

# **Land Reform - A Major Achievement of the People's Progressive Party**

by Janet Jagan

Land in every country is a vital issue. Despite all the successes in the industrialization that began about two centuries ago, and brought about an almost entire change in the lives of most of the world's population, agriculture including fisheries and animal husbandry, remains the basis of life-giving food. So, despite all the major advances made by science and technology, land remains one of the basic units of living worldwide. And farming, of course, has gained from all the technological and scientific advances.

In Guyana, we have been unusually lucky in our historical development. Because we were, in the final stages, colonized by the British, it proved advantageous in one respect. The British, unlike the Spanish and Portuguese colonizers in this hemisphere, never permanently settled here. British colonizers, at least 99%, always went home to Britain at the end of their stay in Guyana. Except for a very limited few, they did not put down their roots here. For this we can be thankful.

But in the rest of the continent the colonizers stayed and, in their powerful positions, provided themselves and their families with large land holdings. That is the basis of the alienation of most land throughout Latin America. Vast areas of land were given to those in power. To this day, this problem dominates the land issue in many countries of the hemisphere.

In our country, land, except for the large areas given to the sugar planters, absentee landowners and importers of sugar, most of Guyana's lands remained in the hands of the state. In the PPP's unique and innovative housing policies, many of these same lands have become house lots for the working people.

When the People's Progressive Party emerged in 1950, one of its chief planks was land reform. Most of the small farmers at that time were eking out a living on small plots of land, 3, 4, 5 and up to 10 acres. Many of these farmers rented their lands from larger, feudal-like, landowners. This was particularly relevant on the Essequibo Coast which I represented as a Legislator in 1953 and from 1957-61. A few large landowners (one, Deroop Maraj, became a leading member of the PNC later on) squeezed the small farmers and kept them literally in bondage by loans, high rentals and shop credit which they could never pay off. I remember being taken by these tenant farmers to the backlands where they showed me another form of exploitation, the landowner took the best lands for himself and rented them the back lands with poor or no drainage and irrigation.

At that period, these unscrupulous landowners dominated life on the Essequibo Coast. But our party fought relentlessly against this feudal system which made life a misery for the poor. One of the many things we did was pass the Security of Tenure for Rice Farmers Act which protected tenant farmers.

In the first Programme of the PPP published in 1950, under the heading "Free the Tenants from debt, Guarantee the land to the Tillers!", ways of protecting farmers from "improper" drainage and irrigation, distress and ruin were outlined. These included "to guarantee the farmers and tenants their inalienable right to possession of their lands, homes and their chattels" and included also means of preventing the accumulation of large land holdings in the hands of sugar companies, landlords and absentee owners. It stated that there should be guaranteed prices for farmers' produce and a demand for world prices for our agricultural exports.

The PPP when it was in office in the 50's and 60's began opening more land for small farmers, providing drainage and irrigation which changed the face of agriculture in Guyana, provided farmers with the tools to make a living and help in controlling pests, selling of produce, etc. For example in the Pomeroon we gave farmers tens of thousands of coconut plants.

I remember that the PPP set up the Guyana Marketing Corporation (GMC) in the 50's and 60's period. At Charity, then part of my constituency, I could observe farmers from the Pomeroon and elsewhere, coming to the GMC in their small boats with their produce, weighing and selling their goods, getting pay on the spot - I remember I had to fight the bureaucrats who said they could not pay on the spot, which would be very, very hard on the producers. But the farmers were poor and that on-the-spot pay was essential to buying up goods at Charity before the long haul in the river back to home.

I remember, too, when the GMC trucks would go through the working class areas of Georgetown selling fresh produce at lower prices, because the middle man was eliminated. Both producers and consumers benefited. But the PNC ended all that when they came into power. They smashed the GMC into nothingness.

The PPP in its 1979 Political Programme called for "1) comprehensive land reform aimed at ending rapacious landlordism 2) allotment of state lands on a fair and rational basis in accordance with the needs of farmers, giving preference to the landless and the land-poor 3) Encourage small and medium land holders to organize themselves into cooperatives."

Today, the feudal landowning problem no longer exists. Agriculture is doing well. Farmers are going into new crops, more selective and quality oriented and our export trade is accelerating.

In the context of land reform, we can also claim successes in the complicated and difficult task of restoring lands to our Amerindian population.

The PPP's most recent Manifesto, that of 2001, noted that the PPP/C had strengthened the mechanism for land distribution. It recorded that the conversion of leaseholds to freeholds has commenced with the average number of land leases issued per year giving farmers less than 200 in 1992-1993, to more than 2000 in 1993-2000.

The newly improved, high-tech Guyana Lands and Survey Commission (GLSC) just announced that last year it handed out 6,000 land titles and expects to do the same this year. For the first time in the nation's history, its vast land resources are at last properly recorded with a modern database and making use of satellite technology.

In a statement, GLSC said that by 2010, when it is fully developed, it will be able to ensure that land is made accessible to everyone, thus contributing to poverty alleviation and national development.

Land reform stands out as one of the great achievements of the People's Progressive Party which this year celebrates its 55th anniversary.