life of the colony. It was the first awakening of women to join the struggle for freedom while liberating themselves from the oppression and inequality which they were under.

Those were not easy times. Political life was dominated by

a British Governor and officials from the Sugar Producers Association, who were all British, and by a few rich local persons who were closely tied to the colonial officials.

#### **PAC leaders challenged Colonial Power**

The young leaders in the PAC challenged the powers that existed in the colony on issues related to national life and working people's interests. They boldly declared that one of their objectives was to win political independence for British Guiana. The PAC made a great impact and in 1947. Janet, Cheddi and Jocelyn contested constituencies at the elections, under a reformed, but still restricted franchise.

#### **Waves in GT Constituency**

Janet, who was extremely popular, contested the Georgetown seat. She was widely known and loved by workers and trade unionists. She was the Organising Secretary of the British Guiana Clerks Union (BGPU) and had also helped Ashton Chase and Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow in the British Guiana Labour Union (BGLU).

An old United Force (UF) member, Murtland Williams, recently told me that he personally saw Janet helping to bathe the little children in the Charlestown area, while talking politics with their parents.

She was pitted against Percy Wight, who at that time owned the Argosy newspapers. Wight was the Mayor of Georgetown and also a member of the Legislative and Executive Councils of the colony and a staunch supporter of colonial power.

When it became clear that Janet would beat him, the whole group that supported the establishment ganged up against her. They supported John Fernandes to contest after seeing the writing on the wall for Percy Wight. Fernandes' family was rich and did charitable work in the city area.

Everything was used against Janet, including invoking the anti-communist bogey, religion and money. Janet barely lost and that was no doubt partly due to limited franchise.

#### **Dr Jagan won EC Constituency**

The Jagans and the PAC's reputation kept growing. Dr. Jagan won a seat in the Legislative Assembly, representing the East Coast Constituency. Janet, by that time, had distinguished herself as a fighter, a very good organiser and an able administrator.

She was involved closely with the labour movement. She helped the Guiana Industrial Workers Union (GIWU) organise the sugar workers, and worked closely with the BGLU, representing almost exclusively urban workers. Those unions were the main unions of the day.

#### **Active in the Sugar Industry**

During the strike of 1948 Janet was very active in

organising relief for the strikers and speaking at meetings to keep up the morale of the workers during the 4 months long strike for the recognition of the GIWU.

When the workers were shot, Janet was one of the first prominent persons to arrive on the scene to give leadership, protection and comfort to the workers and their families. She, together with other leaders of the PAC and the GIWU, led the funeral procession from Enmore to Georgetown, some twenty miles.

In 1980, she repeated a similar feat. In showing her and the PPP's revulsion at the People's National Congress' (PNC) sanctioned murder of Dr. Walter Rodney she marched from Buxton to Georgetown in the protest procession with his body.

### **General Secretary of PPP**

By the time the PPP was founded Janet was certainly one of the most outstanding leaders in the colony. Because of her organising ability and her administrative skills she became the General Secretary of the Party.

She held that position until 1970, when the organisational structure of the Party was changed.

### **Her popularity won her a seat on the Municipal Council**

In 1950 she won a seat on the Municipal Council of Georgetown. She was the first representative of the working people to grace the council chambers. She was the only successful candidate of the three PPP candidates that contested elections in that year. The other two were Forbes Burnham and Cheddi Jagan. Her victory showed how popular Janet had become and her reputation for hard work was already becoming legendary. She had won the Wortmanville/Werk en Rust seat, a predominantly working class area in the city. She became the first woman to hold an elected position in this country.

### **Universal Adult Suffrage**

Janet was part of the PPP's delegation to the Waddington Constitutional Commission which gave an advanced constitution in 1953. It was here among other places that the PPP fearlessly, eloquently and effectively represented the cause for Universal Adult Suffrage. This was a major victory for the Party and the people.

### **Member of Legislative Council**

Recognising her dint of hard work, the Party put her in charge of and the candidate for the West Demerara\ Essequibo Coast district. She was the district's candidate in the 1953 Elections. She won handsomely and became a member of the Legislative Council in 1953. She won that seat again in the 1957 Elections and made those areas PPP strongholds. Along with Jessie Burnham and Jane Phillips Gay she shared the honour of being among the first women in the Legislative Council.

### **Great Achievements in Three Ministries**

Janet's portfolio was Minister of Labour, Health and Housing between 1957 to 1961. In that position her work was indeed outstanding. It was the achievements which she made in that period that helped the Party to win the 1961 Elections.

Under her leadership, malaria was practically wiped out in the colony. A mass campaign was launched to wipe out filaria and children were inoculated with the polio vaccine. An anti-typhoid scheme was also launched. New health centres were constructed. Cottage hospitals along with maternity and child welfare clinics were established in all parts of the colony. The Georgetown Hospital was expanded greatly both in buildings and facilities. It was under her guidance that pure water supply spread throughout the countryside.

In housing, great progress was made both in urban and rural areas. The logies on the sugar estates were eliminated. The Rent Restriction Ordinance covered the whole colony, and not just Georgetown. The expansion of housing in Georgetown helped to relieve overcrowding and removal of slums.

Under her leadership, working people made rapid progress both in wages and conditions of work. Domestic, watchmen, quarry workers, rural cinema employees, grocery and retail store workers, etc. were protected by the ministry for the first time. People, to this day, continue to speak of her phenomenal performance in that period. Many of the houses at Lodge, Ruimveldt, Campbellville and in rural areas still stand as a monument to her great love of working people.

### **She fought against all odds**

All was not smooth sailing in her political life in Guyana. Janet had to fight against tremendous odds. She was attacked because of her race. The League of Coloured People (LCP) launched a racist campaign against Whites as early as the 1947 Elections. Jocelyn Hubbard who had done quite a lot for labour faced a racist campaign led by the LCP. He lost the 1947 elections to Dr. J.A. Nicolson as a result.

Ms. Frances van Stafford, one of the founders of the WPEO, a woman who did a lot to promote women's rights, was also attacked by the LCP. Lies were spread that she, a White Guyanese woman, had kicked an African Guyanese servant down her stairs. That nasty lie caused her to lose as well.

### **Janet, Cheddi: Banned from the Caribbean**

Janet faced the same attacks by those who wanted to exploit the working people as her male colleagues. In



Janet Jagan entering jail to service a six months sentence

1949 she was declared a prohibited immigrant in St. Vincent. In 1952 she and Cheddi were the first post-war prohibited immigrants in Trinidad and Grenada.

#### **Jailed in 1954 through Fabrication**

The British press launched a campaign to demonise Janet. She was jailed in 1954 under fabricated charges. She was accused of having an old copy of the Police Regulations in her home. However later when Forbes Burnham was found with a new one, he was not even questioned.

In the 1960s, the PNC following the tradition of the LCP also heaped slander upon her. They spread rumours of all sorts joining the colonial masters in trying to demonise Janet.

The blatant racist characteristics of those who feared her intellect and contributions to the working class, paraded on the streets during her presidency in the 1990s, mainly because of her ethnic background. Racism had always been among the PNC's most effective tool in its politics. Of course, Janet the fighter, brushed those attacks aside. During the anti-dictatorial struggle she fought on several fronts.

#### **Editor of Thunder**

She became the Editor for the Party's organ, the Thunder. As a leader of the PPP, Janet distinguished herself in several important struggles that brought credit to the Party and our country.

#### **Editor of Mirror**

She was the Editor of Mirror newspapers and played a leading role in defence of the press. She led protests against the banning of flour and other essential food items among other struggles.

She returned to Parliament in 1980 at a time when the Party was sending its best to take up the fight in Parliament, after the third successively rigged elections by the PNC regime.

#### **Book exposed PNC Rigged Elections**

She also used her pen to expose the PNC government. Her book on the 1973 rigged elections is still the best exposé of violence perpetrated on the Guyanese people by the PNC. In the opening sentence she stated frankly and dramatically: "In Guyana the word "elections" has become synonymous with "fraud." It was once again on display as the PNC desperately tried to steal the 2020 elections.

Another notable feat was her examination of National Service in Guyana. This was at the time that the PNC was flirting with socialism. Janet showed that under the PNC regime, National Service was used to oppress, discriminate and to militarise the country, there was nothing progressive about it. Indeed, reminiscent of the Luchoo ban on books, a National Service contingent marched on the University of Guyana (UG) campus in 1974 and destroyed the UG Students Society's office, burning books in the process. Cde. Navin Chandarpal was then the President of UGSS.

Throughout all her struggles Janet was always a great caring and loving human being with tremendous strength and courage. Events have often pushed her to the fore even though her preference would have been to be more private. In his book *The West on Trial* Dr. Jagan captured her personality when he wrote: "...Janet is somewhat of an introvert. She does not like being in the limelight. Nor does she care about possessions and is always willing to go out of her way to help others ... It took a great deal of persuasion before she consented to stand for the Georgetown seat ..." (in reference to the 1947 Elections).

It also took a great deal of persuasion to get her to be the presidential candidate in the 1997 Elections. Party leaders worked hard in days of meetings to get her to stand. She never craved power, for its own sake, but only to advance the cause of the working people.

Janet's leadership style was one to be emulated. She led by being knowledgeable, constant study of various issues and offering informed and sober leadership. She also led by example. In January, 1955 when she was about to be released from prison an article in the January 15,

1955 issue of Thunder fittingly captured her personality: "It can truly be said of Janet that her lot has been the hardest in this time of national oppression. Let us for the moment take our thoughts back to those dark days of November and December, 1953 and afterwards. At that time it would be correct in saying that Janet carried the Party and consequently the country with a courage which could only spring from love and admiration. It may be further correct to say, that, at Janet, was directed the main fire of our rulers, hardly a day went by when either the office, her car, her personal belongings were not searched by some police officers or others."

"Then the court case against her started coming with fierce and vicious rapidity. An unflinching Janet – like the militant fighting General Secretary she is – stood her ground. When she was convicted she walked out of court with her head high and on her face was a familiar smile. Our Party Secretary was conducting herself like a Party Secretary. Today Janet is respected by all. Even those who oppose her politically respect her for her strength of conviction and courage."

#### **New era in Caribbean Politics**

It was therefore not difficult for her to hand over the presidency to Bharrat Jagdeo when she felt that due to her health she could not discharge her duty to the country to the maximum, as she would have liked. In so doing in 1999, she opened a new era in Caribbean politics.

#### **First Female Parliamentarian, Prime Minister and President**

Despite the tremendous achievements for the people of our country and personally being among the first female Parliamentarian, the first female Prime Minister and the first female President in Guyana, she remained extremely modest, very easy to talk with and compassionate to the plight of others. Untold numbers of Guyanese and Caribbean people benefited from her generosity and kindness.

#### **Loved by her party; No Personal Envy**

The political struggles she led sometimes created a lot of hostility mainly engineered by the PNC. However, I do not think that she had a single personal enemy. She was loved by the whole Party and the overwhelming majority

of people in Guyana.

As a revolutionary woman she left the most developed country in the world, the United States of America and made her home in one of the poorest countries, giving her all to the working and oppressed people of what was then British Guiana later Guyana. That made her one of the earliest revolutionary to do so. Ché Guevara became famous for a similar act. Janet was truly a citizen of the world.

There are many other facets of Janet Jagan's life that can be dealt with, her internationalism for instance. But all cannot be told in a short article.

For me, I feel greatly honoured to have had the opportunity to know her and to have worked with her. I, like so many others, benefited from her leadership, guidance, counsel and generosity.

On this the centenary of her birth, I say, as was said at Karl Marx's grave side. "Her name and work would endure; I salute a Pioneer and Revolutionary and feel so proud that our struggle produced such a giant."



*Mr. Donald Ramotar is the former President of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana. He also served as General Secretary of the People's Progressive Party. Mr. Ramotar is a graduate from the University of Guyana in the field of Economics. He is an avid writer, and contributes regularly to the Mirror newspaper and other publications.*