

Late President Premadasa Had an Obsession to Serve the Poor

Rajendran Thangavelu in a hurried analysis (Letters to the Editor, STAR INDIA May 7) of Sri Lankan events after President Premadasa's assassination made factual errors as well as preposterous assumptions which need to be addressed.

The suspected suicide killer of President Premadasa was not a 14-year old as he mentioned, but Kulaveerasingham Veerakumar alias Babu, a 23-year old Tamil Tiger from Gurunagar in Jaffna. Veerakumar had a safehouse at Wellawatte (Colombo) while running a grocery store close to Sucharitha, the late President's private residence, for the past two years.

"It was a one man show and to a person (President Premadasa) who used to govern by instinct and not through any hardcore political or economic philosophy the result was disastrous", Thangavelu said.

It is obvious that Thangavelu missed reading the UNP Manifesto 1988 - 'Mother Lanka: A New Vision, A New Deal'. It says - "What is this new deal? It is a new deal to ensure poverty alleviation, through restructuring the political, economic, social and administra-

tive machinery". And if this statement is not a "hardcore political or economic philosophy", then I am not certain what is!

"The result was disastrous", Thangavelu continued. The Economist of May 18, 1991, said - "According to the Central Bank, GNP is estimated to have increased by 6.6% in real terms in 1990, compared to 2.3% in 1989. This was the highest growth rate for more than a decade. The balance of payments showed a surplus (of \$169m) for the first time in five years. Income per person in real terms rose by 5.4%". Even a High School student wouldn't dare call these soaring numbers "disastrous" in case the student would be given a failing grade for stupidity.

The Traveler of July 1992 in its cover story on Sri Lanka said, "Sri Lanka is getting its act together. The economy has shown resilience under pressure with two years of the highest GDP growth in more than a decade - back-to-back 6 percent rises - and an impressive 500 percent increase in foreign investment last year. An average growth of 5.5 percent is the forecast for the next five years." With such impressive statistics Thangavelu's comment on Sri Lanka's economy as its "result was disastrous", pales into being ridiculous.

To put down the reign of terror which prevailed in Sri Lanka during the years 1988 to 90 needed a lot of courage and it certainly wasn't going to win supporters among the terrorists or their sympathizers. But what Thangavelu failed to recognize was that it certainly won millions of friends among those whom were terrorized and were effected directly or indirectly by the JVP terror. That indeed was the trade off. This cruel terrorism claimed the lives of nearly 6500 innocent people. There was also incalculable damage done to public property, to government offices, factories, electrical and telephone communication installations, radio transmission centers, bridges, public vehicles, all that met the daily needs of the Sri Lankan people. The damage that cost the public were not a penny here or a penny there, but were accounted for hundreds of millions of

rupees that the Sri Lankans could ill afford.

Even as late as June and July 1989 when the JVP brought the civil administration and society itself to a standstill, when public transport came to a complete stop, when hospitals were closing down, when the mass media had been silenced and even the primary source of Sri Lanka's economy - the tea factories - were burnt down, the late President Premadasa waited patiently, holding out his hand to the JVP hoping that they would join the democratic process. But they spurned this offer and stepped up their level of violence. President Premadasa had a choice, either to abdicate or accept his responsibility as a democratically elected leader of Sri Lanka to govern the country or let anarchy rule the day. What happened by 1990 is now history and Sri Lanka has prospered ever since the JVP terror was put down by the Premadasa Government. President Premadasa certainly wasn't after a 'Mr. Popularity' title but was a leader who did what was best for his people with courage and conviction.

"His ambitious schemes like Janasaviya (elimination of poverty)" a million houses for the village people and garment factories in each electorate were launched with an eye more on electoral prospects than anything else", said Thangavelu.

Thangavelu in his assessment has certainly misunderstood the late President's efforts to uplift and give back the dignity to the poor. What he does not know is that the late President Premadasa had an obsession to serve the poor. He was a committed leader of the nation and was one who did not betray the trust placed in him by the dispossessed underclass. He lived and died to give them dignity denied to them by centuries of elitist dominance. All this was because he had personally experienced the pain of poverty. He built more than one million houses for the poor and middle class people. If all this honest work brought him "more electoral prospects" then so be it.

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