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Pathma - an icon of noble causes

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THE visitors are down to a trickle and a deepening quiet has descended upon house No 4 along Lorong Taman Pantai 6, the home of the late Datuk K. Pathmanaban.

A twisted road sign, accidentally battered by an impatient driver trying to squeeze his vehicle into a non-existent parking space, stands as a mute reminder of the day, six weeks ago, when hundreds of cars crowded this usually quiet neighbourhood of Taman Pantai in Kuala Lumpur.

Their occupants came from the length and breadth of the country to bid final farewell to a man they had all come to love, respect and honour in his 40 years of public life.

For the better part of two decades, the house had seen streams of visitors - colleagues, friends, fellow politicians, diplomats, plantation workers and relatives - come and go, at all hours of the morning and night.

Of those who came seeking help, not one of them would be turned away. Every one would be greeted, feted and promised prompt attention to their requests and problems.

To all who knew him, and to his electorate in Telok Kemang, Negri Sembilan, Kunjamboo Pathmanaban, born at 10.10am on June 10, 1937, was a shining beacon. At 1.01 on June 9, 2001 the light went out.

During the intervening 63 years, this second-born child in a family of six, rose from a humble plantation background to carve a niche for him and leave a lasting imprint on the fabric of Malaysian society.

Malaysia should have more people like Pathma, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad earlier this week when he opened the Malacca Manipal Medical College, an institution of which Pathma was part-owner and prime mover.

Overcoming the stiffling morass of his early circumstances, the young scholar excelled in his studies, won scholarships, and added a Harvard education to cap his academic accomplishments.

After his Bachelor's Degree, he was ready in 1960 to report to the Government for duty.

He was sent to the Ministry of Labour as a cadet civil servant.

Pathma was to spend most of his life in the Ministry of Labour (and Manpower).

He also served as Deputy Minister of Health for a considerable length of time.

Many things changed rapidly. In quick succession, Pathma, having made a name for himself as a promising civil servant, caught the eye of Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak and MIC President Tan Sri V. Manickavasagam.

They encouraged him to enter politics. He quit his comfortable civil service job, joined MIC and stood for elections. He won handsomely. That was in 1974.

And then there was to be no turning back.

For the next 25-odd years, he would have his political ups and personal downs. And vice-versa. But he took every twist in his career with equanimity and grace.

Throughout this period, particularly during trying times, some things would always remain true to him. His friends would never leave him, his principles would not desert him, his energy would not fail him.

It has been said of him that he possessed in abundance honesty, a strong

sense of loyalty and an endless capacity for hard work. He was kind-hearted, and dedicated to noble causes.

It has also been said of him that he could not say "no" to anyone who went to him for help. But that is not true. An inability to say No implies a weakness of character. The fact of the matter is he would not say `no'. He always wanted to help wherever he could. An unwillingness to say `no' shows strength in character.

He may not have been quite ahead of his time, but he surely was very much in step with it. He became a crusader, for the cause of estate workers. He became a champion of their rights.

For instance, he lamented in 1991 the fact that the number of clinics and hospitals in plantations continued to decline although public services were increasing as the country developed.

It was only therefore in the natural progression of things that he was later to be appointed to the Malaysian Human Rights Commission.

But some things would not change. He had no ostentatious tastes. In his house, his furniture and furnishing were sparse, but the design was functional. His living room was designed to accommodate groups of visitors, while the rest of the house was designed to afford some measure of privacy for his wife Prema and their three growing children.

The austerity of his house was a carry over of the austerity of his early days at the plantation.

His years at the Labour Ministry taught him, among others, of the virtues of the division of labour. So, to his wife fell the task of managing the household and to be the resident worrier.

Pathma had overflowing compassion for the poor. He worked tirelessly for so many charitable causes, including the National Kidney Foundation of which he was chairman.

When struck down by illness and himself was in need of kidney dialysis, a friend asked him to avail himself of the dialysis machine at the Kidney Foundation. He replied: "No, that is for poor people.".

Every encounter with Pathma was an engaging experience. A phone conversation or a face-to-face meeting would not be a short clinical affair. It would be an occasion for deep interaction.

He would debate, elucidate, bounce off ideas, encourage, share, empathise, but never criticise. No quick temper, no harsh words, no rancour. His was always the voice of reason. Invariably the conversation would last longer than you had budgeted for. But you were grateful.

No 4, Lorong Taman Pantai 6 continues to be the home of his mother, Madam Rogini, and his children Prasanth and Pramogh. His eldest son Praveen also stays there whenever he returns with his family from United Kingdom where he now lives.

The words of Katharine Graham, the late proprietor of the Washington Post, sum up the life of Datuk Pathma.

She said: "I became absorbed by the challenge. I was trying to learn all the time. And I loved what I was doing."

Yes, Pathma loved what he was doing. And he loved the people he was doing it for.

Now friends of Pathma are planning to carry on from where Pathma left off.