

# Illustrious son of Sungai Siput

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Good-hearted, unpretentious, scrupulous and honest. This aptly describes Tun V.T. Sambanthan who led Indians in the fight for an independent Malaya. JASPAL SINGH looks at the life of the man who endeared himself to all

THE nation mourned when Tun V.T. Sambanthan died three weeks short of his 60th birthday on May 18, 1979.

The leader of the Indians had not only made a mark on the community, he had also earned a place for himself in the hearts of the other races.

P. Arunasalam, Sambanthan's long-time friend and biographer, said the leader towered over with not only his height but also his personality. "Whenever he met people, he'd always put his arm round the other person's shoulders and pull him in a tight sideways hug.

"He was always jovial even when his health was failing. In fact, he loved inviting friends and relatives for breakfast, lunch and even dinner. The doors to his house and heart were always open to all," the 70-year-old reminisced.

He said the former MIC president even sold about half of his father's 240ha rubber estate to help the Indian community as well as to provide financial strength to the party coffers.

Born on June 16, 1919, Sambanthan was the second child of M.S. Veerasamy, a pioneer rubber estate owner in Sungai Siput.

His siblings were V.M. Sundram, V. Krishnan and V. Saraswathy.

Sambanthan gained his bachelor's degree from the



Malaysiaku Gemilang

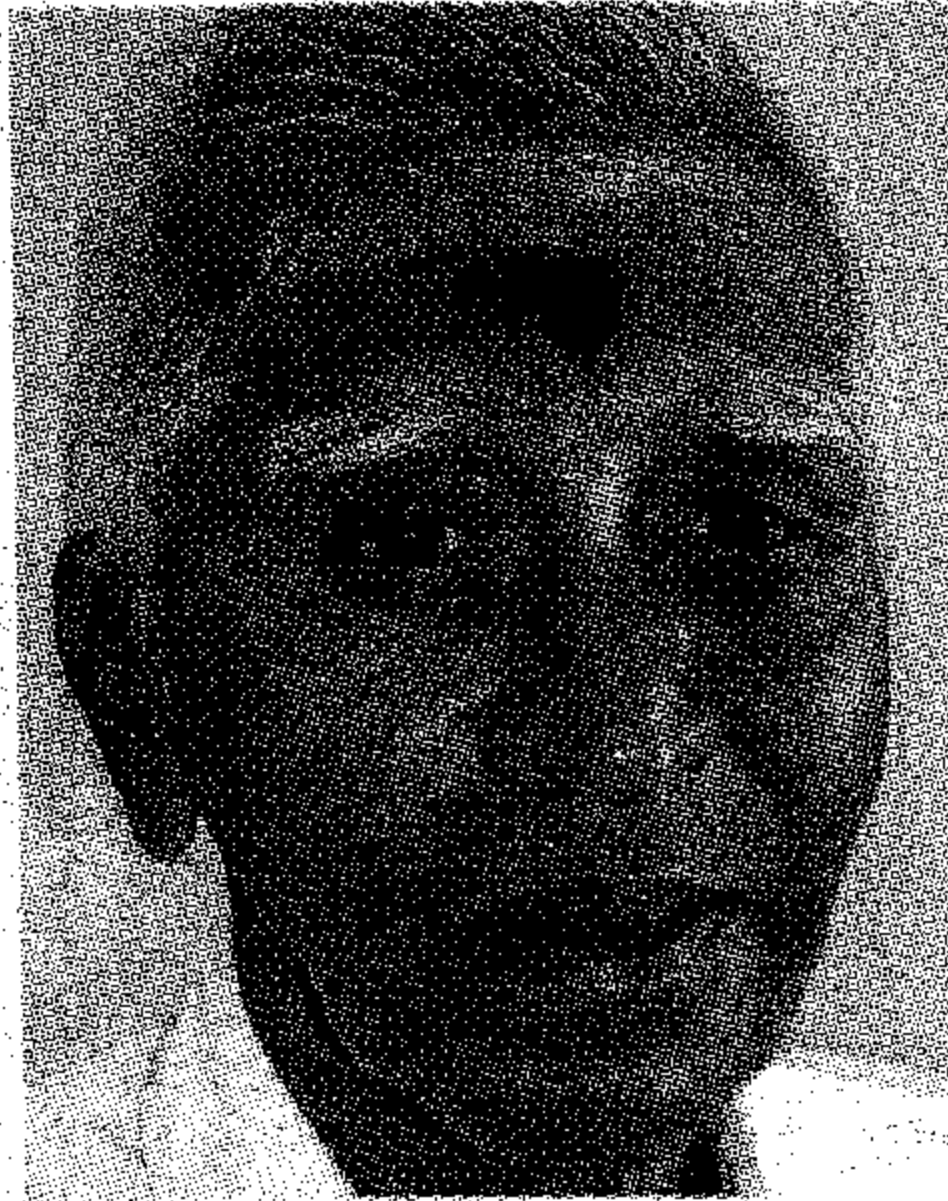
Annamalai University in south India during which time he was involved with Congress activities and learnt the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence which became the thrust of his personal as well as political life.

Keenly interested in education, Sambanthan involved himself in organising modern Tamil schools in Malaya upon returning from India.

In fact, with the intention of creating a more cohesive and unified Indian community, the soft-spoken politician organised the Perak United Indian Council in 1953, the same year he was elected Perak MIC chairman.

However, it was not merely the way he reached out to the Indian mass that helped him secure the MIC presidency but also his close connection to the influential members of the Congress.

According to Arunasalam, the event that helped catapult Sambanthan to the forefront of MIC politics was a visit by Sri Mathi Vijayaletchumi Pandit,



P. Arunasalam, an old friend of Tun V.T. Sambanthan

the younger sister of the then Indian prime minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

Sambanthan had befriended her when he was involved with Congress while studying at Annamalai University.

On his invitation, she visited Malaya in 1954, and despite the ongoing communist insurgency, visited Sungai Siput where she officially opened the Mahatma Gandhi Kalasalai school.

According to Arunasalam, the meeting between Sambanthan and Vijayaletchumi in 1954 helped push the former into the limelight and then on to the party president's position in 1955.

In the same year, he was elected member of the legislative council for Kinta Utara constituency. The consti-

ty was renamed in 1959 as the Sungai Siput seat.

As MIC president and one of the country's founding fathers, Sambanthan was also instrumental in the finalisation of the Merdeka Constitution in 1957 and the creation of Malaysia in 1963.

He also joined the delegation to Jakarta in 1966 to witness the signing of an agreement whereby diplomatic relations between Indonesia and Malaysia were normalised after the Confrontation episode.

Despite all this, Sambanthan is best remembered for founding the National Land Finance Co-operative Society (NLFCS) in 1960 with a view of providing "a positive answer to the fragmentation of estates that assumed alarming proportions resulting in tens of thousands of estate workers being thrown out of employment".

Arunasalam, a retired NLFCS field officer, said the initiative became a ray of light to thousands of Indian estate workers who were able to continue earning their living.

During his tenure in the Alliance and later the Barisan Nasional, Sambanthan was appointed minister of health in 1957 and then works, post and telecommunications in 1959.

He held the last post until December 1971.

He was then appointed minister of National Unity until Sept 4, 1974.

Sambanthan was not appointed to any cabinet position thereafter as he was not eligible anymore since the MIC had not chosen him to defend his Sungai Siput parliamentary seat in the general election of August 1974.

Instead, the seat was given to then MIC vice-president (Datuk Seri) S. Samy Vellu, who won the seat with a victory over the DAP's P. Pato.

Arunasalam, who has written an extensive biography and various articles on Sambanthan in Tamil, said Sambanthan was later appointed executive chairman of the National Unity Board.

He held the post until his death.

Arunasalam said this showed the respect which prime minister Tun Abdul Razak had for him.



Tun V.T. Sambanthan had the wellbeing of people of all races at heart.



The 105-year-old house where Tun V.T. Sambanthan was born.