

The tough negotiator

Tun V.T. Sambanthan stepped in to lead the Malayan Indian Congress at a crucial period in the party's development as the independence movement began to gather pace.

By JOSEPH M. FERNANDO
and UMMADEVI SUPPIAH

VEERASAMY Thirunyana Sambanthan, better known as Tun V.T. Sambanthan, was one of the leading Indian leaders who played a prominent role in the independence movement in Malaya. As president of the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) during this important period of transition, he worked closely with Alliance Party leader Tunku Abdul Rahman and they developed a close personal bond.

The entry of the MIC into the multi-communal Alliance in 1955 contributed greatly to enhancing the coalition's image as the main representative of the three main communities in Malaya.

MIC's Alliance membership provided additional electoral strength to the coalition, convinced the British of increasing evidence of inter-communal co-operation and, more importantly, allowed for more representative negotiations that led to the formulation of a new Constitution.

First Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman described Sambanthan as a "lovable character, gentle and very easy-going". Despite the apparent soft outward appearance, Sambanthan was a tough politician and negotiator.

He took over the mantle of the MIC during a period of turmoil in the party in 1955, barely months before the first federal elections, and over time strengthened the party and consolidated its position in the coalition.

He did not always please his members, but was able to gradually unite a party that had considerable internal splits.

In 1954, there were serious debates within the MIC as to whether the party should join the Umno-MCA Alliance that was emerging as the leading political movement in the country, following their successes in local elections.

The MIC had aligned itself with Datuk Onn Jaafar's Independence of Malaya Party and later Party Negara, and there was a rethink within the MIC leadership during this period.

According to Rajeswary Ampalavanar (author of *The Indian Minority and Political Change in Malaya 1954-1957*), the MIC leadership was quite eager to join the Alliance but there was some resistance within the party's broader membership.

They were willing to support the move if the party could secure some concessions from the Alliance on inter-communal issues, particularly on education.

Then MIC president K.L. Devaser came



Mutual respect: Sambanthan putting a garland on the Tunku on his arrival from Malacca where he had proclaimed the date of Independence in February 1956. Independence was in fact first proclaimed at Bandar Hilir, Malacca, on Feb 20, 1956. However, for logistical and administrative reasons as agreed to by Malaya and the British, it was decided that the official proclamation would only be made the following year. — Courtesy of National Archives

under heavy criticism from the Tamil media for not addressing the pressing issues facing the community. While he was quite outspoken, his influence was largely among the urban-based Indian elite and he lacked wider grassroots support.

Some in the party felt that there was a need for a leader with a stronger relationship with the party's grassroots. In March 1955, reports in the local daily *Tamil Murasu* urged Tamils to boycott the MIC.

Sambanthan, then a state MIC leader, emerged during this period as an alternative candidate for the party leadership. Going by historical records, he was literally coerced into taking up the presidency.

Another candidate, P.P. Narayanan, was approached by party leaders but turned down their invitation because he wanted to concentrate on union activities.

Sambanthan initially declined but following some pressure from the Tamil leaders agreed to take on the party leadership. He was duly elected the fifth president of the MIC in May 1955.

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Malayan interests effectively in London. It was also a personal gesture of his confidence in Tunku's leadership.

Sambanthan was criticised for this decision by his party officials. Nevertheless, when the final constitutional negotiations were held in London in May 1957, Sambanthan was very involved.

Personal transformation

Earlier, in 1956, Sambanthan led the MIC delegation in the negotiations between the Alliance parties in drawing up a memorandum to be presented to the Reid Commission.

Sambanthan was a pragmatic negotiator and worked hard to secure the interests of the Indian community, while at the same time being sensitive to the broader interests of the Alliance party's diverse membership.

He was at times criticised by his party members for conceding on certain issues, but Sambanthan was faced with the need to find a suitable balance to the various sectoral demands and sought to take a middle path in the negotiations. For taking such a position, he was praised by the Tunku.

The final constitutional negotiations in London in May 1957 also saw a personal transformation in Sambanthan. While in London for the constitutional talks, Tunku decided that Sambanthan needed new attire.

Sambanthan had caused some controversy when he wore a dhoti upon being elected into the Federal Legislative Council – a practice deemed taboo during the British period. But Sambanthan defended his choice, arguing: "It makes the average man feel happier." Even after the elections in 1955, when he was appointed Minister of Labour, his traditional Indian attire remained intact.

Thus when in London, Tunku decided that something must be done.

As the Tunku describes in his book *Looking Back*: "When walking with me in London, he was always trailing behind because he could not step out far enough to keep pace with me; or perhaps I walked faster on purpose. One day when we were out for a walk, I led him into Simpson's men's store in Piccadilly. On reaching there, I said: 'Come in; I want to choose a new suit', so he followed me inside."

> SEE NEXT PAGE

Prominent role in country's independence efforts

> FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

"I asked the tailor to fit Sambanthan with a good ready-made suit. He protested, but only briefly, accepting the inevitability, and came out a new man in a new suit – West-End tailored, new shirt, new tie, new shoes and socks."

The Tunku noted that after that incident, Sambanthan was not satisfied with just one suit and secretly went out to buy several more.

During the debate on the draft Constitution at the Federal Legislative Council on July 10, 1957, Sambanthan urged greater co-operation between the communities, reminding them that Malaya was a plural society.

He told the council: "We belong to a plural society, and we should always remember that in such a society we have to recognise that psy-

chology has its own place. It is not enough if one's own attitude towards a problem is good.

"It is necessary that he should see what reaction, what effect it would have on members of different communities."

Sambanthan urged the various communities to uphold their high traditions to ensure a harmonious future: "The traditions of Malaya are the highest traditions. We may be a young nation, but we have very high traditions, and they are: the traditions of brotherhood, of happy and peaceful living among each other. That we must always remember."

He ended his speech in the Legislative Council with a poem:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depths of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action;

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

Apart from ministerial duties, the Tunku often assigned important tasks to Sambanthan. He was a loyal member of Tunku's Cabinet in the post-independence period. In 1968, the Tunku sent Sambanthan to Fiji as an emissary of peace; the Chief Minister of Fiji

acknowledged Sambanthan's contribution in a letter to Tunku thanking him for the "great success" of the delegation "under the superb leadership of Tun Sambanthan".

There is still a need for a more holistic appraisal of Sambanthan's role in Malaysian politics, but there is very little doubt from historical evidence that he played a prominent role in the country's independence movement.

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