



Rise of a leader: Sambanthan (left) at an MIC meeting in 1955 just before taking over the party presidency from K.L. Devaser (seated far right).

Defender of Indian community

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V.T. SAMBANTHAN was born to a wealthy family on June 16, 1919, in Sungai Siput, Perak. His father, A. Veerasamy, came to Malaya in the 1890s, was a planter and owned several rubber plantations.

Sambanthan received his early education at Clifford High School in Kuala Kangsar. A keen sportsman, Sambanthan was an intelligent student who loved to chat and joke, said former Lord President Tun Mohamed Suffian.

Sambanthan continued his studies in economics at the highly respected University of Annamalai in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. His interest in politics is said to have been triggered while studying in India as he closely followed the rise of the Indian nationalist movement.

He even took part in some of the

protests led by the "Quit India" movement against the British and was injured in one instance.

He subscribed to the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence in achieving independence and was attracted to the political ideas of independence fighter Subash Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru who later became the first prime minister of independent India.

When his father died in 1942, Sambanthan was stuck in India as World War II raged. When the war ended, he returned to Malaya in 1946 and took over the management of the family business that included vast rubber plantations.

He took a keen interest in the welfare of the estate community, developing a close rapport with them. He was particularly con-

cerned with the rate of illiteracy among Indians in the estates and devoted much time and energy to introduce schooling.

In 1954, he built the Mahatma Gandhi Tamil School in Sungai Siput with some assistance from the Senior Inspector of Schools, a British official.

His efforts to raise the education level of the Indians drew the attention of the authorities and he was appointed a member of the Board of Councillors by the Perak State Education Department. Soon after, he headed the MIC in Perak.

With the MIC seemingly not making much headway, a group of MIC officials decided that the party needed a new leader. They met Sambanthan and urged him to take on the party leadership.