

Remembering P. Viswambharan

Prof. B. Vivekanandan

P. Viswambharan, veteran socialist leader from Kerala is no more. He passed away peacefully at his home on 9 December 2016, after a brief hospitalisation. He was 92, and was a bachelor. As he laid down, in a 'Personal Note' to his brother's son Anil Kumar, not to perform any religious rituals after his death, he was cremated adjacent to his home, near Kovalam, without any customary rituals. His body was cremated with full state honours. A large number of people, from all walks of life, attended his funeral.

In Kerala politics, P. Viswambharan was an extra-ordinary person. He was an embodiment of value-based politics in Kerala. He was a freedom fighter, a Member of the Travancore-Cochin State Legislative Assembly (1954-56), a Member of the Kerala State Legislative Assembly (1960-64), and was a Member of the Lok Sabha (1967-71). In addition, he held several positions in Kerala politics. He became the State Secretary of the Praja Socialist Party in 1964, and the State Chairman of the Socialist Party in 1971. He became the State President of the Janata Party in 1980, and, later, became a Member of the Janata Dal's National Executive. During the Emergency, he was the State Secretary of the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL). But, he never occupied a ministerial position either in the State or in the Centre. In his demise, Kerala has lost a beacon clean politics.

P. Viswambharan was born on 25 June 1925 at Kovalam, near Trivandrum. After completing his school education in Trivandrum, he did his higher education at Scott Christian College, Nagarcoil, Arts College and the University College in Trivandrum. After graduation, he joined the Law College, Trivandrum, for doing his law, but could not complete studies there, as he got more deeply involved in the freedom struggle and in state politics.

Mr Viswambharan joined politics as a student activist during the 'Quit India' movement and played a significant role in the founding of Student Congress in the Travancore state. In politics, his mentors were tall leaders, like Pattom Thanu Pillai, Ponnara Sreedhar, and T.M. Varghese. Interestingly, owing to his closeness with Pattom Thanu Pillai, P. Viswambharan was given the nickname "Kutty Pattom" (Junior Pattom) by the political circles in the state.

In the early years of his political career, Viswambharan combined politics and journalism, and became notable for his news scoops, including the most sensational one pertaining to the assassination attempt on Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, then Diwan of Travancore State. As an accomplished journalist, Viswambharan made a mark. He was associated with Malayalam newspapers like Malayali, Mathrubhoomi, Desabandhu, and Swathanthrakahalam. He worked also for the news agency, United Press of India (UPI). He was the founder General Secretary of the Travancore-Cochin Journalists Union.

Mr Viswambharan joined the Socialist Party in 1949, and remained its staunch votary till he breathed his last on 9 December 2016. He believed in socialist ideals, and responded to public issues keeping those principles and ideals in view. He maintained a close relationship with many top socialist leaders at the national level. Among them were Jayaprakash Narayan, Asoka Mehta, Ram Manohar Lohia, S.M. Joshi, George Fernandes, Madhu Dandavate, Madhu Limaye, Surendra Nath Dwivedy, Surendra Mohan, H.V. Kamath, G.G. Parikh, Samar Guha, Samarendra Kundu, and Pannalal Surana. Along with Pattom Thanu Pillai, Ponnara Sreedhar, Arangil Sreedharan, K. Chandrasekharan, P. Kunjirama Kurup, and Sivaramabharathi, P. Viswambharan played a significant role in building up the socialist movement in Kerala. He organised systematically many Socialist Study Camps, in different parts of Kerala, to generate a stream of young, well-informed, socialists in the state. Indeed, those who attended these Socialist Study Camps, have constituted the unfailing support base of the socialist movement in the state ever since. It was during these heydays that, in the 1967 General Elections, the Samyukta Socialist Party won three Lok Sabha Seats -- P. Viswambharan in Trivandrum, Arangil Sreedharan in Badagara, and G.P. Mnagalathu Madhom in Harippad -- besides 20 State Assembly seats from Kerala. Looking back, Socialist politics in Kerala in the 1960s and 1970s was fruitfully dominated by a formidable triumvirate -- P. Viswambharan, Arangil Sreedharan and K. Chandrasekharan.

Last time Mr Viswambharan contested the Lok Sabha elections was in 1977, when he contested, as a Janata Party candidate, against the Communist Party veteran Mr. M.N. Govindan Nair, and lost. Pertinently, a secret attempt was made at that time to deny him the Janata Party Ticket to contest from the Trivandrum Lok Sabha constituency. And, therefore, contesting from Trivandrum at that time became a prestige issue for Viswambharan, As the secret move to deny him the Lok Sabha ticket was known well on time, that attempt to bypass him was squarely defeated, and he was given the Janata Party ticket to contest. Yet, he lost that election. That was his last electoral contest. Had he won that election at that time, he would have been in the central cabinet.

Mr Viswambharan made his mark in the cooperative movement of Kerala. He was associated with a large number of cooperative societies in the state. And, in this he paid special attention to organise cooperative societies in the Coir manufacturing sector. In his own village, Pachalloor, he established a successful coir cooperative society -- the Pachalloor Coir Cooperative Society -- which has grown into a notable one in the state, and made an impressive impact not only on the manufacturing of innovative coir products, but also on its marketing outside the state, including in North India. Indeed, this author had the privilege of accompanying him once from New Delhi to Ludhiana, in Punjab, in search of new markets for his coir cooperative society's products. For many years, he was President of that coir cooperative society. Besides, he was President of the famous Alleppey Coir Central Marketing Cooperative Society. He was in its Director Board for many years. For market promotion of Coir products outside India, Mr Viswambharan made three visits abroad. In addition, he was a member of the Executive Committee of the National Federation of Industrial Cooperatives for 20 years.

Mr Viswambharan was an outstanding trade unionist. He was President of many trade unions in Kerala. He was active in organising quarry workers, coir workers, port workers, motor workers, textile workers, and so on.

He was associated with many non-political institutions too. He was closely associated with Gandhian institutions, like Gandhi Smarak Nidhi, in Trivandrum. Similarly, he was closely associated with Mitraniketan, the world famous rural development institute in Vellanad, near Trivandrum. He was a member of its Governing Council for many years. He was a trustee of the S.M. Joshi Socialist Foundation, Pune. He took active interest in the working of the Yusuf Meherally Centre, in Tara. He founded Janata Forum in 1980 for discussing contemporary issues and remained its President since then. He played a big role in the development of Kovalam as an international tourist destination, in the establishment of a Railway Division in Trivandrum, and in making the Trivandrum Airport as an international airport.

He was a voracious reader, and invariably did his homework well before he made his major speeches, whether in the Lok Sabha, or in the State Assembly, or at public meetings, or at Socialist Study Camps. For students of Kerala politics, he was a walking encyclopaedia of Kerala's political history, and of political personalities of the state. He regularly published incisive articles in Janata on political developments in Kerala. In the fag end of his life, he was, like many other freedom fighters, deeply disappointed, and concerned, over the decline of ethical standards, and unabashness, in today's politics in the state and the country. He was concerned over the kleptocracy that is growing in Indian democracy through the establishment of reciprocal nexus between some new rich businessmen and the political and administrative elite, targeting public assets, like natural resources and minerals as objects of their theft.

P. Viswambharan detested parasitical politics, and had never approved its using as a means of self-aggrandisement. In tune with that, even for his elections, he would refrain from approaching vested interests for financial contributions as he knew that the vested interests would expect reciprocal support for their unfair actions. As result of this basic approach, after every election he contested, he had to sell his personal property, without any remorse, for settling the account. This author is aware of such instances. That was Viswambharan. Seldom have we seen such examples in today's politics. That is why even his political rivals never suspected his honesty and integrity, and respected him and his judgments.

Generally, P. Viswambharan presented a tough exterior to ward off any one trying to inveigle him to support an unfair proposition. Perhaps, this is an approach he had imbibed from his mentor, Shri Pattom Thanu Pillai, But, like in the case of Pattom Yhanu Pillai, behind this exterior is hidden a warm hearted, fair minded person, who would quietly go to any extent to support truth and justice. He was a good host and a decent guest who valued personal friendship. He was a politician par excellence. And, he was a broad minded secularist, and was more concerned about the problems of common man. His image as a clean politician earned him universal respect. He will be remembered for long as an icon of clean politics in Kerala.