

JANET JAGAN: ENCOUNTERS I

by Dale A. Bismauth

It had to be 1953, some time between Phagwah and the General Election, that Dr Cheddi Jagan and Mrs Janet Jagan, along with the colleagues of the PPP, visited my paternal grand-father's house, at Better Success.

After Pahgwah, because the almanac which featured the Indian cricket team that had toured England in 1952, and which had been pasted on the wall that was newly papered for Christmas that year, had been stained with beer. It was a matter of great pain for me that the faces of Hazare, Ramchand, Mankad, Pankraj Roy, and the rest had been desecrated with the red stuff.

Before the General Election of June 1953, because it was the campaign leading up to that event that brought the Jagans to the Essequibo Coast, and, eventually, to Better Success. I have a distinct memory of Ashton Chase in that party.

Mrs Jagan had spoken the night before at the open-air, gas-lamp-lit meeting, in front of Seegolam's grocery store. Unlike Pandit Misir, the candidate for our constituency, — lanky, straight black hair neatly slicked down with a puff in front, pencil-thin moustache, jacket-and-red-tie — who sounded nervous and tentative, Mrs Jagan was forceful and articulate. Words like "independence," "colonial masters," "adult suffrage," "jus-

tice" and "freedom," dominated her speech; so, too, did reminders to the audience to vote for the cup. "Dat homan can talk," my uncle observed.

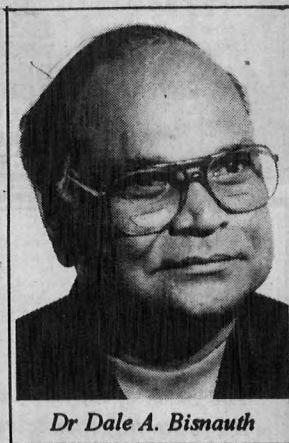
People cheered lustily. So did I. Not that I understood half of what was said. But what I did not understand, I felt. It was heady stuff that appealed to me emotionally to become involved; in what? I was not remotely sure.

Next day, the Jagans and their party came to my grand-father's house for a meeting with folks from the village. It was just after ten in the morning. Kass bus, "The Phantom," which was said to pass through Success en route for Adventure, at ten, had just passed.

For the adults who had gathered for the meeting, it was a momentous occasion. They celebrated. It was not long before the beverage appropriate for celebrations made its appearance. Dr Jagan drank water only. The talk was about politics, the party and the up-coming election. Only men participated in that conversation. It was held in the living-room or, at least, what passed for a living room.

On the verandah, Mrs Jagan chatted with the women-folk. She was quite a contrast to the women. Nicely dressed in blouse and skirt (I cannot remember the colours), strangely-coloured hair caught in a pony-tail, glasses, legs crossed at the knees, confident, shod. The women wore

addresses, the older ones with rumaals or head-kerchiefs on their heads, everybody barefooted and, at first, tongue-tied. Eventually, she got them to talk — mainly about them-



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selves and their children.

For me, it was a time of mixed emotions — part shame, part pride, and wholly conflict-ridden. I could only think of the wattle-and-daub and partly wooden troolie-thatched affair, that was Pa's house, with not enough seats for everyone and not enough things to drink or eat out of. "Damn! Damn!" I said under my breath, over and over again, wishing that the house was worthy of its visitors.

My grandfather, who, in his inebriated moments, spoke of me as some scholastic worthy in the making, (In his sober moments he did not speak of me at all), presented me to the Jagans with great exaggeration as to my potential.

He shook hands and asked me about school, as adults are wont to do with youngsters whom they feel are not quite up to other subjects. She leaned over and said, "Hello there! I hear you're bright." All I would do was to mumble something incoherently and wish furiously that Pa had warned us so that I could, at least, have put on shoes. Suddenly, my feet felt huge and prominent, and I uttered a prayer that she would not notice that my shirt was missing two buttons.

That was 1953. By that time, even in Better Success, Cheddi and Janet Jagan were household names. Men, well into their cups, argued over them. The few who spoke against them declared roundly that they were communists. Nobody knew what communism was, or who communists were.

For all his illiteracy in English and, consequently inability to read the *Daily Chronicle*, Pa was very knowledgeable about the Jagans. He spoke of the Enmore Martyrs and of Cheddi Jagan's vow that their death would not be in vain; of the formation of the Political Affairs Committee and of Mrs Jagan's role and function in that organisation.

Whatever the source of his information, he knew of the Women's Political and Economic Organisation (WPEO) which was formed in 1946, with Janet Jagan and Winifred

Gaskin at the helm. The aim of the WPEO was to encourage women to take an active interest in local and international affairs, and to become involved in working for social and political change. As Pa spoke of the WPEO, I remembered Mrs Jagan's encounter with the women of the village in 1953. Could their awareness be raised? I wondered.

Georgetown was a remote place to me as it was to my grand-father. So was the City Hall. But he knew of the WPEO's meeting at City Hall to call attention to the woeful conditions under which people were living in Wortmanville. He knew as well of the strike at Mackenzie in April—June 1947 in which Janet Jagan and her colleagues raised financial and other support for the workers on strike. He spoke of Janet Jagan's association with Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow of the British Guiana Labour Union, in their attempt to organise domestic workers.

Until 1953, Pa could not vote. My maternal grand-father, a decent, sedate, upright man did; he was literate in English and propertied and, as such, was qualified to vote. Whether he voted for C.V. Wight or Deeroop Maraj in previous elections, he did not say. To my paternal grand-father, it was a matter of some bitterness that he was disqualified to vote — until 1953.

Because of that, he had a

special appreciation for Mrs Jagan's struggle for the right of women to vote in municipal elections. Mrs Jagan herself made history when she became the first woman to be elected to the Georgetown Town Council in 1950, or, as Pa dated it, three years after India became independent.

My grandfather did not know what was the result of the fight to gain women the right to vote in municipal elections. But he regarded that struggle as important in winning for all Guianese of age the right to vote in the 1953 Election — the first under universal adult suffrage, whatever people's literacy and property qualifications. He linked Janet Jagan's name to that struggle.

Pa knew of Janet Jagan's leadership in the campaign on behalf of female civil servants under the slogan: Equal Pay for Equal Work, and of her stance on the issue of Women's Reproductive Health and related Rights. But he lauded her most for her role in the fight for Universal Adult Suffrage.

Needless to say, when, in 1953, Janet Jagan, Jessie Burnham and Jane Phillips-Gay, all Js and all PPP, were elected to the legislature, he was ecstatic. He went on a three-day drinking binge to celebrate. The only other time he did that, was when I, his eldest grandson, was born. **Peace!**