

Focus

Janet Jagan's finer steel will grow

By Ramabai Espinet

Meeting Janet Jagan is an exhilarating, warm, interesting and humbling experience—all at the same time. A few months ago this privilege was mine.

I visited her at her office in Freedom House, Georgetown, Guyana. Her ready laughter is what I remember keenly. That, and her vigorous and informed discussion of Caribbean literature, global feminism, Phyllis Allfrey's politics, grassroots women's issues, the importance of media, the silencing of voices of protest... the abnegation of self for a cause that she believes in.

Here is a citizen of the world in the vanguard of a fight for human values, bringing to bear the educational and other entitlements of her background as well as her own humane beliefs in entitlement for all, to a portion of South America largely neglected by civil libertarians in the Caribbean and world communities for over 30 years.

Her self-appointed task over this period of time was to fight alongside her husband, Cheddi Jagan, for the political will of the people of Guyana to prevail as it does in most other "democratic" countries of the Western hemisphere.

Born to privilege in Chicago, Janet Rosenberg made a home and a family in a Guyanese Indian community and immersed herself in a life of political activism.

In a Caribbean archipelago stratified to the bone by race and class divisions this could hardly have been easy.

On the one hand there would have been adulation by poor neglected folk who, living out the legacy of colonialism, could not help but worship her as a Lady Bountiful in their midst.

On the other hand, there would have been the vigorous anti-colonial agenda, driven by a black nationalist rhetoric and infused with a justifiable pride in their once-despised skin colour and features, which would see her as anathema to the cause of sovereignty from within the region.

Who is this gentle, humorous woman with the fine lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth, her smile betraying at once a lively and direct interest in people and things, malgre tout...

On the morning of October 5 in Georgetown, amidst rumours of unspeakable dangers to party members at Freedom House, it was Janet who stayed with the staff in a situation of near-siege while other key people were whisked off to safety. "The Iron Lady" — the name she earned as a result of her courageous stand.

On an interview on Guyanese television after the results of the election were known, Janet was asked: "What social role will you play as President's wife?"

Her reply speaks to the years of political commitment and unflinching sacrifice in the service of human values:

"For... my whole life... my whole adult life I have been a political activist and a journalist. When you say social and entertainment and all that — it's all behind me — I couldn't manage my political life and a big social life.

"So I never had much of a social life. But if you speak of social in terms of helping people, helping children get better nutrition and better health care, and helping mothers enjoy a better nutritional condition and get better care at the time of delivery — at that social level — yes, that's part of my life.

"And that's the motivation I have had to spend 40-odd years in politics. My motivation is to relieve misery and let people get ahead and enjoy their lives because life should be enjoyable; it shouldn't be a torment or shouldn't be an everyday punishment because of water or whatever it is.

"People must be able to have the basic necessities of life to be able to enjoy life."

In 1946 when the Political Affairs Committee (PAC) was formed, Janet Jagan was a founding member along with Cheddi Jagan, Ashton Chase and Jocelyn Hubbard. She was

also the editor of the PAC Bulletin.

The People's Progressive Party (PPP) was formed in 1950 out of the PAC initiative. Janet again functioned as the editor of its organ, *Thunder*.

In addition to her numerous other activities, especially those dedicated to improving the conditions of poor rural women, she is at present editor of the *Mirror* newspaper as well as one of its key journalists.

During her long years of political activism Janet Jagan, along with other members of the PPP, endured great hardship and insecurity.

Family life was disrupted by constant upheaval, and on occasion, imprisonment of either of the Jagans.

In the television interview she reminisces about how she would be harassed by police as she drove her son to school. His nervousness at the police car trailing them would no doubt have been aggravated by an actual memory of her imprisonment.

Her account of this imprisonment is as follows:

"In 1957 many things happened and our party entered into a campaign of civil disobedience. You weren't allowed to hold meetings. We were accused of holding illegal meetings, having subversive literature etc. I was before the courts and was found guilty on all four charges. I was given a fine or imprisonment. But our policy was that we didn't pay fines; we went to prison.

So I went to prison. What was interesting was that Dr. Jagan had gone to prison about six months before. The day he came out I went in — we didn't even see each other.

"So I spent altogether — with remission and all that — 5 months in jail. First I was in Georgetown jail and then I was moved over to New Amsterdam jail."

A friend recalls the event: "Though she was always slender, she came out of jail a mere wisp of herself. She was pale and thin and her skin was blotched. She had been subjected to the same harsh conditions and poor food as any other inmate."

Janet had made stuffed dolls in jail and also kept a prison diary. When she came out she was not bitter. Jail was the consequence of her political activity, that was all. She went about her work as usual.

Janet Jagan, *nee* Rosenberg, was born in Chicago, Illinois, on October 20, 1920. She was educated at the University of Detroit, Wayne State University, Michigan State College and the Cook County School of Nursing.

In 1943 she married Cheddi Jagan and returned to Guyana with him that same year. She has planted her roots firmly in Guyana's soil, renouncing her American citizenship in the process. Is she important to Guyana? Has she worked for change?

The record of 40-odd years speaks for itself. She moves now into a new phase of political action where the power to effect change can take a more direct path.

Janet Jagan has proved her mettle as a fighter, and as an enduring model of support and inspiration for others in the battle for social justice beyond the shores of Guyana.

In the end those in the vanguard of resistance against the forces of injustice and inequitable distribution can recognize no barriers of race, class or colour — all accidents of birth over which we have no control.

What matters is action for change. It especially matters where risks are high (including risks to one's children) and rewards lean.

Janet Jagan's indomitable spirit has been forged in the crucible of struggle. In the words of a sister Guyanese woman and poet, Mahadai Das, may "her finer steel" continue to grow from strength to strength as she undertakes the new tasks which lie ahead.