

Story & Photos by Jo Hann Tan
Pusat KOMAS / MALAYSIA

In a quiet oil palm plantation in Selangor, Malaysia, a boy named Sinnappan Savriamuthu grew up in a household of 12, sharing a small, crowded home with his parents, grandparents, and seven siblings. Born in 1950 in the Minyak Estate, his childhood was defined by the physical toll of harvesting palm oil.

Paul Sinnappan as he is known to friends, later went on to become a veteran community organizer and social activist who passionately championed the rights of hundreds of thousands of marginalized grassroots communities and the rights of women across 22 countries.

Although he passed away at the age of 71 in 2021, his story continues to inspire many people, especially those wanting to do something about injustice, and inequality among marginalized communities. His life was not one of grand political maneuvers, but of a quiet, persistent commitment to the "Bottom 40" (B40)—the most economically vulnerable members of Malaysian society.

From an early age, Sinnappan was very clear, he had opted for the poor and later on passionately championed for gender equality. His own family background and life was deeply rooted in the historical reality of poor Indian communities trapped within Malaysia's rubber and oil palm estates. In his unpublished writings, Sinnappan revealed that there were times when his family had very little to eat, his mother cleverly substituted daily staples with tapioca planted in their yard.

"I began to understand poverty in my own family first and then my community at large and began to slowly see how they are related to the socio-economic, cultural and educational conditions of the plantation community."

His grandfather had journeyed from Tamil Nadu, India, arriving in Malaya under the British colonial system, only to face backbreaking labor, systemic poverty, and entrenched caste divisions. These early childhood observations planted the seeds for what would become a lifelong crusade.

Paul Sinnappan

Empowering the Poor

One Credit Union at a Time



Sinnappan co-founder of the People's Credit Union movement in Batang Berjuntai (top left), participating in a peaceful protest in Kuala Lumpur (top right), gathering with credit union members during their annual meeting (center), with the network of community organizers of the Southeast Asia Popular Communications Program (SEAPCP) in Kuala Lumpur (bottom).

The Plight of Plantation and Urban Poor Communities

Generations of Indian estate workers were brought over from India during the British Colonial era as bonded laborers. They lived in isolated structural enclaves, received meager wages, endured sub-standard housing, and socially and economically almost totally dependent on plantation management.

Sinnappan's own father, Savriamuthu, worked for years as a palm oil fruit harvester before becoming an estate trade union leader. He grappled with the systemic poverty by organizing the workers to protect their rights and help families trapped in cycles of debt.

Sinnappan's mother toiled as a fruit collector, enduring chronic physical pain from carrying heavy fruit bunches. He wrote "During school holidays I used to help my mother carry those fruits which were so heavy and thorny. My mother did this work for many years and developed headaches and a neck sprain which lasted until her death. For many years she overcame the pain by only taking Panadol tablets."



The desolate living conditions in the plantations and estates (top & bottom)

Despite working to the bone, these families could barely sustain themselves and their families, while European management staff enjoyed luxurious bungalows, fine food and a lavish lifestyle - a glaring disparity that left a deep impression on young Sinnappan. The structural oppression of the estates meant that generations of children were locked out of social mobility. Compounding this, many men in the estate community coped with the crushing stress of poverty through heavy alcoholism, a vice that drained family resources and brought immense burdens to women at home.

Credit Union as a Platform for Community Organizing

Sinnappan recognized that welfare and dole out aid would never break this cycle. Instead, he channeled his energy into organizing plantation workers and poor urban settlers - as well as expanding into rural Malay and Orang Asli (Indigenous Peoples in West Malaysia) communities—to fight systemic marginalization.

These early experiences were polarized by two forces - the negative realities of alcoholism, caste-based divisions, and domestic violence that permeated the community, and the positive seeds of solidarity and potential for self-reliance.

"My grandma used to hold a bitter leaf holder bag called 'surukku pai'. In that bag she saved all the coins from the small money given by my father and grandpa. Whenever we children asked for some little money to meet school expenses she always drew out some coins from the bag and gave it to us. This went on until she died and she never said she had no money at any time," Sinnappan recalled in his writings.

He shared that his mother used to save coins in the rice and dhal pots, and in hidden secret corners in their house, which was used for repaying debts and family financial needs. "Observing these saving habits in my family and among other women in the community showed me the importance of saving regardless of how poor they were."

Sinnappan also saw firsthand how credit was often almost unreachably to poor cash strapped communities when he worked in a bank for 6 years. But his strategic position as head of the small business department probably helped to some extent.

He wrote "I was processing and providing small loans to the poor to start agriculture projects and small and medium retail businesses, including the rural poor Malays and Tamils in Kuala Selangor, Tanjong Karang and Sabak Bernam Districts." Meanwhile Sinnappan continued organizing the vast network of community-based Credit Unions and later founded the Peoples Service Organization (PSO), an NGO advocating workers' welfare and grassroots empowerment.

He was able to rally the community using powerful local worker anthems that reminded them of their dignity, urging them to break free from bonded plantation servitude and unite in collective resistance. He helped poor communities mobilize their own meager savings.

He shared in his writings that by the end of 2001 the Credit Union had organized over 3,000 adult and children members in 38 communities. The accumulated savings of the adult members amounted to almost RM1.8 mil. (USD440,000) and the children's savings, almost RM154,000 (USD38,000).

After leaving the bank, Sinnappan joined the National Office for Human Development (NOHD) of the Catholic Church in 1980. He was in charge of the rural and urban poor desk which allowed him to continue organizing Credit Unions and agriculture projects throughout Malaysia for the poor and needy of all races and religions.

At the same time he started to link the urban and rural poor with other NGOs to take up political advocacy work on matters which oppressed and exploited them.

For Sinnappan, the financial aspect was merely an "entry point." Once a community was organized, the Credit Union served as a platform to address holistic issues such as defending the rights of indigenous people and plantation workers, combating domestic violence and promoting women's leadership, and breaking cycles of ignorance through literacy and vocational training.

Faith as the motivator

Sinnappan's drive was rooted in a strong bond between his Christian Catholic faith and the harsh realities of plantation life. In 1965, Sinnappan joined the Young Christian Students (YCS) and Young Christian Workers (YCW) movements. These groups introduced him to the methodology of Cardinal Cardijn: See, Judge, and Act. This framework taught him to analyze his community's problems not as inevitable tragedies, but as systemic issues that could be challenged through collective action.

When he was 22 years old, Sinnappan had the opportunity to pursue further studies at the Southeast Asia Rural Social Leadership Institute (SEARSOLIN) in the Philippines. It was here that his social perspective sharpened as he became immensely impressed by the vibrant social activism happening there.

Upon returning to Malaysia, Sinnappan helped build the Fatima Training Center (FTC) which was started by Fr. Caroff of the Oblate of Mary Immaculate (OMI) missionary religious congregation of the Catholic Church. Fr Caroff was Sinnappan's mentor and had also made a deep impression on his life and commitment to social transformation work.

The center aimed at reaching out to the plantation Tamil communities and poor residents of Batang Berjuntai town especially to become aware of their family and community problems and find ways and means to resolve those problems. They used collective approaches and methodologies, and shifted from purely charitable work to sustainable, community-led economic projects.

Sinnappan in the AGM of their Credit Union (left), speaking at the church (right)



Wife and Family

Sinnappan's journey was profoundly shaped by his life partner, Papathiammal (Papathi), whom he met during his secondary school years. Their romance faced formidable barriers due to religious differences, as Sinnappan came from a Christian Catholic family while Papathi's family were Hindus. Undeterred, the couple went ahead to persevere through a five-year courtship and registered their marriage despite strong objections. Sinnappan wrote that, "it took many years before my wife's family could accept our marriage."

Papathi became a steadfast anchor in Sinnappan's life, working as a primary school teacher and eventually retiring as a headmistress while managing the home front as he traveled extensively. Her quiet strength, sacrifice, and unwavering emotional support allowed Sinnappan to dedicate his life entirely to social action without faltering.

"Sinnappan was truly a good-hearted person and always kind to others. His option for the poor was very clear, and it cut across social boundaries, culture, caste and religion", Papathi shared proudly.

Whenever Sinnappan returned from harrowing missions or international training programs across Asia, Africa, and the Americas, he would share these stories with his family and especially his children. Family remained the heartbeat of Sinnappan's activism.

Alongside his daughter Nithya and elder son Selva, his son Arul Prakkash grew up witnessing a household dedicated to the service of others. Prakkash recalls following his father to the estates when he was still a teenager and was inspired and amazed to witness his father passionately sharing knowledge and skills with the workers.

"My father always practiced what he preached, he was consistent in his values and principles in our home and also the community," Prakkash shared. Prakkash himself has committed almost 3 decades of his life to social activism and community organizing working in Pusat Komus, a human rights NGO in Kuala Lumpur and later on in WITNESS an international nonprofit organization using video and technology to protect and defend human rights.

Sinnappan was ultimately inspired to write down his vast lifelong experiences and knowledge, mainly as an important reference for generations of community workers wanting to engage with marginalized grassroots communities.

Unfortunately, he could not complete this work before his passing, but his family, who constantly witnessed a father who committed his time, energy, and resources to uplift bottom-tier communities, is determined to realize his father's legacy by completing this task.

Sinnappan and his wife Papathi (left), with his son Arul Prakkash (right).





Sinnappan and his wife Papathi in BERSIH 4 Rally (left), women in leadership training (right)

Transforming Society & Gender Equality

Beyond economics, Sinnappan's grassroots training and mentoring expanded into holistic social reforms, mainstreaming gender equality and a feminist lens into his training workshops since the 1990's. He restructured the Batang Berjuntai Credit Cooperative to ensure 50 percent female membership.

Sinnappan wrote "I began to see women with leadership qualities and commitment helping other women who are in need, thus my respect for women increased." He added "In the beginning mostly men joined the Credit Unions, later on more women began to join and there was a great need for organizing education and training programs for the women to actively participate in the Credit Unions."

Sinnappan and his team used creative methodologies like role-play and drama to conduct these education and training activities which included challenging patriarchal mindsets and highlighting domestic burdens within marginalized households. Leadership training activities strongly emphasized promoting good values and replacing existing domineering, dictatorial type of leadership with collective and gender balanced leadership.

In his later years Sinnappan often wrestled with the inevitable changing times as many local leaders started to waver in their values and principles. Many were distracted by the mundane daily survival issues and seemed to have lost interest in community development activities.

Nevertheless, Sinnappan remained relentless in engaging these leaders and reminding them of the significance of being part of the community transformation process.

Sinnappan navigated the complex political landscape of Malaysia, moving from the private sector to church-affiliated social work, and eventually becoming a consultant for international agencies. He remained a vocal critic of race and religion-based policies, arguing that true development requires a citizen-based approach that unifies Malaysians across all ethnic divides.

His pioneering grassroots models eventually drew acclaim from local and international bodies, earning him awards such as the Silver Medal from the World Council of Credit Unions in the USA, recognition from the Canadian Cooperative Association, and an honorary Doctor of Philosophy from a Tamil Nadu Bible University.

Paul Sinnappan's life work has touched many lives and serves as a testament to the power of community-based social action. His wife Papathi shares that "he dedicated his entire life to uplift the marginalized transcending race and religion."

He strongly believed that systemic change does not always begin in parliament halls or corporate boardrooms but often starts with listening to the cries of the marginalized and oppressed. Sinnappan truly believed that "when the poor are given the tools to organize, they do not just survive, they transform their own destinies." ●