

## **Book Review:**

**By Donald Ramotar**

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Ms. Patricia Mohamed, author of “Janet Jagan: Freedom Fighter of Guyana” has done a really commendable job in writing a biography of Janet Jagan, one of Guyana’s greatest citizens and undoubtedly a woman way ahead of her times. She was a very complex person, a woman of many diverse qualities, yet those of us who have had the pleasure and honour of knowing her, can attest to her often-extreme modesty.

Ms. Mohamed who herself said that her more than five-hundred-page biography of Mrs. Jagan, is not an exhaustive account of her very eventful life, yet she managed to capture a considerable amount of the many attributes of this extra-ordinary woman.

From a very young age J.J, displayed independent and, even in that time rebellious tendencies. She loved sports and was a very strong swimmer. She was adventurous and wanted to explore the unknown. Perhaps that is why she learned to fly planes and did some solo flying. She was never afraid of investigating the unknown.

Her strong character was moulded by her early experience as a Jewish girl growing up in the United States where antisemitism was pretty high. Therefore, she experienced discrimination at an early age. This must have been one of the factors that forged her anti-racist views.

The way those types of discriminations impacted her were totally different how similar situations impacted most other people who experienced such behaviour. Many people who experienced racial or national discrimination became racists themselves, they became bitter and often led them to act in similar ways to those who had offended them. The racism many experienced transformed them into racist themselves.

That did not happen to J.J, indeed it made her hate all forms of discrimination by race, religion and creed. It fueled her sense of fair play and her deep belief in the equality of all human beings. It helped to make her the champion she became, of the oppressed, the downtrodden and the exploited. Those characteristics were already strong with her even before she got into contact with Marxism, the ideology of the working class.

When she arrived in British Guiana in December of 1943, the social structure of the society was akin to what was happening in Southern African, even if not as acute. At the top of the society were the whites, mainly British, Scottish, etc, below that were the Portuguese, who in Guyana are not always regarded as white, and the Mulatos, a mixture of European and African. At the bottom were the African (Blacks), the Indians, Amerindians and the Douglas (African and Indian Mix race).

The colonialists behaviour and their propoganda had created a mentality in which whites would be regarded as superior to the coloured population. Mrs. Jagan could have easily gravitated to that club and enjoy the privileges of that upper class society. That however, held no attraction to her. Indeed, she immediately rebelled against it.

The very fact that she chose to live and work among the working people was one of the first blows she delivered to the colour structure in the society. This was very pronounced when she along with her husband Dr. Cheddi Jagan, Ashton Chase and Joselyn Hubbard launched their struggle in the political arena. That act was a blow to the racist ideology of the coloured masters.

She was a leader by example, she led from the front. She was in all the marches organised by labour fighting to improve living and working conditions, she was at the front line in all the activities in demanding independence and for the changes that would help the poor immediately.

She worked to organise some of the workers most difficult to bring together, eg, the domestic workers, workers in bakeries and other smaller enterprises, yet she managed to bring them together and led them to improve their circumstances.

She was a pioneer in many things. The first woman to hold public offices among many other posts.

Ms. Mohamed also cast her as a kind of feminist. While it is true that Janet Jagan has probably done the most in getting women to involve themselves in the political and economic life and struggles in Guyana, she was not a feminist as we know feminists today.

Her main objective was national and social liberation of the working class and farmer. She knew that involving working women in political arena was extremely important in bringing victories to the class as a whole. For that reason, she did a lot in organising them in the party, the PPP and the unions.

She was a very able administrator. Much was said about her role in the PPP as an organiser. However, as the Minister of Labour, Health and Housing in the 1957 to 1961 PPP government, she displayed her talent as manager par excellence. She was a talented administrator. The PPP benefited greatly from that talent of her's.

It was under her leadership that health services began reaching every village on the coast and in the furthest parts of the interior. The Georgetown hospital was expanded and became the largest in the Caribbean. Malaria, which was killing many people was eliminated under her watch. A widespread vaccination program began against polio and other diseases.

It was as Minister of Health that she took over the golf course in Georgetown and turned it into our National Park for the people of the city to have somewhere to relax. The golf-course was sent to Lusignan where it still is today.

Her achievements in the sphere of labour are stella. She piloted the bill that made May Day a public holiday – A Workers Holiday. She protected unorganised workers ensuring that they had holidays with pay and other benefits.

In her, trade unions had a real friend. In this period workers gains were substantial, including Workers Compensation Legislation which was one of the landmark legislations in that period.

In Housing, she led the way. The first set of mass house buildings in our country began under her tireless leadership. Many of the houses and housing schemes are still standing as a living monument to her hard work and great achievements.

Ms. Mohamed was able to capture a lot of her personal traits as well. She had a heart of gold. She was generous and selfless in dealing with the underprivileged and her own comrades. She contributed generously to every good cause. Her strength could be seen in how she responded to great problems.

She bore adversity with a great staunchness. This she had to do in the latter part of her days.

When her husband, Cheddi Jagan passed away, it was Janet who consoled the nation and held us all close to her heart. Her poise in public helped to assure a grieving nation that everything would have been alright!

In the aftermath of the 1997 elections when the PNC, unleashed violence and a display of lude-ness Mrs. Jagan again faced it head on. No doubt it must have been

painful for her, but few ever knew that. Here again her heart led her to make compromises that was beneficial to our society.

It is apposite to recall here that she signed the Herdmanson Accord in which the PPP was deprived of two years of their term of office.

Many of the PPP leaders were not happy with this and expressed their views at a meeting of the PPP's Central Committee.

Mrs. Jagan reminded her colleagues that she lived through the 1960s and she saw how destructive the PNC's policy can harm people, not only physically but the hatred that their racism could generate. She said then, I never want to see that happen to Guyana again. That period showed her deep humanity and her love for our country, which she put in front of everything else.

Janet Jagan was loved by the working people of our country, despite what the minority in the opposition tried to do. This was noted in the fact that the votes which the PPP won at the 1957 elections were the biggest in the history of the PPP.

That tells the great esteem in which she was and is held in our society.

This book is worth reading and each Guyanese should have a prominent place in their libraries to celebrate one of our greatest heroes, Janet Jagan!