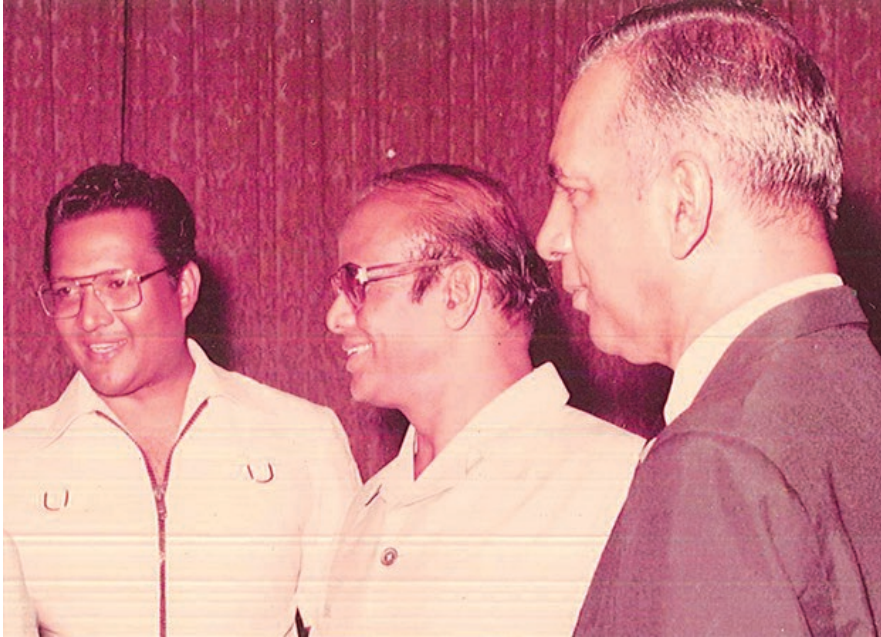


# TRIBUTE TO K. GUNARATNAM OF JAFFNA ON HIS 30<sup>TH</sup> YEAR DEATH ANNIVERSARY

***BRUTALLY GUNNED DOWN ON 9<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST 1983 BY UNIDENTIFIED GOONS***



*Late Mr. K. Gunaratnam (center) & Late Mr. N.G.P. Panditharatna (right)  
at a Reception hosted by me (left) in 1982*

Mr. K. Gunaratnam, popularly known as 'KG', with his humble beginnings in Jaffna, had commenced businesses in Colombo. I came to know him in 1974, when his son G.R. Pathmaraj introduced me to him. Mr. K. Gunaratnam wanted me to join his businesses. I agreed to render services as a part time management consultant from August 1974. He allocated a separate room and a secretary for me to co-ordinate work. I was

directly responsible to him and all executives of his businesses were so informed. I more or less functioned as an executive consultant of the chairman, Mr. K. Gunaratnam.

Except when he was overseas, I used to meet him daily early afternoons before he goes for lunch and has a nap. He had strictly instructed that he be not disturbed for whatever reason, whilst he had his afternoon nap. He socialized regularly in the evenings moving with various levels of people, developing close friendships and business relationships.

Commencing business in the film industry, he became Sri Lanka's most successful film producer, distributor and owner of a chain of cinemas island-wide. He had inspired and developed several personalities in the Sinhala film industry, including those such as Eddie Jayamanne, Rukmani Devi, Ananda Jayaratne, Sandya Kumari and the legendary Gamini Fonseka. One of his very popular productions was the film 'Sandeshaya', with the hit song 'Poorthugisi Karaya'. Lester James Peiries made a name as the director of this film and Arisen Ahubudu came into recognition with this famous song "Poorthugisi Karaya".

Mr. K. Gunaratnam had produced over 25 films developing the Sinhala film industry. Some of the films having been Sujatha, Warada Kageda, Radala Piliuruwa, Duppathage Duka, Wana Mohini, Sooraya, Weera Vijaya, Divarayo, Allapu Gedera, Chandiya, Oba Dutu Da, Ataweni Pudumaya, Lakseta Kodiya, Athma Puja, Hodai Narakai. Sandeshaya and some of these films are lost forever to the present generation due to the barbaric black July riots of 1983.

Mr. K. Gunaratnam had also diversified into industries, manufacturing ball point pens, corrugated cartons, plastic containers, and developing a state of the art, yarn spinning and weaving mills at Ja Ela, with 24,000 Swiss Reiter spindles, which was being expanded into weaving with 200 Picanol water jet looms, with 100 looms having been imported in June 1983 and temporarily stored at the Hendala industrial complex, until the foreign engineers were to install them at the weaving mills at Ja Ela in August 1983. The Hendala complex included the Vijaya Studios where films were produced. In addition there were Studio facilities at Kirula Road, Colombo 5.

The industrial complex at Hendala comprising factories manufacturing corrugated cartons, plastic containers and ball point pens had just been developed with ultra-modern machinery and technology, with the traditional head office being at Sri Sangarajah Mawatha, Colombo 10 which also had a printing press and with the original Cinemas head office being at New Chetty Street, Colombo 13.

A very large stock of paper reels and plastic granules had been stored at the Hendala complex. On the night of the ethnic riots of black July 1983, Mr. K. Gunaratnam was chased away by goons on the rampage from his luxurious house at Bullers Road, which luckily had not caught fire. Mr. K. Gunaratnam had sought refuge occupying an entire floor of then Holiday Inn Hotel, where he was a Director. A few days later on 30<sup>th</sup> July 1983 being his Birthday, together with a 'curfew pass' I went and saw him at the Hotel. He wept.

The Hendala industrial complex was set ablaze and the fire lasted for over two weeks, with the huge stock of paper reels and plastic granules and also destroying the 100 brand new picanol looms which had no insurance as they were waiting to be installed at the Ja Ela mills. Mr. K. Gunaratnam lost over 200 Mn., at the value of money at that time due to the July 1983 ethnic riots and he shifted to small house at Barnes Place.

Mr. K. Gunaratnam was the main owner of the Tower Hall, formerly known as 'Tower Talkies' which developed the Sinhala drama and artistes. When President R. Premadasa requested for these premises, Mr. K. Gunaratnam unhesitatingly gifted the same to the Government. Today developed as Tower Hall Theater, with no mention, whatsoever, of this invaluable philanthropic donation of Mr. K. Gunaratnam. It ought have named after him.

When President R. Premadasa made a historic visit to Jaffna, Mr. K. Gunaratnam personally went to Jaffna, I too along with him. He got huge posters of President R. Premadasa put up on trees lining the roads in Jaffna, using his staff of the Wellington Cinema in Jaffna and organized a rousing warm welcome reception to President R. Premadasa on his arrival at the Palalay Airport, Jaffna.

When I got married, Mr. K. Gunaratnam and his wife entertained us to a big reception in his residential house in Jaffna, inviting the Jaffna business community. More than from professional studies and work, I have gained much knowledge and experience from late Mr. K. Gunaratnam, as to how to deal with people with humbleness and humility. I have travelled overseas with him always economy class and staying at 3 to 4 star hotels. Mr. K. Gunaratnam never showed off his wealth.

On the other hand, Mr. K. Gunaratnam used to entertain lavishly, and on Thai Pongal night he annually had a grand dinner at his luxurious house at Bullers Road with a large circle of persons who had interacted with him. The crab curry is to be flown from Jaffna. He moved with various politicians which included Hugh Fernando, Maithripala Senanayake, T.B. Illangaratne and the Ratwattes. Albert Page of Ceylon Theaters, though a competitor, was a very close friend of his, with whom he used to have a regular get together of 4 or 5 people, including me.

On the faithful day of 9<sup>th</sup> August 1989, Mr. K. Gunaratnam telephoned me at around 1.00 p.m. in the afternoon and had a chat, and I informed him that I was going to UK that night for few days. I left for lunch with a friend of mine and was telephoned by my office to inform me that Mr. K. Gunaratnam had died. I immediately stopped the lunch and returned to my office thinking that he had had a natural death, as he had had a cardiac bypass operation in the US just a few years previously.

However, when I phoned his secretary, I was shocked to hear of the tragic shooting. I immediately cancelled going to UK that night and contacted his son G.R. Pathmaraj and went to the mortuary to obtain the release of his body. It was a very shocking and a very sad day. Whilst coming out of his office in the front seat of his car, at a point of turning, two gunmen on a motor cycle had shot him at very close range, whilst the attempted shooting of the driver had failed and who had rushed Mr. K. Gunaratnam to hospital, where he had been pronounced dead. His secretary later informed me that CID had inquired, as to who I was, as the last telephone call Mr. K. Gunaratnam had taken from his office before he died, had been to me.

That era of 1989 was of sheer fear psychosis and even after his killing and other killings at that time there was a sense of fear and apprehension in society. Gamini Fonseka and I organized the funeral arrangements, with a committee operating from my office. Both Gamini and I walked with Mr. K. Gunaratnam's two sons behind the corpse at the funeral, though several persons cautioned us not to do so, out of the prevalent fear, tension and apprehensions at that time. Several bodies of persons killed had also been found in front of the gate of the textile mill at Ja Ela. It is indeed an unforgivable tragedy that man who had made such yeomen contribution to develop Sinhala areas, Sinhala film industry, artistes and the people with employment had been so brutally dealt with.

Those who had been responsible for the barbaric black July ethnic riots of 1983 and those who went on a killings spree in 1989 instilling a fear psychosis had not been held accountable and dealt with under the law, and nor had they apologized to the people of this country for the immense damage caused by them to the country and its peoples, and as a result stifling the very development and growth of this country and its peoples.

**Nihal Sri Amersekere**