

Yoges: firebrand for justice and peace

Four years have rolled by after the cruel assassination of Yoges, as he was affectionately called by all those near and dear to him. I pay this tribute to Yogeswaran not as his fond wife, but as the Secretary of the Colombo Branch of the Tamil United Liberation Front.

Vettivelu Yogeswaran chose politics because he was a man of peace and he chose peace because he loved humanity. During his sixteen long years' stay in Britain and France from 1953 to 1969, he was an Inns of Courts student, a leading activist in the Union of Students, a committee member of the Anti-apartheid League and President of the Ceylon Tamil Overseas League in Britain. He contested in the London Local Government elections while engaged in Labour Party politics. On his return to Sri Lanka he became an action committee member of the T.U.L.F. from 1975 to 1976, and also secretary in charge of youth affairs. He entered Parliament as the nominee of the T.U.L.F. in July 1977 and won the Jaffna seat by a convincing majority of 9,291 votes, beating the sitting M.P. C.X. Martyn who polled a mere 900 votes, and Kumar Ponnambalam who polled

6,960 votes.

As MP for Jaffna he toured his electorate working ceaselessly for the upliftment of the Jaffna man. Due to his refined educational background and upbringing he was able to see the problems of the Tamil people and the country at large in their proper perspective. I remember the time when during the opening of the Insurance Corporation in Jaffna, the Tamil youth engaged in a sathyagraha, in front of our gates, tried to force him to retract his promise to attend the function. But he kept his word to the late Minister Lalith Athulathmudali to attend the ceremony and so it was he who crossed over the heads of the youth, sitting near the gates chanting anti-government slogans, although it pained him to cross swords with the youth who endearingly referred to him as the "Darling of the Youth". Charged with emotion he made one of the finest speeches with tears in his eyes. Mr. Athulathmudali while congratulating him said, "I am also a debator and orator from Oxford but you surpassed me on this occasion."

He was a man of wit, loquacity, cheerfulness, and charm - more charm than the law generally

permits. He was also volatile, unpredictable and used to tell me, "the less it is about you as a politician the better it is". But neither success nor failure seemed to damage his decent nature. He brought a sound bite into Tamil National Politics - short sharp bite pitched as he always was with the then Industries Minister Cyril Mathew who would have very much wanted to put him behind bars, instead of in parliament because of his uncertain association with the militant youth. He revelled in verbal fireworks.

He was a controversial figure in Sri Lankan politics, often branded by the press as a spitting firebrand with fire in his tongue. He was often the target of the police and armed forces and also the security council in Sri Lanka which was trying to serve a detention order on him because of an interview he gave to a foreign journalist, criticising the Sri Lankan government.

His leader Mr. Amirthalingam and his colleagues wanted him to retract what he had said in that interview. But Yogeswaran refused to do so and so did the journalist who refused to return to Sri Lanka to give evi-

dence. This was because the Government told Yogeswaran if he did not retract the objectionable part of the interview, the government would charge him with libel. It was by a hair's breadth that he saved his skin.

Many were the times he had to conduct the funerals of youth who died in police custody. One such occasion was when Inpam with his brother-in-law Selvaratnam was murdered and the government refused to hold an inquiry in Jaffna. Yoges prevented the bodies being transported to Colombo for postmortem. He held the funerals at Manipay where thousands paid homage to the fallen heroes amidst a funeral procession as one Tamil youth ironically commented that C.I.D. officers outnumbered the public in the procession.

He was also in close contact with every diplomatic mission in Colombo. He kept an ongoing dialogue about the latest developments on the ethnic front. At that time Mr. Munro Scott (Jr) who was a close friend of Yogeswaran and the First Secretary to the American Embassy was recalled to the State Department in Washington on the advice of the Sri Lankan Govern-

ment because he dared to criticise the government at a party for trying to serve a detention order on Yogeswaran. Such was his impact on the political scene in Colombo.

During the orgy of violence and arson in Jaffna from May 31 to June 4 in 1981 when my home was razed to the ground Yogeswaran spoke in Parliament on June 9. That speech of his has been described as the finest in his career.

After the Indo-Lanka Accord Yogeswaran continued his efforts in forging Tamil unity among the militant groups and the T.U.L.F. To the end of his life he was attempting to do this.

During this ongoing effort in his own unsuspecting manner he trusted three men who not only put an end to his well-meaning efforts but cruelly and senselessly brought an end to his young life. The following is a befitting epitaph on his death. "Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind".

Yogeswaran's death has diminished the Tamil community of a leader who never sought wealth or fame and who neglected his health in the service of his people".

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