

JANET JAGAN: REBEL 'WITH' A CAUSE



Mrs. Janet Jagan (President of the WPO) acknowledging delegates during a march-past at the commencement of a WPO Congress.

October 20 marked the 100th birth anniversary of Mrs. Janet Jagan. This was indeed a significant milestone in our political history. Mrs. Jagan was the first female President of Guyana in addition to her several other "firsts."

Janet Jagan stands tall among the great women of history. The prestigious and widely circulated TIME Magazine named her as one of History's Most 'Rebellious' Women.

It is important to put in perspective the term 'rebellious' which did not in any way convey negative connotation but was meant to recognize the role played by those women in challenging the then prevailing status quo which was, in the main, oppressive and anti-people. The other salient point to note is that the recognition by TIME Magazine is not limited to this decade or century. It went back to time immemorial which makes the citation all the more historically significant.

The People's Progressive Party (PPP) and the entire

country for that matter have been given a lift by such recognition and not just Mrs. Jagan. It is unfortunate that she did not live long enough to experience how the world felt about her and her role in the liberation of Guyana from poverty and undemocratic rule. Mrs. Jagan ranks among great women of history including the celebrated Joan of Arc, a 15th century French peasant girl who fought against the British and played a key role in the lifting of the siege of Orleans. She was eventually burnt at the stake by the British for heresy and witchcraft but later canonized by the Vatican.

Other popular names mentioned in the TIME Magazine citation included Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi who spent 15 years under house arrest until recently when she was set free by the military junta and Jiang Qing, wife of former Chinese leader Mao Zedong. These are 'rebels' with a cause; most of whom championed the cause of the poor and the down-trodden at tremendous odds, as in the case of Phoolam



Chairman of the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre, Mr. Hydar Ally, handing over the Janet Jagan Centenary First Day Cover Commemorative Stamp to H.E. President Irfaan Ali at State House.

Devi, who became famous for taking up the plight of India's 'untouchables' and earned in the process the nickname of "Bandit Queen."

In the case of Mrs. Jagan the citation read as follows:

"For Chicago born Janet Jagan, the vibrant labour struggles in the mid-20th century of her own country was not enough. After falling in love with Cheddi Jagan, a Guyanese dentistry student at Northwestern, Jagan followed her future husband, with Lenin's writings in hand, to his homeland in 1943. Setting up shop as a dental assistant, she set on a path that would lead to her becoming Guyana's first woman president.

In 1950, she and her husband formed the People's Progressive Party which sought to promote Marxist ideals as well as decolonization from the United Kingdom. Strikes in what was then referred to as "British Guiana" by domestic workers in the late 1940s had been inspired by the Jagans and the movement attracted the ire of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill who put the Jagans in jail. But Jagan proved to be a political survivor, remaining in the game despite

various attempts to politically purge her from leadership posts.

An impolitic public relations campaign singing the praises of the Cuban revolution attracted the attention of John Kennedy in the 1960s that in turn targeted the country's labour movement. Relegated to the sidelines, after a leftist government flopped in the 1960s Jagan took to the pages of the Mirror newspaper and became its editor. By the time she was elected the country's president in 1997, the country achieved complete independence from Britain that she had sought and nationalized much of its economy."

This citation by TIME Magazine provides a panoramic view of the epic struggles waged by Mrs. Jagan and her husband, Cheddi Jagan, for the liberation of Guyana from the yoke of colonialism and neo-colonialism and for a free and democratic Guyana. This is why the PPP, of which they were founding members, remains wedded to the ideas and ideals that they passionately embraced and defended throughout their political life which together surpassed a hundred years, quite a remarkable contribution by any political couple.

The fact that Janet Jagan was identified as one of the outstanding women of history by an international magazine with a readership that run into millions is, in my view, a fitting tribute to someone who had dedicated her entire life alongside her husband, Dr. Cheddi Jagan, for the cause of humanity. For a small developing country with a population of less than a million people, Mrs. Jagan's contribution had to be extraordinary and outstanding to have gained the notice of the directorate of TIME Magazine.

Despite her undoubted bravery and extraordinary courage, there is also that human side of Mrs. Jagan that is not often given the prominence it deserved. She was a people's person who very often would go out of her way to help persons in need. The list is long of people who have been touched by her outpouring of love and compassion. It was not uncommon for people to take advantage of her generosity by narrating all manner of sad stories but it was never her business to probe into individual's circumstances. She gave what she could afford.

Those of us who had the honour and privilege of knowing her at a personal level can attest to her generosity, integrity and high moral and ethical standards. I had the accolade of sharing the centre-spread of the Mirror newspaper for several years with her and I cannot recall her missing an edition. What I found very useful as a columnist was the encouragement and support she gave me from time to time which served to enhance my confidence as a columnist. She served as Editor for both the Mirror and the Thunder, the theoretical organ of the PPP and ensured that the publications went out on a timely and regular basis, an indication of her disciplined approach to work.

It speaks to her creativity and ingenuity that she managed to effectively multi-tasked and combined her several roles of mother, wife, politician, journalist and writer into a seemingly integrated whole. As far as I can recall she never missed an assignment be it an article for publication or any other task assigned to her. She was

never late for meetings and was intolerant of mediocrity or indiscipline.

Apart from her numerous articles she also wrote several books including children's stories. These are all stories about the virtues of good over evil, honesty and kindness to others which in fundamental ways reflected her own personality and character.

I remain indebted to her for encouraging me to keep on writing. She would from time to time send me handwritten notes in which she would commend me for my articles in the Thunder or the Mirror. She was at the same time not shy in pointing out areas of perceived deficiencies, all of which when taken together helped to improve my writing skills. She even took it upon herself to put together a selected number of my articles in the Thunder and Mirror in a booklet titled 'Insightful Views on Guyana' in which she was kind enough to write the Foreword.

Like all mortals, age in the end had taken its toll and slowed her down. She resigned from the presidency before the end of her tenure due to failing health but she remained committed right to the very end to the things she loved doing most, writing for and editing the Mirror and the Thunder. During that period, I had the opportunity of interacting with her on a regular basis where she would share with me stories and experiences some of which will remain confidential.

To say that Mrs. Jagan has made her contribution to Guyana would be an understatement. She helped to shape the political and social landscapes of Guyana in fundamental ways and in the process transformed the lives of countless Guyanese positively. She can truly be considered a role-model for all Guyanese and for women in particular. As mentioned earlier, she faced a number of challenges but she took them all in strides without malice or ill will.

A Guyanese, indeed a world icon had departed the world stage but her vision of a better and more humane society continues to live on and inspire future generations.



Mr. Hydar Ally is currently the Chairman of the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre. He is the author of two publications: "Pragmatism or Opportunism? Guyana's Foreign Policy Behaviour 1966-1985" and "Insightful Views on Guyana." He is the holder of a Master's Degree in Political Science and also Graduate Diploma in Developing Studies. He serves as a member of the Public Service Appellate Tribunal.