

Kandasamy, Sri Lanka's forgotten trade union martyr

One key observation of Kandasamy's martyrdom June 5, 1947 was that Tamils could not detect G G Ponnambalam's communal political duplicity even at that time when Sri Lanka was under the British and his treachery soon afterwards as a member of the D S Senanayake Government.

By Victor Karunairajan

Sixty two years ago June 5 a young Velupillai Kandasamy a Clerical Officer of the Department of Health and Sanitary Services was killed by police firing ordered by the British Police Superintendent Robins on an orderly march of the members of the Government Clerical Services Union (GCSU). The main contention of the marchers totaling 50,000 public servants was that the proposed Soulbury Constitution for an independent Sri Lanka failed to guarantee workers' rights.

The Soulbury Constitution was weak on other issues too for it largely ignored the rights of the constituent minority communities of Sri Lanka and even the unique features of the cultural diversities and their traditional regions not only of the Tamils and Muslims but also of the Kandyan and low-country Sinhalese and the urban Malay and Burgher communities. It was a highly short-sighted proposition that pleased the Colombo elite and served their interests,

The immediate cause of the June 1947 demonstration was the interdiction of the GCSU president T B Illangaratne and nineteen other of his trade union colleagues for having held a meeting on the Galle Face Green in contravention of Public Services Regulations.

The Public Security Ordinance (PSO) was made into law under strange circumstances by the State Council headed by D S Senanayake. There was a hurried approach and the bill was passed with a bare ninety minutes of debate. May be, it was thought better to have it in law while the country was still under the British that being the style and nature of colonial rule.

The passage of the PSO sparked a major strike of the public servants and on June 5, 1947 thousands of slogan-shouting but peaceful strikers took to the streets to march in orderly manner headed by Dr N M Perera the leader of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) to hold a public meeting at Ralahamigewatte in Kolonnawa. They marched through Dematagoda, a politically strong left-oriented worker-based district of the City of Colombo.

When confronted by the police headed by the British Police Superintendent Robins, somewhat of the nature of Brigadier General Reginald Dyer responsible for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (April 13, 1919) and known as the Butcher of Amritsar, Dr N M Perera approached him to explain that the meeting was authorized and therefore a legal expression of the views of the GCSU.

But Dr Perera was dealt with a stunning blow by the baton on his head and he fell on the ground. But before mayhem was let loose by an incensed British officer commanding as the Butcher of Amritsar did using a police force entirely of Sri Lankans, Dr Perera was spirited away to safety by his comrades. The officer, however, gave the order to shoot not in the sky but at the demonstrators who carried no weapons nor were they violence-provocative in any way. But this was too much for British authority supported by the Colombo Brown Sahibs to either digest or even to accept that which challenged their authority.

Altogether the police fired nineteen rounds of bullets into the strikers that killed one and injured nineteen others and five them seriously.

The fatal victim was Kandasamy of Moolai Road, Vaddukodai a quiet, gentle breadwinner of a family of two brothers and five sisters. When his remains were brought to Jaffna by the mail train, the Tamil Congress leader G G Ponnambalam unashamedly seized this opportunity to make racist political capital out of this tragedy. When the casket bearing Kandasamy's remains were taken off the train, Ponnambalam stood by it and addressed the people who had gathered there and in his own style of public oration said Kandasamy was killed by the Sinhalese government.

The truth however was that Kandasamy was a member of an all-island union of workers of Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers and had nothing whatsoever to do being a Tamil. Even to the gathering that morning, nearly all of them in a state of shock and intense grief, Ponnambalam's mendacious and misleading mischief never made any impact.

This was the time when Ponnambalam, the artful trickster of Tamil politics was preaching the incredible political slogan of 50-50 and yet within months of his election and even before the first anniversary of Kandasamy's death joined the Government of D S Senanayake accepted a cabinet position and promptly supported its measures to disfranchise thousands of Tamil plantation workers. In this act alone, the man who wanted 50-50 representation, helped to erode the minority representation in parliament.

Yet this man, the leader of the Tamil Congress marketed as the Uncrowned King of Jaffna who held fort as Member of Parliament for Jaffna for over a decade and a half cursed the people of Jaffna when he lost to an independent candidate in the 1965 general elections; he was Jaffna's popular mayor, Alfred Duryappah.

What Ponnambalam did on that day June 5, 1947 at the Jaffna Railway Station making political capital out of a human tragedy, gave instant fuel to deform and distort reality to stir up racist sentiments. Unfortunately, even to this day, racism is being resorted to, even with greater frenzy when it is more than evident that Sri Lanka is ready for a peaceful resolution of the ethnic problems. The Diaspora in particular has an obligation and responsibility to help their homeland in facing this challenge and not to be proxies of colonial interests that prospered with tyranny in a bygone era.

Kandasamy deserves to be remembered as a trade union martyr. He was a man of peace, and how appropriate it would be if his memorial in Colombo is restored and June 5 declared and observed as Kandasamy Day. Alternately Sri Lanka should shift its workers day from May 1 to the Fifth Day of June in memory of Velupillai Kandasamy.