

# Chicago girl, GUYANA'S FLAME

The Janet Jagan  
Biography by  
Dr Patricia Mohammed



IRA MATHUR

This Sunday Guardian Bookshelf spotlights Janet Jagan: Freedom Fighter of Guyana, a commanding biography by Dr Patricia Mohammed that uncovers the complex and compelling life of Janet Jagan—freedom fighter, stateswoman, and the first female president of Guyana. With meticulous research and narrative precision, Dr Mohammed restores Jagan's legacy as a woman who defied expectations of race, gender, and nationality to become a central figure in Guyana's turbulent struggle for independence.

Dr Patricia Mohammed is Emerita Professor of Gender and Cultural Studies at The University of the West Indies and a pioneer in Caribbean feminist activism and gender studies.

As an interdisciplinary scholar and feminist pioneer, writing this biography was an act of reclamation—an opportunity to challenge decades of misconceptions surrounding Jagan. Growing up in Trinidad, she was familiar with stories of hardship and political turmoil in Guyana, not as distant history but as pressing realities during her youth. Jagan's story offered a chance to close the gap in regional understanding to uncover truths buried beneath myths and political rhetoric.

In Janet Jagan: Freedom Fighter of Guyana, Dr Mohammed reconstructs pivotal moments in Jagan's life, including her tireless advocacy for independence on global platforms. Jagan's fearless voice at the United Nations in 1964—where she exposed Britain's political manoeuvring and the Cold War interference of the United States—underscored her strength as a leader undeterred by the forces stacked against her.

In 1943, Janet Jagan née Rosenberg, gave up her studies in nursing in Cook County Hospital, Chicago, and her goal of serving in the Second World War in Europe, to marry Cheddi Jagan, a young man from British Guiana who had come to the USA to study dentistry. She followed her husband to this little-known British colony in that same year. In a unique political partnership, which would last for fifty-four years, this revolutionary couple charted a new course in Guyana's anti-colonial history. With a few like-minded individuals, they would create the People's Progressive Party (PPP), the first mass party in this country. Janet was a committed and disciplined activist of the party, holding the role of general secretary for decades and ministerial positions when the PPP held parliamentary power. By 1997, she was elected as the first female President of Guyana.

Two years after her death in 2011, *Time* magazine named her as one of history's sixteen most rebellious women. This was no mean achievement for a young Jewish woman born in Chicago in 1920. She earned notoriety largely through the prominence she continued to receive from the world press for her support of the socialist stance that she and Cheddi Jagan took during 1930s Gold War politics and beyond. But she has remained an enigma to many. This first authorized biography probes the influence that shaped her formative years in the United States and tracks her struggles for democracy, women's and worker's rights, and her commitment to the cultural advancement of Guyana. It lays claim to the pivotal role she has played in the history of Guyana in the legacies she has left in both public spheres and private lives.



Patricia Mohammed has always followed an interdisciplinary path as a scholar, writer, filmmaker, and a pioneer in the feminist movement in the Anglophone Caribbean. She has published extensively on gender and feminism, in cultural studies in art and visual practices, and has directed eighteen experimental documentaries, among them two award-winning films. Her full-length publications include *Gender Negotiations among Indians in Trinidad* (2001), *Gendered Realities* (2002) and *Jagging the Caribbean: Cultural and Visual Traditions* (2009). She is Emerita Professor of Gender and Cultural Studies at The University of the West Indies. She now devotes herself fully to writing and other creative projects, distributing her year between Trinidad and Northern Ireland with her husband, artist Rex Dixon.



MOHAMMED  
Janet Jagan  
Freedom Fighter of Guyana



Janet Jagan  
Freedom Fighter of Guyana

Patricia Mohammed

## Excerpt of Janet Jagan: Freedom Fighter of Guyana by Patricia Mohammed

### CHAPTER 1. 'I Stand Between Posterity's Horizon and Her History' Pp 12-13

The year 1964 marked a painful turning point for the PPP, as the US supported opposition parties – the rise to power of the People's National Congress (PNC), led by Forbes Burnham, and the United Force (UF), led by Peter D'Aguiar. The US backing fuelled strikes and voter intimidation, enabling a coalition that eventually ousted the PPP from government. In a non-violent response to the traumatic upheavals of 1964, PPP supporters would march 115 miles (185 km) from Courantyne, and 50 miles (80 km) from Pomeroy, to meet up in Georgetown for a rally that was themed 'Peace, Unity, Independence and Freedom.' Dr Jagan's stirring speech at this rally to the thousands gathered focused on the history of the struggle for independence and the need for racial unity. Moved by this test of endurance, Janet Jagan would write the poem *Freedom Marchers* – 1964, a lasting testament to the party comrades' convictions.

#### Freedom March Marchers for Freedom

Feet sore, swollen toes, blistered  
By the hot, rocky road.  
Eyes red with dust, hair dry, dust struck  
Heads high, lips tight  
With conviction  
Hearts fired for freedom.  
On we march  
Mile over dust filled mile  
Each step a cry  
To free our comrades  
Chained, chained.  
By those who say no to freedom.  
Our feet will free them  
Our cries will unbind them

### The Bookshelf

March! March!  
Freedom Marchers.

(Janet Jagan, *Unpublished Stories and Poems*, 2010)

The word 'freedom' has many philosophical interpretations and applications, ranging from the political to the religious to the right of speech and the right to human agency. It has been interpreted variously and incrementally over the centuries. While campaigning for the presidency of Guyana in 1997, Janet Jagan described herself as a 'freedom fighter,' a self-identification she repeated in interviews. In some interviews, she would describe herself as 'fearless.' How did this girl child, born to Jewish parents in south-side Chicago in 1920, come to hold such strong convictions on human freedoms, a conviction that went far beyond expression in words and was acted out in her daily practice for decades, often at great personal cost? How did she rise to become known as one of the most revolutionary women in the world? Was this view of her as an outstanding political activist and leader shared by all? How much of this role is inextricably intertwined with her life partner Cheddi Jagan, and can we extricate her and see the shape and contours that define her individuality? In her responses to a McGill University student on the question of leadership in 1999, Janet replied, 'For women to be leaders they have to be tough, caring, willing to listen, able to make decisions without procrastination and by consultation, and understanding the major challenges facing the world to keep the peace, avoid bloody

confrontations, and solve the poverty problem.' Janet Jagan represents a unique individual in the history of political activism globally and dare one say it, a woman of the Caribbean whose life story must be claimed.

### CHAPTER 9. With Pragmatism and Optimism Pp 258–261 (edited)

In 1964, as minister of home affairs, she had been sent on a mission to London to visit Duncan Sandys. While in London, she also met up with various other players. Janet diligently keeps a record of this visit in her diary for 1964 which is transcribed fully in the next chapter of this biography, but it is pertinent here to track her movements and actions on behalf of the struggle for independence for British Guiana. She leaves London with no assurance that the British government would reverse their decision on proportional representation. After an unencouraging meeting with Duncan Sandys and other officials, Janet, then a member of the senate, leaves London and flies directly to New York to represent British Guiana at the United Nations to put forward the case for independence for this nation.

Her address to the United Nations Special Committee of Twenty-Four on Decolonisation on May 8, 1964, was preceded by an unemotional and sparing speaker from Iraq, who listlessly read out the findings of the Committee on the granting of independence to Aden (now Yemen). ... The presenter on Aden is interrupted as Janet is ushered into the forum. She looks every inch the composed stateswoman, dark-suited and elegant, as she is shown to her seat, far more collected than the previous speaker, who fiddled endlessly with his pen, papers, and desk accoutrements, never raising his eyes to the gathering. She addresses the august committee without tremor or hesitation in her voice:

"Mr Chairman, distinguished delegates...I am indeed grateful for this opportunity ...through

you to, once again, bring before the Special Committee, the question of British Guiana, even at this late hour. I say the hour is late because I have just come from London, where I spoke with Mr Duncan Sandys, the United Kingdom Secretary of State for the colony, and asked him to hold back the heavy hand of uneven justice he dealt the British Guiana government before it is too late to contain, and stop the violence and hate that has been unleashed in that unhappy land by the abridgement of the British Guiana constitution in 1960."

Maintaining total composure for the full length of her delivery and although reading from a script, she often spoke directly to the audience, Janet Jagan went on to ask the United Nations to appoint a team of constitutional lawyers to formulate an acceptable constitution for the territory. 'Only in this way can peace and harmony be returned to the country,' she declared.

Mrs Jagan charged that Britain's real aim in making constitutional changes in the face of the opposition of the British Guiana Government was to bring about the defeat of the governing party.

During radio and television interviews after her UN presentation, she said that press reports describing she and her husband as communist probably arose from a 'Witch hunt' by those who were against Dr Jagan's ruling People's Progressive Party (PPP). 'I would describe myself as one seeking freedom and independence for the people of British Guiana...I have never been a member of any communist party,' she said.

#### End of excerpt

An interdisciplinary scholar and filmmaker, Dr Patricia Mohammed has published widely, including *Gender Negotiations among Indians in Trinidad* (2001) and *Imaging the Caribbean* (2009). She has directed 18 experimental documentaries, including award-winning works.