

Janet Jagan Lived a frugal life, was never overwhelmed by the trappings of power

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Dear Editor

October 20 marks the centenary birth anniversary of Mrs. Janet Jagan, a trailblazer for full political and economic emancipation in Guyana. Her illustrious career in public service is capitulated by the many articles, commentaries, and documentaries produced in her honor. Her life-long contributions to public service continue to be celebrated as one who not only made major contributions to the advancement of the rights of ordinary people but also revolutionize established thinking with forward looking ideas that addressed practical real-life challenges.

Janet Jagan's political activism spanned some 66 years with 46 of those years as a member of parliament, a record for a woman in the Western Hemisphere that still stands tall. Besides that, Cde. Janet scored many firsts: among them, first woman parliamentarian, first woman minister, first woman Prime Minister and President in Guyana. She was the second woman head of state in Latin America preceded only by Eva Peron of Argentina who was not elected but inherited the position. When the idea of women empowerment was a distant dream in the minds of people, Cde Janet was one of those who dreamt that dream and worked towards its realization. It is therefore not surprising that UNESCO awarded her in 1997 the Gandhi Gold Medal for peace, democracy, and women rights for her sterling contribution. The reputable Time magazine, in honor of International Women's Day in March 2011 recognized Janet Jagan as "one of history's most rebellious women" as her work continued to resonate beyond the shores of Guyana.

Many revered the years Janet Jagan served as Minister of Health, Labour and Housing. Her strong gender activism brought her close to complex problems faced by women at the grassroots level. During her tenure as Minister, health, labour and housing conditions improved with better equipped hospitals, new health centers, wages and conditions for domestic workers along with new housing schemes. I read that the late Dr. Frank Williams would argue with even former President Burnham that Janet Jagan was the best Minister of Health he worked with during his tenure as Chief Medical Officer.

Janet Jagan earned her place in the political spectrum with her stellar contribution, commitment, courage, and honesty in public life. I had the distinct pleasure of listening to her on election night in 1973 on the radio discussions as she lambasted her opponents and exposed the blatant rigging of the general election and was ably supported by another brave woman the late Eleanor D'Silvia from the Liberator Party. It is along that tradition that the PPP remained steadfast in preventing another barefaced effort to rig the last general election this year.

Cde Janet was actively involved with literary and cultural life in Guyana. Martin Carter poems were published in Thunder while she was editor and she played a major role in publication of Carter's early collection, *The Hill of Fire Glows Red*. She edited the Thunder and Mirror newspaper until her demise. During the days of suppressed press freedom in the late 70's early 80's, she ensured publication of the weekly Mirror that provided vital information to the public, be it the Jonestown Massacre, Father Darke murder, Walter Rodney assassination, or the 90 percent boycott of the referendum to name a few as the desperate state media attempted clumsy cover ups. Later Cde Janet was an unremitting patron of the National Art Gallery at Castellani House.

In the course of her political journey Janet Jagan suffered many indignities such as imprisonment for civil disobedience, violent threat to her life, racism, misogyny and charter assassination but these did not deter her nor scared from her militant activism, always a strong voice for the under privilege and the disenfranchised. Despite being the victim of the most scandalous and malicious attack by the media she never filed a libel action and the same goes for her husband Dr. Cheddi Jagan as they relied on public opinion to defend their character.

Despite Cde Janet outstanding achievements she remained a simple, humble and honest character who was always willing to share her personal resource to help the needy. She was an amicable personality that never loved the limelight; she walked with the Queen but never lost the common touch. Cde Janet lived a frugal life and was never overwhelmed by the trappings of power nor higher office.

Yours truly,

Rajendra Rampersaud