

A Remarkable Woman



Mrs. Indranie Chandarpal addressing a forum celebrating Mrs. Janet Jagan's life and work at an anniversary of the formation of the WPO.

October 20, 2020 marked the 100th birth anniversary of Janet Jagan nee Rosenberg. On the occasion of that important milestone it is my honour and privilege to share some aspects on the life of this remarkable woman.

All of us who had the opportunity to know her, not in a fleeting way but at a more personal level, can attest to the many facets of her personality. She touched our lives in a variety of ways and has left an indelible impression.

Even before she came to Guyana in 1943 she had started to live a challenging life. She was bright, athletic and a young woman of great determination. She was a good

swimmer and even tried her hand at flying a plane. She grew up in a middle class suburb of Chicago and had the opportunity to attend Wayne University where she became involved in left wing politics. Her actions were prompted by the fact that she was Jewish and was passionate about the plight of the underdog.

Her meeting with Dr. Cheddi Jagan and the decision to marry him created quite a stir in her family since not only was she marrying a foreigner but she was going to leave her country as well. It was a tough decision to make which she did with no hesitation.

When she arrived in the former British Guiana she lost no time in joining her husband as they sought to address the various issues confronting the underprivileged and downtrodden at that time. One year after her arrival (1944) she took up the cause of women by penning a letter in the Labour Advocate on the question of adult suffrage.

Women in British Guiana by the mid-forties had already entered the fray of struggle in the working class arena. Those in the middle class were trying to provide assistance to the less fortunate in their midst by working through the charitable and friendly societies that were formed.

The body politics at that period was characterised by male dominance since there was strict demarcation in the public and private spheres of society and women were not permitted to enter that domain. She was not constrained by that situation since she was nurtured in her country through her involvement in left wing politics. While she believed in women's emancipation she recognised how difficult it would have been to obtain emancipation in the environment that existed at that time.

Adult suffrage had to include women and freedom from colonial rule was also necessary. Jocelyn Hubbard, who according to Cde Janet, had political vision and astuteness urged her to form a women's organisation and even

assisted in many aspects of the establishment of the Women's Political and Economic Organisation (WPEO) on the 12th July, 1946. The three women responsible for the formation were Mrs. Janet Jagan, Mrs. Winifred Gaskin and Ms. Frances Van Stafford. The mission was to ensure the political and economic organisation of women in order to promote their economic welfare and their political and social emancipation as well as their betterment.

The WPEO set about encouraging women to register as voters for the election in 1947. It was at this election that Mrs. Jagan made her entrance in the political arena. She contested the Central Georgetown seat and although she made a great impact, she lost because of limited franchise.

The WPEO not only encouraged women to vote but also urged women in charitable organisations to exert pressure on the government to create improvements in social welfare in general and housing conditions in particular. Within the first three months it attracted approximately 165 members both working and middle class women.

In 1948, the shooting deaths of five Enmore workers impacted on the lives of the Jagans as well as the events that led to the formation of the People's Progressive Party (PPP) on January 1st 1950. The elections under universal adult suffrage saw the PPP winning those elections of April, 1953 when three women were elected to the House of Assembly. Mrs. Jagan was elected Deputy Speaker of British Guiana's first House of Assembly.

On May 27th 1953 the Women's Progressive Organisation (WPO) was formed by Mrs. Janet Jagan, Ms. Jane Phillips Gay and Ms. Aukland with the following mission: "The WPO stands for a better educated woman who can bring up her children in surroundings of security; it stands for the raising of our living standards and it stands for peace and friendship among the peoples of the world and for the ultimate liberation of women from colonialism and poverty."

Two days after the formation of the WPO Cde Janet left British Guiana to participate in a meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark, organized by the Women's International Democratic Federation. At that meeting she made a call for British Guiana to become independent.

She was a pioneer of the movement to improve the conditions of Guyanese women by organizing them

in their communities and at the national level to have equal treatment and recognition of their human rights.

She lived to see that vision become a reality when she herself attained the highest office of the land; where girls were excelling in all areas of life and where free and fair elections became a reality.

Janet Jagan played a special role in the formation of the Political Action Committee (PAC) in 1946 and the many actions which helped to light the torch of the popular movement for political independence. She was even jailed for six months because of that activism.

When the PPP was formed she was elected as the first General Secretary, a position which she held for 20 years and was indeed the driving force behind the Party's dynamic organizational efforts for the rest of her life. She witnessed the formation of the Progressive Youth Organisation (PYO), the Mirror Newspaper and the Thunder Journal.

Former President Janet Jagan lived a purposeful life filled with many challenges and triumphs. The challenges were numerous starting from the decision she took when she decided to marry Dr. Jagan and come to the then British Guiana and continuing to the period of her presidency.

Her feats are chronicled in various documents and the one which illustrates her passion and commitment is the reference by Dr. Jagan in his book *The West on Trial* when he referred to her role as a Minister of Labour, Health and Housing in the period 1957-1961.

We are well aware of the various unions she had participated in and from her actions and writings we know that she was a true friend of the working class and a champion for the independence of Guyana.

During the 28 years when the PPP was in opposition she spent a considerable time working at the Mirror Newspaper and also ensured the publication of *Thunder*, the theoretical journal of the PPP. These publications were dear to her heart.

When the struggle was intensifying against the removal of essential commodities in Guyana, Janet Jagan was in the forefront of the demonstrations and other protests. On international issues, she was always a part of picketing exercises whether it was for the release of Nelson Mandela or in solidarity with the peoples of Palestine or Chile.



Executive Members of the WPO during a congress. In picture are Mrs. Janet Jagan, Mrs. Indranie Chandrapal, Ms. Gail Texiera and others.

Her role in the fights for the restoration of democracy was a relentless one, and she used her pen effectively to expose and inform of the infringements as they occurred.

Her position as the First Lady was one of simplicity, humility and decorum. While she was in a position of power she never allowed it to create a barrier from her and other people. That in itself was greatness. When Dr. Jagan passed away she stood there as a tower of strength and provided comfort to all even though her heart was bleeding.

The election of 1997 was a very testing period for Mrs. Janet Jagan. I recall vividly the campaign, the energy she displayed and the support which she received everywhere she went. However, the violent protests by the opposition made her assumption to office a very difficult one. For me, it was a privilege to listen to her reflecting on the early stages of her struggle when she addressed the ceremonial opening of the 7th Parliament and declared:

“Today as I address you as the first woman Head of State, fond memories of the long and hard struggles of our people come to mind. I particularly recall the plight of women in the late forties and the early fifties. I remember the courage of many women who came forward in those dangerous times to join the struggle. A momentous occasion was when in 1953, I was among the first three women ever to be elected to Parliament after we had just completed a vigorous election campaign. For me it was doubly difficult since in contesting the Essequibo constituency, which I won, my gender

was a central issue as I had to do battle with two wealthy macho landowners.

Our victory in 1953, and the spirit of oneness and togetherness which accompanied it, was like the end of a long eclipse which had engulfed our nation. That day, May 3, 1953 was a proud moment as the PPP parliamentarians, with Cheddi Jagan and Forbes Burnham at the lead, marched from the party’s headquarters to Parliament Buildings for the opening ceremony. We were all confident of the future and filled with patriotic fervour to start a process of genuine independence and economic and social progress.

The process began but was soon affected by many difficulties. These did not, however, deter us as a nation as we moved from independence to Republican status. Today, as we look back, we understand that there are many interpretations of our history. But at some point, we, as a nation, must have a common approach to our history, our difficulties and where we go from here. As a nation we have to constantly move forward. We cannot turn back. We have to live with our history. It is ours and the most we could do at this point is to learn the lessons that that history taught us. Our past should not divide us but give us strength and deepen our commitment to pursue boldly the interest of the nation and people. We must understand our unique cultural experience and realize that our oneness as a nation transcends the sum of its parts.”

Another issue which I would like to refer to is an interview that was done with President Janet Jagan on the 25th January 1998. This interview dealt with issues such as the Herdmanston Accord, constitutional changes, media matters, parliament, government performance and the Rights of the Child. President Jagan in responding to Earl Bousquet on the Accord stated:

“I want the whole nation to know how dangerous the situation was and that it was due to the responsible attitude of the PPP/Civic government that we were able to make what necessary concessions were required to bring about peace to this land. We are hoping that all Guyanese would understand what happened and would also appreciate our contribution has been one of a responsible government; a

government that cares, a government that does not want anything untoward to happen to its people. We want their safety, their future, etc.”

What is important to note is that it was her great sense of character, her dedication and strong organizing ability and commitment which helped her to withstand the assault on her character during her 63 years in Guyana. She was a morally upright and fearless human being who was never afraid to take a position on any issue even though her views may not have coincided with others.

By 1997 she was the longest serving member of the National Assembly and as a debater she argued well and stood her ground on any issue. She was a great role model for the women of the party. She was intensely private yet reached out to people at all times. She promoted the highest moral standards and led by example. While she believed in women's equality she did not encourage mediocrity in women.

Almost all the comrades who worked closely with her can attest to her humanity, her kindness, her thoughtfulness. Members of the public who came to see her weekly would have laid their stories to her and would have received assistance from her or would have been sent to some official for assistance.

She was fiercely independent and always gave a good fight for what she believed in; we saw her on so many occasions standing firm and holding her own. Unfortunately, she was vilified by some who cannot even begin to understand the contributions she has made to this country which became her real home. She never wanted sympathy or thanks since whatever she was doing was on her own accord and for what she believed in.

As General Secretary of the party from 1950 -1970 she managed that office, helped the WPO, wrote for Mirror, represented the PPP at special forums, visited groups

and managed her home and family. When asked about her ability to perform such diverse tasks on a daily basis she would always respond “you have to know how to manage time and for women they need to know how to balance family life with public and professional life.”

Janet Jagan was the comrade many had gone to in times of doubt and uncertainty. She was always willing and was never afraid to give advice. Cheddi and Janet Jagan came onto the political landscape at a critical, historical period and having completed the most difficult tasks have passed on. It is now left to us to build on the legacy they have left us.

We must all be proud of this daughter, this mother, this friend and comrade who lived a life of service to humanity and the liberation of man and womankind. She was a pioneer in politics and the struggle for independence and women's rights, being among one of the first women members of the Legislature in Guyana, the first female to be made a Deputy Speaker in 1953, one of the longest serving members of the National Assembly, the first female Minister in Guyana, the first female Prime Minister and the first female President of Guyana; Recipient of the Order of Excellence and the Gandhi Gold Medal for Peace, Democracy and Women's Rights by UNESCO. In 2012 Times Magazine nominated her among the most rebellious women in history.

The greatest legacy of all is the PPP which Cheddi and Janet dedicated their energies and total commitment to build and solidify. While we have all helped individually and collectively to strengthen it, had it not been for their vision and their dedication, the PPP would not be what it is today.

As we observed the 100th birth anniversary of Janet Jagan we do so with great reverence and respect for a woman whose life was characterised by service, compassion and fearlessness.



Mrs. Indranie Chandarpal is the President of the Women's Progressive Organisation (WPO) and a member of the Central Committee of the People's Progressive Party. She is also the Chairperson of the Women and Gender Equality Commission and the Administrator of the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre.