

WHY THE CONTINUED REVISIONIST DISTORTIONS AGAINST THE JAGANS

Any serious discussion on the merits, demerits and consequences resultant from the political roles of the Jagans must commence with the balance of class forces in the Colony in the early 20th century.

(As in Walter Rodney, A History of the Guyanese Working People).

The transition to Independence fraught with the problematic of urban-rural differentia; and expressed by the at times retreat from the goals of self-determination by the middle class, must also be viewed as significant at the level of mobilizing all the genuinely progressive forces for Independence based on national unity.

As stated by Jagan himself in his West on Trial, the struggle for a united political and socialist sovereignty was uneven and determined by the diktat of the Colonial Office in London.

What emerged subsequent to the victory of the People's Progressive Party (PPP) in 1953 was the realisation that decolonization would not be supported by imperialism as this posed an existential threat to vested interests in the Eastern Caribbean, particularly in Jamaica and Trinidad.

The failure of the West Indian federation (James, CLR and Munroe T.) could be regarded as the most critical moment in the 1950s history of the English-speaking Caribbean.

Whatever could be surmised of the West Indian nation extolling achievements in diverse fields (e.g. cricket, academia – Eric Williams and Sir Arthur Lewis as well as Norman Manley), was paralleled by the struggles of the working people above all at the leadership level (e.g. Cipriani, Buzz Butler, H.N. Critchlow and importantly the Jagans).

Class hostility was compounded by ethnic insecurities and served as a leverage against Dr. Jagan and his lifelong partner Janet Jagan.

In this context Barry L. Sukhram's Divide and Conquer (Hansib) is an excellent and in-depth researched documentation that demystifies the material as well as the supra-structural 'asymmetry' of local and external factors that formulated as dynamic in the 1950s and 1960s Cold war campaign against Cheddi and Janet Jagan.

Despite the passage in time including the irresistible dedication and moral fortitude of the slain Marxist revolutionary Walter Rodney, Sukhram's research completes the Dialectic and empowers the socialisation for Democracy and Peace.

Janet Jagan the PPP and Institutional Memory

Notes from the Marxist Revolutionary Perspective

1. It is impossible to recount, to relate to the history of modern political Guyana without substantiating, recognising and just as important initiating the kind of criticism 'JJ' herself often set in a formalist polemic.

- Value Utilitarianism and Mass Mobilisation

'JJ' was adept in recognising the values of print/electronic messaging in the era before social media and also within the sphere-of-interests dynamic as this comprised a reality internal to the Colony during the height of the Cold War (i.e., subsequent to US President Harry Truman's Fulton speech in 1947).

The following could be cited as part of that historical era.

- Public notices and official proclamations that had become common place during the latter part of the 19th century- how these were viewed by the working class.
- Constraints imposed on sectors who were illiterate, could not comprehend the significance e.g., of the <estate notice board> and thereby excluded from meaningful participation in events directly affecting their immediate interests.
- 'JJ' utilised her capacity to articulate issues that were complex and translated or reformulated the main points to those forces whose accommodation she sought.
(See for instance the description made of the PAC Bulletin by one Vincent Roth, who in attacking the precursor to the PPP termed the organ as one aiming to "Push All Communism"-cf., West on Trial C Jagan; p.104).
Subsequently, and as a response to the suspension of the 1953 PPP administration/Constitution, the Jamaican socialist Richard Hart joined with the Jagans to upgrade the PPP's media influence and PR as social traits.
Hart served as co-editor to the party's news organ Mirror in tandem with Janet Jagan.

2. Amongst the early pamphlets and leaflets that would have been circulated by the PAC after the division of labour and class struggles converged, were those carried on picket-lines such as "Fight for Freedom"/ "Who owns the Press"/ "Is Imperialism Dead"/ "Bitter Sugar" and scores of others (B. H. Benn, 'Legacies of Chedi Jagan', ed., Caribbean Labor & Politics, Perry Mars and A. Young, p.11)

*These public manifestations were new to the Guianese People and almost certainly have been influenced by the Jagans based on their experiences of American Left Wing and revolutionary socialist anti-racist agitation and social protests (see James R Cannon-The Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928, Brian D Palmer. Palmer, a Canadian historian is a winner of the Wallace K. Ferguson Prize of the Canadian Historical Association).
-See New Left Review, Jan/Feb 2011, No. 67, p. 144 Box A, www.combinedacademic.co.uk.*

Political Education to Build a Genuine Progressive Movement

In his analyses of both the PAC and the PPP the late Ashton Chase S.C, (who was a founder member of both organisations), categorically observed that the PPP was not a Communist institution but more so, a group of trade union activists and <seniors> who had a shared anti-colonialist set of beliefs (see for an insight itself academic, the dated <Foreword> of A History of Trade Unionism in Guyana 1900-1961).

“Above all, we need to remember that the system of indentured labour for the recruitment of the Indian majority of the Guyanese population persisted well into our own century, that it conferred on a preponderance of the population of employees a status little different from serfdom in the name of John Ball, that the machinery of colonial government exercised the prerogative of enforcing the legal restrictions it imposed in the interests of Allen corporations and that their workers had negligible opportunities for participating in government till well after the Second World War”.

Lancelot Hogben, 1964

Industrial and Political Rights vs Franchise Voting Rights and the Process leading to Adult Universal Suffrage (Eligible 21 years and over) served as a Primary Agenda Demand.

Hogben, a Welsh scientist was the first University of Guyana head (? Chancellor) and few would seriously question his integrity. However, he also noted in connection with the Communist /Stalinist scare viz the Jagans and others;

“If therefore such epithets as proletarian and formulae such as the Marxist definition of the State have a flavour no longer topical to a reader from Denmark or Detroit, they do appropriately describe both a situation which existed within the lifetime of now living leaders in the struggle for Guyanese Independence, and a state of abject poverty from which self-government has not as yet the so lately enfranchised working people...” (p8).

Ashton Chase proceeds further in debunking the reactionary slanders vilifying the PPP in his publication “133 Days...”, where he discusses political directives, goals and governance in its historical context of Cold War rivalry and the Pluralist dispensation.

At this level it should be recalled that the **Balram Singh Affair** could be analysed in the broader landscape of radical particularism, itself compromised and emerging as an alternative to the PPP and its Constitution as a Working-class institution.

-See essay Balram Singh Rai of Guyana, Baytoram Ramharack, Journal of Indo Caribbean Research Vol 5 No 1/p, 90, for articles and publications of Rai, including Dharma and Sri Rama, Karma, Justice and Reincarnation.

During another Janet Jagan commemoration last year, or it could have been the October 5 Restoration of Democracy activity, mention was made or an analogy drawn between the roles of ‘revolutionary socialist’ and ‘scientific socialist’ in politics.

Janet was considered as a ‘revolutionary’ ideologue whilst Cheddi Jagan was alluded to as a ‘scientific socialist’.

Since then, there have been a series of ultra, or to be more precise illiberal anti-communist documentation levelled against both Janet and Cheddi Jagan.

(See for one such narrative the position formulated by Baytoram Rambarack in Stabroek News, 22/9/2024).

Orthodox political science would categorize such an academic treatise as a revisionist caper sustained by the egoism of a perceived racial capitalism where intellectual niches crop up however sporadically, for the branding of a political leader whose entire life was devoted to the struggle to abolish Oppression in all its forms.

(See The Thinker Vol 3/July-December, 2020; article, Janet Jagan- ‘A Pioneer and Revolutionary’, Donald Ramotar, former president of the Republic, pp1-5).

3. For the present purposes it would be in keeping with the context of a public discussion on a specific occasion-a book launch by another academic-Patricia Mohamed, whose efforts set a qualitatively different critique than those of Baytoram, Seecharan et al)-to refer these empirical points would be in keeping with the topic:

- Janet Jagan emerged from a major capitalist centre of Chicago as a young student nurse who would have eventually become a qualified surgical/medical nurse had she not become married to Cheddi Jagan.
- Unlike other women leaders in the English-speaking Caribbean ‘JJ’ was more likely than not to have read the works of James Cannon, the iconic industrial trade union leader of the 1920s/30s.

This 'labor' induction was complemented by her deep interest in Art and culture such as this would have been accessible in Chicago's galleries and museums.

- JJ's early involvement with female workers leading to the formation of the WEPO must have reflected an earlier experience with Indian workers both male and female; but who were unorganized or misrepresented by the "company union" of the MPCA.
- Not only was she the first populist/radical workers leader to be so recognized (Ramotar 2020, 02), but she coalesced with another white woman Frances Stafford, Winifred Gaskin and James Phillips-Gay to breach the *cordon sanitaire* that held female labour in virtual bondage in Colonial Guyana,
- The formation of the PAC that coincided with that of the WPO in 1946/7 in practical terms could only have signified that JJ's innate? administrative capacity was itself a form of empowerment for the nascent mass political party of the working class.
(See A History of Trade Unionism in Guyana 1900-1961, p 152 for a slant on JJ's contribution to the resistance of the Enmore Workers leading to the appointment of the Venn Commission).

4. What emerges as evidence based are the processes of cyclic/seasonal class struggle of the working class in field and factory. The leading role of proletarians such as Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow, J Hubbard as well as Ashton Chase and Dr Jagan, always retained that essential gender balance-JJ's vanguard engagement an equal amongst her peers.

From a Marxist perspective it is also a truism to observe that the formation of the People's Progressive Party (PPP) in 1950, catapulted to the fore a relatively young and inexperienced group of people's leaders whose organizing acumen evolved almost exclusively around the courage and audacity of Dr Cheddi Jagan; who had won a seat in the Legislative Council during elections held in 1947.

Jagan's role in governance raised public awareness to a level unprecedented historically.

In the era of "Doctor" politics and given the hazards of colonial impoverishment it was perhaps inevitable that the national petit bourgeoisie would react in similar mode perhaps to counterparts in West Africa (Ghana) and ally with Pro imperialist forces (Jagan C., West on Trial as well as publication A History of the PPP, Janet Jagan, Georgetown, 1963; cf, Barry Sukhrum in his Divide Conquer, Hansib/Bibliography, p.109).

JJ's direct involvement (in the 1950s-1960s) with the Essequibo constituency could be regarded as one of the most crucial stages of her political career. Isack Basir at one time recounted how together with 2 or 3 companions 'JJ' would outreach to a string of coastal Essequibo villages; she travelled by motor speedboat to learn of the People's problems.

In this process of socialization, she would have been the first woman in Guyana to provide leadership in the fight for independence and the abolition of colonialism as a system.

In his multi-chapter publication Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA, John Prados reserves almost an entire chapter to B. G. in the 1950s and 1960s. He concludes that the imperialists were almost certain that the PPP would win the 1961 elections.

Mr. George McBundy urged the preparation of a <contingency plan> (pp. 17/18) to which the CIA responded ensuring that the Guyana issue would be discussed by the State Department.

Prados writes,

"Meanwhile in Georgetown after months of encouragement from CIA political action officers, Indian politician Balram Singh Rai decided to form a new party. For a month or so Rai appeared to do well. But then his efforts spluttered to a halt. An internal document from Jagan's PPP, which the CIA had acquired late in August, declared that the local elements hostile to the PPP had 'secured international assistance in their efforts to overthrow the government...'" (p.18)

Ramharack posits that Rai had assumed the posture as an <alternative Indian leaders> to (both) the Jagans, and in praxis was opposed to the PPP's concept of serving the working class (See West on Trial, pp. 6,7, 64, 68). For an insight into this episode see interview with Janet Jagan in Stabroek News, 8.4. 1999 (Also, previously SN. 12 July, 1989, int. Desiree Wintz).

It is instructive to note that the Balram Rai/Cheddi/Janet Jagan affair ensued during a phase where the priority agenda item for Anglo/US colonial strategy was the overthrow of the PPP, to curtail the progressive reforms the PPP government has with great difficulties managed to achieve.

Both Janet and Cheddi Jagan were strong advocates of the **National Front Alliance** that popularised anticolonial liberation movements. These were models adhered to in political Latin America as well as in Asia with varying degrees of success. Paradoxically it was in Jamaica¹ that Jagan had sought to refurbish the collage for a united front based on all the oppressed, marginalised and impoverished based on international solidarity (See West on Trial pp105-106).

Within this framework the Balram Rai Affair marked a reversal on racial unity at both the electoral and village or country levels given the country's demographics as well as the hierarchal traits that tended to impede whatever gains

the working class and its allies could register even under the rigours of the colonial state system. (See archival correspondence HMSO/PPP collated by the late Dr Odeen Ishmael for a deeper understanding of the role that democratic centralism contributed to the political process in the pre-independence phase leading to the Lancaster House Coup).

To refocus on Janet Jagan's political praxis, it is necessary to appreciate that her popularity amongst the more advanced sectors would have soared beyond that of the so-called 'moderates', particularly subsequent to her imprisonment in the 1950s (See Anatomy of Resistance: Anticolonialism in Guyana, 1823-1966; Maurice St. Pierre).

As parentheses it would refurbish a conscious grasp of JJ's political role to acknowledge that she was more Guyanese than many if not the majority of the population in the post WWII paradigm. But she reserved her reactions to being a victim of antisemitism just to cite this as an abstract. She refused to allow herself to be categorised as a victim (Teixeira, Gail).

One can recall the trauma most people worldwide experienced during the frameup -trial and execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg during March-August 1951. Although she carried the Rosenberg (surname) there is no concrete linkage between Janet Jagan and the two America Communist party activists condemned for being agents of the Soviet Union. This would have been a period of heightened anxiety and stress and perhaps a scan of Professor Mohamed's publication may provide some relevant clues.

Former president Donald Ramotar has enlightened the progressive strata of youth cadreship, that she was an internationalist. This has been stated whilst illustrating the fact that 'JJ' was known for being supportive of young cadres.

It would perhaps fill some gaps to observe that she specifically denied being a card-carrying member, or inductee into the Communist Party i.e., the CPUSA). That has been recorded especially by ethnographers renown in the historical interpretation of events.

At the same time, it is also true that the experiences of socialists in America such as Beatrice and Sydney Webb, the militant Teamster Workers and other trade union stalwarts of the Depression decades² would have exercised a considerable influence on her idea formation, her vision for a better world.

'JJ' would at times defer in discussions about ideological 'variants' preferring to define situations "When there were in the revolutionary period...", or those comrades who failed to dismantle colonialism were not adequately prepared for a protracted and often bitter struggle".

She would have been strongly opposed to the brand of Socialism espoused by the Khmer Rouge, or Pol Pot/leng Sary tyranny. That kind of society could never be socialist. Despite all of these transitional contradictions Janet Jagan remained until the end of her life, a revolutionary socialist concerned with the interests of the People.

Lawrence Rodney

Notes

- ¹ A review of Daniel Guerin's The West Indies & their Future could assist in deciphering the Jagan/Jamaica connection and whatever linkages survived the failed Federation.
- ² See the interesting America's Road to Socialism by James P. Cannon 1975