

Sambanthan – champion of the poor *The Sun - 19/7/2007.*

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HE was one of independent Malaya's founding fathers, and understood how essential racial harmony was in nation building.

Tun V.T. Sambanthan, the fifth MIC president from 1955 to 1973, was one of the signatories of the Merdeka Agreement on Aug 31, 1957.

Additionally, he was one of the country's pioneer cabinet ministers, beginning as Labour Minister (1955-57), followed by ministerial positions in the ministries of Health (1957-59), Works, Posts and Telecommunications (1959-71), and National Unity (1972-74).

"One of the challenges of the early Malayan government was getting

citizenship organised for the people," Sambanthan's widow, Toh Puan Uma Sambanthan, said.

A majority of the Indians in post-independent Malaya were poor, migrant plantation workers from the villages of Tamil Nadu, South India.

They neither understood the process and benefits of citizenship nor did they possess the resources to become citizens in the newly independent nation.

Because Sambanthan, as his father before him, had worked towards empowering migrant workers in their rubber estates in Sungai Siput, Perak, he understood too well the need to assist their integration into society at large, and to help them gain the political and civil rights of citizenship.

"The MIC would fill up citizenship

forms for these migrant workers and bring a Justice of Peace to the estates for mass swearing every weekend during the year when passing the Malay language was not yet mandatory for citizenship.

"Many of them would not have known how to fill up the forms. And we couldn't expect them to come to the city to look for a Justice of Peace," Uma told *theSun* at her home in Petaling Jaya.

She said even the urban Indians – the North Indian or Malayalee elite who had founded MIC in 1946 – had lost touch with the reality of the majority of the Indian community in the estates.

Sambanthan's challenge, as the sole Indian representative in the new cabinet and Parliament, was to make his colleagues aware that these workers

had contributed to the country, and that there was an urgent need to uplift them economically.

However, he did not believe in making loud demands for minority rights.

"Instead, he worked towards improving the workers' lot so that they could play their part as citizens of a free country. He believed that if a community fulfilled its duty to the nation, their rights would follow," Uma said.

"He also didn't want the community to be handicapped and to have to keep asking for assistance," she added.

Sambanthan, who passed away 28 years ago, was responsible for setting up the National Land Finance Cooperative Society (NLFC) in 1960 to

give Indian workers a chance to own land at a time when rubber estates were being fragmented and they were losing their jobs.

It was the first cooperative to provide a solution to a real social problem, and would later be a model for other national cooperatives.

Before he died, Sambanthan managed to acquire for the cooperative the building which had been the Shell Malaysia headquarters. He predicted in his presidential address at his last NLFC annual general assembly in 1978, that the five-storey building could eventually be converted into a high-rise building representing the growth of the poor estate worker's asset base. The building today stands 27 storeys high.

"It was a national cooperative and

the other races were allowed to buy shares in it, too," Uma said, remembering that during her husband's time, the Malays and Chinese owned about 9% of the cooperative.

She said Tunku Abdul Rahman, in his speech at the launch of the 1,200ha Bukit Sidim estate in Kulim that the NLFCS bought after only a year of existence, noted that it was only in a democracy such as Malaya's that such a venture was possible to assist the poor.

Bukit Sidim was the NLFCS's first purchase and was bought for RM3 million from its British owner without government support. By the time of Sambanthan's death, the cooperative had bought over more than 20 estates, totalling 12,000ha, and had a membership of 85,000 workers.

The May 13 clashes were another major challenge for the new government. Sambanthan chaired some of the committees under the National Operations Council that was set up to run the country in the midst of the riots until 1971.

"Even before he became national unity minister, he wanted to build bridges by maintaining each community's right to cultural expression, and doing everything to bring back each race's confidence so that the wounds would heal," Uma said.

Uma said Sambanthan believed that poverty eradication should benefit all the races.

"In his first speech as national unity minister, he defined poverty for all the races and underscored the need for

measures that were in proportion to what each community needed."

Of the early cabinet, Uma said: "They were building the nation. They weren't just working for the next general elections but it was a long-term vision for the country."

Their mission of nation building, she said, was driven by a recognition that racial harmony would provide a strong foundation for Malaysia.

It was this principle, she stressed, that helped build the nation in the first 10 years after independence.

Uma stands next to an image of a towering Sambanthan, one of independent Malaya's founding fathers.

