

## HISTORICAL PLACES AND PERSONALITIES

### SUNGAI SIPUT AND TUN V.T. SAMBANTHAN



# Illustrious son of Sungai Siput

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



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.





SUNGAI SIPUT has always had an MIC flavour to it.

Former MIC leader Tun V.T. Sambanthan came from the area while the current member of parliament for the constituency is party chief Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu.

Not surprising really as the area is essentially an agricultural centre where Indians have traditionally worked.

When the tin mining industry collapsed in the mid-1980s, many workers joined the growing oil palm sector.

Indeed, the visitor to Sungai Siput is greeted by plantations right from Ladang Dovenby, the entry point into Sungai Siput, to Karai, the exit point just before the old Iskandar bridge leading into Kuala Kangsar.

The eye is met by hectares upon hectares of oil palm and rubber.

The history of rubber estates in Sungai Siput is incomplete without mention of Sambanthan's father, M.S. Veerasamy.

Despite the substantial plantation presence in the areas, development in the tangible sense only came to Sungai Siput in the early 1990s.

The reason development took its time to arrive in this sub-district is because Sungai Siput was a communist hotspots for decades.

Thanks to its geographical link with the Korbu Range, a heavily forested area which joins several mountain ranges stretching into Thailand and which became the sanctuary for the leftist insurgents, the town was never considered safe.

In fact, it was in Sungai Siput 59 years ago that the communist guerillas from the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) shot dead three European planters which prompted the then British authority to declare the Emergency in 1948.

N. Subramaniam, a retired plantation worker, who was sent from Prai to work at the Pang Estate in Sungai Siput in January 1974, recalled experiences he had during that era.

He remembers the time he received a life bullet in an envelope for rallying estate workers to organise themselves with legitimate political parties instead of being cowed by the communists.

"The truth is that until the real threat of communist ended when the CPM laid down their arms and ended the struggle in 1989, the people of Sungai Siput had to grapple with the never-ending respect of being a target of communist guns," said the 9-year-old.

The special assistant to army Vellu said the Merdeka clock tower in the middle of

## Once a communist hotspot, now a thriving town



It was only in the last 20 years that Sungai Siput has seen development of infrastructure and public amenities.



See Kuan Poh



K. Paramasivam



N. Subramaniam

town was built in 1957 to commemorate the birth of independent Malaya.

"It is a monument to the bravery of the people of Sungai Siput in the face of such adversity. The monument, unveiled by then prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, was built with public donations.

"The monument stands as a reminder that the people of Sungai Siput even in the atmosphere of fear and despair had rejected the communist ideology and the CPM's struggle, instead rallying behind Tun V.T. Sambanthan, the illustrious son of Sungai Siput.

Retired Public Works Department technician K. Paramasivam said this sent the guerilla movement a clear

message that people of all races in the area welcomed their new-found freedom.

"It showed that they had no wish to waste their energy supporting the futile struggle of the communists," the 65-year-old said.

The communist threat in a way spurred development as new settlements were built for reformed communist insurgents.

The houses of Chinese living on the fringes of forests began to be constructed closer to the town centre.

The move, initiated under the Brigg's Plan, resulted in the establishment of Rimba Panjang, Sungai Buloh, Simpang Jalong, Lasah, Salak and Karai settlements along the

main road that runs through this small town.

"Very slowly, other developments such as road infrastructure and public amenities began to trickle in as more and more areas in Sungai Siput became safer for travelling and living."

Kasdi Hamid, 65, a trader, said most of these developments started in the 1980s with things really picking up in the last 17 years.

In fact, the Sungai Siput hospital which opened in 1994 is often cited as a classic example of the slow pace of development in the area.

It took 34 years for the public amenity to materialise at its present spot at the foot of Bukit Singa, the famous landmark

development until the late 1980s, the motion gained its momentum after the 1989 agreement was signed between the communist and the government.

Ahamad Mokhtar, 45, said the well-tarred roads in the area should not be used as an indicator of progress.

Neither should the increasing number of residential areas, he added.

Ahamad, a factory worker, laments the lack of downstream activities to support Sungai Siput's vast plantation sector.

"The majority of labourers are working in the plantation sector.

"Given a choice, many would want to earn steady and higher wages as factory workers but there are not that many industries in the Sungai Siput area," he said.

He said youths had to seek employment in industrial areas located out of Sungai Siput due to lack of employment opportunities in the district.

The truth of Ahamad's statement is reflected in the 2005 District Profile which shows that 65 per cent of Sungai Siput's workforce is involved in the plantation sector, with only 15 per cent in the manufacturing side.

The rest are in the civil service (five per cent) and businesses (15 per cent).

There are only three small industrial areas in the sub-district: The Salak, Rimba Panjang and Sungai Siput industrial estates.

Echoing Ahamad's concern, Paramasivam said there was a need for more downstream industrial activities to provide job opportunities for the coming generations, adding that at the same time such move would also attract people from other areas to work in Sungai Siput, paving the way for a more developed sub-district.

But, those interviewed did agree on one point, though: it is too early to expect Sungai Siput to be an industrial hub for downstream activities linked with the plantation sector in Perak.

"It is only in the last 20 years that Sungai Siput has begun to receive development. It will surely take another 15 or 20 years to turn this area into an important industrial hub in the state, but it will need a cohesive will and effort on the part of the state government and the local authority to do so," said businessman See Kuan Poh, 73.

Teoh and the others interviewees are hopeful that Sungai Siput will one day be given its due recognition in the form of a full district status in recognition of its economic and political contribution to Perak and the country.

of Sungai Siput.

Sambanthan had first announced the construction of the hospital back in 1960, the year the Emergency was lifted by the government.

Work on the RM38 million hospital began in 1990, 30 years after the announcement was made, and duly opened to the public in August 1994. It now serves the district's population of 65,841.

"Before that, if one were seriously ill, one had to go either to the Ipoh or the Kuala Kangsar Hospital for treatment," said Kasdi, adding that infrastructural development such as expansion and opening of roads and construction of other new buildings took their "sweet time to arrive" despite the two Sungai Siput MPs — Sambanthan and Samy Vellu — having served in the cabinet for a long time.

Today, besides the Sungai Siput hospital, there are three mini-health centres, eight desa and at least nine private clinics.

However, the current doctor-patient ratio of 1:3,700 is way above the national ratio of 1:2,000, according to the 2005 District Profile data compiled by the Sungai Siput Sub-District and Land Office.

Despite the slow pace of de-