

Janet Jagan, an illustrious lady

TO THE CRITICS of the Maha Sabha: For the record, I would like to clear the air on the suitability of President Janet Jagan as guest speaker of the Maha Sabha's recent Women's Shakti Sangha.

The Maha Sabha does not have to justify its actions to anyone, even when they are dismissed as foolishness, except its huge membership.

However, Jagan is an illustrious lady, with more than "some unique perspective and competence" (Pt Indrani—*Guardian* 27/6) that made her eminently qualified for the role. In deference to her I make this concession.

Firstly, for information, the first Hindu women's conference attracted more than 2,000 women, who flocked from everywhere, on a day that saw a deluge of rainfall for this historic event. It was immensely successful and augers well for Hindu women and Hinduism generally.

To those who claim that Maha Sabha is backward and lacking an intelligentsia, within mere months it admitted women into its national executive, launched a women's arm and hosted a women's conference.

How many organisations can boast of such rapid development? Are these actions not consistent

with progress and intellectualism? But without the Maha Sabha some would have nothing to write about.

One criticism was that as an atheist she had no place in a Hindu event.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Atheism has a place within the all-embracing fold of Hinduism and is regarded as a legitimate search for moksha.

Her husband, the late President Cheddi Jagan, was a confirmed atheist as well, but was cremated with full Hindu rites by pundits. They are perhaps the best loved atheists by Hindus.

And to imply that the Maha Sabha needs something from her is pathetic.

This organisation is incomparable for its independence. Its many schools and mandirs were built with its own resources.

Furthermore, they are constantly refurbished and modernised and its many activities get token assistance from Government and the private sector. Did the Maha Sabha wait for Government to computerise its schools? So why would it want to burden the beleaguered president with its problems?

The view that her position as politician is inconsistent with Maha Sabha's philoso-



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phy is baseless. It has no objection to women politicians and hold them in high regard. To quote from its recent column (1/7): "In politics and commerce they (women) have displayed leadership while in warfare they fearlessly led armies."

But perhaps the best reason for inviting her is her enduring love for and commitment to Guyana. She went to live there in 1944, some 54 years ago.

She lived there for most of her life and is older than most Guyanese. Many may have forgotten that she is American-born.

She struggled consistently alongside her husband, never flinching for one moment. She may be Marxist but has fought harder for democracy in Guyana than most natural citizens. She was imprisoned and debarred from many

Caribbean countries but never fled Guyana.

Her involvement in the sugar workers' struggles and for empowerment for rural (Hindu) women is legendary. In fact the supporters of the PPP (mainly Hindus) consider her to be the Mother of Guyana.

On a personal level, the late Cheddi Jagan said (*West on Trial*) that parents on both sides objected to the marriage. Yet Janet adopted his family and was responsible for educating his four brothers and five sisters, something unachievable on their parents' finances.

She has written books for the children of Guyana chronicling its history and docu-

menting the lives of its heroes. Her involvement and adoption of Guyana is total. In fact it is said of her that she is more Guyanese than many of its citizens by birth.

So how dare anyone question her right to be President of Guyana and Maha Sabha's guest speaker or compare her with Sonia Gandhi of India?

And the point about male speakers at the conference is a moot point. The Women's Arm declared up front that it is not gender-biased nor a forum for male-bashing. It will involve men in its activities and seek expertise wherever it is available, regardless of gender.