

## Janet Jagan's Role On "The Right to Development"

Rajendra Rampersaud

Janet Jagan was beyond any doubt one of the towering political figures in the Western Hemisphere. Her career lasted more than six decades after she joined her husband Dr. Cheddi Jagan in British Guiana in December 1943. Indeed, it is difficult to assess Janet Jagan's contributions in one article given her multifaceted role in the development of Guyana. Even though her prominence was at times out shadowed by the contributions of her late husband Dr. Cheddi Jagan she was still able to hold her own. Being among the first women to have held the highest offices in the region Janet Jagan was a trail blazer for Human Development since the mid-forties. This was the time when the issue of human development was a distant dream in the minds of most in international institutions. Mrs. Jagan's struggle for a new economic and social order is a fitting testimony to the United Nations emphasis on Human Development as a main stream to real economic development. This article will focus on Mrs. Jagan's role in development.

Mrs. Jagan's career as a tireless campaigner for equal opportunity to the forbidden and the under privileged has located her in the gallery of those who have made major contributions to the advancement of the rights of people. In recognition of her sterling contributions, the United Nations honoured her with the coveted Gandhi Gold Medal for peace, democracy and human rights. Mrs. Jagan's struggle to ensure people's right to development had characterized her strong political activism and, unlike many of her contemporaries, she remained steadfast in her commitments to improve the conditions of the underprivileged while serving the highest office in Guyana.

Mrs. Jagan partnered her husband to fully argue for a more equitable international economic order within the framework of the United Nations system. In 1986, the United Nations eventually adopted a declaration on The Right to Development as an inalienable human right. The process of development is *"the realization of all civil, economic, social, cultural, and other human rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."* Responsibility for the formulation of policy to advance human development is vested in nation states. States have the right and duty to formulate appropriate national development policies to ensure *"the constant improvement in the well being of the entire population and of all individuals."* Further, Article Eight states that *"equal opportunity for all in their access to basic resources, education, and health services, food, housing, employment and the fair distribution of income."* These declarations were adopted in the late 1980's and early 1990's by the United Nations long after Cheddi and Janet Jagan adopted it as their mantra in their struggle for economic and social transformation in Guyana.

Mrs. Jagan was not only the first female to be elected to the legislative but served as the Minister of Labour, Health and Housing for the period 1957-1961. After her arrival in British Guiana, she made frequent visits to the sugar plantation in Port Mourant, the place of birth of her husband, and observed the sufferings and the deplorable living conditions of sugar workers. It was, therefore, not surprising that her activism inspired her to work as a Field Secretary of an urban-based Clerical and Commercial Workers Union. By the mid-forties, she was already manning the street championing the cause of both bauxite and sugar workers in the then British Guiana.

Mrs. Jagan's political consciousness and strong commitments ensured her common touch and bond with the underprivileged while serving as Minister of Labour, Health and Housing. This Ministry under her

tenure witnessed the most rapid changes to the conditions of labour, health and housing, considered the fundamental of social change. In the field of health, some 14 health centres and cottage hospitals were built in several parts of the country. Also, 21 new maternity and child welfare clinics were established, especially in the remote areas. Mrs. Jagan ensured that health care was free and accessible to the rural poor. Malaria, especially in the coastal areas, was almost eliminated with UN assistance. An intensive campaign was also conducted to eradicate Filaria. Children throughout the country were inoculated with vaccine to prevent polio. It was during Mrs. Jagan's tenure as Minister that preventative health care became the bedrock of health policy.

With first-hand experience of the deplorable living conditions of the logies in the sugar plantation, Mrs. Jagan worked steadfastly as Minister to ensure improved housing conditions with the opening of new housing schemes. These new schemes were equipped with potable and clean water supplies that were extremely scarce in those days. Mrs. Jagan, along side her husband, worked tirelessly to ensure that Bookers granted the sale of house lots to sugar workers for a minimal sum of one Guyana dollar. The Rent Restriction was extended to ensure tenants protection from unscrupulous landlords.

In the field of labour, a Shops Ordinance was passed in 1958 restricting shop assistants' working week to 40 3/4 hours instead of 47 hours. Assistants also received an annual holiday with pay. The Workmen's Compensation Act was amended to extend protection to domestics and other marginalized workers for the first time. It is my personal view, that the period Mrs. Jagan served as Minister of Health, Labour and Housing was the hallmark of her political career. Her performance evinced the most serious attempt to improve the standard of living of ordinary people thereby placing human development as the cornerstone to a people's oriented development path.

Mrs. Jagan was extremely effective in social networking. It is, therefore, not surprising that while serving as the de facto leader of the National Assembly, in her capacity as Prime Minister, that the long awaited Trade Union Recognition Bill was passed in December 1997. Even though her career in the late 1990's as President was short-lived because of health reasons, it was during that period that Guyana successfully qualified for the Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPIC) initiative. This would release much needed funds that would have gone toward debt payment to reinvestment in education, health and poverty reduction.

Another important chapter to Mrs. Jagan's contribution to development was her lead role in the field of art, literature and culture. She promoted the publication of poetry and literature by aspiring writers, and participated in most events at Castellani House be it on Martin Carter day of poetry or art, literature and paintings ceremonies. Just days before her passing she edited her final issue of *Thunder* for publication and persuaded me to produce an article on the global financial crises. She is an accomplished author with the publication of a number of short stories. These attributes have contributed in no small way in uplifting the social consciousness of people.

Mrs. Jagan's struggles to ensure people's right to development have set the bar at a very high level that is recognized by even her most coveted opponents. She is a role model for the Twentieth Century women politician. Mrs. Jagan delivered a public service of a very high quality that was people-centered and contributed to the right to development. Her day-to-day activities in and out of office was centered on resolving and helping people with social and, many times, personal problems. There are thousand of Guyanese and individuals, some of whom I have met, that received direct assistance from the hand of Janet Jagan.

Finally, Mrs. Jagan will be sadly missed as that strong voice that spoke forcibly for the overall improvement in the socioeconomic conditions of the Guyanese people. Her contribution to ensure fair and equitable development, and access to socioeconomic resources is second to none in the Western Hemisphere.