

THE TEXTILE KING



Karumuttu Thiagaraja Chettiar

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FOREWORD

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Biography is a branch of literature. It is not the chronological narration of an individual's entries in his diary, but a literary creation dealing with the life and work of the subject under consideration, his faiths and beliefs, his ambitions and aspirations, enterprises and encounters, moments of melancholy and mirth, in short, the pilgrimage of life with all its ups and downs, pleasant breeze and blazing sun, and the dream of realizing the mission if any.

There are two broad categories of biographers: the first is a person who has known the individual and has easy access to authentic records; the second is a person who is separated in time and space and depends on written documents and oral evidences. Some of the masterpieces in biography have been produced by the first category of people. The author of the biography under consideration, namely, Dr (Mrs) Radha Thiagarajan, belongs to the first category. She has taken full advantage of her opportunities for close observation of the subject for a major part of his life and her access to documents. Thanks to this advantage coupled with her remarkable felicity of expression, the author has certainly produced a biographical literature, dependable, objective, and comprehensive.

The life of Karumuttu Thiagaraja Chettiar is rich in achievements, but richer still in events. The area of his interest and involvement covers a very broad spectrum with components that are diverse, varied and even conflicting. There was in him the combination of a labour leader and an industrial mogul; even when he was presiding over an empire of sixteen textile mills, the labour leader in him did not disappear since it was rooted in his genuine concern for the workers and his innate sense of justice, when a claim is legitimate. All over the world commerce co-operates, even colludes, with the establishment, with the Government, but Karumuttu was made of different stuff. He can

co-operate only with his conscience; can follow the guidance of only his conviction; the author says:

Kalaithanthai somehow was always opposed to the establishment (p.89)

Fighting against the establishment, especially the mighty Government, is not the path that business man would choose; it is not a path to prosperity; it could even spell disaster in the case of lesser mortals. The Govt. in this country have been and still are often unimaginative and obstructive. Karumuttu battled against the Government, sometimes to protect the legitimate interests of his business, but more often, to establish a right, to stop excesses on the part of the powers that be, to protect larger public interest and sometimes to uphold his self-respect. At the heyday of his business he was dealing with persons and firms all over the world: but he never went abroad barring Ceylon. A businessman's medium of transaction is cheques and drafts. He was dealing in millions, but never signed a cheque.—unbelievable, but true. Nagarathars as a community were prone to shun taking risks; but with Karumuttu risk was a way of life. He has been in many respects a unique person; out of the common run among industrialists and intellectuals; a combination of ancient virtues and modern values, uncompromising conviction and dauntless stand in its preservation; apparently stern but humane at heart, accepts nothing but the best but opts for a life of dignified simplicity, abiding interest in, and love for art, literature and culture but with great faith in science and technology, devotion and love for Tamil with great pride in his Tamil heritage—in short, an extraordinary person with many dimensions and the biographer Dr (Mrs.) Radha Thiagarajan has certainly succeeded in capturing with commendable comprehensiveness the personality of a complex person who strode on the textile world like a colossus. In so doing, she has not allowed her relationship with him as his spouse influence her objectivity. When she lists his achievements, with due admiration and appreciation, it is with great restraint and moderation. She has not omitted to mention certain aspects that may not appear to be complimentary. Karumuttu used to be away from Madurai often and at times for long; but this was on business trip. She could have left it at that; but she

was frank and fair enough to state that his absence sometimes could also have been to avoid creditors. She says:

Kalaithantai had often to be away on work connected with the mills, with cotton purchases, to learn the latest trends in the business, to raise money and some times even to avoid creditors. (p.28)

For a member of the Nagarathar family, business may be considered an extension of the hereditary occupation of money lending, but labour leadership is a real departure. He was neither a plantation owner, nor an official in the plantations. Having become a labour leader for the immigrant Indian labour in the plantations, he succeeded in abolishing the abominable practice of branding and reducing the working hours from 12 to 8. It is a significant achievement by any standard.

We study the biography of individuals since their experiences hold some lessons for our guidance. The way that Karumuttu built up a really great textile empire, starting virtually from scratch, and facing the competition from the British monopoly, which was enjoying Government patronage, is an absorbing story bordering on legend, ably narrated by the biographer. The choice of personnel for the organization, the methods adopted for the selection of managers, entrusting responsibility to them, placing complete confidence after making the choice, appear to be literally based on the maxims in *Thirukkural*. As we go through the chapters on his building Sree Meenakshi Mills and acquiring other mills, we are invariably reminded of the following stanzas from Kural.

Whatever men desire they will achieve even as they desire, if only they possess the firmness of mind in executing it. (666)

After having considered that this man can accomplish this (task) by this means, choose that man and leave that (task) to him. (517)

choose no one without previous consideration; having so chosen place confidence in him and do not entertain doubts and reservations (509)

Addressing the libraries, Walt Whitman said:

Shut not your doors to me proud libraries, For that which was lacking on all your well-fill'd shelves, yet needed most, I bring,

Karumuttu had a genius for identifying what is needed most, but what is not there. He found that banks were mostly in the North and there was none in Tamil Nadu with the exception of Indian Bank. He decided to start a bank in Madurai. He started in 1943 the Bank of Madura and built it brick by brick and had succeeded in bringing about the merger of ten banks. At this stage, he wanted to make it a scheduled bank. It required the approval of the Reserve Bank of India. In keeping with his tradition of choosing the 'right man for the right job' as is pointed out by the biographer, he appointed a retired officer of the Reserve Bank of India as the secretary of the bank who knew the job and the Bank of Madura became a scheduled bank in 1959. The Nagarathar community as such did not take to higher education in a big way; school education was good enough for the occupation they were engaged in. But surprisingly, it is the Nagarathar community that has produced some of the tallest leaders in building educational institutions. Among the Nagarathars, three great leaders in the field of establishing educational institutions were:

1. Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar
2. Dr.Rm. Alagappa Chettiar
3. Kalaithanthai Karumuttu Thiagaraja Chettiar

Karumuttu visualized with great insight, the emergence of knowledge as a major resource for the social, political and economic development. He also realised the dominant role that science and technology would play and set about establishing higher education institutions in Arts, Science, Engineering, Technology and Management. I had the privilege of attending one meeting of the Board of Management of the Thiagarajar College of Engineering in my capacity as the Director of Technical Education, Government of Tamil Nadu. Karumuttu as the Chairman, Board of Management presided over the meeting. I could still recollect the majestic figure that he was and the dignity with which he conducted the meeting.

He wanted to establish a Tamil University in Madurai and a Rural University at Courtallam. The State Government as well as the Central Government did not have then, and they do not have even to-day, a well defined and enlightened policy that would promote a healthy development of universities in the private and corporate sectors. An imaginative and enlightened approach towards providing opportunities for private initiative in university development with adequate safe guards is the desideratum in the field of higher education. The State Government refused permission for establishing universities at Madurai and Courtallam since the state policy was not to permit private universities. However, I am of the considered opinion that if not today, certainly tomorrow, the chain of higher education institutions left behind by him would blossom into a major private university. It is desirable even now for the managements of Thiagarajar College of Arts and Thiagarajar College of Engineering to opt for and work towards 'Deemed University Status'.

Man is not immortal; but he alone is capable of creating institutions that could remain immortal. Educational institutions endure for centuries; the Oxford University is more than eight centuries old; the Cambridge University, more than seven centuries. The educational institutions established by Karumuttu would certainly immortalize him. Dr (Mrs) Radha Thiagarajan has given in the biography an excellent account of the time, effort and thought Karumuttu spent on the location of the institutions, the architecture of the buildings, the acquisition of the services of talented faculty and his emphasis on maintenance of quality and developing high traditions.

Among the industrialists and elites of Tamil Nadu, Karumuttu soars high and stands almost unmatched when it comes to his love for Tamil and willingness to fight for its protection. The Government of India under the Prime Ministership of Mr. Lal Bahadur Shastri went back on Nehru's assurance regarding the continuance of English and decided to introduce Hindi exclusively in some Ministries in 1965. This move was a violation of the solemn promise made by no less a person than Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru on the floor of the parliament; this came as a great shock to non-Hindi states and there

was fierce opposition from the D.M.K., the student population in general and also broadly from the members of the public. The agitation was widespread in Tamil Nadu.

Karumuttu was a nationalist and a congressman. He was the secretary of the Provincial Congress in 1916 and was elected to the AICC in 1917. He left the party in 1921. But he remained a nationalist all along. Gandhiji during his first visit to Madurai stayed in a house in the office of Sree Meenakshi Mills as Karumuttu's guest. It was during this stay, records Dr. (Mrs.) Radha Thiagarajan, that Gandhiji took the momentous decision one day that he would henceforth wear only a loin cloth. It is stated that there is a board even now in front of the house where Gandhiji stayed, mentioning that Gandhi took to loin cloth when he had been staying in that house (p.85). It is really a pity that this important information does not seem to find mention in the biography of Gandhiji.

Notwithstanding his nationalism, earlier membership of the Congress Party and his continued association with Congress leaders, Karumuttu was not in agreement with the Congress policy on compulsory introduction of Hindi. He opposed it when Rajaji introduced Hindi compulsorily in the schools in 1938 and opposed it again in 1965.

Madurai was in the forefront of agitation: the students of the Thiagarajar College of Engineering participated in a big way in the agitation. When it was the protection of Tamil, his nationalist sentiments and affinity to Congress Party did not stand in the way. The Tamil daily of which Karumuttu was the Managing Editor, wrote strong editorials against the language policy. The Government thought that he was fanning the agitation and was even financing it. He dared incur the extreme wrath of the Government which went to the extent of issuing orders of arrest. Perhaps, in the history of Tamil Nadu, Karumuttu might possibly have been the only industrialist, who at the height of his prosperity as an industrialist, risked his business; staked his standing with the Government and faced arrest, all for the sake of Tamil which was so dear to him. I have no hesitation in recording that for a person placed in such a vulnerable position, the story of his battle for Tamil was a battle of epic dimensions.

It is a sad fact that notwithstanding the numerous conferences organised, processions undertaken, demonstrations held, and slogans shouted over a period of 40 years we do not have today a mass circulation Tamil daily or English daily that truly represents the ancient heritage of the Tamils, gives expression to the ambitions and aspirations of the Tamil community, protects the legitimate interests of the Tamils and promotes the talented among the Tamils and projects them to the peers nationwide and beyond. Karumuttu really started a Tamil daily to fulfill this need. It speaks for his imagination, perception and vision. It is certainly unfortunate that *Tamil Nadu*, the Tamil daily started by Chettiar with laudable objectives had to be discontinued after 17 years. However, the example set by this institution will have a place in the history of Tamil journalism.

Karumuttu was a labour leader; a textile King; a great humanist and a philanthropist, an educator, a discriminating connoisseur of art and above all a great Indian and a great Tamil.

Biographies have been written by different categories of people—acquaintances, friends, researchers, historians and even literary critics and persons in the field of creative literature. But biographies written by the spouses may not be many in number. For one's spouse it is a delicate task and the challenge of maintaining objectivity in assessment, fairness in judgement, restraint against the influence of emotional attachment is formidable. It is this daunting task that Dr. (Mrs.) Radha Thiagarajan has undertaken and may I say, has accomplished with great success. The life history of Karumuttu is a story of long pilgrimage and in narrating the story Dr. (Mrs.) Radha Thiagarajan has succeeded in keeping the biographer distinct from the spouse. The story is told in an elegant language and makes, certainly, an interesting reading. Dr. (Mrs.) Radha Thiagarajan must be congratulated for making an addition to the biographic literature and presenting to the world the story of a man, who crowned himself with great success against many odds and without making even remotely any compromise on his conviction

or ethical and moral values.

Chennai

20.05.2004

KARUMUTTU THIAGARAJA CHETTIAR

HOMAGE

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I had been associated with the Chettiar family for nearly two decades. For me it was a rich and memorable experience. I lived in Madurai the best of my life during those two decades. The first five years of that time I was happy and fortunate, having worked with that great Indian, something like Secretary to him.

Thiagaraja Chettiar is a great man indeed. The first thing that struck me is that he disliked publicity and flattery. He had a very knowledgeable experience of the Nationalist struggle and had a firsthand contact with several top leaders like Nehru and V.V. Giri. He might have chosen politics but he opted to be an industrialist. And he became one of the reputed industrialists in India. I leave to experts to tell us about his role and success in Tamil Nadu's industrial progress.

There are aspects of his life and spirit which we have to remember and for which he deserves our reverence. In the first place, he is a traditionalist to the core. We see in him the real Indian and the real Hindu. He was devotedly religious, and deeply too with his cultural interests. He is here far above many who acquired fame and name. His passion for temple architecture and Tamil Language and Devotional Literature had such an influence on me that I recall him often with reverence, because he has awakened in me those cultural interests. Let me say this as a Telugu man, we have nobody like him in Andhra. I esteem him as a fine embodiment of time-honoured Chettinad traditions. I honour him as a transcendent human being, for the very substance of his religious and cultural life. I see in him the elements of a great civilization: a taste in architecture, a

love of Tamil and its classics, and his philanthropy. I salute him for being an exemplary Indian who has rejected Westernization, which is universally adopted for social prestige in India.

Yes, Chettiar is an unrivalled philanthropist. So many of quality higher educational institutions were founded and maintained so well that I feel hurt that no university is named after him. One has to see what he has achieved for education in Tamil Nadu to believe it. I can attest to the fact that no one has his taste, sense of discrimination, and magnanimity. In his selection of staff and his policy of admissions, I cannot imagine that we can find his judgement, his impartiality and fair- mindedness anywhere in India.

Chettiar is an institution considering all his achievements. He was firm, manly and even stern in his stand on values. I once compared him to a Roman emperor in his majestic, sparkling white Indian dress. There are two things Indians ought to learn from him concerning communication; one to speak briefly and—to the point; two, never to use verbose language. There is a great Indian whom I admire and whose memory I cherish.

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I am very grateful to Professor *T.V.Subba Rao* for offering his tribute to Mr Chettiar.

Dr K. Hariharan, formerly of Thiagarajar College, gave me invaluable help while I was preparing the book and saw it through the press. I owe him special thanks.

The inspiration for the book came from the numerous admirers of Kalaithanthai and my unbounded admiration for him.

My sincere thanks to *Mr. Y. Thirunavukkarasu* of M/s Vanathi Pathippakam, a veteran in the Tamil publishing field, for taking up the publication of the book and bringing it out nicely.

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INTO THE BOOK....

In these pages, I have tried to outline the life and achievements of a great and unusual man. Karumuttu Thiagaraja Chettiar, or Kalaithanthai as he was known, lived at the height of the freedom struggle and during the early decades of the reconstruction of Independent India, and in his own way contributed to both. Born in a well-to-do family of businessmen, he entered the textile industry at a time when the industry was largely under the control of foreigners, and by his phenomenal success, took the country on the path of self-reliance. After Independence, Kalaithanthai established numerous educational institutions of higher learning thus playing a part in building a better future for countless children of India.

Having been in a privileged position, I could watch him closely, and the more I saw of him, the more I admired him. His life came to have a fascination for me. When I knew him he was already well established in business, presiding over what could be called an industrial empire. In casual conversations, in bits and pieces, I learnt the details of his heroic struggle as he was trying to find his feet in the textile industry, which was a new field to him. I gathered the picture of a man of great courage, perseverance, high principles and determination, who put his blood, sweat and toil to achieve his ambition. I saw how he made liberal use of the millions he made for the good of the country. I saw how passionately he loved Tamil and how he patronized Tamil scholars, like the kings of old. I felt I owed it to his memory to record the story of his achievements.

I have no doubt that his life would be an inspiration to others. But this is more a personal tribute to the memory of a great man. To quote T.S. Eliot, these are “private words addressed to you in public.”

Dr (Mrs) Radha Thiagarajan

His life was gentle, and the elements
So mix'd in him, that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, "This was the man."

SHAKESPEARE, Julius Caesar

1

THE KARUMUTTU FAMILY

The glorious worth of my descent

SHAKESPEARE, Richard II

Kalaithanthai Karumuttu Thiagaraja Chettiar came of an affluent family of *nagarathars*, or Nattukkottai Chettiars, as they are generally known. The *nagarathars* are a close-knit business community, concentrated in ninety-six villages around Kunnakkudi in Ramanathapuram district in Tamil Nadu. They have a history going back three thousand years. There is historical evidence to show that they had once lived in modern Nagaland and in Mohenjo Daro. They appear to have migrated south and been a flourishing community in Thondainadu (modern Kancheepuram and its surroundings) and Poompuhar in the Sangam period. Around 700 A.D. they seemed to have come down further south and made their home in Ramanathapuram. The area they settled in came to be known as Chettinad.

The *nagarathars* have always been a prosperous community and have occupied a very high place in the social scale. They went abroad to seek their fortune, carrying on their business in Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka), Burma (Myanmar), Malaysia and Singapore. They were successful and made big fortunes. But wherever they have been, they have preserved their identity. Even now we can see the community prospering in Malaysia and Singapore. Back home they built huge mansions in their villages and the Chettinad architecture that developed is a marvel. *Nagarathars* have been known for their frugality, but they have been great philanthropists as well. They are deeply religious and their life is closely bound with temples, which are an essential part of Hindu religion

and Tamil culture. In the olden days, kings looked after their construction and maintenance. In the modern days, it has been mainly the *nagarathars* who have taken it upon themselves to preserve these symbols of our culture. They are Saivaites, and it is their custom to set apart a portion of their earnings for Lord Siva and use the money for constructing new temples and renovating old ones. In this way, they have played a crucial role in preserving our religious and cultural heritage. They started and maintained several Veda patasalas, traditional residential schools for teaching the Hindu scriptures.

2

The ancestral home of the Karumuttu family is Karungulam, a small village on the outskirts of Pattamangalam in the old Ramanathapuram district. One of the ninety-six villages or small towns that have been the traditional homes of *Nagarathars*, Pattamangalam is sacred to Lord Siva, who is worshipped there as Dakshinamoorthy, the Universal Teacher. In the form of Dakshinamoorthy, the lord sits in an informal pose, with one hand raised in a gesture of explanation. The place is celebrated in Manickavasagar's *Tiruvacakam* as Pattamangai. Kalaithanthai's forebears lived in Karungulam, and, in Athikkadu Thekkur, to which they moved later, they are even now referred to as '*Karungulathars*'.

The Karumuttu family moved to Athikkadu Thekkur in the second half of the nineteenth century, but they have kept up their connection with their old ancestral place. They visit Karungulam at Least once a year, generally around Mahasivarathri, and offer worship at the shrine of their family deity, Thottiathu Karuppar at Kathapattu, close to Karungulam. It is their custom to conduct the tonsure and cradle ceremony for newborn children at the shrine. They offer this deity *ghee* made from the first milk obtained from their cows after the birth of a calf. They periodically set aside money for the temple, which they take with them when they go to worship there. They regularly make vows to the family deity and fulfil them. They make it a point to worship at the shrine on

important occasions - before functions in the family, before going abroad, when starting any new business and particularly on Sivarathri days.

It is these customs that preserve the family's link to their ancestral home.

The Karumuttu family deity, Thottiyathu Karuppar, is also known as "Malayalathu Thottian", Thottiam being a place in Kerala. Karuppan, Muthukaruppan and Karuppiyah are common names in the families here.

Kalaithanthai's grandfather was Karuppan Chettiar and father was Muthukaruppan Chettiar. The family name *Karumuttu* is a portmanteau word formed by joining the first parts of the two names - grandfather's and father's.

Muthukaruppan Chettiar's mother was from Athikkadu Thekkur. She died when he was still a child, and Muthukaruppan Chettiar stayed back at Thekkur with his maternal uncle. Thenceforth, Athikkadu Thekkur became the Karumuttus' home. Athikkadu Thekkur got its name from being south of Athikkadu, a forest abundant in *Athi*, a plant sacred to Lord Siva.

3

The *nagarathars*' traditional business is money lending. It used to be said, albeit in jest, that a chettiar's main interest lay in the interest his money would fetch and in making money breed money. Muthukaruppan Chettiar thought differently. He was firm that no member of his family should do money-lending business. Determined to break the tradition, he chose to enter textile business. Those were days when fabrics had mostly to be imported from England. The Karumuttu family imported different types of clothes and sold them in Ceylon and India. They had a shop in Nagapattinam. They had a business house in Colombo, too, known as the "Karumuttu House". Muthukaruppan Chettiar was progressive in his outlook and was a man of high principles. A strict vegetarian himself, he infused vegetarianism in his children. He undertook several projects for the good of the community. He laid the road connecting A.Thekkur with the Madurai highway and attempted to connect Thekkur with Peria Maruthupatti in the south.

Muthukaruppan Chettiar's first wife was Meenakshi Achi. After her death, he married Vinaitheerthal Achi from the Al.A.Al. family of Kandavarayanpatti. She bore him ten children - four sons and six daughters. Kalaithanthai was the youngest. All the children distinguished themselves and brought fame to the family. All of them were full of a reformist spirit and did much to fight many of the social evils prevalent in the community.

4

Kalaithanthai's eldest brother was Karumuttu Arunachalam Chettiar. He possessed great business acumen. He had a deep interest in architecture. He was very knowledgeable about textiles; by merely looking at a fabric he could tell the quality of the yarn used, its count and weight. He was an expert in assessing the quality of diamonds too. He looked after the family business at Colombo.

The second brother was Karumuttu Alagappa Chettiar. He passionately loved Tamil and Tamil Literature and patronized Tamil poets and scholars. He was the founder-president of the Melai Sivapuri Divine Life Society. He was in charge of the temple renovation undertaken by the family at Sikkal. He was interested in social reform and set himself to rid the community of certain bad customs. It seemed to have been the practice in *nagarathar* weddings for an elderly man to tie the *tali*. Thanks to Alagappa Chettiar's persistent campaign, the practice was given up. He also brought about changes in the dress code of the women in the community. They didn't use to wear a blouse or top before. He was a friend of Pandithamani Kathiresan Chettiar, and worked with his brother Chinniah Chettiar to bring about the reforms. He campaigned, unsuccessfully though, against the custom of sacrificing animals at temple festivals. He was a member of the taluk board at Tirpputtur. He laid the road from Thekkur to Kandavarayanpatti.

Ramanathan Chettiar, the third brother left for England in 1904 - the first from the community to go to London. He started a business there in 1908 and, two years later took his two sons with him. The family lost touch with him. He seems to have carried on

business in Europe and America and returned to India around 1940 to settle in Pune. He is said to have supplied the equipment for the commissioning of the first AIR station in the country.

Muthukaruppan Chettiar had six daughters - Nachammai, Meenakshi, Kalyani, Seethai, Kannathal and Unnamalai. Of these, Seethai Achi married into Poolankurichi and the others into Kandavarayanpatti. Seethai Achi's son V.S.Rm. Valliappa Chettiar was a member of the Madras Legislative Council. He, his sister and sister's husband Karumuttu Sivalingam Chettiar were members of the Ramnad District Council. All three were grandchildren of Muthukaruppan Chettiar. It was a rare distinction for any family in those days.

5

Kalaithanthai's eldest son, Sundaram Chettiar, graduated in Commerce from Calcutta University and assisted his father in his business. He was the secretary of Sree Meenakshi Mills and correspondent of Thiagarajar College for several years. Very humane in his approach to people, he was loved by workers and students alike. He was deeply interested in Tamil Literature. He was instrumental in starting the Lions Club of Madurai and was its president and later district governor.

Manickavasagam Chettiar, the second son, studied at Loyola College in Madras and got the B.A. degree. Having studied Tamil Literature under Varada Nanjaiah Pillai, he was deeply interested in literary research and wrote several books. His book on *Kambaramayanam* was widely acclaimed. He was secretary of Thiagarajar College and Thiagarajar College of Engineering for many years. He took an active interest in education and was mainly responsible for the introduction of postgraduate courses in colleges outside Madras. He carried on a campaign for abolishing Pre-university courses

at colleges. Kalithanthai made him editor of *Tamil Nadu*, the Tamil daily that he started. He was president of the Madurai-Ramnad Chamber of Commerce and also of the Mill Owners' Association. He was district governor of the Rotary Club.

Of the daughters, Meenakshi Achi married M.S.Chockalingam Chettiar of Poolankurichi. They have three sons and three daughters. Saraswathi Achi married C.S.N.L.Narayanan Chettiar of Kandaramanickam. They have four sons and two daughters. Rukmini Achi married M.Shanmugam Chettiar of Kallal. They have five sons. She was the first woman graduate in the *nagarathar* community. All the three daughters are highly accomplished and cultured.

CHILDHOOD AND LIFE IN COLOMBO

The promise of his greener days

SHAKESPEARE, Henry V

Kalaithanthai Karumuttu Thiagaraja Chettiar was born on 16.6.1893, as the youngest son of Muthukaruppan Chettiar. As is the custom in Hindu families, the child's horoscope was cast soon after birth, and the astrologer said that the conjunction of seven planets in the constellation of Gemini in the horoscope indicated that the child would earn in millions and live a glorious life. He also hinted at the possibility of the child becoming an ascetic. The first part of the prediction came true: Kalaithanthai did build a fortune. He was certainly not an ascetic, but had a profound interest in spiritual matters. He was deeply read in Saiva Siddhanta philosophy. Not a day of his life passed without his chanting *Tiruvacakam* and the other *Tirumurais*.

Kalaithanthai's early education was in the traditional village school at A.Thekkur. After three years there, he was taken to Madurai, where the family had a house. He joined Setupati High School in the fourth standard. His contemporary at school was Sir P.T. Rajan, who later distinguished himself in the political field, first as the president of the Justice Party and then as a minister in the Madras Presidency. A friendship developed between the two schoolmates, which lasted throughout their life. Kalaithanthai presided over the eightieth birthday celebrations of Sir P.T. Rajan.

Sir P.T. Rajan went to London to become a barrister. Once, referring to the superior education of P.T.R., Kalaithanthai said, 'mtUld; \$l gbj;jhYk; ehd; Fiwag; gbj;jtd;.' Perhaps he had an unexpressed regret that he was not able to go for higher

studies. He would have made a great lawyer himself. Though he had no formal education in law, he possessed an exceptionally sharp legal acumen, which was the admiration of experts in the field.

2

As a young boy, Kalaithanthai used to go daily to Sri Meenakshi temple and he was drawn to the wonderful sculptures there. The massive structure of the temple fascinated him. He would spend hours studying the sculptures. He developed an interest in architecture, which continued throughout his life, and is reflected in the marvellous buildings he constructed for himself, for his mills and for his educational institutions. In later life, he was never tired of praising the engineering skills of the ancient Tamils.

3

Kalaithanthai lost his father in 1902, when he was only nine and, as generally happens in a Hindu family, he came under the care of his eldest brother, Arunachalam Chettiar, who was twenty-three years his senior. Arunachalam Chettiar was looking after the family business in Colombo and he decided to take his brother with him to Colombo for further studies and for training in business under his direct supervision. Kalaithanthai joined the renowned St Thomas College. The education he received there for eight years, from 1902 to 1910, laid a solid foundation for his future distinctions. He studied under British, Sinhalese and Tamil teachers. He had an excellent training in English. His accent was impeccable and he acquired a mastery over the language. Later, those who listened to him at meetings and conferences marvelled at his articulation. While at college, he took pains to prepare speeches beforehand and rehearse the delivery. He kept up this habit throughout.

Outside school hours, he had lessons in Tamil Literature and Saiva Siddhanta under Chitkailasa Pillai, a Tamil and Sanskrit scholar of great eminence. Pillai belonged to a family of traditional Tamil scholars in Nallur in Jaffna. He was the official poet of Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam. Scholars like C.V.Damodaran Pillai and Navalar

Sababathy had been his students. He had translated *Kalidasa's Sakuntalam* into Tamil. He had taught Saivaite philosophical works to the members of the Vivekananda Sabha, Colombo. Kalaithanthai studied *Tolkappiam*, Sangam works like *Pattupattu*, *Purananuru* and *Kalladam*, and Saiva Siddhanta and Thayumanavar's songs under Chitkailasa Pillai.

His companion in studies was Ponnambalam Arunachalam who belonged to a distinguished family of Ceylon Tamils. He later entered Ceylon Civil Service and served as the Registrar General of Ceylon. He translated Thayumanavar's songs and parts of *Tiruvacakam* into English in his *Studies in Tamil Philosophy and Religion*. His elder brother Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan was as much respected in Ceylon as Mahatma Gandhi was in India. His wife, an Australian, constructed the Kurinji Andavar Temple at Kodaikanal, at a picturesque spot on the hills from where her husband used to worship Palani temple. Incidentally, when I was the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Palani Andavar Koil, it was given to me to make a few structural improvements in the Kurinji Andavar Temple. Ananda Coomarasamy, whose book, *The Dance of Siva*, acquainted the western world with the divine cosmic dance of Lord Nataraja, was also from this family. The members of this family visited Kalaithanthai at Kodaikanal once and were happy to recall their old association.

In Tamil, literature and music are inseparable. Young Kalaithanthai was interested in music but, owing to pressures of business, he had no time to develop the art. His love for music persisted throughout his life as a passion.

4

Kalaithanthai returned to India in 1910. He married soon after. The bride was Visalakshi Achi from the KM family at A.Thekkur. They were an affectionate couple. She was a devoted wife and his partner for thirty-seven years, through the many ups and downs in his life. She was intelligent and quietly efficient. There were occasions when business would keep Kalaithanthai away from home for long periods together and there were times when, concentrating on his business, he would forget his family and leave her to her own devices. She never complained and managed the family alone in those times.

She showed enormous patience and tolerance in times of strain and difficulty. Kalaithanthai always spoke feelingly of her. Shortly after her death, he started the Visalakshi High School at Thekkur in her memory. Later he was to start many high schools, colleges and polytechnics, but this was the first. The beautiful building in which the school is housed now was opened by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru on April 15, 1959.

5

Kalaithanthai went back to Ceylon two years after his marriage to help in the family business. There were about a thousand *nagarathar* families, engaged in business in various parts of Ceylon. In Colombo alone, there were some six hundred business-houses belonging to *nagarathars*. Ninety per cent of them were in Sea Street close to the sea. And the Street came to be known as Chettiar Street. Half of the *nagarathars* living in Colombo followed their traditional business of moneylending. A few had jewellery shops, where they sold new jewellery and the unredeemed jewels with them. Some others imported rice from Burma and South India and sold it to the plantations. The Karumuttus chose a line of their own. They imported sarees and dress fabrics from European countries like England, Holland, Belgium and Germany. They had special dhotis made in Lancashire and Manchester. They would send the specifications for the dhotis - 4 and 8 cubits - and even indicate the patterns for the border. They sent models of dhotis used in weddings. They had their own Karumuttu trademark put on the dhotis. Expensive silk sarees used to be packed in attractive boxes. Dhotis, packed individually in the same way and shipped from England, were known as Colombo Box Dhotis and were in great demand in India too. Arunachalam Bros imported mill cloth rolled in cardboard tubes from Manchester. As long as he was in Colombo, Kalaithanthai used to take hundreds of these to Madurai every year as gifts to friends.

Muthukaruppan Chettiar had started the textile business in Ceylon in 1886 and it was run under the family name 'Karumuttu'. Two years after his death in 1902, it was changed into a partnership firm called Arunachalam Bros. In 1910, one of the brothers, Karumuttu Ramanathan Chettiar left the partnership. The other brothers continued the

partnership till 1916, when, owing to wartime restrictions and regulations, merchant ships stopped coming to Colombo, and business became impossible. The partnership was dissolved and the three brothers took half a million rupees each as their share, after setting aside one million for the renovation of the Singaravelar temple at Sikkal and one million for their sisters.

Kalaithanthai was fond of recalling one little incident in his life in Colombo, which revealed his brother's great affection for him. It was shortly after he went back to Ceylon and was just taking training in business. One day the manager gave him Rs 5000 to change into smaller currency, and when he brought back the change, there was a shortage of Rs 50. The manager teased him on what he called an "un-chettiar-like" carelessness in money matters. The dejected young man ran away and hid himself in the storehouse of a family friend, C.N.S. Lakshmanan Chettiar, who later started the Mahalakshmi Mills in Madurai. When Arunachalam Chettiar came to know of the incident, he reproved the manager and instituted a search for the young man. The boy was located only the next day. Arunachalam Chettiar was very tender. "This is a trivial matter; don't let it upset you. You have the makings of a millionaire and I am sure you will live a glorious life," he said. His brother's affection touched Kalaithanthai. He had the greatest regard for his brother who was almost like a father to him. Later he gave high positions in his mills to his brother's sons AR.Thiagarajan and Alagappan and also to his son-in-law K.R.Sethuraman.

The year 1914 was a turning point in Kalaithanthai's life. He joined as a correspondent in *The Morning Leader*, an English daily published from Colombo. This was indeed a revolutionary step, considering that even reading a newspaper was frowned

upon by *nagarathars*. In this, Kalaithanthai was a trailblazer. Later several members of the community were to take to journalism and make a success of it. His work involved attending political meetings and government offices and gathering news and editing them. This was a valuable experience. He owed his felicity in expression and his passion for perfection in writing to his two years' experience in the journalistic field. He soon rose to be an assistant editor. That was the time of the First World War and his work brought him valuable knowledge.

As a journalist, he studied the working and living conditions of the Indian immigrant labour in the tea and rubber plantations of Ceylon and was the first to raise his voice on their behalf. In this he was inspired by Mahatma Gandhiji's fight for the rights of Indians in South Africa suffering under the apartheid policy of a tyrannical government.

He worked in the newspaper for two years. He became homesick and longed to return to India. It was a remarkable coincidence that Gandhiji and Kalaithanthai returned to their homeland in the same year - 1916.

7

Kalaithanthai's first thought on returning to India was to devote himself to social service. He wrote to the Madras Governor about the difficulties of the migrant labour of Indian origin in Ceylon. The letter is preserved in the government archives. He started a campaign to help the plantation workers in Ceylon. This brought him into contact with Mrs Annie Besant, who was the supreme leader of the Indian National Movement until Gandhiji came on the scene. Annie Besant *was* the President of the Indian National Congress in 1917 in Calcutta and Kalaithanthai attended the annual Congress Session.

After some hesitation, Kalaithanthai decided to start a business and do it in

Madurai. He set up his home in Madurai. By deciding to start a textile mill, he made his own contribution to the National Movement. At a time when foreign domination had suppressed native industries and the country had to depend on England for everything including textiles, Kalaithanthai showed that she could produce her own cloth and regain her old glory. And their family had been in the business of importing textiles from England!

A nationalist to the core, Kalaithanthai wore only the traditional Indian costume - the panchakacham and kurta. He was never seen in a Western dress. But his elegant bearing made people call him a “Dorai”, which means ‘a European gentleman’.

LABOUR LEADER

Sir, all this service

Have I done since I went

SHAKESPEARE, *The Tempest*

While all know Kalaithanthai as an industrialist who built up a textile empire, few would know that he was in his early days a labour leader and fought for the cause of the immigrant Tamil labourers who worked in the tea and rubber plantations in Ceylon. It is all the more remarkable when we remember that he neither owned a plantation nor was a labourer in any plantation. None of his family were in any way connected with the plantations. Impelled purely by altruistic motives, he took upon himself the responsibility of fighting for the cause of the helpless workers.

1

In the course of colonizing South East Asia, the Europeans established hundreds of rubber and tea plantations and sugarcane fields in the countries they colonized. They set up rubber plantations in Malaysia, tea and rubber plantations in Ceylon and sugarcane fields in Fiji and other islands, and they needed a large workforce. They got them mostly from India. And these Indians, thousands of men, women and children, who had been attracted by the prospect of making money, had to eke out their livelihood in miserable conditions. With no hopes of getting back to their motherland, they suffered untold hardships. The European owners were slave drivers. Gandhiji's disciple, Rev. C.F. Andrews, drew attention to the sufferings of the workers in the sugarcane fields in the Fiji islands. His account stirred the anger of the people in India but they could do little. The great Tamil poet Subramania Bharathi wrote a moving poem, *On the Sugar-cane Fields*, on the desperate plight of the emigrant Indian workers.

The lot of the Indians working in the plantations in Ceylon was no better. Young Kalaithanthai's heart went out to the suffering workers. His work as a correspondent in *The Morning Leader* had brought him face to face with the conditions in the plantations, and he decided to devote himself to the welfare of the workers. He was hardly twenty-two and he threw himself into their cause with all the fervour and impetuosity of youth.

The tea and rubber plantations in Ceylon are concentrated in the central mountainous part of Ceylon and are the main source of wealth for the country and the backbone of its economy. All these plantations belonged to Europeans then and most of the workers were Tamils, who had come in the hope of 'making their fortune'.

The recruitment was done by brokers who were known as *kanganies*, who worked on a commission basis, getting anywhere between 10 and 45 rupees for every recruit. The *kangany* would come to India every six months and visit villages in search of prospective workers. He had the gift of the gab and would paint a glorious picture of Ceylon, calling it a *paradise* on earth. Many villagers would be tempted, but how could they go to Ceylon with no money? The *kangany* would offer a loan for the journey and for immediate expenses. The people would be taken in and come to look upon him as a saviour. They would start on their journey with high hopes. And what a shock they had when they landed in Ceylon! They would be known as 'coolies'. They were denied even civil rights. They could not get citizenship in Ceylon and were no better than slaves. They had to work for 12 hours a day on very meagre wages. The *kangany* would have a stranglehold on them, as they would be unable to repay his loan. Unable to bear the suffering, many of them would run away, but they would be caught and punished. There was no chance of their going back to India. There was also the horrible custom of branding the coolies, as cattle were. And punishment was heavy for even petty offences. Fines and flogging were common.

The degrading and disgraceful conditions of the plantation workers roused

Kalaithanthai to fury. He started a movement to champion their cause. He wrote articles in newspapers, exposing the fraudulent ways of the *kangany*, whom he described as the embodiment of deceit, and the inhuman conditions in which the plantation workers toiled. Once in the clutches of the *kangany* there was no hope of release for them. Kalaithanthai brought to light the injustice done to the workers. He showed how their suffering began even at the quarantine camp at Mandapam. He organised protests and produced reports on the conditions of the workers.

The articles and reports of Kalaithanthai were naturally embarrassing to the British government in Ceylon, and they began inquiring into his antecedents. The Bureau of Investigation was asked to keep a tab on him. The British owners of the plantations resented Kalaithanthai's interference and came to regard him as their enemy.

3

Kalaithanthai's articles, however, did have some effect. There was a public outcry and the Madras government was forced to appoint a Commission in 1913 to enquire into the conditions of the Indian workers in Ceylon and Malaya. It was a two-man commission. One member was Marjorie Banks, an English I.C.S. officer and the other was Khan Bahadur A.K.G. Ahamed Tampi Maraikkayar Sahib Bahadur, a Muslim millionaire. The Commission was to examine at first hand the conditions of the plantation workers in Ceylon and Malaya and submit its report and recommendations.

The Commission's report came out after four years in 1917. It went the way of all such reports: nobody paid any attention to it. There was an exception. Kalaithanthai studied the report carefully and thoroughly, not missing even trivial details. He felt that it was imperative that he should write a rejoinder to it. He had not been a news correspondent for nothing. He had become a writer when he was twenty and knew the

power of the pen. He had a good analytic mind and the patience to wade through details and had great power of expression. And, most important, he had the rare courage to speak out. The rejoinder shows Kalaithanthai's mettle.

What stands out in the rejoinder is Kalaithanthai's fearlessness. He freely expressed his views, fearing neither the British plantation owners nor the British government. What prompted him was his concern for the poor workers. It was the same concern that was later to impel him to start Sree Meenakshi Mills.

The rejoinder appeared under the title '**A Whitewashing Commission**'. That was how Kalaithanthai described the Commission. He made a point-by-point criticism of the report. The criticism was based on an independent study of the conditions in the plantations, which he had made.

Kalaithanthai made several charges against the Commission. First they did not know how a report should be written. It required a certain courage to say this of a team with an I.C.S. officer for a member. Secondly, there was no indication that the Commission, which had been appointed to enquire into the conditions of the workers, had ever met them or taken the trouble to ascertain their views. Again, of the two thousand and more plantations, the Commission had visited only six, and there too, they had not made any attempt to ascertain the views of the workers. Next, the report was silent on the role of the *kanganies*. Further, the Commission had tried to gloss over the poor wages of the workers by taking into account only the wages given for pruning, which was a seasonal job. And its observation that the cost of living in Ceylon was less than that in India was contrary to the truth.. Kalaithanthai pointed out twenty-four such defects in the Commission's report. The full text of the report is given in *Appendix 1*. He did not stop with this. He himself made a firsthand study of the conditions of the workers and brought out a detailed report.

Many newspapers in India and Ceylon published his report. There was universal praise for Kalaithanthai's selfless interest in the workers' welfare. In its editorial on March 7, 1917, *The Hindu* wrote that the Madras and Indian governments should accept the well-authenticated report of Karumuttu Thiagaraja Chettiar and reject the Marjorie Banks-Ahamed Tambi Marakkayar report. On the same day Mrs Annie Besant wrote in *The New India*: 'A study of Thiagaraja Chettiar's report along with Marjorie Banks-Ahamed Marakkayar's will force the conclusion that the latter need not have gone to Ceylon to make such a report.' There was an editorial on the reports in the next day's issue also. Following is a part of it:

It would be good if some private individual with an interest in social service could go to Malaya and acquaint us with the truth about the conditions of immigrant labour there. It is clear that the Commission appointed by the government had met just a few willing plantation owners. The Commission reports that the condition of workers in Malaya is better than in Ceylon. If there had been someone like Mr Karumuttu Thiagarajan in Malaya to give us the true picture, he would have given the lie to this part of the report also.

The Indian Patriot also wrote on the same lines.

The next year Kalaithanthai appeared before the Immigrant Labour Committee in Ceylon and gave evidence on the sufferings of the Indian workers. It is given in *Appendix 2*.

The effect of it all was that for several years Kalaithanthai was the acknowledged leader of the labour movement in the plantations in Ceylon. As a result of his efforts, the workers gained many rights. Branding was given up. They came to have voting rights. Their working hours were reduced from twelve to eight. It cannot be denied that Kalaithanthai was mainly responsible for the mitigation of the sufferings of the workers. Thanks to him, the workers came to have a measure of respect and dignity in their life.

Kalaithanthai spent seven years of his early career fighting selflessly for the cause of workers. He had no patience with the latter-day labour leaders, who, he felt, were careerists and opportunists interested only in personal advancement and not in the welfare of the workers.

4

SIKKAL SINGARAVELAR TEMPLE

Much to cast down, much to build, much to restore

T.S.ELIOT, Choruses from 'The Rock'

It was in 1920 that the K arumuttu family took up the renovation work of the Singaravelar temple at Sikkal. Though Kalithanthai was not directly involved in the work, it deserves a separate chapter, as it gives us a glimpse into the devotion of the family to public work.

In taking up the renovation work, the family was only following the *nagarathar* tradition. After the ancient Tamil kings, it was the *nagarathars* who had been in the forefront in preserving our temples. In the pre-industrial times, life in the community centred round the temples. 'Don't live in a town that has no temples,' says an old Tamil maxim. Thousands of temples are scattered all over Tamil Nadu. Most of these temples had been built by the ancient Tamil kings and chieftains at different times. With the passage of time and with foreign invasions, many of the temples were neglected and tended to fall into ruins. According to the *agama sastras*, the temples should be periodically renovated and consecrated. The *nagarathars* took it upon themselves to do the renovation. They developed their own style of architecture and rebuilt the old temples. They selected Siva temples celebrated in the devotional songs of the *Saivaite* saints and took up the reconstruction work with dedication. The beautiful *mandapam* with the sculptured pillars in the Sundareswarar *sannidhi* in the Sri Meenakshi Temple at Madurai was built by Vainagaram Nagappa Chettiar and his brother some three hundred years ago.

Sikkal is close to Nagappattinam in the old Tanjore district where the Karumuttu family had their business. The word *chetty* in Tamil refers to Lord Muruga, and as members of the *chettiar* community, the Karumuttu brothers undertook the renovation work of the Singaravelar temple at Sikkal as it was close to their place of business.

According to *Kanda Puranarn*, Lord Muruga was born to rid the world of Surapaduman, a demon king, who had been terrorizing all the three worlds. According to the story, Muruga's mother, Parasakthi gave her son a spear (*Vel*) for killing the demon.

And it was in Sikkal that Muruga received the *Vel*.

The Singaravelar temple is part of the Siva temple at Sikkal and it stands on an artificial hillock. It was built by the Chola king, Kocchengotcholan in the fourth century A.D. The construction seems to have taken thirty-five years. Later kings who ruled from Tanjore, notably the Nayaks, seem to have made endowments to the temple. It is a temple that has been sung by Tirugnanasambandar and Saint Chidambaranar of Kanchi. The name of the god is *Navaneetheshwarar* and the goddess is *Velnedumkannal*. Sikkal is known as an abode of Lord Muruga, and He is here with his two consorts, Valli and Deivanai, and with a *Vel* in his hand. There is a festival here connected with the giving of the *Vel* to Lord Muruga (*Vel vaangudal*) by Parasakti. What happens during the festival is beyond our comprehension, and one might not believe it "without the sensible and true avouch" of one's own eye. At the time when the son rushes to his mother to receive the *Vel*, beads of perspiration can be seen on the idol of Singaravelar. We can only say with Hamlet,

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than arc dreamt of in your philosophy.

The renovation work undertaken by the Karumuttu family took ten years from 1920 to 1930. Kalaithanthai did not take active part in the work. It was his second brother Karumunu Alagappa Chettiar who supervised the work and completed it to everyone's admiration. The family spent a million rupees on it, which will easily be equivalent to a hundred million today. The floor was paved with Italian marble. The chief tower has seven tiers and has a majestic appearance. The family also made gold mounts (*vahanas*) for the idols. These were the admiration of the foreign delegates of the Second World Tamil Conference at Madras, some of whom were keen to take them to their country to be exhibited at cultural festivals.

During the festivals, music concerts would be conducted on a grand scale. For such concerts and for celebrating marriages, Alagappa Chettiar constructed a permanent hall with iron pillars. This did not satisfy the aesthetic taste of Kalaithanthai, who, in a lighter vein, ascribed the not-so-good construction to Alagappa Chettiar's fear of the evil eye.

There are statues of Karumuttu Alagappa Chettiar and his wife in the temple.

Kalaithanthai tried in 1946 to get back the hereditary trusteeship of the temple and rebuild it but did not succeed. However, God's blessings have no limit. The Karumuttu family have been able to participate in the periodic renovation of the temple. And now, in 2003, my son, Karumuttu T Kannan, along with Alagappa Chettiar's grandson, Sri Murugappan, has undertaken the renovation of the temple.

Perhaps it was the family's devotion to Lord Muruga and their successful renovation of the temple at Sikkal that got me the position as the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Palani Dhandayuthapani temple. My son T. Kannan too has been equally blessed: he has been Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Tirupparankundram Subramanyaswamy temple twice in the last decade.

SREE MEENAKSHI MILLS

Thou hadst one aim, one business, one desire.

MATTHEW ARNOLD, *The Scholar Gipsy*

Kalaithanthai returned from Ceylon in 1916 and set up his home in Madurai. He wavered for nearly five years about his future. On the one hand, he wanted to continue his work as a champion of the oppressed and devote himself to social service. On the other hand, as one belonging to a business community, he had an inner urge to start some business. It was an accident that determined his choice.

1

His house was near Harvey Mills (now, Madura Coats). He had interest in the trade union movement and was engaging himself in the welfare of the workers. There was a major strike in the Harvey Mills in 1921, which resulted in a large number of workers losing their jobs. The helpless workers approached several eminent Indian businessmen and appealed to them to start a mill and give them employment but no one came forward. The thought of competing with an English company was daunting. Eventually, Kalyanji Ramji, a Gujarati businessman, who owned Kalyani and Sons at Madras, offered to start a mill at Madurai as a unit of his company, provided Kalaithanthai agreed to be a director. That was how Sree Meenakshi Mills was born. Besides Kalaithanthai, there were three other directors - the Congress leader, Andhra Kesari Sri T.Prakasam, the Raja of Sivaganga and the Devakottai Zamindar AL.AR. Narayanan Chettiar. Immediately, however, the mill ran into trouble. Not enough share capital was forthcoming — only Rs 65000 could be collected. The mill could not start production, but, on the contrary, accumulated a huge debt. Kalyanji Ramji felt he had burnt his fingers and wished to get out. He appealed to Kalaithanthai to take over the

mills. Kalaithanthai took charge in 1923. It was, however, another four years before the mills could start production. The workers were mainly the retrenched employees of the Harvey Mills, whom Kalaithanthai wanted to help.

This was how a labour leader was transformed into an industrialist.

2

Kalaithanthai was a stranger to the manufacturing side of the textile industry. The odds against him were heavy. In Tamil Nadu, the industry was dominated by Britishers — the Binnys in Madras, the Stanes in Coimbatore and the Harveys in Madurai — and all of them had been in the field for long. Besides, they belonged to the ruling class. Kalaithanthai entered the business without any of their advantages but on the contrary, with a lot of handicaps. But he brought to his work a sense of commitment and with patience, wisdom and innate business sagacity, he slowly built up what was really a textile empire.

The first ten years were a period of trial. There was crisis after crisis. Many were the occasions when he was tempted to close down the mills. Only his sense of commitment and fear of disgrace kept him back.

3

The first step was to find the capital. Throughout 1924, Kalaithanthai went from village to village in Chettinad and by his tireless efforts succeeded in collecting a share capital of Rs 24 lakhs. His Ceylon connection helped. There were many who had been his friends in Ceylon and had done business with the Karumuttu family there, and they readily bought shares. They all considered it a privilege to be shareholders in a company run by a member of the Karumuttu family. The father of S.Thondaman, who later became a leader of the plantation Tamil workers and a minister in Sri Lanka, was an example. It is a measure of the respect that Kalaithanthai commanded among his own community that many of his *nagararhar* friends, like Pudukkottai EMM, Pallathur AMM, Devakottai AVK., Kandavarayanpatti VR.KR., Natchandupatty P.RM.RM.CM., and

Mithilapatty N.PL.CH, not only bought shares themselves but helped in marketing them. For example, Paganeri K.SP.S. Kathiresan Chettiar, who had been a friend of the family in Kandy and been connected with them in business, went from village to village canvassing shares. Kalaithanthai would stipulate the number of shares each prospective buyer should buy and Kathiresan Chettiar was so loyal to Kalaithanthai that he would not rest till he had achieved the target.

4

The next step was to find a suitable location for the mills. Kalaithanthai purchased 20 acres of land in Andalpuram on the Tirupparankundram Road for putting up the factory. Aware that he was new to the field, he set about the work methodically. He went to different parts of India to personally study the workings of well-known mills. Then he himself drew up a building plan for Sree Meenakshi Mills. He always went in for the best talent to help him. To oversee the construction of the building for his mill, he appointed Mr Nageswara Iyer, a civil engineer of wide experience. Mr Nageswara Iyer had worked in the District Corporation, had gone to Nepal to lay the roads in the Himalayan kingdom, and later had laid the ghat road in Tirumala-Tirupati. Kalaithanthai designed the factory building after consulting him and other Indian and European engineers.

5

Then there was the work of procuring the machinery. Though Kalaithanthai had no formal education in mechanical engineering, he studied the working of the machines with the help of various mechanical engineers and soon became so much of an expert that he could give instructions on the erection of the machines himself. He attended to the minutest details in the installation of the machinery. He would say that the machines should be in perfect rows and would not allow the slightest irregularity in the arrangement. He constantly upgraded the old machines and improved the buildings. He wanted Sree Meenakshi Mills to be always modern and constantly introduced new machines, discarding the old ones. No financial constraints deterred him, when it came,

to modernizing the mills. The Water Tube Boiler and Steam Turbine installed in Sree Meenakshi Mills in 1927, for example, was a revolutionary engine in those days.

Machinery for the mills were procured from the agents of Howard and Bullow at Bombay and from Dobson and Burlow. In the beginning there were 24000 spindles. Kalaithanthai had great business acumen and knew how to deal with the suppliers of machinery. A good bargainer, he could beat the supplier down to his own terms.

6

Sree Meenakshi Mills started production on May 4, 1927. To begin with, 14.5 bales of 20.5 count yarn were produced per day from 10000 spindles. The yarn was of standard quality, superior to the yarn from any other mill in India. Kalaithanthai knew that the only way to survive competition from Harvey Mills was to concentrate on quality. He was particular that the yarn produced in Sree Meenakshi Mills should in every way be superior to the yarn of Harvey Mills. He went for the best quality cotton. His group of mills produced yarn of different counts.

Sree Meenakshi Mills yarn became very popular, though it was more expensive than the yarn of other mills. It was sold the day it was produced. The demand could not be met. To increase production, night shift had to be introduced. Kalaithanthai was one of the first to introduce night shift in spinning mills in India.

7

Soon, Kalaithanthai became interested in cotton farming in the southern districts and was largely responsible for the increase in cotton farming areas in Theni, Virudhunagar, Sankarankoil and Kovilpatti and surroundings. He would meet cotton growers and give them suggestions on increasing production. He would point out the advantages of improving the quality of the cotton. He would instruct his mills to procure all the cotton produced in the southern districts and go in for cotton from Andhra, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat (upcountry cotton) only after exhausting the local source.

For very nice yarn (of a high count), high quality cotton imported from abroad

would be needed. There was a notebook for standing instructions in the mill and imported cotton could be purchased only if there were instructions in Kalaithanthai's own hand. Later when the number of mills increased, the mills needed 1, 00,000 bales of Indian and 10,000 bales of imported cotton a year.

Sree Meenakshi Mills was able to get cotton from reliable cotton farmers. Other mills that were not so lucky would often approach Kalaithanthai for help.

The land around Sattur and Kovilpatti is rich in black soil, ideal for the growth of cotton. The Britishers called the cotton grown in these areas 'Tinnys' and throughout the nineteenth century shipped it to England. Tuticorin was the port. The farmers took the cotton in carts to Tuticorin. The roads in Tuticorin through which the carts moved still bear the names Great Cotton Road and West Cotton Road, though the export of cotton stopped long ago. The export of cotton stopped after Kalaithanthai expanded his mills.

Sree Meenakshi Mills imported Egyptian cotton in a big way. The Economic Ministry in Egypt held a cotton festival biennially and officers from the mills were special invitees at these festivals. The Egyptian government and the Alexandrian Cotton Merchants Corporation made arrangements for representatives of Sree Meenakshi Mills to attend the cotton exhibition in which they introduced new varieties of cotton and exhibited the different stages of cotton growth. The officers went to Uganda and Sudan also on their *way* back.

At a later stage, as its production touched the peak, Sree Meenakshi Mills imported cotton from America too. The director of the Calcot Co-operative in California, which was engaged in cotton export, met Kalaithanthai during a visit to India in 1963, and struck a deal with him. He had learnt from some friends that Kalaithanthai would not compromise on quality and if the cotton was not up to the mark, and if there was the slightest difference between the sample and the cotton sent in respect of quality, Kalaithanthai would even haul him to court. He invited the mills' purchase officers to California to select their requirements and ship them to India. This would save a lot of confusion and ensure a smooth relationship. From 1963, officials from Sree Meenakshi

Mills regularly went to America. On their way back, they would visit Japan to study the working of the mills there and also the position of the cotton trade. Kalaithanthai himself never went abroad.

8

Even as he was struggling to find his feet in the business, Kalaithanthai ventured into related fields. He started ginning factories to process the cotton. He purchased ginning factories at Nalattinputtur, Dindigul, Salem and Virudhunagar. He built a factory himself at Rajapalayam.

When Japan entered the Second World War, all the Japanese interests in India were taken over by the Indian government. The custodian of enemy property who was in charge of them auctioned them at Bombay. Kalaithanthai sent one of his officers, Mr C.V. Rangachari, to Bombay to buy up the ginning factories of the Japanese in Virudhunagar and Sattur. He was able to get them very cheap. He installed new machinery and increased the capacity of the mills. He put up new buildings and had reliable people to work for him.

Kalaithanthai started a new company, The East India Corporation, and brought all the ginning factories under it.

9

Kalaithanthai had his own method in selling yarn, preferring to sell it to users. His early customers were the Madura Knitting Mills, which produced vests and briefs, and the Kothandaram Weaving Mill, which made dhotis and coarse fabrics. He would say that the produced yarn should be sold as soon as possible. There was no point in keeping the stock, resulting in the locking up of capital. It would be a dead investment. At the same time, the yarn should not be thrown away for a song. It is significant that there was no godown in his mills for yarn.

Kalaithanthai never interfered in the working of the sales department. He stopped with formulating general principles and guidelines. Of course, he would be watching the

market conditions and sometimes give valuable advice. The department had complete freedom to sell the yarn to any reliable buyer. When he trusted somebody, he trusted him absolutely.

10

In course of time, Kalaithanthai took charge of several mills. Such was the confidence that people had in Kalaithanthai's management and so sure were they of the quality of the yarn and also of the promptness of delivery that the price of the yarn of those mills that he took over immediately went up. This he achieved by his indefatigable effort, integrity and watchfulness.

Sree Meenakshi Mills produced yarn of 20 and 40 counts. A handloom factory with 40 looms functioning in Madurai was closed down. Kalaithanthai bought the looms and set up a weaving unit in his mills, with the same labourers. Later he bought 20 more looms and built a separate handloomweaving shed and produced dhotis of high quality. These dhotis were very popular in India and abroad. He installed a power loom and produced quality coarse fabric.

11

The first secretary of Sree Meenakshi Mills was Mr N.L. Srinivasan from a well-known Sourashtra family in Madurai. He was related to P.A.P. Kuppusamy Iyer, one of the directors of the mill. He was a graduate and a very knowledgeable person. When he left after three years, Mr C.S. Ramachari (C.S.R., as he was known) took his place. He had worked under Srinivasan for three years. Kalaithanthai had grown to like him.

C.S.R. joined Sree Meenakshi Mills in 1929. He was soon made supervisor of the spinning section. Later he was authorized to make cotton purchases. Gradually the relationship between Kalaithanthai and C.S.R. transcended the level of employer and employee — they became fast friends — 'till death do us part'. Kalaithanthai had often to be away on work connected with the mills, with cotton purchases, to learn the latest trends in the business, to raise money and sometimes even to avoid creditors. At these times, it was C.S.R. who ran the mill. Kalaithanthai only laid down the broad principles.

Only C.S.R. was in his confidence. Nothing in Sree Meenakshi Mills was done without his knowledge or approval. He would leave late after work but be at office promptly at 9 in the morning. Every day he and Kalaithanthai would go to Sri Meenakshi Temple and Tirupparankundram. They would return to the office at nine o'clock at night and continue to work.

In 1956, C.S.R. expressed a desire to start a textile mill himself. Kalaithanthai was happy, and C.S.R. set about *it*. It was difficult for him to leave Sree Meenakshi Mills. He had been with the mills for close on 27 years, and had grown with it. He had become an *alter ego* of Kalaithanthai. Left to himself, he would have continued to serve but Kalaithanthai would not agree, as he knew from his own experience that C.S.R.'s new venture would require all his attention. The two parted very reluctantly and an association of two and a half decades came to an end. It was the end of an era in the history of Sree Meenakshi Mills. It was Kalaithanthai who inaugurated C.S.R.'s mill at Tirunagar. C.S.R.'s Sitalakshmi Mills became the nucleus of a number of mills later.

12

The day-to-day working of the mills was looked after by senior officials who were free to take decisions. Even if some action turned out to be wrong, Kalaithanthai would not think of cancelling it. He would just ask the officers to be careful in future. He never signed cheques. Six senior officers had been authorized to do it. This ensured that the cotton farmers got immediate payment.

The workers had the highest regard for Kalaithanthai. They were amazed at his industry and intelligence. Always they had something new to learn from him. C.S.R. used to say that whatever he knew of textile business he owed to Kalaithanthai. Kalaithanthai was always gentle with the workers and would never get angry even if they were in the wrong. There was certainly no one who could excel him in management skills. Management skills have become a subject of study only in recent years. But he knew the basic principles of management and adopted them. He delegated responsibilities to the higher officials and never interfered in their activities.

He was very accessible - workers, cotton merchants, yarn dealers and others could meet him any time. He would patiently listen to them. He felt that such meetings would be valuable. He never wounded the self-respect of any worker. He was very friendly. He never stood on prestige and when any mistake was pointed out, he would rectify it.

13

Sree Meenakshi Mills needed a spinning superintendent. In those days there was only one institute in the country to give training in textile technology - The Bombay Victoria Jubilee Technical Institute. Kalaithanthai got a lecturer from the institute to work in the Mills. He had a purpose in bringing him. He selected four fresh graduates and took them as trainees in the mill on a stipend. They had their instruction under the new superintendent from Bombay. At the end of the training, they took the test conducted by the City and Guilds of London. Two of them got gold and bronze medals for their proficiency. They were taken into Sree Meenakshi Mills itself. One of them left for the Madura Mills and the other also joined another mill. One officer, L.N.Sundararaman, felt that there was no point in the training programme if the trainees did not stay to serve the mill and so scrapped it. When Kalaithanthai came to know of it, he immediately revived the programme. That the trainees got better opportunities spoke well of the training and that should not be a reason for calling off the programme, he said. He introduced Weaving as an optional subject in the school at A.Thekkur in the very first year. The Thiagarajar Polytechnic at Salem offers the LTM course.

He knew the value of practical training in technology and office administration. He believed in imparting training to students coming out of the academic institutes. In a special interview to Mr S.Y.Nanal, the editor of *The Textile Digest*, he spelt out his views born of experience. He was for the closest possible liaison between textile mills and institutes of textile technology. This would ensure that the teachers were in touch with the industry and the students got good practical training. Sree Meenakshi Mills had embarked on such a relationship with the Victoria Jubilee Institute in Bombay and he was sure that it would be beneficial to both. If we could have a sandwich course in textile

engineering with the mills' co-operation, we could have very good maintenance engineers. The student should spend half the day in the mill and half the day in college, Kalaithanthai would say. He was willing to extend all help for conducting seminars and lectures on matters connected with the textile industry. He would welcome all new developments in textile technology. In fact, he was certain that technology and science were indispensable for the progress of the nation. Kalaithanthai's views are now aired often under 'universityindustry interaction'. But it is rarely acted upon. The full text of the interview is given in *Appendix 3*.

14

Sree Meenakshi Mills expanded steadily. In 1939, 14000 new spindles were introduced, making the total number of spindles 40000. In 1940, it was the largest mill run by an Indian in South India. Sixty percent of the income was paid as tax in 1941 and the next year the tax was 80%. In 1943, the company paid 10% additional dividend to shareholders in the form of a three-year bond. This was because 80% of the income had been paid as tax and another 13% as compulsory deposit. There was, however, an agreement with the Bank of Madura by which the shareholders could redeem the bond after six months.

15

In 1942, the government passed the Yarn Price Control Order. To escape its provisions, Kalaithanthai started the Pudukkottai Company at Pudukkottai, which was an independent State. More than fifty industrialists had opened offices at Pudukkottai, promising to start industries within the State. Only Kalaithanthai started a mill there and ran it efficiently. It was the Thiagesar Mill, a unit of Sree Meenakshi Mills. It was started on the outskirts of Manapparai, within Pudukkottai State limits. Manapparai was a backward area, becoming active only once a week on market days. Thanks to Kalaithanthai's enterprise, it is now an industrial area and a municipal town and taluk headquarters.

The other unit of Sree Meenakshi mills *was* started at Paravai near Madurai in 1956.

16

Sree Meenakshi Mills won wide acclaim. The 1930 report on the industrial growth of Madras Presidency singled out the mills for special praise. The managing director of Yeats and Tom, a leading boiler plant in England visited the mills in 1939 and declared that there were very few mills in India or in England comparable to Sree Meenakshi Mills.

R.Venkatraman, the then Industries Minister of Tamil Nadu, said on 16.3.59, after a visit to the mills, “The spinning section of the mills bears witness to the high level of automation in the textile industry.”

Howard N.Noody, the head of an American trade delegation, who visited the mills declared that he knew of no other mill in India or America equal to Sree Meenakshi Mills in excellence or efficiency of machinery.

Sir A.Ramaswamy Mudaliar wrote this note: “I have seen numerous textile mills in different parts of the world. Sree Meenakshi Mills surpasses all those mills. The beauty of the factory building, the brand-new machinery, the cleanliness, the light and the ventilation enrapture me. Tamil Nadu can well be proud of it.”

Sri Jeyaprakash Narayan admired the Thiagarajar Colony. “I visited Thiagarajar Colony along with Thiagaraja Chettiar. I have seen colonies put up by the state governments. Nowhere else have I seen a colony so well planned. This could be a good model for future colonies for workers.”

17

Up to 1939, Kalaithanthai suffered terribly. He had to struggle hard. He did not cave in. With nothing to support him but his confidence in himself and faith in the future, he came up overcoming obstacles at every stage.

In the beginning, he had to face competition from Harvey Mills. The Europeans could not bear the idea of their Indian counterpart being successful, and did everything in their power to crush Kalaithanthai. They suddenly brought down the price of their yarn. Kalaithanthai was undaunted. He bought up their stock of yarn through his bank and through friends in the yarn trade. He rented a building in South Masi Street to keep the yarn and started a shop to sell it.

His troubles had started in 1929. That was the year of the Great Depression and throughout the world, prices fell and money became scarce. It was almost impossible to raise money. Kalaithanthai's only thought was how to save Sree Meenakshi Mills and make it grow. He forgot his family. He did not worry about his own comforts. There were days when he went without food and sleep. The growth of Sree Meenakshi Mills became an obsession with him.

Kalaithanthai needed one and a half million rupees to carry out his plans for the growth of the Mills. It was impossible to raise such a huge amount. And many of the small creditors pressed Kalaithanthai for repayment. They could not be put off. To clear the small loans, he needed at least half a million rupees. He took a hard decision. He approached Harvey Mills. The managing director had great regard for Kalaithanthai and he readily agreed to advance the money. But there were conditions. Sree Meenakshi Mills had to give bonds for the amount to Harvey Mills. The amount had to be repaid in 10 years in equal instalments of Rs 50000. If, for any reason, it failed to clear the loan in 10 years, Sree Meenakshi Mills would be taken over by Harvey Mills. The London office of Harvey Mills laid down certain additional conditions: Sree Meenakshi Mills should not sell its yarn at less than Harvey Mills yarn and it should not pay the cotton merchants more than Harvey Mills. The agreement was clearly one-sided, but Kalaithanthai had no choice. But he had faith that things would turn for the better.

Harvey Mills were a British company and Britain was ruling India. The directors were moneyed people and they had been in the textile industry for a long time. Kalaithanthai was new to the business and he had no money. The danger of Harvey Mills

absorbing Sree Meenakshi mills was very real. Kalaithanthai was determined not to let this happen.

18

Madurai was agog with rumours. It was given out that Kalaithanthai had sold his mill to the Harveys. What was to be done? Kalaithanthai felt that the only way to scotch the rumour was to repay the loan before the due date. He had to look for another source of money. He met the Secretary of the Indian Bank, Sri Suryasekara Iyer, to seek his help. But the Secretary had no authority to sanction the huge amount Kalaithanthai required. Only the Board of Directors could do it. Fortunately, most of the directors owed their position to Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar, the Founder of the bank. When Kalaithanthai approached him, he was sympathetic but said that he would decide after visiting the mill. Kalaithanthai took him round every section of the mill. Sir Annamalai Chettiar was impressed. He had just given up his directorship of the Indian Bank and in view of the Silver Jubilee celebrations of the bank coming up after two months, his son, Rajah Sir Muthiah Chettiar, had been elected Chairman of the Board of Directors. Twenty days after the Silver Jubilee celebrations, Sir Muthiah Chettiar paid a formal visit to the mill and sanctioned the loan at the next board meeting. Kalaithanthai was ever grateful to the Rajah's family for helping him at a critical time.

By this time Sree Meenakshi Mills had paid the first two instalments of their dues to Harvey Mills. With the prospect of getting the sanctioned loan within the next ten or fifteen days, Kalaithanthai intimated to Harvey Mills that he would be clearing the loan in the next few days. Harvey Mills stuck to the terms of the loan whereby the loan could be repaid only in ten instalments. They said that there was no provision for prepayment of the debt. Kalaithanthai wired to the London office.

The London office advised its Madurai office to accept repayment if it was made within thirty days, failing which the original schedule should be insisted on. Kalaithanthai paid the amount within the period and got back the mill. In the annual

report, he said that whenever the mill met difficulties, it was able to overcome them and reach new heights.

19

The troubles were not over. But they were not peculiar to him. They were troubles he shared with other industrialists. In 1931 and 32, there was a steep fall in prices all over the world. All industries suffered. The New Deal introduced by Franklin Roosevelt in America was to show its effect only 1936. Many of the companies could not even pay sitting fees for the directors attending board meetings. Such was the financial crunch. In months when the mill worked to full capacity and the yarn price was good, Sree Meenakshi Mills could make a profit of Rs 25000 per month. Kalaithanthai knew that he could not realize his dream of making Sree Meenakshi mills the foremost mill in India with this profit.

Kalaithanthai had to face trouble from some of the shareholders. Two of them, V.S.Swaminathan (the son of the great Tamil scholar, Suryanarayana Sastri) and Anantha Padmanahha Sastri distributed leaflets at a shareholders' meeting, holding Kalaithanthai responsible for the loss incurred by the mills. They blamed the loss on his indulging in speculative cotton trading. The President at that meeting, A.M.Murugappa Chettiar, pacified the shareholders by pointing out that all mills were going through difficult times. Some of the shareholders, ignorant of the intricacies of the industry, spread the rumour that Kalaithanthai's losses were heavy and there was no chance of his recovery.

There was trouble from the workers too, most of whom had been with the Harvey Mills and had lost their jobs during the strike there before Sree Meenakshi Mills was started. In fact, one of the considerations that had weighed with Kalaithanthai in starting his mill was his concern for them. Under their leader, Varadarajulu Naidu, the workers would resort to frequent strikes for no reason. Kalaithanthai faced the strikes unruffled and all labour trouble ended by 1939. The Mills had turned the corner.

Kalaithanthai never forgot his sufferings and would often refer to them later. Once

he unveiled the portrait of the industrialist VA. Peri.M. Arunachalam Chettiar at Pallattur. Speaking of Arunachalam Chettiar's achievement, Kalaithanthai said, "Arunachalam Chettiar was my forerunner in industry and had gone through the same stages as myself. He started an industry to make big money. He lost everything and got into debt. He worked patiently, 'taking up arms against a sea of troubles,' and at last became prosperous."

6

BUILDING UP THE EMPIRE

Add more feathers to our wings

SHAKESPEARE, Henry V

By 1939, Sree Meenakshi Mills had tided over all its crises and established itself. After that kalaithanthai never looked back. He expended his business, starting new mills and buying old ones, in Tamilnadu and kerala. Gradually, he built up a textile empire.

1

Sree Meenakshi Mills' growth was phenomenal during the Second World War. Its yarn and cloth entered the international market and it netted huge profits. With a share capital of Rs 15, 00000 and 40000 spindles, it had become a premier mill in the State, and Kalaithanthai set his mind on expansion.

Kalaithanthai put up two mills as units of Sree Meenakshi Mills — the Thiagesar Mills at Manapparai in 1942 and the Sree Meenakshi Mills at Paravai near Madurai in 1956. The Sree Meenakshi group of Mills together had 110000 spindles and the Madurai unit had 400 powerlooms.

Kalaithanthai also started new mills on the outskirts of Madurai in three directions - East, South and North- Rukmini Mills in Silaiman on the Madurai-Ramanathapuram Road, Thiagarajar Mills at Kappalur on the Madurai - Tirumangalam highway and Sivakami Mills at Thenur on the Madurai- Dindigul highway.

2

Kalaithanthai also acquired some old mills.

When the Saroja Mills came up for sale in 1935, Kalaithanthai bought its shares in

partnership with A.M. Muthappa Chettiar of Pudukkottai. They jointly started Muthappa and Co to manage the mill. But there were problems in carrying on the business jointly as Muthappa Chettiar interfered in the day-to-day working of the mills. The problem was solved when the Board of Directors made Thiagaraja Chetty & Co., a company floated by Kalaithanthai, the managing agents.

Sri Rajendra Mills, Salem had an unduly large number Directors, and each directors' meeting was like a shareholders' meeting. It was running at a loss and the share price went down. The directors requested Kalaithanthai to buy the shares and take over the Mills. When he went to Salem to formalize the agreement, they had second thoughts and went back on their request. Kalaithanthai was not offended; instead he offered to help them in running the mill. But within a month, they changed their mind again and handed the mills over to Kalaithanthai. Within a year, Kalaithanthai cleared all the outstanding debts of the mills.

Virudunagar Textiles was originally with A.V. Thomas, who planned it as a spinning mill but it had to turn to weaving, as the State government had surrendered the spindles allotted to the Mills by the Centre, in order to support Khadder. Kalaithanthai bought the Mills from A.V. Thomas and soon its production increased and it turned out new kinds of fabrics.

Loyal Textiles, situated on the high ground of Kovilpatti, belonged to the distinguished E.T. Sasoon group, the then uncrowned monarchs of the industry. A.V. Thomas bought it from them and, unable to run it, sold it to Kalaithanthai. The Mill prospered under Kalaithanthai's management.

People who had started new mills and were unable to manage them always turned to Kalaithanthai for help. Several small textile units had been started around Pudukkottai when it was a separate state. At the request of the owners, Kalaithanthai managed the

Pudukkottai Mills at Namanasamudram, Mahalakshmi Mills at Pudukkottai and Kaveri Mills at Kaveri Nagar for several years.

3

Kalaithanthai extended his business into Kerala also. Seetharam Mills at Trissur was a private mill taken over by the Kerala government. Unable to run it efficiently, the government entrusted it to Kalaithanthai for two years. Dr Rm. Alagappa Chettiar had a mill, Alagappa Textiles, at Trissur. After his death, the trustees of Alagappa College sold it to Kalaithanthai. At that time, plenty of land was available cheap near the mill. Kalaithanthai seized the opportunity. He acquired the land, got new machinery and started the Kerala Lakshmi Mill. He bought shares of Vijayamohini Mills at Trivandrum and became the managing agent. He also bought A.D.Cotton Mills at Quilon and renamed it as Parvathi Mills.

4

The textile empire built up by Kalaithanthai consisted of the following sixteen mills:

Sree Meenakshi Mills, Madurai.

Sree Meenakshi Mills, Paravai.

Thiagesar Mills, Manapparai.

Thiagarajar Mills, Kappalur.

Rukmini Mills, Silaiman.

Sivakami Mills, Thenur.

Saroja Mills, Coimbatore.

Kamala Mills, Coimbatore.

Sarada Mills, Poddanur.

Rajendra Mills, Salem.

Loyal Mills, Kovilpatti.

Virudhunagar Textiles, Sulakkarai.

Alagappa Textiles, Trissur.

Parvathi Mills, Quilon.

Vijayamohini Mills, Trivandrum.

Kerala Lakshmi Mills, Trissur.

BANKING AND INSURANCE

.....and other palms are won

WORDSWORTH, Ode on the Intimations of Immortality

After stabilizing the mills and even while expanding his empire, Kalaithanthai turned his attention to banking and insurance. From his experience he knew how important they were for the growth of industry. The Gujaratis were in the forefront in both banking and insurance businesses. There were over a dozen leading banks, most of them started by North Indian businessmen. In Tamil Nadu there was only the Indian Bank founded by Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar. There was a general desire among the Tamil merchant community to enter the field. But Kalaithanthai Karumuttu Thiagaraja Chettiar was the one person who ventured into the field and achieved success. He started the Bank of Madura and the Madurai Insurance Corporation in 1943.

1

The opening of the Bank of Madura was the fulfilment of a long-cherished dream of Kalaithanthai. Here too he had to pass through hurdles and with his usual diligence and persistence, he built it up as he had built up the mills.

The inauguration of the bank was a low-key affair. It had only three branches when it was started - in Madurai, in Salem and in Pudukkottai. Many of the employees had no prior experience in banking. The Madurai branch functioned in the premises of Sree Meenakshi Mills.

It was under the charge of C.S. Ramachary as practically every section of Sree Meenakshi Mills had been. It was some time before the bank had a full-time secretary in T.T. Pillai, who had served under Sir Jamshedji Poochanwala, the founder of the Central Bank of India

In the beginning, there was not much business to speak of. As it was a small bank, the Reserve Bank would not accord it the status of a scheduled bank. That was a real handicap. All government departments, public sector undertakings, government boards, municipalities, aided institutions, universities, temples, WAQF board and other similar institutions had to transact business only through scheduled banks.

2

Kalaithanthai struggled for sixteen years, and slowly built up the bank, literally brick by brick. He opened branch after branch without any fanfare and gained the confidence of the public. His sagacity came to his aid. He amalgamated small banks that lay scattered. Some of them had hardly half a dozen branches. The following banks merged with the Bank of Madura:

Chettinad Mercantile Bank, Karaikkudi
The Reliance Bank, Madras
The Tiruchirappalli Bank, Trichy
The South India Commercial Bank, Karur
The Ilanchi Bank, Tenkasi
The Mayavaram Bank, Mayuram
The Janopahara Bank, Srirangam
Vettaikkaran Pudur Bank
Bank of Karaikkudi, Karaikkudi

Little by little the Bank grew. It came to have branches in most districts in Tamil Nadu. When Thomcos Bank, Alleppey, merged with it, the Bank of Madura set foot in Kerala.

After thus strengthening the foundation, Kalaithanthai set about the job of making it a scheduled bank. He appointed T.K. Ramasubramanian, a retired officer of the Reserve Bank of India, his bank's secretary, knowing that he would be familiar with the procedure for making it a scheduled bank. He was following the precept of Tiruvalluvar: "Select the man who will deliver the goods and entrust the job to him." He had chosen the right man for the right job. The Bank of Madura became a scheduled bank in 1959, sixteen years after its inception.

From that moment the bank never looked back. Kalaithanthai was as successful in banking as he had been in the textile industry. Many industrial houses and banking corporations invited Kalaithanthai to be on their governing body. But he declined. He was very frank. With all his responsibilities, he would not be able to do justice to fresh assignments. He did not want any position for the position's sake.

When the government enunciated a new banking policy, whereby banks had to focus on social welfare, it also laid down the condition that the Chairman of the Board of Directors should be a full-time servant of the bank. Kalaithanthai gave up his position as Chairman of the bank and severed his connection with the governing body also. Sri L. Krishnan, who had started his service in the Bank of Madura and who had later served in the Reserve Bank of India, became the first Chairman of the bank according to the new policy. As chairman, Kalaithanthai had provided employment to a large number of people, granted advances to many industries and helped people in various other ways.

At its peak, the Bank of Madura had 253 branches, spread over the entire country, and its business portfolio had crossed 570 crores. It celebrated its golden jubilee in March 1993. None can gainsay the fact that the Bank of Madura was Kalaithanthai's child and owed its glory to him. A grandson of Kalaithanthai, Dr K.M. Thiagarajan, became the Chairman and by his dynamism brought it to still greater heights, but at a cost. The bank

merged with the ICICI and lost its identity, though in the process it reached a larger clientele. Perhaps it is an inevitable development in this age of globalization.

5

The factory building, the machinery and the cotton in the godowns in Kalaithanthai's mills were insured against fire and other accidents, and Kalaithanthai found that he had to pay large premiums to the insurance companies. He saw that the insurance companies reinsured the goods with other companies. This sparked off the idea of starting an insurance company of his own. He founded the Madurai Insurance Corporation in 1943. It was started without any fanfare. He insured the goods sent by ship to clients and entered into an agreement with the Norwich Union Agricultural Insurance Company, UK.

Kalaithanthai wanted to enter life insurance business but the government had decided to nationalise the insurance business and did not allow the opening of new insurance companies by private parties.

Kalaithanthai studied the balance sheets of other insurance companies. The Vijaya Sarathi Insurance Company in Kerala was functioning as a life insurance corporation, issuing a Janata policy for Rs 1000. Kalaithanthai merged it with the Madurai Insurance Corporation and issued a life insurance bond for Rs 1000 to his workers. He made arrangements for the company to stand guarantee for loans other than from the Bank of Madura. He always struck out on new paths.

The Madurai Insurance Corporation functioned successfully, before it was nationalized along with other insurance companies in 1973.

When there was a boom in the textile industry, the North Indian capitalists invested their huge profits in sugar and chemical industries. The mill-owners of Coimbatore started engineering industries and bought estates. Kalaithanthai turned to banking and insurance, to journalism and to the educational field.

8

DIVERSIFICATION

.....to fresh woods and pastures new

MILTON, Lycidas

When he had firmly established himself in the textile industry,

Kalaithanthai was led by circumstances to enter fresh fields.

1

Sugar Industry

Kalaithanthai was not very much interested in the sugar industry. Kallal A.M.family had a small sugar mill at Mayilpatti in North Arcot district. They offered it to Kalaithanthai in 1950. But he stopped with giving advice on how to run the factory and sending one of his officers to assist. But he was soon drawn into the industry. Madura Sugars in Pandiarajapuram had obtained advance against shares from Sir James Doak of the A & F Harvey Mills, and subsequently A&F Harvey and Co became the managing agents of Madura Sugars.

On the eve of his departure for England, Doak was arranging to sell his shares to Dalmia. One of the directors, Thiru P.T Rajan, was opposed to the shares being sold to a person outside Tamil Nadu. Doak offered the shares to P.T.R. himself.

When PTR failed to respond, Doak contacted Kalaithanthai. It was a new field but Kalaithanthai, after giving the matter some thought, felt that, as it was a very small factory, he could run it easily. He accepted Doak's offer on condition that he was entrusted with the management of the factory. Unable to make alternative arrangements within the short time available, PTR and Soundarapandian agreed to the proposal and

later sold their shares too to Kalaithanthai. Under Kalaithanthai's management new machines were installed and the production increased greatly.

In Pennadam, the Aruna Sugar Mills possessed an unused license from the Central Government and the Chief Minister Kamaraj wanted Kalaithanthai to start the mills but before Kalaithanthai could act, another industrialist took over the license.

There was a sugar mill on the banks of the Godavari in AP - Tanuku Sugar Mills. The sixteen partners of the factory were divided into two groups and there were constant clashes affecting the working of the factory. Both the groups sold the mill to Kalaithanthai through a broker. Changing the name to Sivakami Sugar Mills, Kalaithanthai invested a few lakhs in it.

2

Pudukkottai Co and Pudukkottai Corporation

In 1942 the Indian Government issued the Yarn Price Control Order. The mills could sell yarn only at the price fixed by the Textile Commissioner.

“For twenty years we have sweated, working against heavy odds and overcoming crisis after crisis and just when we are about to break even, the government interferes. It is not fair,” said Kalaithanthai. “The government seems to say, ‘Heads we win; tails you lose’”

To get over this situation, Kalaithanthai founded the Pudukkottai Company and the Pudukkottai Corporation in Pudukkottai, which was a separate State and beyond the jurisdiction of the Indian government. Sree Meenakshi group of mills sold the yarn to these companies for the price fixed by the Government. They in turn sold it to merchants at the prevailing market rate. Thus the Pudukkottai Company made huge profits. The

Bank of Madura opened a branch at Pudukkottai. Kalaithanthai used the income of the two companies to start new mills and to found educational institutions.

3

P. Orr. & Sons

It is possibly one of the oldest British Companies in India, having been started in 1849. There does not seem to be any company older than this in Madras. Initially it was engaged in selling watches, rifles, guns and instruments for land survey. Then it took up the sale of different types of clocks, precision engineering instruments, silverware, and consumer items and even manufactured some items. Kalaithanthai would often visit this concern to buy various items. It was here that he bought the table used by Robert Clive, who laid the foundation for the British Empire in India. He became acquainted with the directors of the company. One of the British directors sold his shares to Kalaithanthai for Rs 25,000 on the eve of his return to England. Within two months Kalaithanthai got a cheque for Rs 8,000 as dividend for the previous year. Subsequently Kalaithanthai bought more shares of the company. Simpson & Co also had been buying shares of the company and soon Kalaithanthai and Simpson & Co had the same number of shares. The directors of Simpson & Co told Kalaithanthai either to sell his shares to them or to buy theirs. Kalaithanthai bought their shares.

Whatever field of industry he chose, Kalaithanthai was successful because of his keen intelligence, experience in management and the ability to take quick decisions. Now the concerns have spread like a banyan tree and provide employment to countless people.

RELATIVES AND FRIENDS

Most free and bounteous

SHAKESPEARE, Hamlet

We saw how Kalaithanthai entered the textile industry when the odds were very much against him, what with his being new to the field and his having to compete with the Britishers who were not very happy with an Indian challenging their supremacy. But with characteristic tenacity, he struggled and established himself in the industry. He had to struggle for more than fifteen years but at the end he had his reward.

1

There is a verse in *Tirukkural* that says that there is no pleasure in this world or the next equal to the joy of being helpful to those around you. Kalaithanthai exemplified it in his life. He helped his friends and relatives generously. He took his relatives into the mills and gave them valuable training and good positions. He encouraged some of them to take up the business of selling yarn. He appointed many of his relatives to various positions in his mills, bank and insurance company. Countless were the *nagarathars* who benefited from Kalaithanthai, got jobs, received higher education, or started industry with his help.

2

Nagarathars needed help just at the time that Kalaithanthai had become successful. There was demand for rice in East European countries throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the supply was mostly from India and Burma. But the ships had to take the long route round the Cape of Good Hope and the freight charges were high. But with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1885, the distance

was reduced by 5000 km. Rice export became lucrative business and the *nagarathars* who were in business in Burma, a part of British India then, took to it in a big way. They became very prosperous. However, it all came to an end dramatically during the Second World War. On Dec 7, 1941 Japan bombed Pearl Harbour and America entered the War, which now spread to South East Asia. All traffic between India and the South East Asian countries - Burma, Thailand, Indo-China, Malaya, and Indonesia - stopped. The communications, were also disrupted. This was a blow to the *nagarathars*, who were ill prepared for the development. Millionaires became paupers overnight. Those who had donated liberally to charities had now to look for charity. Those who had given jobs to others now wanted jobs for their children. The womenfolk who had remained in Chettinad suffered. The reason was that *nagarathars* had almost all the cash and other property in foreign countries only. They had only built huge houses in Chettinad. They used to send money for household expenses once in three months through Pay Orders. For this there were *hawala* shops in 40 of the Chettinad villages. *Nagarathars* did not keep much money in India, as they did not want to lose on interest. The idea that they should go abroad to make money was ingrained in them. So too, the tendency to engage in risk-free business. M.P. Sivagnanam used to say that because of this cautious attitude of the Chettiars most of the big business houses in Madras belong to non-Tamils.

Kalaithanthai was the one exception to this general outlook of Chettiars. He had taken up the textile business full of risk and built it up successfully. Early in his life he had gone to Ceylon to take part in the family business but once he came back to India he never went abroad. Even when the Reserve Bank of India gave clearance to the Bank of Madura to open branches overseas, Kalaithanthai did not do it.

The spread of the Second World War to South East Asia threw the life of *nagarathars* out of gear. Their activities literally came to a standstill. They could not conduct marriages on the large scale they used to. They had to leave the magnificent buildings they had started, unfinished. Those who had undertaken the renovation of the temple at Rameswaram could not complete it. Many were reduced to the level of

demolishing their houses and selling the windows and doors, which were made of teakwood. Most knew only money-lending business and had no money left now. These came to Kalaithanthai with their tales of woe, and appealed to him for help. Kalaithanthai helped them in many ways.

3

The Bank of Madura had just been started. It extended re-pledging facility for the suffering *nagarathars* whereby they could re-pledge with the Bank the jewels pledged with them and get money. It also allowed them to pledge other things besides gold. To save the bank from being broken, Kalaithanthai had the loans insured with the Madura Insurance Company on a reasonable premium. He helped the Chettiars who wanted to take to yarn business. Some of these became successful mill owners themselves. He helped some of the *nagarathars* by making them selling agents of the yarn produced by his mills. He was convinced of their capabilities. When rich *nagararhars* approached him for favour, Kalaithanthai would invariably advise them to start their own mills. Many followed his advice.

There was a sea change in the mode of life *of nagarathars* after 1943. They sought jobs for their children most of whom were not very educated. Kalaithanthai took many of them into his mills and the bank. He gave places in his educational institutions to those of them who wanted to study. What was striking about Kalaithanthai was the promptness with which he gave his help. He would never keep anyone coming for favours waiting. There was no need for them to meet him even. A letter would do.

4

Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar started the Meenakshi College in Chidambaram and later made it into a university. Dr Alagappa Chettiar too started colleges in Karaikkudi. Between 1920 and 1947, many more of the *nagarathars* could have started even 200 colleges if they had set their mind to it. But after Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar and Dr Alagappa Chettiar, it was only Kalaithanthai who started a college and that too in Madurai, which was the original choice of Annamalai Chettiar. Raja Sir Muthiah

Chettiar once referred to this in a conversation with Kalaithanthai: “My father bought land at Madurai for a college. He did not go any further. But you have started a college in Madurai”. Noting the tinge of regret in his voice, Kalaithanthai said, “Raja, Annamalai Chettiar wanted Madurai. He got Chidambaram. In Madurai Lord Nataraja danced on a silver dais (*velliambalam*), but in Chidambaram the dais is of gold (*ponnambalam*).”

Nagarathars traditionally devoted themselves to the construction and renovation of temples, putting up of choultries and running *Veda Patasalas*. Because of the example set by Kalaithanthai, many of them, notably Kalaithanthai’s relatives and his associates, founded educational institutions.

Kalaithanthai helped many of the *nagarathars* to study in his colleges and become lecturers, professors, and principals in the institutions. He helped many of them with scholarships. Hundreds of *nagarathars* got positions in the mills, in other industries, in the bank, in the newspaper and in the colleges.

Some of the *nagarathars* who had taken loans from the Bank of Madura had paid interest for 2 or 3 years and were unable to pay any further. Kalaithanthai got only the principal from them and wrote off the interest. The interest already paid was adjusted against the principal. When the Reserve Bank took strong exception to it, Kalaithanthai had a suitable explanation sent.

Devakottai P.Somasundaram Chettiar was the first South Indian to start a textile mill. He started it in Calicut in 1893. Between 1893 and 1923, *nagarathars* had been very prosperous and could have started hundreds of mills all over India and effected an economic revolution. It was only Kalaithanthai who promoted industry. Following him and his advice, at least 30 *nagarathars* started mills. When his close associates and other business friends founded mills, it was generally Kalaithanthai who inaugurated them.

SERVICE TO EDUCATION

...For his bounty

There was no winter in 't; an autumn 'twas

That grew the more by reaping

SHAKESPEARE, Antony and Cleopatra

“Earn the means first — God surety will contrive

Use for our earning.”

These two verses from Robert Browning seem specially true of Kalaithanthai. By the time India became independent, Kalaithanthai had put behind all his sufferings and was making a huge fortune. The patriot that he was, he hit upon a way of contributing to the building-up of a new India. *Nagarathars* have been great philanthropists, but by and large, they spent their money on temples — constructing new temples and renovating old ones. Some of them, of course, turned to education. Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar, for example, started Sree Meenakshi College in Chidambaram in 1920, which later blossomed into the Annamalai University. Dr Alagappa Chettiar started a group of colleges in Karaikkudi.

The idea of starting educational institutions or temples of learning, as he always called them, took hold of Kalaithanthai very early in his life, even as he was struggling to establish himself in business. During most of 1932 and 1933, those years when he was facing crisis after crisis, business took him often to Bombay and Calcutta. During one of his trips to Calcutta, he had a chance to visit Santiniketan, founded by the poet, Rabindranath Tagore. He also met Tagore. As he went round Viswabharathi University,

Tagore's dream-child, Kalaithanthai felt inspired. He came back from Santiniketan with his mind full of ideas. He had decided how he was going to use the millions he was sure he would earn one day.

2

To translate his views into action, Kalaithanthai started many trusts as charities. He bought properties in their name. The first trust was the Thiagarajar Endowment, started in 1944. It had shares in many mills. The second was formed in 1948 - Thiagarajar *dharma vanigam* - Thiagarajar Business Charities. Kalaithanthai ensured that the income from this business should be spent only on charitable acts like education. The third was the Thiagarajar College Endowment Trust started in 1951. The fourth was registered in 1962 as the Thiagarajar Charities. The fifth was the Thiagarajar Educational Trust intended to meet the expenses of the Polytechnic and Management School. He formed a separate trust for the welfare of children.

3

Thiagarajar Arts College

The Thiagarajar College was the first institution of higher learning that Kalaithanthai started. Kalaithanthai bought the Sethupathi Palace on the banks of the river Vaigai for housing the college and constructed additional buildings. He chose the building for the beautiful Mariamman Teppakulam it overlooks. The College started functioning on 7-7-1949. It was formally inaugurated at a colourful function by H.E. Bhavanagar Maharajah, the Governor of Madras on October 12, 1949. The first principal was C.D.S. Chetty who had been Registrar of Andhra University. Dr I.N. Menon, of the Cochin royal family, who had studied Philosophy in Oxford and had been Director of Higher Education, succeeded him.

In his welcome address to the Governor at the inauguration (vide *Appendix 4*), Kalaithanthai described the college as 'a small and humble endeavour' on his part to provide proper educational facilities to the country's youth. As Kalaithanthai conceived it, the College was to be the nucleus of a Tamil University, on the lines of Oxford and

Cambridge, which would recapture the glory of Madurai with its ancient Sangams. It was to be a centre of teaching and research in the Humanities with a special emphasis on the ancient literature and culture of Tamil Nadu. When he chose the location, he visualized colleges springing up all round the magnificent Teppakkulam.

Initially, the College offered only Humanities subjects at the graduate level, science subjects being confined to the Intermediate level. It kept this up for the first six years, starting courses like Philosophy, Psychology, and Geography, subjects that had been discontinued in other colleges 'for lack of demand'. Kalaithanthai wanted to make the institution a unique one, not just one more college. The college offered Sanskrit as a Second Language. Geography was offered in only one other college in the entire State — the Presidency College in Madras.

Kalaithanthai's aim was to make it every way the best college. He selected people of outstanding merit to serve on the faculty. He offered higher scales of pay than were prevalent then. He built up a fine library. Even though science subjects were offered only at the Intermediate level, the laboratories had very advanced equipment. A well-equipped museum was built in the Zoology Department and it is even now the pride of the college. Beautifully terraced and with beautiful lawns and ponds, the campus was highly inspiring.

The very next year, Kalaithanthai wanted to introduce the three years' Honours Course, but the Madras University did not think much of the colleges outside Madras and Trichy and did not want to 'dilute' the standards. It required all Kalaithanthai's efforts to persuade the University to send a Commission to inspect the colleges in Madurai. The Commission was satisfied with the infrastructure in the colleges in Madurai and recommended the starting of a University Study Centre in Madurai. The Study Centre came into being in 1957, paving the way for the creation of the Madurai University. Post-Graduate courses were started in *1958*. Thus within ten years of its inception, the College became a post-graduate institution, offering postgraduate courses in Tamil, Economics and Zoology to begin with. Soon, it started PG programmes in other subjects

like Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Botany. In 1961, PG course in English Language and Literature was introduced — a real triumph for the college. Kalaithanthai had an Oxonian to head the English department.

Kalaithanthai visualized a Tamil University in Madurai. With several distinguished Tamil scholars like Avvai S. Duraisamy Pillai, A.K. Paranthaman, and A.M. Paramasivanandam on its staff, the College soon came to be recognized as a centre of Tamil learning. It played a part in the resurgence of Tamil in the fifties and sixties.

In the five decades of its existence, the College has grown steadily and is now one of the premier institutions affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University. It offers 11 UG and 8 PG Courses. It also offers M.Phil. Programme in several subjects. It became ‘Autonomous’ in 1987 according to a policy of the UGC to allow institutions of proven excellence to devise their own courses of study, to plan the curriculum and to conduct their own examinations. Since then the College has grown by leaps and bounds. Autonomy has given a new dynamism to the staff and students, which is reflected in the innovative courses they have devised. In keeping with the changing academic perceptions, the college has introduced a number of vocational as well as job-oriented courses. Several departments are recognized for research and take scholars for doctoral and post-doctoral work. In 2002 the NAAC awarded the College the Five Star Status. The day is not far off when it will graduate into a Deemed University, thus fulfilling at least a part of Kalaithanthai’s dream.

4

Thiagarajar College of Preceptors

In 1956, seven years after starting the arts college, Kalaithanthai founded the Thiagarajar College of Preceptors. It was the first teacher training college to be started in the district. It is on the western banks of the Mariamman Teppakkulam. Kalaithanthai had ambitious plans for the college. He wanted to expand it into a Post-Graduate college of Education and also establish a separate training college for women. But he could not

realize his dream for lack of sufficient space for expansion. A premier teacher training institution, the college has been selected by NCERT to do some of its projects.

5

Thiagarajar Model High School

Kalaithanthai started the Thiagarajar Model High School on the southern banks of the Teppakkulam, as an adjunct to the Preceptors' College. The school was intended to provide the training ground for the students of the Preceptors' College.

6

Thiagarajar College of Engineering

An Engineering College had been long in Kalaithanthai's mind. Late in 1956, the Indian Council of Technical Education (now, AICTE), which was the Authority to sanction new engineering colleges, informed Kalaithanthai that the Council was meeting in two days' time and suggested that he send in a formal application. The application was approved and the College was started in 1957 with the Preprofessional Course, on the premises of the Thiagarajar Arts College. It moved to its own beautiful campus at 'Tirupparankundram the next year.

Kalaithanthai examined the hillock near Tirupparankundram several times from several angles with his officers before choosing the present site. Some of the civil engineers he consulted discouraged him, declaring that it would not be feasible to put up buildings on the slopes. Kalaithanthai was sure of himself and he constructed beautiful buildings with several tiers depending upon the elevation of the land. Spread out over a total land area of 56 hectares with the towering Tirupparankundram hill in the background and with its imposing buildings, the Engineering College stands as a great monument to Kalaithanthai's aesthetic taste and knowledge of architecture.

When it started, the college had or its rolls 120 students and offered the B.E. Course in three Branches — Civil, Mechanical and Electrical Engineering. And its progress in four decades has been truly tremendous. It has now 10 graduate programmes

and 10 Post-graduate programmes, including M.Sc. Applied Sciences and M.C.A. It offers both full-time and part-time programmes. All the departments specialize in research projects, which they take up in collaboration with industry. The college has MOU with national and international companies like SISCO, IBM, Sterling Infotech and National Instruments. It has the greatest number of IBM Certificate holders. It has close association with the Carnegie University in New York. Honeywell, a multi-national company engaged in software development programmes in instrumentation, has a centre in the college. It trains the students and in turn its recruits are taught by the teachers in the college. The college had entered into an MOU with DRDL, Hyderabad, for on-line research projects – at least 10 projects are on. It had own NBA award.

On the whole, with its band of dedicated and enthusiastic teachers, the College is surging forward to scale new heights in the new millennium.

7

Thiagarajar School of Management

Kalaithanthai had wonderful foresight. He knew that Management Studies would assume great importance and started the School of Management in 1961, the first of its kind outside Madras. It conducted part-time diploma courses in Industrial Management and Business Administration and was a godsend for the industrial personnel in the area. Later it moved to its own building. Now it offers a two-year M.B.A. course – full time and part time.

8

The Thiagarajar Polytechnic, Salem

The institute was started in 1958 and offers certificate courses in civil engineering, electrical engineering and mechanical engineering. Textile technology was introduced in 1959. One of the foremost polytechnics in Tamil Nadu, the institute has blossomed into the Sona College of Technology.

Primary Schools

Kalaithanthai founded many primary schools too. Even here one could see his stamp. To give just one example, he thought of teaching some craft to the children in the schools run on the Meenakshi Mills premises. In 1940 he appointed a qualified hand to teach the children the making of hand-made paper.

10

Kalaithanthai was keen on founding a university in Madurai. He said, “I will consider no sacrifice too great to have a university established in Madurai.” He wrote to C.Subraminam, M. Bhaktavatsalam and K. Kamaraj expressing his wish. But the government’s policy in those days was that private individuals should not be encouraged to establish universities. But Kalaitlianthai spared no pains in getting a University for Madurai.

The Tamil Nadu government has been paying the schoolteachers’ salary directly since 1963. Earlier, the school managements were paying the salary getting a little grant from the government. Many schools were not able to carry on. Kalaithanthai offered to take over any such school. It was thus that the Konapattu Saraswathi High School came under the trust.

Kalaithanthai spent over sixty million rupees on the educational institutions. In addition he bought several properties and made several investments in the name of the trusts. These institutions have added to the glory of the man. It has to be mentioned that he spent his own money and never took donations from anybody and even now his institutions never accept donations. Kalaithanthai did not start the institutions to get favours from the government or to make money. Actually, he gave the staff higher salaries than the prevailing government scales. He offered free education before it became a political slogan.

THE ARCHITECT OF TODAY'S MADURAI

Remember I have done thee worthy service

SHAKESPEARE, *The Tempest*

Madurai is a very ancient city with a glorious history. Historians refer to it as India's Athens. Under the Pandya kings in the Sangam period it was a centre of learning. The last Tamil Sangam flourished here and the kings patronized learning. It was culturally advanced. Sangam literature gives us the picture of a high civilization. *Silappathikaram* presents a glorious picture of life in those days. After the Sangam period there was a decline. The city regained some of its glory under Thirumalai Naicker but that was only for a brief period.

1

When Kalaithanthai came to start his industry, Madurai was very backward. It was lacking in all the facilities that could make it modern. There was no industry worth speaking of, not many educational institutions, no telecommunication links, and not much transport. Madurai remained a Temple City enclosed within the four *Veli* (outer) streets.

Now the picture is different. Madurai has advanced in all respects. The credit for this must go to Kalaithanthai Karumuttu Thiagaraa Chettiar.

2

Industrial growth is indispensable for the development of a place. Before the advent of Kalaithanthai on the scene, the only industrial unit in Madurai was A & F Harvey Mills (later, Madura Mills and now, Madura Coats) in Madurai. But even that

had most of its factories outside Madurai - in Tuticorin and Ambasamudram. The owners of the Mills were foreigners, not very much interested in the development of Madurai. Madura Mills diversified but they preferred to start their new industries in other States. Even the headquarters of Madura Coats has been shifted to Bangalore now.

Kalaithanthai loved Madurai and did everything in his power to put it on the industrial map of India. Wherever we turn in Madurai, we find his mills or mills started by his friends, relatives and workers. How many thousands of families have benefited from them! And how many cotton farmers there are in Madurai and adjoining districts, who grow cotton required for these mills!

3

In the field of education Madurai was far behind Trichy. There were only two arts and science colleges— The Madura College and The American College. Raja Annamalai Chettiar's efforts to start a college in Madurai did not come to fruition. The Tamil Sangam, started in 1901, was not very active.

Today Madurai has a great university. By starting an arts college, an engineering college, a teacher-training college and a school of management, Kalaithanthai created more than a mere nucleus for a University. He wanted to start a university on the banks of the Vaigai near the Teppakulam on the model of the Cambridge University, but the government would not allow private universities.

4

In the field of banking, an indispensable concomitant of industry, it was Kalaithanthai who single-handedly put Madurai on the financial map of India. As a matter of fact, there were very few large-scale banks founded or run by South Indians. The one substantial exception was the Indian Bank, which had been founded by Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar. On the other hand, in the north, there were several banks promoted by Marwaris and Gujarathis who were business magnates also. Kalaithanthai founded a bank because he wanted a financial institution that would minister to the needs of the people here. He started the Bank of Madura and built it up by his own efforts.

Under him it rose to very great heights and now it has merged with the ICICI and has immortalized Madurai in the business world. If he had been alive he would not have allowed the Head Office of the bank to be shifted from Madurai. And he would not have let it lose its identity.

When the Bank of Madura started several branches in Madurai, other leading banks had to follow.

Kalaithanthai started a General Insurance Company in Madurai against the same background, and for the same reasons. It served the purpose very well but it also lost its individuality when it was nationalized along with other such companies.

5

Kalaithanthai also ventured into journalism, starting a Tamil daily, named *Tamil Nadu*, in Madurai. Kalaithanthai's one aim was to enhance the use of 'pure' literary Tamil in journalism and thereby check the debasement of the language. It was a successful venture and at one stage 30,000 copies were sold daily. This inspired Ramnath Goenka to start the Madurai edition of the *Dinamani* and *The Indian Express*.

The Madras Mail, published from Madras by the Amalgamations completed 100 years and the Amalgamations wanted Kalaithanthai to buy it along with P.Orr. & Sons. Kalaithanthai was not keen. *The Madras Mail* could not sustain itself in the face of competition from *The Indian Express* and *The Hindu*, though it managed to carry on till 1981. At about this time, the management of *The Hindu* bought their own plane and supplied their paper to the southern districts early in the morning and offset the competition from *The Indian Express*. Later they planned to publish *The Hindu* from Madurai also. They had their eye on *Tamil Nadu*. They calculated that it would be economical if they published a Tamil daily along with *The Hindu*. They approached Kalaithanthai and talks were initiated. The talks could not make much headway, as the management of *The Hindu* were not agreeable to the conditions laid down by Kalaithanthai and the principles he insisted on. Subsequently, *The Hindu* started publishing a facsimile edition simultaneously from Madurai and Madras. Later many

dailies came to be published from Madurai. The credit for this must go to Kalaithanthai, as his entry into the world of journalism was responsible for the competition.

6

Though Madura Mills had been in Madurai for over 50 years, they never thought of having telephone facilities. The first person in Madurai to have a telephone was Kalaithanthai (Phone No.1). He was instrumental in the installation of a telephone exchange in Madurai. He was also the first to have a post box in the Head Post Office in Madurai with Post Box No.1 as his address.

He very much wanted to beautify the banks of the Vaigai. When he started the Thiagarajar Arts College, he chose the banks of the Vaigai because he wanted it to become a university like the Cambridge University on the banks of the Cam. He asked the government to hand over the maintenance of the Teppakulam to him but the government would not.

By his success in different fields, Kalaithanthai changed the face of Madurai. He can well be called the architect of present day Madurai.

RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY- SAIVISM

Therefore to whom turn I but to Thee, the ineffable Flame?

ROBERT BROWNING, Abt Vogler

Kalaithanthai was deeply religious. As one belonging to the *nagarathar* community, he was a devout Saivite. He firmly believed that he owed his success and prosperity to the blessings of Lord Siva. He was deeply read devotional poetry — he knew the whole of *Tiruvacakam* by heart and hundreds of *pathikams* from the other *Tirumurais*. As mentioned earlier, not a day of his life passed without his serene chanting of the *Tirumurais*.

As a devout Saivaite, Kalaithanthai fasted once a week. This practice he followed from his twenty-fifth year. Monday — *somavaram*— a day sacred to Lord Siva, was his fasting day. It was a coincidence that he attained the Lord’s feet also on a Monday morning.

2

He strongly felt that religion should find a place in education. He felt sorry that religion, which is absolutely necessary for spiritual development, finds no place in the curricula in our schools and colleges. In his Founder’s Commemoration Day Address in Annamalai University in 1960 (vide *Appendix 7*), he made a fervent plea for the provision of opportunities for prayers, meditations and moral instruction in the campus.

“In Oxford, Cambridge and other Western Universities, which grew up under religious auspices, there are chapels where services are regularly held for the benefit of their staff and students. It should not be difficult for separate religious practices of the different faiths of our land to be permitted in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of our Centres of Learning.”

He insisted that theological colleges and schools for teaching Saiva Siddhanta and the *Tirumurais* should be established throughout the land. As long as Avvai S. Duraisamy Pillai was on the staff, Saiva Siddhanta classes were conducted regularly in Thiagarajar College. Kalaithanthai had an idea of starting a Saiva Siddhanta Research Centre in the College. True to his wish, such a Centre has been functioning in it since 1981.

Kalaithanthai regularly visited the Saiva mutts and often took part in conferences organized by them. In his discussion with the mutt chiefs he would outline the kind of service the mutts should take up.

Kalaithanthai was keenly interested in the growth of the Saiva Siddhanta Society. It was his desire that the Saiva religious works should be translated into English and other languages.

3

He regularly worshipped at temples. For several years he went daily to the Sri Meenakshi Temple at Madurai and the Muruga Temple at Thirupparankundram. When he had time he would undertake pilgrimages to different temples. Before going he would insist on reading the holy hymns sung on the temples by the great Tamil saints.

When going on a journey with him, I used to feel nervous like a schoolgirl taking an examination. He would expect me to have a thorough knowledge of the *Thevaram* and be able to remember which line occurred in which song and on which place. On one occasion we were going to Haridwar. Kalaithanthai raised a few points on the songs of Kariakkal Ammaiyar, and a literary discussion followed. Kadiapatty T.N.M. Arunachalam Chettiar who was travelling with us was amazed at the depth of Kalaithanthai's knowledge of Tamil Literature.

Kalaithanthai loved to tell stories connected with the various temples. One such story is connected with the temple at Thiruppoovanam, celebrated by the three great saints Appar, Sundarar and Gnansambandar. It was the site of one of the sixty-four miracles of Lord Siva. Ponnaniyal, a devotee, longed to make a gold idol of the Lord

and was sad that she had not the necessary means. The Lord appeared before her as a *Siddha* and bade her bring all the iron, copper, lead and brass vessels with her and converted them into gold and because of this, He came to be known as an alchemist. Ponnaiyalar made a beautiful idol of Lord Siva, which fascinated her so much that she lovingly pinched its cheeks and the mark is visible even today on the idol.

Pazhamudircholai on the Alagar Koil hills near Madurai is one of the six important places sacred to Lord Muruga. But in the course of history it had disappeared. But in the middle of the last century certain devotees took steps to rebuild a temple there. Kalaithanthal supported the move and worshipped the *Vel*, when it was being taken to Palamudircholai.

4

He selected one of the stanzas of *Tiruvacakam* as the prayer song for the Thiagarajar Arts College. The college motto is “*Anbum arivum siva*”

On the southern extreme of the Meenakshi Mills premises near the Thiagarajar High School there is a small temple of Rowtha Royya Swamy. The deity is supposed to be a form of Lord Siva who came as a horse-dealer for the sake of Manickavasagar. The people in the nearby Palanganatham regularly offered worship there and Kalaithanthal was happy to spare this land belonging to the Sree Meenakshi Mills for them to carry on their worship.

5

Kalaithanthal revelled in religious discussions with Tamil scholars and Saivaite saints. *Tiruvacakam* was the book he almost worshipped. It was his conviction that it is a treasure house of profound divine splendence. He found certain passages in it obscure and would discuss them with scholars.

In 1974 Kalaithanthal and I went to all the major Siva temples in Tamil Nadu. After getting back to Madurai, he had Professor A. Sankaranarayanan sing the *Thevaram* songs connected with these temples and explicate them. This went on for many days and

Kalaithanthai put off important office work during those days and did not even see the Mills' officials who came to meet him.

6

As a community, the *nagarathars* belong to one of nine temples. Kalaithanthai's family belonged to the temple at Mathur. The deity is *Ainnutrisan*. The traders' community that worshipped this God were called *Ainnutruvar* and were believed to have traded in rice and grains and in horses.

Kalaithanthai took a leading part in the renovation of this temple. It was the tradition that all the families belonging to the temple must participate in its renovation. The consecration was done in April 1974. A special function was arranged to felicitate Thiru Chidambaram Chettiar; who had overseen the renovation. Kalaithanthai was to preside, but that was not to be — before that he was called to his Heavenly Abode.

13

VEGETARIANISM

How can he expect Grace, who fattens himself

on the flesh of other creatures?

Tirukkural

Saivism and Tamil were the twin passions of Kalaithanthai.

1

According to Kalaithanthai, Saivism includes not merely following the practices of the Hindu sect worshipping Lord Siva but also adopting of the food habits of a Saivaite. Saivaite food is vegetarian food. He was a vegetarian all his life and offered only vegetarian food to all his guests and made no exception even in the case of foreigners. He was firm on this.

During festivals it was the practice in village temples to sacrifice cocks and goats. Melai Sivapuri Sanmarga Sabhai (Divine Life Society) started a campaign against the practice. Roy Chockalingam and S. Murugappan were active in this and in his young days Kalaithanthai joined in their efforts at the Konnaiyur Mariamman Temple at Koppanapatti. He tried to put an end to the practice at the Ayyanar shrines of village deities at Kathappattu but was unsuccessful, as the other devotees opposed him.

Many of the *nagarathars* are non-vegetarian. It was Kalaithanthai's belief that this had not always been so. He held that as long as *nagaratthars* were in Kaveripoompattinam they had followed vegetarianism as a principle. They lost the habit only after their immigration to Chettinad, perhaps influenced by the Mukkulathors living there. It was significant that immigrants to other places from Kaveripoompattinam called themselves 'Saiva chettiars', to distinguish themselves from Nattukottai Chettiars

In places like Devakottai, *nagarathars* remain strict vegetarians. This, according to

Kalaithanthai, is evidence of their ancient tradition. Devakottai is only a modification of Devikottai. There was a Devikottai on the outskirts of Kaveripoompattinam and those who had emigrated from there and settled in Devakottai might have called the settlement Devakottai.

Kalaithanthai felt bad when he saw hotels in big cities bearing the name “Chettinad Military Hotel”. He considered such things a blemish on the *nagarathars* who built temples in foreign countries and spread Saivism.

2

In the hostels of the colleges established by him, he insisted on having vegetarian mess only. He never compromised on this. On one occasion, students of the Thiagarajar College of Engineering started an agitation for the introduction of non- vegetarian mess. Kalaithanthai refused. The boys complained to the Director of Technical Education. The Director told Kalaithanthai that he was depriving the boys of their right to eat the food they liked and that he had no right to impose his convictions on the students. Kalaithanthai did not budge. He argued, “The colleges run by Jains do not serve non-vegetarian food. They do not even offer courses like Zoology, involving dissection of animals. Still the government did not object to that. And power is measured in terms of horse power, but the horse is only a vegetarian.” The Director had no answer. Kalaithanthai was firm that he would not serve non-vegetarian food in his hostels. He would rather close down the mess.

Once Kamaraj was Kalaithanthai’s guest at Courtallam for a few days. He was accustomed to non-vegetarian food. This was the first time when he took vegetarian food for a few days together. He said that one could give up non-vegetarian food if one could get vegetarian food as in Kalaithanthai’s house.

Kalaithanthai participated in vegetarian conferences and helped the vegetarian movement to publish its magazines regularly. He was also an active member of the Animal Welfare Board. He was never tired of quoting the relevant chapters from *Tirukkural* to enforce his views.

PASSION FOR TAMIL

. . .for still I seem

To love thee more and more.

WORDSWORTH, I Travell'd among Unknown Men

Kalaithanthai was deeply read in Tamil Literature and was passionately interested in Tamil. It is astonishing that he could find time for Tamil studies in spite of the heavy demands of his business. He cherished the friendship of all Tamil scholars and patronised them like the old Tamil kings.

As a young man, when he was in Ceylon, he had the rare opportunity of learning Tamil under the great Jaffna scholar, Chitkailasa Pillai for three years from 1914 to 1917. That was the period when he came under the spell of Tamil Literature, and his interest never flagged since. He studied many Tamil classics with Chitkailasa Pillai. He never missed an opportunity of enriching his knowledge of Tamil Literature. When Arasan Shanmuganar of Sholavandan, a great Tamil scholar, came on a month's visit to Ceylon and was a guest of the Karumuttu family, young Kalaithanthai had many valuable lessons in Tamil from him. Later when Arasan Shanmuganar was working in the Tamil Sangam in Madurai, Kalaithanthai renewed his association with him and refreshed his Tamil grammar.

“Mahamahopadhyaya” was the highest title in Tamil in those days and there were only two mahamahopadhyayas - Pandithamani Kathiresan Chettiar and U.V. Swaminatha Iyer. Kathiresan Chettiar was from Mahipalanpatti near A. Thekkur. Kalaithanthai had the highest regard for him. Their relationship was like that between Kapilar (the ancient Tamil poet) and Pari (one of the small Tamil chieftains). Kalaithanthai knew the other Mahamahopadhyaya, U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, a man of the

most profound scholarship, a great researcher and a writer, who, by his strenuous efforts, rescued ancient Tamil Sangam works from oblivion. Another great Tamil scholar that Kalaithanthai liked was V.O.Chidamabaranar who had written commentaries on some ancient Tamil books. Kalaithanthai was particularly drawn to Dr Somasundara Bharathiar, who was both a lawyer and a great Tamil scholar. He had appeared for some cases for the Sree Meenakshi group of mills while in Tuticorin, and when he settled down in Madurai, Kalaithanthai constantly met him. He would call on Bharathiar every day on his way back from Tirupparankundaram and spend some time with him.

Another scholar he admired was Raya Cho (Raya Chockalingam) who was well versed in both Tamil and European literatures and could profusely quote Tamil poems from memory and give parallel passages from other literatures as well.

2

The word 'yarn' in English can refer to a cotton thread and also to a story. The corresponding Tamil word '*nool*' can refer to a cotton thread and to a book. There is an old Tamil saying that if a person is interested in cotton thread, he will not be interested in books. Kalaithanthai was an exception to the saying. He was as much at home in the world of books as in the world of textiles. He travelled widely in what Keats called "the realms of gold". His intimacy with ancient Tamil Literature was amazing. He always made a close study of the text. He had a very good library, which he constantly updated. He possessed all the books of Sangam literature and all the works on Saiva Siddhanta.

When the libraries of great scholars came up for sale, Kalaithanthai would invariably buy them. Thus he bought the libraries of Pandithamani Kathiresan Chettiar, Professor Ratnaswamy, Professor I.N. Menon, Professor Dastoor and many others. He had personal libraries in Madurai, Kodaikanal and Courtallum. The study is an important part of an Englishman's home as the room for worship is a part of Indian homes. When Englishmen living in Kodaikkanal left India for good, they would sell their houses to Indians and would leave their libraries also to the buyers. Almost the first thing the

Indian buyers would do was to sell the books, as they would not know the value of the books. Kalaithanthai would never miss an opportunity to buy them.

3

During interviews for the selection of English or Tamil teachers of his colleges, he would himself be present along with the Principal and the professor. The interviews would usually be long-drawn-out affairs. Kalaithanthai himself would ask the questions, often to the discomfiture of the candidates, and he himself would give the answers. The ease with which he could draw from the ancient Tamil texts and great English writers would amaze everyone - professors and scholars.

4

Kalaithanthai was never tired of expatiating on the richness of Tamil Literature. His enthusiasm was infectious. Many of his friends who had been concerned only with their business, money and family came to be interested in Tamil literature and in Tamil scholars after their contact with Kalaithanthai. He had learnt Tamil from Tamil scholars and wanted that others should appreciate the beauty of Tamil Literature.

Even when overburdened with work, Kalaithanthai found time to meet Tamil savants. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than literary discussions with them. He spent a few hours every day reading Tamil poems. Tamil scholars too enjoyed reading the poems with him and they were always struck by his taste and perception. He was alive to the nuances and subtleties in the poems.

He did not stop with studying Tamil literature himself. He made me also study it. He was particular that his children and grandchildren should get a good exposure to Tamil literature and arranged for them to move with Tamil scholars. During holidays, he took Tamil scholars with him to Kodaikkanal, in order to teach his grandchildren Tamil poems. He wanted the workers' families too to learn and appreciate Tamil literature. He planned to teach *Tirukkural* and *Tiruvacakam* to the workers and their children. And the supervisors he chose for the workers' colony were Tamil scholars with a deep knowledge of Saiva Siddhanta, like Kalyanam Pillai, M.R.P. Shanmugasundaram, and

K. Ramalinganar.

Kalaithanthai would not bear any criticism of Tamil traditions. Once Tirikuta Sundaram Pillai expressed the view that it was wrong of Kannagi to have burnt Madurai. Kalaithanthai joined issue with him, and published a reply in *Tamil Nadu*, condemning his statement.

5

One Tamil book that filled his whole being was *Tiruvacakam*. He had the firm conviction that in religious content, in spiritual wealth and in literary excellence, it surpassed every other book. So great was his devotion to the book, that he called one of his sons Manickavasagam, after the author of *Tiruvacakam*. It was at his instance that I chose to work on *Tiruvacakam* for my Ph.D. degree. When K.M. Balasubramaniam was the editor of *Tamil Nadu*, Kalaithanthai used to compare notes on the book with him. Later Balasubramaniam translated *Tiruvacakam* into English. Kalaithanthai knew the whole of *Tiruvacakam* by heart and recited verses from it every day. Even on his last day, he recited the verses.

Another book he threw his heart into was *Tirukkural*. He would often discuss the book with scholars. He would maintain that there was no other book equal to it in teaching ethics, statecraft, worldliness and love. Political wisdom, which one rarely came across in Plato and Aristotle, could be found in abundance in *Tirukkural*. Not only was he well read in the book, but he lived the precepts contained therein. Rajaji's translation of *Tirukkural* in English was released by Kalaithanthai at a function in Madurai Tiruvalluvar Kazhagam.

6

It was a turning point in the resurgence of Tamil studies in Madurai when Kalaithanthai brought Avvai S.Duraisami Pillai as a professor in the Thiagarajar College. By taking great Tamil scholars to serve on the faculty in the college, Kalaithanthai

enabled the Madurai Tiruvalluvar Kazhagam to have regular meetings and to organize lecture series. Arignar Annadurai once said that Kalaithanthai had organized another Tamil Sangam in his college, which was true.

Kalaithanthai loved *Tolkappiam*, which, he said, ‘laid down the principles of not only Tamil grammar but also of living’ and ‘was a unique work’. He studied *Tolkappiam* under Chitkailasam Pillai and Arasan Shanmuganar. When Dr Ilakkuvanar was working on *Tolkappiam* for his Ph.D. thesis, Kalaithanthai studied the book in depth. He financed the publication of the thesis in book form.

7

Kalaithanthai loved other Tamil books also. He particularly admired *Silappathikaram* and *Kamba Ramayanam* for the beauty of their language. He had memorised many poems of the Sangam period, like *Nedunalvadai*, *Kurinjippattu*, *Kalithogai* and *Tirumurugatrupadai*. According to him, it is a unique distinction of Tamil that there has been a continuous tradition of writings expounding the Ultimate Truth and stirring the emotions. *Tiruvacakam*, *Thevaram* and *Tiruvaimozhi*— what other language can boast of such collections of songs — songs that could move even the hardest-hearted, and remove the dross in them? And Sangam literature—is there any aspect of life that has not been touched by the great Sangam poets? Kalaithanthai loved nothing better than quoting from those poets. Before giving any lecture, he would himself choose appropriate passages to quote from the poems in order to emphasize his points. He would consult scholars to confirm their aptness.

8

Only scholars who had mastered ancient Tamil literature could find a place in Kalaithanthai’s literary coterie. Avvai S.Duraisamy Pillai was the foremost among these. Another was Varada Nanjiah Pillai who used to call himself the court poet of the Karumuttu house. In his old age, he spent six years with Kalaithanthai, who celebrated his Diamond Jubilee in Madurai and Salem. He was deeply read in Tamil literature and

grammar, Saivaite philosophy and astrology. Kalaithanthai had the highest regard for him.

9

Kalaithanthai was as meticulous in composing a letter as in preparing a speech or writing an article. He brought to it an analytical frame of mind and a capacity for clear expression. Whether it was a personal or a business letter or a letter to the government, he would spend hours composing it in his mind. He took as much care in writing it as he would a legal document. He would not be satisfied unless it was perfect in every respect. He valued conciseness and clarity in expression. If it were a business letter, he would consult the officers, insisting that they put everything in words. The letter or speech or article would occupy his whole attention, and nothing would distract him until he got it right.

In his speech there was depth of thought and elegance of expression, clarity and perfection. He would substantiate his point with illustrations from great writers. In his language, there would be no meaningless blabber; no unnecessary jokes, no inappropriate epithets, no redundant words. Words came from the depth of the heart. A man of convictions, he always spoke out his mind, not worrying whether his ideas would be acceptable to others.

10

Kalaithanthai's love of Tamil was recognized everywhere. He was the patron of over a hundred organizations devoted to the development of Tamil. He gave valuable suggestions for their proper functioning.

The Tamil Fine Arts Association was started in 1954 to organize World Tamil conferences, and Kalaithanthai was elected its vice-president. He took an active part in the activities of the association, regularly meeting the other office-bearers and offering valuable suggestions.

He had many suggestions for the growth of the Tamil Sangam at Madurai, but

because of internecine hostility among the members of the Managing Committee, nothing could be done. And it was mostly the Tamil faculty of the Thiagarajar College that rendered assistance for the celebration of the golden jubilee of the Sangam.

K.A.P. Viswanathan, the “Sentinel of Tamil” (*Tamizh-kkavalalar*), started a Council of Tamil Poets and Kalaithanthai donated liberally to it and invited the poets to Madurai and honoured them.

A Tamil festival took place in Madurai in 1942. As a member of the reception committee, Kalaithanthai assumed great responsibility. He insisted on prefixing ‘Thiru’ to the names of the addressees in the invitations and, though there was some opposition to it initially, he had his way. He also got Sage Vipulananda to attend the festival. It was the first visit of the sage to Madurai.

As a kind of prelude to the World Tamil Conference, the Tamil Development Council and the State Government organized a Tamil festival in Madurai in 1947. Kalaithanthai participated in it in a big way and made a liberal donation to the council. The secretary of the Tamil Development Council, Kalki R.Krishnamoorthy, was unstinting in his praise of Kalaithanthai’s great love for Tamil.

The Second World Tamil Conference was held in Madras when C.N.Annadurai was Chief Minister. Kalaithanthai contributed liberally to the conference and honoured all the delegates who visited Madurai.

11

After the Pachaiappa’s College in Madras and the Annamalai University, it was the Thiagarajar College that started the postgraduate course in Tamil. It produced many good Tamil scholars who made a name as public speakers and writers. Now the Tamil department in the college is a recognized research centre. Students from Mauritius, Malaysia and Singapore come here to study Tamil.

Kalaithanthai wanted very much to start a college exclusively for Tamil Studies. There was the Ganesar Tamil College at Melai Sivapuri run by the local Sanmarga

Sangam. The intake of students went down and the college could not function. Kalaithanthai offered to take over the college and shift it to Madurai. He said that there was no future for such colleges in small towns. There were precedents for the shifting of colleges from one place to another. St. Joseph's College at Trichy was originally at Nagappattinam. But the founders of the college were not interested. Kalaithanthai's desire remained unfulfilled.

12

Nowadays the State government organizes functions to commemorate poets. It was Kalaithanthai who was the forerunner in this. The Thiagarajar College was started in 1949. The very next year Kalaithanthai made arrangements for the celebration of a 'poet's festival' (*Pulavar Vizha*). A poet was chosen and students from the university area were invited to submit papers on the poet and a prize was given to the best paper. That was the first research paper competition in Tamil among colleges before the postgraduate course in Tamil was started in the southern districts. The festival became an annual feature. So far over fifty such festivals have taken place and great Tamil savants have given lectures on the poets.

13

Kalaithanthai had an innate affection for Tamil scholars. When he learnt that Thiru Vi.Ka. was ill, he hastened to send him a monthly stipend and forwarded the first cheque. Hesitant to accept any such help, Thiru Vi.Ka. politely declined and sent it back. Dr A.M.Paramasivanandam served the Thiagarajar College only for ten months, but he gratefully remembered his stay in Madurai. His association with Kalaithanthai was a turning point in his life, he said.

Professor Ilakkuvanar had been working in a college in Virudhunagar and had lost his job. He wanted to join the Thiagarajar College. Kalaithanthai was warned that he might, knowingly or unknowingly, create an embarrassing situation for the management with the government. Kalaithanthai took him on the staff. He saw in him only a Tamil

scholar in need of help. He advanced him money when he wanted to build a house at Tirunagar. Ilakkuvanar was grateful and called his house 'Karumuttu Illam'.

Father Heras was a Spanish monk and he came to Tamil Nadu to carry on research on the Dravidian civilization. He established the antiquity of Dravidian culture, which, he showed, had been prevalent in the Mediterranean countries. He called himself a Dravidian from Spain. In 1955, Kalaithanthai went to Madras to meet him. He was told that the Father was in Madurai and ill. Kalaithanthai immediately contacted his office and arranged to admit the Father in the Christian Mission Hospital. Later he made all arrangements for him to get back to Spain. The Jesuits Society in Bombay was grateful to him

When a Czechoslovakian Tamil scholar visited Tamil Nadu, Kalaithanthai invited him to Madurai and honoured him.

Kalaithanthai fully supported Maraimalai Adigal in his efforts to start a 'pure' Tamil movement. He also supported the activities of Devaneyya Pavanar who was following in the footsteps of Adigalar. When the Madurai Writers' Guild presented Pavanar with a purse to enable him to publish his books, Kalaithanthai made a substantial contribution.

It is an incontrovertible fact that Kalaithanthai played an important part in the development of Tamil in the twentieth century.

TAMIL DAILY

They are the abstract and brief chroniclers of time.

SHAKESPEARE, Hamlet

Kalaithanthai left his mark on Tamil journalism too. For long he had wanted to start a newspaper in Tamil. He had begun his career as a correspondent of *The Morning Leader* of Ceylon and knew the power of the media. He had original views on various issues and he felt that it was his duty to put them forth, though they might not find immediate acceptance. He strongly felt that a newspaper was the proper medium for the purpose. He had clear ideas on what lines Tamil Nadu should develop, what was to be done for the improvement of Tamil language and literature and what should be done to improve industry. How could he take these to the people and the government? To have his own newspaper seemed the proper course and the Tamil daily *Tamil Nadu* was born.

The choice of the name itself shows Kalaithanthai's deep love for Tamil. The paper started publication on 10-10-1951 from Madurai. For a brief period an edition was published from Madras too. It existed as a daily newspaper for seventeen years, and, as a weekly for five years. It used literary Tamil. In the first issue Kalaithanthai set out the basic tenets of the paper. Quoting the first couplet of *Tirukkural*, he said,

This daily with the name *Tamil Nadu* is being published from today. The Tamils are a very ancient race with a mighty civilization flourishing from time immemorial. We venture on this publication with the conviction that the paper devoted to preserving the art, culture and rights of the Tamils will be cherished by Tamilians.

His aim was that all over Tamil Nadu, people should develop a passionate interest in Tamil language and culture. The daily was popular, and at one stage its circulation reached 30,000.

2

Tamil Nadu was a journal with a difference. The difference lay in its presentation of news. With the introduction of English education, Tamil, like the other Indian languages, had been relegated to the background. It was only after the national movement for Independence was started, there was a kind of renaissance of Tamil. Tamil newspapers were started. But the language used in them and elsewhere was a kind of mixture of Sanskrit and Tamil. There was opposition to this from Tamil scholars and there started a 'war' between the supporters of 'pure' Tamil unmixed with Sanskrit words and the others, much on the lines of the 'war' between Saxonists and Latinists in England in the Elizabethan period. While the other leading Tamil dailies and magazines used English words freely and a mixture of Sanskrit and Tamil, *Tamil Nadu* used 'pure' Tamil without an admixture of English or Sanskrit. Kalaithanthai was particular that 'pure' Tamil should be popularized. Journalism is said to debase language by overusing 'charged' words. Kalaithanthai wanted his paper to enrich the language. His paper set the trend and the other papers, like *Dinamani*, had to change the kind of language they used. The impact of *Tamil Nadu* can be clearly understood if one compares the language used in papers before its advent and after.

3

He picked on Professor M. Ratnaswamy, a great scholar, who had been the Principal of Pachiappa's College, Vice-Chancellor of Annamalai University, the Chairman of the State Public Service Commission, and the Chairman of the Madras Legislative Council, to be the editor of *Tamil Nadu*.

Kalaithanthai had often met Professor Ratnaswamy before and had been struck by his concern for Tamil culture. It was soon after Independence, and Ratnaswamy was a Tamil enthusiast, who felt that something must be done to uphold Tamil values and channelize public opinion. A newspaper would be necessary to give the proper lead to the people. The adoption of Hindi as the official language in the Constitution alarmed many Tamils who feared that Tamil identity would be destroyed. One reason why Kalaithanthai started *Tamil Nadu* was to give shape to the views of Tamilians and to oppose the introduction of Hindi as the official language.

4

Kalaithanthai was the managing editor, Karumuttu T.Manickavasagam Chettiar, the editor, and Professor Ratnaswamy, the executive editor of *Tamil Nadu*. Tiruvacakamani K.M.Balasubramaniam and T.A.V.Nathan, a descendant of Sadaiyappar, the patron of Kambar, worked full time and many Tamil professors part time and helped to make it popular with lovers of Tamil.

Daily in the evening, Kalaithanthai would discuss with Professor Ratnaswamy the day's important news and the next day's editorial with great political maturity. Ratnaswamy would absorb Kalaithanthai's ideas and produce excellent editorials. The editorials were worthy of being collected into a book. But few realized their worth then.

The newspaper coined new Tamil words, words that came to be accepted later. We can easily give a list of English words for which the paper coined good Tamil equivalents:

Commission, Board, Candidate, minister, bus, soft drink, office, Governor, Central government, State government, Government order, licence, money order, taluk, district, collector, Revenue department, magistrate, appeal, Recreation club, driver, conductor, public sector, private sector, hospital, dispensary/pharmacy, session (in parliament), concert, and many others.

Tamil Nadu was the first Tamil newspaper to coin countless such words and give them currency. It also revived old words with new meanings. It did valuable service to Tamil in the field of mass communication. The Sunday edition contained literary essays,

stories and cinema news. The book reviews, the literary essays and short stories went well with young minds.

S.P. Raman was in charge of the section on the cinema, and on the US government's invitation, he went to America and studied the working of small newspapers, their publishing modes and their general layout.

Tamil Nadu played no mean part in the spread of 'pure' Tamil in writing, in the publication of new books in Tamil and in strengthening the anti-Hindi movement in Tamil Nadu. For the sake of Tamil, Kalaithanthai faced opposition boldly and single-handedly.

16

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE CONTROVERSY

...whilst I can vent clamour from my throat,

I'll tell thee thou dost evil.

SHAKESPEARE, King Lear

The Karumuttus have always been nationalists. They supported the Indian National Movement. The great leaders of the Indian Independence Struggle like Bipin Chandra Pal and C.R. Das had been guests at the Karumuttu home in Ceylon. Kalaithanthai himself came to be acquainted with leaders like Annie Besant and Thiru Srinivasa Iyengar when he was espousing the cause of the plantation workers in Ceylon. As Andhra Kesari Prakasam was one of the directors of the Sree Meenakshi Mills in the initial stages, he had occasion to move with him closely. Gradually he came to know most of the national leaders personally. Kalaithanthai shared the feeling of many patriotic Indians that India should produce all its requirements itself. It was one of the reasons that weighed with him when he decided to enter the textile industry, though he had no prior experience.

2

It was a proud moment for Kalaithanthai when Mahatma Gandhi stayed in the office of Sree Meenakshi Mills as his guest during his first ever visit to Madurai in 1921. The office of the Mills was in the West Masi Street. There was only the name board, as the mills had not been started. Kalaithanthai came to reside in the house. It was the Gujarati businessman Kalyanji Ramji who prevailed upon Gandhiji to stay in the office as Kalaithanthai's guest.

The visit had a great significance in the life of Gandhiji. It was then that he took his historic vow to wear only a loincloth. It came about this way. That had been a very bad year for Madurai district. The monsoon had failed and Madurai was in the grip of a drought. One day while on his walk, Gandhiji encountered the suffering people and was touched. The next day he came out with only a loincloth on him. He said, "Patriotic Indians have set fire to foreign clothes. Most Indians have not enough money to buy Khader garments. Let them hereafter be happy with their scanty dress. Let me show them the way. From today I am giving up my dhoti, cap and banian. A small loincloth will be my dress hereafter. To protect myself from the cold weather, I shall use a towel."

Gandhi's momentous decision was taken when he was in Kalaithanthai's house. Kalaithanthai has mentioned this in a letter to Rajaji. Even now there is a board at the front of the house mentioning that Gandhi took to loincloth when he had been staying in that house. But unfortunately the fact that Gandhiji was Kalaithanthai's guest at the time has not been mentioned.

3

Kalaithanthai did not directly take part in the nationalist movement but he was, as he described himself, 'a loyal and staunch Congressman who, though without publicity, has worked and sacrificed not a little'. He joined the Indian National Congress on his return from Ceylon and was an active member. He attended the annual session of the Congress in Calcutta in 1917, when Mrs Annie Besant was President. He was the secretary of the Provincial Congress in 1916 and was elected to the All-India Congress Committee in 1917. He left the party in 1921 to devote himself to industry.

But he continued to be sympathetic to the National movement. He strongly supported the Congress though by his action he incurred the wrath of the government more than once. And through his friend, N.M.R. Subbaraman, the Congress leader in Madurai, he kept in touch with the activities of the Congress. He also helped the Congress in the elections in 1937.

But it so happened that Kalaithanthai had to take a stand against the very first action of the Congress government, which came to power in Madras after the elections, with Chakravarthy Rajagopalachariar as the Prime Minister. In one of its annual sessions, Congress had passed a resolution that Hindi, as the language of the majority of Indians, should be the common language of free India. English, to the Congress then, was a symbol of slavery and it could not conceive of English continuing to be powerful after freedom. As a first step towards making Hindi the common language, Rajaji made Hindi a compulsory language to be taught in schools. There was stiff opposition to the step, which was considered hasty. And Kalaithanthai and Somasundara Bharathi were in the forefront of the opposition. As both of them were known to be very patriotic, Congressmen were unhappy.

Kalaithanthai felt the move would adversely affect Tamil and arrest its development. He was deeply concerned about the danger. He clearly listed his arguments against the scheme. He wrote them in the form of a letter and sent it to Rajaji. He had the letter printed and distributed all over Tamil Nadu. The letter shows Kalaithanthai at his best. He examines the burning question of the day from all angles and refutes all the arguments in favour of the imposition of Hindi. Kalaithanthai's arguments drew wide appreciation.

Kalaithanthai began his argument saying that there would have been no opposition if Hindi had been introduced as an optional language. "Is it always right to make a good thing compulsory?" he asked. Even when primary education had not been made compulsory, when 96 % of the population could not express their thoughts fairly in their own mother tongue, what was the point in introducing another language as a compulsory subject of study? It would only increase the burden of the students. An element of compulsion gave rise to suspicion and a strong reaction. If and when a need arose for a thing it would overcome all obstacles and would come to stand on its own. Why then force it prematurely? Instead of bringing about solidarity between the provinces as it was

supposed to do, compulsory Hindi would only create misunderstanding and produce unnecessary tension. India did not derive its greatness from one language. Kalaithanthai's point was that Rajaji's move was premature. The right step would be to introduce Hindi as an optional subject in colleges. The full text of the letter is given in *Appendix 5*.

It was a vindication of Kalaithanthai's stand, when, later in life, Rajaji changed his views completely and carried on a campaign for retaining English as the official language.

There were anti-Hindi conferences all over Tamil Nadu in 1937 and Kalaithanthai took part in them. There were agitations too.

5

The Indian Constitution framed after Independence made Hindi the official language of India. It allowed the use of English for 15 years from 1950. Hindi was to be the sole official language from *1965*. As 1965 approached, anti-Hindi feelings ran high in Tamil Nadu. In 1963, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru gave the assurance that English would continue to be the official language as long as non-Hindi speakers wished. After Nehru's death in 1964, Lal Bahadur Shastri became Prime Minister. Agitations were started in Tamil Nadu to force the Central government to make Nehru's oral assurance law. At the beginning of 1965, the agitation intensified and turned violent. Riots broke out. Students were in the forefront. They were worried that their job prospects would be affected if preference were given to those who knew Hindi.

Soon it turned out to be an opposition to Hindi and not to its imposition.

6

Madurai was in the forefront of the agitation - in fact it started in Madurai. There were student rallies all over Tamil Nadu, and in Madurai, the police resorted to lathi

charge and it sparked off riots all over Tamil Nadu. Unfortunately, in some circles, lovers of Tamil were considered opponents of the Central government and the Congress party. Love of language was misconstrued as opposition to the government.

Students of the Thiagarajar Engineering College took an active part in the agitation. Knowing Kalaithanthai's strong stand on the language question, the then Chief Minister of Madras, Thiru Bhaktavatsalam suspected that Kalaithanthai was behind the agitation and was actually financing it. He did not bother to investigate. The government was angered at the anti-Hindi editorials in *Tamil Nadu* that appeared daily for five or six days. The Central Home Minister Gulzarilal Nanda was in touch with the goings-on in Tamil Nadu and he was determined to crush the agitation and destroy those who were opposed to Hindi. He issued necessary instructions to the State government.

As a result, police entered the Engineering College Hostel, indulged in vandalism, beat up the students and tortured them. Kalaithanthai spoke to the DIG S.M.Diaz over the phone and took strong exception to the police action. Such police atrocities were unheard-of even under British rule. *Tamil Nadu* published pictures of students who had lost their ears and hands and the blood stains on the floor. The government took exception to this because it considered the pictures provocative, aimed at overthrowing an elected government. It thought of taking severe action against Kalaithanthai, the founder-editor. Some of the Congressmen abused Kalaithanthai before Kamaraj. Kamaraj said whatever they might say, he would never believe that Kalaithanthai wanted to overthrow the government or was spending money for that. He knew Kalaithanthai too well to believe that.

Kalaithanthai went to Madras and talked to Bhaktavatsalam. He pointed out to him that it was the duty of the State government to convey the views of the public to the Central government. Bhaktavatsalam did not agree with his views. His distrust of Kalaithanthai deepened after this meeting.

There was talk everywhere that Kalaithanthai was going to be arrested. Kalaithanthai was not worried or upset. He was prepared for any situation. He even gave instructions to *Tamil Nadu* on how his arrest should be reported.

The arrest warrant arrived in Madurai when Kalaithanthai was away. Mill officials informed Kalaithanthai over the phone of this and appealed to him not to come to Madurai. But Kalaithanthai came to Madurai immediately. “Why be afraid? What is destined to happen will happen. *Que sera, sera,*” he said. He appeared before the magistrate and was immediately released on bail.

At the height of the agitation, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, who was in Lal Bahadur’s ministry, came to Madras and assured the people that she would see that Nehru’s assurance was honoured, which she did when she became Prime Minister in 1967.

The Bhaktavatsalam government never changed its hostile attitude towards Kalaithanthai but he did not care. Wherever he spoke he never failed to stress his opposition to the imposition of Hindi.

DAUNTLESS SPIRIT

He is the rock, the oak not to be wind-shaken.

SHAKESPEARE, Coriolanus

Perhaps because of long foreign rule, Indians in those days were generally timid. They were afraid of authority and submitted to things meekly. But Kalaithanthai was of a sterner stuff. He possessed a dauntless spirit and he raised his voice against the authorities. Governors, ministers and officials had to be wary while dealing with him. His was not a blind courage. He was well informed and discerning in all matters and well versed in the industry. He was also deeply religious and had a sense of fair play and justice. Arrogance and vanity were foreign to him.

He had his home on the premises of the Mills. It was an unparalleled and courageous act.

2

Kalaithanthai was totally opposed to violence. He wanted industries to grow in an atmosphere of peace and India to develop in peace. He never supported violent movements or agitations.

Nethaji Subash Chandra Bose visited Madurai in 1940. He had come to start a branch of the Forward Bloc, his newly started party. Kalaithanthai entertained him in his house and praised his sacrifices for the country. But he did not join the party. Nethaji believed in the violent overthrow of the British. Kalaithanthai was opposed to it.

Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar, the President of the Tamil Nadu wing of the Forward Bloc, once suggested that Kalaithanthai could contest the Parliamentary election

on the party's ticket. Kalaithanthai refused. There was no question of it when he did not accept the basic tenets of the party.

3

Whenever he faced difficulties, Kalaithanthai could think out the matter clearly and take a decision and be fearless in carrying it out. He never prevaricated. He never believed in making the best of both the worlds by taking contradictory stands at the same time.

The South India Mill Owners' Association (SIMA) came into being in 1930 in Coimbatore. The members were those who were running textile mills in the then Madras Presidency. Its activity was confined to sending the statistical data required by the government and holding an annual meeting. Kalaithanthai felt that the executive members of the association did not have the courage of mind to criticize the activity of the government. He insisted that the Mill Owners' Association had a duty to safeguard the rights of the members and to get concessions from the government when the industry faced difficulties. The association turned a deaf ear to Kalaithanthai.

Kalaithanthai himself solved the problem. He started the Tamil Nadu Mill Owners' Association in 1959. The association functioned successfully for 25 years. Those mill owners who accepted Kalaithanthai's viewpoint became its members. Kalaithanthai's experience in the textile industry and his clear thinking on all issues were responsible for the successful functioning of the association. It got a lot of concessions from the government for all mills. It safeguarded the interests of the mills by taking immediate action against any move from any quarter that might adversely affect them.

“The absence of criticism would encourage the government to be irresponsible. For a good government there must be at least a few persons with courage to point out the mistakes. They must come forward to consider the outstanding issues of any time dispassionately. When there is no protest, hundreds and thousands of people will suffer”. This was his firm belief, and he stuck to it till the last.

He never missed any opportunity to express his views, whether he was personally affected or not. He did not mind when some people became his opponents and tried to attribute motives to him.

4

Kalaithanthai somehow was always opposed to the establishment. He was a nationalist and when he competed with the British industrialists by starting a textile mill, the government took unkindly to him.

Indians did not help him either. He had been associated with the nationalist movement from his young age and as a result he knew all the leaders personally. He had moved closely with Mahatma Gandhi, T. Prakasam, Kamaraj and other Congress leaders and with them he was fairly intimate.

In 1937, Congress won the elections and formed governments in all presidencies. Rajaji became Chief Minister. As soon as he assumed office, Rajaji announced several radical reforms and was eager to implement them quickly. Kalaithanthai gave his views on all the reforms. He was particularly opposed to Rajaji's order on compulsory teaching of Hindi in schools. So he was not popular with the government.

Of course the Dravidian parties and their leaders had great regard for him because of his bold and principled stand on Hindi. Some good came of it. Kalaithanthai had been trying to get some land for the Engineering College. The Congress government postponed taking a decision on his application. When the D.M.K came to power in 1967, C.N. Annadurai took immediate steps and arranged to provide the land to the College free of cost.

5

It was the practice for big industries to pledge the stock of their raw material and final product to a bank and get an open loan proportionate to the stock. Sree Meenakshi Mills had such an arrangement with the Imperial Bank in Madurai. On one occasion in 1934, the bank received an anonymous letter complaining that the Mill was exaggerating

the stock position to get a higher loan. The European manager of the bank immediately rushed to the mills and wanted to check the stock. He said he had heard that the Mill was cheating on the stock position and if it were true he would close down the mills.

Kalaithanthai was informed but he was unruffled. He continued his morning routine, had breakfast and came to the office after an hour. He talked to the manager. He was polite but firm. The manager had no right to come to the mills without prior information and seek to check the stock. It was not fair for the bank to insult an organization that had been maintaining an account with the bank for years and to interrupt the working. It was not good business. It was *his* right to keep the mills open or closed. The bank did not have that right. They had only advanced a loan and at best could demand repayment. Kalaithanthai asked the manager when he would like to have repayment. The manager said that he would be satisfied if he repaid the loan within a week. Kalaithanthai agreed. In fact, he had no ready money. All the mill officials were amazed. The next day Kalaithanthai went to Chettinad, raised the necessary money and returned to the mills only after repaying the loan to the bank. He was always able to handle a situation quite easily.

In September 1939, war broke out between Britain and Germany. At that time Kalaithanthai sent a telegraphic order to 'Toyoto', a Japanese company for 14,000 spindles. Nobody thought that the spindles would arrive. But they did come. Kalaithanthai had no money with him till the day before the machines came. But within three days the spindles were installed in the mills and within a year he earned more than the cost.

6

There was a personal driver for Kalaithanthai called Chellam. He had the highest regard for Kalaithanthai. One day in 1938 the workers had a midnight meeting. The labour leader S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu attacked Kalaithanthai in his speech. Chellam became enraged and took exception to the speech. The workers turned violent and stabbed him to death.

Kalaithanthai was not afraid. He sent for some of the workers and advised them to check the accounts of the union before paying their subscription. He told them that he too had been a labour leader and was giving them the advice in their own interests. He spoke to them for an hour. The workers took offence and called a strike. Kalaithanthai brought workers from other mills and ensured the continuous working of the mills. The strike fizzled out. He was unmoved when workers indulged in stone throwing from outside the mills.

Life was a continuous struggle for Kalaithanthai. He always won because he was always righteous, courageous, undaunted and unruffled.

LEGAL LUMINARY

*He hath... points more than all the lawyers
in Bohemia can learnedly handle.*

SHAKESPEARE, *The Winter's Tale*

Kalaithanthai's knowledge of law was immense. From his early days he had been interested in law. He had mastered the Indian Companies Act and was an expert in it.

The general impression was that Kalaithanthai loved litigation and went to court at the slightest provocation. This was not true. He was a fighter all right, but he never picked a quarrel. He would go to court only when it was unavoidable. He never fought with weak people but only against equals or those above him or the all-powerful government. He never fought for the sake of the fight - out of vanity or as a pastime. He would go to court to demand his rights. He would weigh the options and study the legal position carefully before embarking on a case.

In his lifetime Kalaithanthai filed 250 cases in court, mainly to uphold his principles. He won 200 of them, lost 40. In 10 there was no final judgment.

2

There was a legal department in Sree Meenakshi Mills. It was started with a single lawyer but gradually grew, and at one stage it consisted of 20 lawyers. Over the years it had become a kind of white elephant. The returns were not commensurate with the expenditure, as the department invariably engaged outside lawyers to argue the cases. Kalaithanthai closed down the department as part of an economy measure.

It was Kalaithanthai's practice to engage the best legal talent to argue his cases. Once he tried to get Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the Muslim League leader, who later became Pakistan's first Governor-General, to argue a case for him. Jinnah declined, as he was going to England in the next few days. And on his suggestion, Kalaithanthai engaged the services of Bulabhai Desai, the leader of the Congress party in the Indian Assembly. Kalaithanthai was in touch with great European lawyers like Nugent Grant and Indians like T.R.Venkatarama Sastriar. Lawyers were very happy to argue cases for him. They invariably admired his knowledge of law. There were occasions when the lawyers acknowledged that a discussion with Kalaithanthai sharpened their knowledge. He was able to see points that they had overlooked. Many of them called him "the lawyer of lawyers". Even senior lawyers complimented him on his knowledge.

With all his legal knowledge, Kalaithanthai was fair - minded and highly principled. In 1964, a new Labour Union was formed, its leader being Kannan, a lawyer in Madurai. One day, the workers had a gate meeting and Kannan shouted slogans calling upon the management to recognize the Union. Kalaithanthai felt that Kannan was an outsider, unconnected with the mill, and for him to enter the mill premises and shout slogans against the management was an act of criminal trespass. He gave instructions to the legal department to file a case against Kannan. The leading criminal lawyer in Madurai then was Kalyanasundaram Iyer. He said that there was not sufficient ground for action and for the case to be strong they should add that Kannan used abusive language. Kalaithanthai refused. It was wrong to attribute to Kannan words he had not used. The case was limited to getting a punishment for exceeding propriety.

Mr A. Lakshminarayana Iyer was a renowned lawyer in Madurai. Around 1930, Kalaithanthai would visit him every evening for consultation. A.L. would study the

papers and explain points of law. The young Kalaithanthai would himself give certain subtle points to the astonishment of the lawyer. The lawyer was ungrudging in his praise. He used to say that Kalaithanthai would have made a very good lawyer. If ever he had to argue a case for himself, he would unhesitatingly ask Kalaithanthai to appear for him.

There were occasions when the lawyers on the other side were afraid of Kalaithanthai. Not that they thought that he was a terrible man. They were apprehensive of his knowledge of the law, his analytic mind, his felicity in English, his clear thinking, his confidence, his tenacity, and his faith in the justness of his cause.

He felt that the government passed various acts without bestowing much thought and consequently there were many defects in them, which should be brought to public notice. When others were afraid to bell the cat, Kalaithanthai came forward to fight. Some of the cases he filed were public interest suits that were helpful to others. He never went to court without sufficient reason. He respected the law and never tried to infringe it.

6

The year was 1937. Though Sree Meenakshi Mills was making a profit, it did not pay any dividend to the shareholders. Two of the shareholders thought that Kalaithanthai was losing money in speculative trading in the Bombay cotton market. They preferred a complaint with the Assistant Registrar of Joint Stock Companies. The Assistant Registrar already had a grouse against Kalaithanthai. All mills had to send regular reports of accounts to the Assistant Registrar. Sree Meenakshi Mills had not sent in its reports and the Assistant Registrar had taken up the matter with the Mills, threatening legal action if the reports were not sent in time. An angry Kalaithanthai had written a strong letter to the officer. He objected to the threatening tone of the letter. Sree Meenakshi Mills was a big company managed by respectable directors. The Assistant Registrar had to be polite in his letters. The Mill was not going to submit any statement of accounts. He sent a copy of his reply to the government. The Assistant Registrar was naturally furious and he wanted to get back at Kalaithanthai. The shareholders' complaint was a godsend, and he

wrote to the government recommending a thorough inquiry into the working of Sree Meenakshi Mills.

The Madras government appointed Brahmiah of Brahmiah & Co., auditors, to examine the working of the Mills. The necessary order was passed, but before it was received at the Mills, Brahmiah came without prior notice and demanded to see the account books. Kalaithanthai was away and C.S.R. told him that he had no authority to show the accounts books in Kalaithanthai's absence to any officer, however great. Brahmiah recorded his visit and said that he would come back after five days.

Kalaithanthai returned the next day. He resolved that he was not going to show even a scrap of paper to the officer. Whatever happened, he was not going to permit any investigation into the affairs of the mills. If word got round that the accounts were being examined by the government, the creditors would become jittery and press for repayment and there would be no other option for him but to close down the mill. He wrote to the government about the unfairness of the order and appealed for its withdrawal.

In the meanwhile, Brahmiah had visited the mills thrice but could not gain access to the accounts. He reported to the government and the government promptly filed a case against Kalaithanthai in the City Criminal Court, which issued a notice. In those days a person hauled up to the criminal court was in danger of losing his social standing and being criticized.

Kalaithanthai was not worried. He had no doubt that he would win the case. He engaged a leading criminal lawyer, Ramanujam. He himself went through the Companies Act closely and had no doubt that the government order appointing Brahmiah to inspect the accounts was invalid.

The British Parliament had passed the India Government Act in 1935 and it had become operative. Under it, though the Presidencies (now States) had been given self-rule, companies had been transferred from the State list to the Centre. The Act was to become law on April 1, 1937. Before that, the Emperor had promulgated an order called the India Burma Transitory Provisions Order whereby till the Act came into force and

new governments were formed in the presidencies, the Governor, as the Governor General's representative, could have executive powers. Kalaithanthai took the stand that according to this, any order under the Companies Act could be passed only by the governor and not by the government. He argued that the government order was not in order and he could not be held guilty of any violation. The government's reply was that the phrase "under the governor's seal" at the end of the order indicated that the government's order was also the governor's.

Kalaithanthai did not give in. He went to the Government Printing Press and the Directorate of Government Stationery and Printing and enquired how a government order was issued. He found that an under-secretary could issue it. He argued that the phrase "under the governor's order" did not make an order automatically the governor's. Ramanujam said that the argument would not be accepted in the lower courts. They could use it in the High Court. Kalaithanthai petitioned the court to call the Governor, the Chief Secretary and the Registrar of Companies for enquiry. But the court only called the Registrar of Companies.

The judge in Madurai fined Kalaithanthai Rs 150 for not complying with the government order and not allowing Brahmiah to inspect the accounts — at Rs 50 for each occasion. Brahmiah had visited the mills thrice and been denied access to the account books. Kalaithanthai preferred an appeal at the District Sessions court saying that there was no provision in the law to punish a person thrice for the same offence and had the fine reduced to Rs 50.

Kalaithanthai appealed to the High Court where the case came up before Justice Lakshmana Rao. Nugel Grant, an English lawyer, was famous then. Kalaithanthai met him, gave him the details of the case and gave him a cheque for Rs 600 as fee. He left all the papers with him. The next day, the lawyer declined to take up the case saying that he could not understand it. He sent Kalaithanthai to T.R.Venkatarama Sastri who was ready to take it up. He was sure that the government order would be declared null and void. He wanted the same fee that Kalaithanthai had offered Nugel Grant.

Sastri was right. The government order was quashed. Kalaithanthai had scored a point against the government. He could not resist the impulse to show off. He rang up the secretary of the concerned department and told him that their order had been thrown into the dump.

The government wanted to appeal to the Federal Court, the highest court in the country then. The time for appeal had lapsed, and the chief government lawyer, Sir Alladi Krishnasamy Iyer applied to the High Court for condonation of the delay. A three-member bench, presided over by Sir Lionel Leech, who had recently been transferred from the Burmese High Court, rejected the petition. It was very critical of the government: 'The entire action (beginning with the appointment of Brahmiah) had been taken without prior intimation to the Mills. Even now the details of the petition have not been given to them. The government is trying to misuse the provisions of the law by seeking to appeal to the Federal Court now. The application is rejected.'

The judgment was published in all the leading newspapers, including *The Hindu*, and also in the *Law Digest*. It was a full-page news item in *The Hindu*. As long as Sir Lionel Leech was Chief Judge, Sir Alladi did not attend his court.

7

As Managing Director, Kalaithanthai received an honorarium of Rs 1000 and a share of the profit. The Income Tax department held that tax should be deducted at source for the honorarium and passed an order. Kalaithanthai would not hear of it. He argued that the rule regarding tax deduction at source applied only to salaried employees and not to him, as he was not an employee. The department took action and Kalaithanthai took the matter to the High Court. Justice Berne declared that the action taken by the Income Tax department was not according to law. It was a momentous judgement, which benefited the managing directors of textile mills and other companies all over India. In the earlier case, it had been decided that the government had no right to order the inspection of the accounts of a company without prior intimation. The world of industry in India sat up and wanted to know more about Kalaithanthai.

The Bombay Cotton Market dealt in cotton in a big way. There would be frequent disputes about the quality of the cotton. To effect a compromise between buyer and seller, there was an association called The East India Cotton Association. Its decision was binding on all the parties involved. Once Kalaithanthai found that the cotton sold to him by a dealer was substandard, and took it up with the association. His lawyer was presenting his case. Kalaithanthai and his officer L.N.Sundararaman were attracted by the way the cotton merchant's lawyer was presenting his arguments. Kalaithanthai promptly engaged him for another case he had on hand. I mention this episode to show how quick he was to spot talent.

LITIGATIONS

His cause was just and his quarrel honorable.

SHAKESPEARE, Henry V

Some of the legal battles Kalaithanthai fought are worthy of mention.

1

In 1968, Sree Meenakshi Mills purchased American cotton for Rs 10 lakhs through a Bombay broker, Narandas Rajaram & Co. The broker's agent had sent the cotton. It was of an inferior quality and was not according to the sample shown at the time of the sale agreement. It was fit only for the production of 40-count yarn. The mill had ordered cotton suitable for 60-count yarn. It was clearly seen from the label on the bales that it was old stock.

In a letter to the broker, Sree Meenakshi Mills pointed this out and refused to accept the cotton. They informed the broker that the cotton was kept in the mills godowns and insured at the broker's cost. In his reply, the broker claimed that the company that had sent the cotton had been in the business for a long time and there was no chance of any fraudulence. Still he agreed to refer the matter to the East India Cotton Association and be bound by their decision. The mill did not agree. It was too serious a matter to be taken to the Association. At most, the Association would recommend a refund of Rs 30 per bale. The dispute was with regard to the fulfilment of the agreement. The point raised by the mill was that there had been a violation of the contract. But the broker took the dispute to the East India Cotton Association.

Kalaithanthai went through the sale agreement and the papers relating to the despatch of the cotton to the mill. He got the legal opinion that as the cotton had not been

sent according to the terms of the agreement, there was no need to accept it. When the broker came to Madurai, Kalaithanthai did not mince his words: “I had ordered high-bred Arabian horses and you have sent me mules. How can I accept them?”

There was a compromise and the price was reduced by Rs 400 per bale. The mill also got the discount allowed by the East India Cotton Association.

2

H.M. Mehta and Co, a Bombay company, had supplied textile machinery (spindles) to Sree Meenakshi Mills. There was some dispute about the price. It dragged on for months. H.M. Mehta threatened to go to court.

Kalaithanthai was not upset. He pre-empted the move. There was a reputed firm of solicitors, Mulla and Mulla, in Bombay. One of the lawyers of the firm had been a judge of the Privy Council in London. Kalaithanthai sent all the details of the case to the firm and requested them to take up the case. This was the reply he received:

Messrs H.M. Mehta & Co happen to be our clients. The dispute is between them and you. Without knowing that we are their lawyers, you have sent all the relevant particulars of the case to us. Now that we know all the details of your side of the case, it would not be fair for us to take up the case against you on behalf of our clients. If you are agreeable, we are prepared to talk to our clients and settle the matter in a fair manner. There is no need to go to court.

Kalaithanthai closed with the offer and the dispute was settled. Thereafter, all the Meenakshi Mills cases were handled by Mulla and Mulla.

3

There was an interesting sequel to the dispute. Mulla and Mulla sent a bill to Sree Meenakshi Mills for their services in effecting the compromise in the case pertaining to the purchase of machinery. It *was* for a whopping Rs 14000. They had given a breakdown of the fees - fees for giving legal advice, for going through the documents, for preparing affidavits, for making telephone calls and sending telegrams. Kalaithanthai was taken aback. When he pointed out that the fees was on the high side, they said that the bill had been prepared according to the guidelines laid down by the Proto Notary and

Senior Master of the Bombay High Court. He was free to appeal to that officer. They were willing to be bound by the decision of the officer. Kalaithanthai decided to appeal.

Both Kalaithanthai and L.N.S. went to Bombay. It was arranged that L.N.S should go to the office of Mulla and Mulla the next day, proceed to the office of the Pro Notary with one of the partners and have the matter settled. The next day, however, Kalaithanthai asked L.N.S. to go directly to the Pro Notary's office with a lawyer. It was not the custom for plaintiff and respondent to go to the court together. The partner of Mulla and Mulla was cross with the lawyer for appearing against a fellow lawyer on the question of fees. But the bill was reduced by 40% and Kalaithanthai had to pay only Rs 8400. When L.N.S. asked for the new lawyer's bill, he just said that he could pay him whatever he pleased. He jocularly said that if he presented a bill, Kalaithanthai might go to another lawyer against him!

4

Kalaithanthai put to good use his legal knowledge to get out of tight corners. He had been engaged in forward trading in cotton for years, often going to Bombay for the purpose. Once a deal was finalised, an advance was paid and the balance amount, calculated at the prevailing market rate, had to be paid within two or three months. If the payment was not made within a specified date, the broker would send a bill through a bank. The bank had to collect the amount with interest and send it to the broker within 90 days

Once the broker, Thomas Smith & Co, sent a bill to Kalaithanthai. The financial position of the mill was not very good. He had to buy time till the position improved. The bill had been made out in the name of Sree Meenakshi Mills instead of Thiagaraja Chetty & Co, which had purchased the cotton. Kalaithanthai asked Mulla and Mulla to write to the broker that the bill had been wrongly made out and as such it could not be accepted. Mulla and Mulla prepared a detailed one - page reply. Kalaithanthai was not satisfied. He insisted that the letter should not contain more than two sentences. Mulla and Mulla maintained that they had only mentioned the facts and that no harm would

result. If he was not satisfied, he was free to consult another lawyer. Kalaithanthai went to Sri Jamshedjee Ganga, a renowned legal expert. He saw Kalaithanthai's point and drafted a short letter.

Thomas Smith & Co took the letter to Little & Co, a European firm of lawyers, who advised the company that it would be in its interest to aim at a compromise with the writer of such a letter and get whatever was possible, rather than approach the court and risk losing everything. Kalaithanthai had to pay only Rs 5000, instead of Rs 25000, which was the original bill amount.

It should be mentioned that Sir Jamshedji Ganga, who had accepted Kalaithanthai's point about the letter, was a renowned lawyer of Bombay in the thirties and that the great constitutional expert, N.A. Palkhiwala, was his junior.

5

Kalaithanthai's great legal battle related to the Yarn Price Control Order passed by the Commissioner of Textiles in 1972. It was a time when the textile business was in the doldrums and all the mills were struggling for their very existence. The Yarn Price Control Order required the mills to sell their yarn at the price fixed by the Commissioner to merchants specified by him. They should not sell their yarn to anybody else. The price fixed was Rs 14 less per bundle than the cost of production.

The mill owners were shocked. The South Indian Mill Owners' Association (SIMA) met at Coimbatore and reviewed the situation. It had been only a few days earlier that the government had taken over 104 mills spread over the country and had started the National Textile Corporation to run the mills. SIMA felt that, in the prevailing circumstances, it would be unwise to oppose the government order, and there was nothing for it but to 'grin and bear it.'

Kalaithanthai did not agree. He filed a case in the Supreme Court. He engaged the services of the legal luminaries, M.C. Setalvad, Daphtari, S.V.Gupte and M.K. Ramamurthy. It was argued on behalf of Kalaithanthai that the price control order aimed

at nothing less than confiscating a person's property and as such was violative of article 19 (1) g of the Constitution, which ensured protection of property right. The order would undermine people's faith in the Constitution.

The case was taken up on the day preceding the summer vacation. The judges accepted Kalaithanthai's argument and stayed the operation of the order in respect of Sree Meenakshi Mills. The mill was free to sell its yarn at the prevailing market price to persons of its choice. The Court was closed for three months and during the period, only important cases could be taken before the vacation judge, Chandrachud.

The Tamil Nadu government opposed the stay. It said that there were over 150 textile mills in the State and the stay order would affect thousands of handloom weavers who bought yarn from the mills. It preferred an appeal at the court of the vacation judge. The Tamil Nadu Advocate-General, Mr Govind Swaminathan, argued that the stay would create a law and order problem in the State as handloom weavers might start an agitation, and asked for its vacation. Messrs J. Ramamurthy and M.K. Ramamurthy appeared on behalf of Kalaithanthai. The judge ruled that, whatever the problems before the government, it could not force the mills to sell their yarn at less than the cost price, which would crush the industry. He also made the stay absolute.

This was a historic case. It came up before a constitution bench, consisting of Justices A.N.Ray, Palekar, T.N. Bhagavathi, V.R. Krishna Iyer and Y.V.Chandrachud. F.S. Nariman argued the case on behalf of the Textile Commissioner. The arguments went on for several days. In the end, the bench reserved its judgment. It was several months before the judgment was given.

Nearly a year had passed since the case had been filed. In the interval, the textile mills made huge profits and amassed enormous wealth. Other mill-owners in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere approached the courts and, with Kalaithanthai's precedent, got exemption for themselves from the operation of the Yarn Price Control Order. Mill-owners, especially from North India, who had followed the case as it was being argued in the Supreme Court, were very grateful to Kalaithanthai for his service to the industry.

The Tamil Nadu government felt humiliated by the stay order and wanted to 'teach Kalaithanthai a lesson'. It promulgated an Essential Commodities Act, whereby essential items could be moved from one place to another only with the prior permission of the government. Charging Sree Meenakshi Mills with having violated the provisions of the Act, police entered the Mills premises with lorries in the afternoon and took all the bundles of yarn to the Crime Branch.

Kalaithanthai immediately filed a contempt petition against the authorities. He filed a case in the criminal court asking for the release of the confiscated yarn. On the basis of the stay granted by the Supreme Court, the judge ordered the release of the yarn. The officials got in touch with the higher-ups in Madras who instructed them to file an appeal in the Sessions Court and ask for a retrial under a different judge. Even as the case was being argued Sree Meenakshi Mills managed to sell the yarn to merchants and arranged for the bundles to be lifted from the Crime Branch itself. The appeal became infructuous. Two DSPs and the Additional Director of Handlooms who had lifted the yarn from the Mills tendered an unconditional apology to the Supreme Court.

The Tamil Nadu government would not give up. It was blind with rage. It stopped power supply to Sree Meenakshi Mills for several hours every day. Kalaithanthai once again approached the Supreme Court calling for an end to the discrimination against his mills. The Supreme Court sent a telegraphic order to the Tamil Nadu government calling upon it to provide uninterrupted power supply to the Mills against whom cases were pending, as was being done for other mills. The Mills could get continuous power supply only after this order.

Thanks to the stay given by the Supreme Court, all the textile mills minted money. The mill-owners adored Kalaithanthai. The eight months when the yarn price control order had been stayed were a boom period for Indian textile industry.

Kalaithanthai was involved in litigation when he desired to expand one of his educational institutions. He was very particular about the location of his organizations whether they were residences, mills or educational institutions. When Sree Meenakshi Mills was started, there was no electricity in Madurai and the factory had to be run with steam engines. Kalaithanthai felt that the ideal place for the mill would be the area between the Vaigai and the Mariamman tank (the present location of the Thiagarajar College). There were two Palaces then in the area, both belonging to the Setupati Rajas of Ramanathapuram. The Raja's family used to stay in one of them when they visited Madurai. The other smaller mansion served as the residence of the Ramnad district judge.

Kalaithanthai tried to secure the mansions for starting the mills. Raja Muthuramalinga Setupati did not want to sell them. Already, the family had taken steps to sell their Woodlands Palace at Royapettah at the instance of the Court of Wards managing their estates. To sell the Madurai mansions also at the same time would reflect badly on the family. He offered to get the neighbouring land (later, the Pankajam Gardens) from the zamindar of Paalayampatti, who was his relation. Kalaithanthai did not agree. Muhuramalinga Setupati then helped Kalaithanthai to get the land in which Sree Meenakshi Mills is now functioning from Marikar of Mandapam, his friend. This was in 1922.

It so happened that twenty-five years later Kalaithanthai started the Thiagarajar College in the Palace of the Setupatis. The place was too small for a college - only 10.4 acres in all. The University Commission, which recommended the affiliation of the college, said that the college should have 100 acres. Kalaithanthai was now interested in the adjacent Pankajam Gardens. What should have been a simple affair became complicated and he was forced to go to court but in spite of his best efforts could not get the land.

Pankajam Gardens belonged to the zamindar of Paalayampatti. It consisted of nearly 64 acres of land to the west of the Thiagarajar College. Part of it - about 27 acres - had been sold to someone. An Englishman, Fischer, had bought the rest of it. Subban Chettiar, a zamindar from Bodinayakkanur, had bought this land and Konthagai, a village to the east of Madurai for Rs 41250 at an auction. Kalaithanthai offered Rs 41250 plus some specified amount for the land alone. He approached the government for help. The government asked Kalaithanthai to pay Rs 14 lakhs for the entire land of nearly 64 acres. Of this eight lakhs would be paid to the family of Subban Chettiar. Kalaithanthai insisted that he wanted the land not for commercial use, but for educational purposes. The government was bound to get him the adjoining land. Rajaji, who was the Chief Minister then, offered the required land near the airport or in Anuppanadi. Kalaithanthai stuck to his position.

He went to court. Even after ten years, nothing happened. When Dr S. Radhakrishnan was vice-president, he talked to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Kalaithanthai met Nehru and explained his position. Nehru advised him to have the matter sorted out by the State government. He asked the State government too to consider Kalaithanthai's request sympathetically. Kamaraj offered to give the required land on the northern banks of the Vaigai and construct a bridge across the river. Kalaithanthai did not agree. It is a pity that an educational institution suffered because of the obstinacy of the government.

PUBLIC SPIRIT

... to the public good

Private respects must yield.

Milton, Samson Agonistes

Kalaithanthai was an industrialist *par excellence*, having worked his way to the top by dint of hard work and perseverance. But his thoughts went beyond his own private interests. From his early days, he had interested himself in public service. In Ceylon, he took up the cause of the Indian plantation workers and strove hard for the mitigation of their suffering. The main motive-force for his desire to start a textile mill was his concern for the Harvey Mill workers who had lost their jobs after a strike. By starting textile mills, he made his own contribution to the industrial development of the country. From the profits from business, he established several charitable trusts and started several educational institutions under them, which disseminated knowledge to the less fortunate sections of society. He was a nationalist and joined the Indian National Congress and actively took part in its activities in the beginning. After Independence, he took active interest in the goings-on in the different fields. He thought of the country at large, of Tamil Nadu, of Tamil language and Tamil culture. He had answers to most of the problems of the country and did not miss any opportunity to go public with them. And he articulated his views fearlessly. What he said was not always palatable to the authorities, who tended to ignore them. That did not deter him.

2

Prohibition was an article of faith with Gandhiji and the Congress party under him. The Congress party wanted total prohibition to be introduced in free India. Kalaithanthai was opposed to prohibition. He wrote several letters to Gandhiji on it. He felt it would be an unwise step, which was sure to 'cripple India's finances without conferring any

commensurate benefit'. Total prohibition had been tried in other countries and given up as being impossible of enforcement. His point was that the government should try to bring about temperance through propaganda. One of his letters to Gandhiji is given in Appendix 6. One might not agree with some of his arguments but the fact remains that the few States, including Tamil Nadu, which had introduced total prohibition and had set up the necessary machinery to enforce it, have had to relax it or give it up.

We saw how Kalaithanthai was strongly opposed to the imposition of Hindi and how he used different fora for making his views known. He wrote open letters to Rajaji and other leaders. He had the letters printed and distributed throughout the land. He was widely misunderstood. Yet, it is a fact that Rajaji who had introduced compulsory Hindi in schools as Chief Minister came to oppose it later and carry on a crusade for the retention of English as the official language.

It was Kalaithanthai's interest in Tamil and his desire to prevent Tamil being debased that led him to start *Tamil Nadu*, and run it against heavy odds for 22 years. It cannot be denied that he brought about a remarkable change in the Tamil newspapers - in their language and get-up.

3

It is now rare to see people who hold fast to principles in the face of opposition, obstacles and impediment. Engaged in the struggle for life, one hardly remembers one's principles or ideals. Principles are often thrown to the winds for other considerations.

Kalaithanthai was of a different mettle. He never compromised on principles. He never failed to fight against injustice. When governmental action was against industry, he went to court seeking justice. The entire industry benefited.

4

He never remained indifferent where public welfare was concerned. He wanted public institutions meant for the good of the people to be started and run properly. For

example, he was very happy when the government decided to start an agricultural college in Madurai. He visualized an agricultural college flourishing amidst green fields. He offered 400 acres of his own land at Uchappatti for the college. But the government did not accept it and started the college on a dry stretch of land at the foot of the Yanaimalai. They did not pay heed to Kalaithanthai's argument that the place was not suitable for an agricultural college because of the radiation from the hillock.

The same thing happened when the Madurai University (now, Madurai-Kamaraj University) was formed. In Kalaithanthai's view the University should be located in a place full of natural beauty. An area on the banks of the Vaigai in Sholavandan seemed ideal to him. Kalaithanthai took the three-member committee appointed to examine different locations to the place and pointed out its distinct advantages. But again, the government chose to start the university at the foot of the Nagamalai hills.

5

When renovation work was done in the Sri Meenakshi Temple in 1963, P.T.Rajan was the chairman of the renovation committee. He approached Kalaithanthai for a generous donation. Kalaithanthai offered to have the renovation of one of the towers done lavishly at his own cost by his own men and in keeping with traditional architectural principles. P.T.Rajan did not agree. He said that Kalaithanthai might be an authority on textiles but must leave the renovation work to others. Kalaithanthai followed the renovation work carefully and was disappointed with the slipshod manner in which it was being done. He objected to the bright colors that were being used for the *gopurams*. He did not also approve of the renovation committee passing over the *Thiruppani* carried out by the Vainagaram family of Amaravati Pudur. The family had completed the Northern Tower three hundred years ago and this was not mentioned in the slab fixed at the foot of the tower during the renovation.

To the last, Kalaithanthai concerned himself with the welfare of Tamil Nadu and its people. He carried on a crusade for it. Sometimes he succeeded, sometimes he did not.

THE MAN

He was a man, take him for all in all,

I shall not look upon his like again.

SHAKESPEARE, Hamlet

Kalaithanthai was a unique personality. In the preceding chapters we saw how he distinguished himself in whatever field he ventured into. As a labour leader in Ceylon he worked to alleviate the sufferings of the migrant Indians. Then he opted to become an industrialist and succeeded in building up a textile empire. Courageously he faced the competition from the British rivals in the field. He diversified into banking and journalism and left his stamp on them. A great visionary, he founded institutions of higher learning and helped in the development of the country. A nationalist to the core, he concerned himself with the various problems confronting the country and came up with suggestions for their solution. “Tamil was his life-breath.” and he played a key role in the Renaissance of Tamil. He was a devout Hindu and a true Indian. He was firmly rooted in tradition and was not swayed by Westernization. I shall here insert a few particulars that give us further insights into his personality.

1

Simplicity

The first thing that struck anyone about Kalaithanthai was his simplicity. He disliked publicity and was a model of humility. In assemblies, he never thrust himself forward. He never showed off nor sought respect. Under unavoidable circumstances, because of his concern for the country’s welfare, he would speak out. In this he was as dauntless as the proverbial Nakkirar, who even challenged Lord Siva.

He conducted himself in the same way through ups and downs. He was not haughty when he was prosperous nor demeaned himself when he was in difficulties.

He would not even wait for a lift but climbed the stairs without standing on formality. Once when he was returning from Madras, the assistant who was to meet him at the station did not turn up in time. Kalaithanthai walked the distance from the station.

Similarly when he attended the funeral of Pandithamani Kathiresan Chettiar at Mahibalanpatti, a small village surrounded by river, due to flash floods, cars could not reach the village, as there was no bridge. Kalaithanthai crossed the river in a bullock-cart.

He never had the habit of taking a motorcade with him when he travelled.

2

Equanimity

He had many setbacks in life but he always remained unruffled and faced both success and failure with equanimity. One is reminded of Hamlet's words:

A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards

Hast ta'en with equal thanks.

Once, the textile industry was afflicted with many troubles. Kalaithanthai did not give way to despondency but took efforts to overcome them. His words to a friend who marveled at his equipoise are memorable: "If we take care of the business, the business will take care of us".

The NTC (National Textile Corporation) had been formed in the public sector and there was a rumour that the government was going to nationalize the textile industry and take over all the textile mills. When some friends drew Kalaithanthai's attention to it he only laughed. "If we lose one business, there will be another opening". He had such faith in human effort and divine Grace.

Even in the face of critical moments in business, personal life or family life, Kalaithanthai never lost his cool, was never at a loss, never confused. He would display rare equanimity.

Once while talking to Professor Avvai S. Duraisami Pillai, the profound Tamil scholar and commentator, Kalaithanthai quoted the following lines from Goldsmith.

“Man wants but little here below
Nor wants that little long,”

and pointed to a similar thought in Nakkirar: “We eat but little food, we wear but a little cloth and even this little may slip out of our hands.”

He was always soft-spoken and never lost his temper nor raised his voice.

Dignity, Duty and Discipline were his watchwords. Personality cult, vanity, sycophancy, corrupt political leadership, spineless journals, and newspapers that spread falsehood were his abomination.

3

Dignity of Labour

He knew the value of work. He was ready to take up any work from masonry to gardening. There were occasions when he worked with the labourers.

He was a stickler for perfection and was meticulous about the minutest details. He left his distinctive mark on any work that he undertook. Even when he sent someone to get some flowers he would give a lot of instructions. This set him apart from the rest.

Relationship with Employees

He never tolerated indolence in any of his workers. When he came to know that one of his officers whose house was only a few metres away from the mill always waited for the car to pick him up, he promptly transferred him to another mill.

What he liked in his employees were hard work, diligence, courage and frugality.

In the initial stages, when the mill had only 25 workers, he knew all their family background intimately.

He never failed to recognize merit and reward it. This can be illustrated from the case of Thiru C.V. Rengachari, who was just a clerk in Sree Meenakshi Mills. The mills had been buying cotton from Rathilal & Co of Bombay. C.V.R. discovered while examining the accounts that some of the money sent by Meenakshi Mills had not been credited to the account of the Bombay Company. Thiru C.S.R., to whom he reported the matter, thought he must be mistaken. It was inconceivable that a company of that stature could be guilty of such a lapse. The clerk was sure of his ground and said that the company had not given credit for one lakh rupees. He turned out to be right when the company acknowledged its mistake. Kalaithanthai trebled the clerk's salary.

He never hesitated to support the deserving. And the help he extended was immediate and comprehensive. There was one Thiru Ganapathy Pillai, who was blind but who could compete with the computer in solving problems. Kalaithanthai felt that such a genius should not suffer poverty and arranged to give him an allowance from the Mills throughout his lifetime and also gave some good position in the Mills to his sons.

Attitude to Other Industrialists

Great industrialists, educationists, political leaders and intellectuals considered it a privilege to exchange views with him as he had clear ideas and articulated them in terse

and clear language. Most of them had been his guests enjoying his hospitality. But for himself, he would visit his business friends but would never stay with them, preferring to stay in hotels. He expected his family members and company officials to follow him in this. It was never advisable to stay in the house of persons whose connection, he would say, is only a business one.

6

Appreciation of Originality

Kalaithanthai was quick to appreciate original talent. It is from this that a friendship developed between Kalaithanthai and G.D. Naidu of Coimbatore.

A Japanese company invented a Super Hydraft System in Spinning Ring Frames. Kalaithanthai wrote a letter congratulating the company on the invention and he was the first to install them in India.

A youngman, Balasundaram, who had studied Textile Technology at Sheffield in England and settled in Coimbatore came forward to make textile machinery in India. He had started a company called Textool & Co. Kalaithanthai was happy and encouraged him. He lauded his intelligence and inventiveness. The frames he made had less width than usual and hence required less space for installation. This would bring factory building costs also.

7

Knowledge of Accountancy

Kalaithanthai had not even elementary education in commerce but he could study the balance sheets of the mills and could deduce everything about their working. He would get the balance sheets of all the other well-known mills in India and compare them with that of his mills. And he would ask several questions - How is it that we are paying more interest to the bank? How is it that they have claimed greater depreciation than us? Why did not our auditor do that? Is their machinery older than ours? How has this company paid less electricity charges than we have? Do they have generators? Or do

they get electricity at a concessional rate? He would throw all these questions at his officers.

8

Knowledge of Engineering

When he engaged himself in some activity that required technical knowledge, Kalaithanthai would consult engineering experts and learn about the nature of the machinery, their working, and the difference between one machine and another. He could easily understand technical details.

An engineer in Sree Meenakshi Mills was sacked because he disregarded Kalaithanthai's instructions regarding the installation of some machine. He went to court. His contention was that he was a qualified engineer and his boss, who had no qualification in engineering, could not dictate to him what to do. In his judgment, the judge said that this particular boss might not have a formal engineering qualification but he was competent to judge the ability and performance of a qualified engineer.

When Brown Bower & Co of Switzerland sent single gears instead of double helical gears that had been ordered, Kalaithanthai was furious. The company claimed that they had sent only double gears, but later they had to admit their mistake and replace the gears. Perhaps they thought that Kalaithanthai would not notice the difference.

9

Self-respect

Kalaithanthai had great self-respect. He would never demean himself for the sake of any gain. He expected his employees too not to demean themselves. Even at the most crucial moments, he was conscious of his good name and never gave up his self-respect. He was equally careful of the reputation of the Mills.

Between 1940 and 1943, Kalaithanthai started several new mills and also set about expanding the existing mills. He needed large quantities of iron and steel — about 500

tons. Since the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, iron and steel had been brought under the control of the government. The Iron and Steel Commissioner's Office in Calcutta was the sanctioning authority. The Commissioner then was Thiru Sundaresan, a Tamilian. An officer was sent to Calcutta with an application. He was also a Tamilian with the same name and from the same place in Tamil Nadu, Pathamadaai in Tirunelveli district. The Commissioner refused even to consider the application, as the steel position was very tight. The officer from the Meenakshi Mills persisted and succeeded in getting the sanction. Nobody knew how he got the order. After about six months, one of the officers in the Commissioner's Office in Calcutta spoke to Kalaithanthai on the phone on some business. And casually he complimented Kalaithanthai on having an officer who was a go-getter and who would adopt any means to succeed in his efforts. Kalaithanthai learned from him that Sundaresan, his officer, had prostrated before the Commissioner. He immediately sent for the officer and reprimanded him: "Why did you prostrate before the Commissioner? Is he a God? He is only a government servant whose duty is to allot iron and steel to those who want it, keeping in mind the overall good of the country. We ask for a particular quota. If he does not give it, we will take legal steps to get it. The employees of Sree Meenakshi Mills should not beg. We must establish our right and never demean ourselves. The name Sree Meenakshi Mills should inspire awe and respect in all. All I expect from my employees is that they should maintain self-respect. We should not beg. We should not fear."

10

Attitude towards ex-employees

He would not stand in the way of any worker who wanted to leave service to better his prospects. He would relieve him immediately. Even if the person did not disclose the reason, he would not mind. If anybody said that he was going to better his prospects he would give him his blessings. If for any reason a worker who had left wanted to come back he would take him back. P.N. Desikachari left to join the Mettur Mills, which

offered him a higher pay. Within a short time he wanted to come back. Kalaithanthai magnanimously took him back.

C.S. Ramachary was a very strict disciplinarian. He would not overlook even minor lapses. He would even go to the extent of sacking the defaulters. In such cases Kalaithanthai would not think of rescinding his order but he would give the sacked worker a generous compensation package. He took care of the sick workers.

That he had worked under Kalaithanthai was sufficient testimonial for any person. Any worker in Sree Meenakshi Mills - spinning master, cotton purchase officer, yarn sales officer, lawyer in the legal department, engineer, mason, gardener - was always welcomed with open arms in other mills. There were people who joined Sree Meenakshi Mills early in life, grew under Kalaithanthai and later turned their experience to account by starting mills of their own or by becoming advisors to mills.

11

Tolerance to human errors

In any big organization it is inevitable that there should be internal politics and bickering among colleagues. This would lead to talebearing. Kalaithanthai would never encourage it. When Sree Meenakshi Mills expanded, a lot of new people were appointed to high positions. Some of the old timers would often speak to Kalaithanthai against some of the new entrants. One day Kalaithanthai called all the high officials and told them that nobody was free from defects and they must all practice forbearance. If for one defect or other they were to send this or that man away, there would be only fools and idiots left in the organization.

12

High expectations from employees

Throughout his life Kalaithanthai was tirelessly active and expected the same trait in his employees as well. He was impatient with indolence and listlessness. It was hard for him to tolerate inactivity. He expected his high officials to have details at their

fingertips. What is the plinth area of Rukmini Mills, what is the speed of the ring frame at Manapparai; what is the construction cost of the Paravai Mills? Many developed talents for answering such questions.

13

Meenakshi Mills Stamp on the workers

Kalaithanthai took on his staff only talented people. Those who came to him at 18 or 19 grew to be experts in their field.

Sree Meenakshi Mills purchased Casablanca Drafting spare parts for the ring frames. They did not function properly. The company's attention was drawn to it. They said that the mill's engineers were experts and could carry out any minor modification required. It was a tribute to Kalaithanthai that the entire industry had a high opinion of the calibre of the engineers of Sree Meenakshi Mills.

The Indian government decided to send a six-member delegation from the textile industry to Russia, Czechoslovakia and other European countries to study the working of the textile industry in these countries. The NTC was in charge of selecting the delegates. The only delegate from South India was P.N.Desikachari, an expert in the spinning section of Sree Meenakshi Mills

14

Command of English

Kalaithanthai's knowledge of English was as profound as his knowledge of Tamil. He had studied in a renowned college (St. Thomas College) in Ceylon. He was careful about his English accent. He excelled in written English also. He had served as correspondent in an English newspaper run by Englishmen. He had the mastery to analyze the report of an English I.C.S. officer and pull it to pieces. Even after coming to Madurai, Kalaithanthai took daily lessons in English from Father Simon, Headmaster of St. Mary's High School. In summer while at Kodaikkanal he would read Milton and other poets with Father Simon at the Sacred Heart College, Shenbaganur.

The Europeans and Americans who met Kalaithanthai always thought that he had been trained in language in Oxford or Cambridge. Duke Wellington was the viceroy of India in 1931. Earlier in 1925 he had been governor of Madras Presidency. He once visited Madurai. As it was rare for a governor to undertake visits to places outside Madras, it was a great occasion. Several citizens' committees were formed to receive the governor. Each committee had a particular responsibility. The American Christian missionaries in Madurai were assigned the job of drafting the welcome address to be presented to the governor. They requested Kalaithanthai's help. This is a proof of Kalaithanthai's unparalleled command of English.

15

Dr Alagappa Chettiar

Kalaithanthai had a special friendship with the great philanthropist of the time, Dr. Alagappa Chettiar. His tenacity of purpose, mastery of English and wonderful conversation fascinated Kalaithanthai. He used to meet him frequently.

Alagappa Chettiar had a textile mill in Pudukadu in the Cochin area. It was a tax-free zone but still Alagappa Chettiar failed to make it viable. This was because he could not attend to the day-to-day administration. At his request Kalaithanthai took up the management of the mills.

Alagappa Chettiar was a great philanthropist and he started college after college in Karaikudi. After his death it was decided to dispose of the Alagappa Mills for the sake of the educational institutions. The trustees of the educational institutions A.M.M. Murugappa Chettiar and C.V.C.T. Venkatachalam Chettiar appealed to Kalaithanthai to buy the Alagappa Mills. Kalaithanthai consulted the high officials of the Meenakshi mills, who explained the difficulties that they might have to face if the mills were taken over. Murugappa Chettiar said, "This is not a matter in which you have to consult these experts. There are instances when we have used our common sense. If you don't help

now, the educational institutions will have to be closed down.” Kalaithanthai bought the mills without a word.

After the takeover, Kalaithanthai initiated steps to improve the mills and its finances amid serious obstacles. The company Lay Registrar took action against the buying, on the ground that it was illegal of Sree Meenakshi Mills to have acquired shares far in excess of the allotted amount. To escape action, Kalaithanthai floated a new company to buy the shares of Alagappa Mills.

The mills faced crisis after crisis. The textile commissioner and the Company Registrar sent notices that legal action should be taken against the ex-directors for various irregularities. Action was taken. The details are given in the director’s report issued after the 31-12-1960 meeting of the directors of the Alagappa Textiles. The income from the mills was not sufficient for running Alagappa Polytechnic Pudukkadu and Kalaithanthai brought it under the Thiagarajar Trust.

It was against this background that it was contemplated to change the name of the mills. Kalaithanthai and CSR had been to Madras. Alagappa Chettiar was gravely ill and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited him. Kalaithanthai and CSR went to see him. Alagappa Chettiar told Kalaithanthai that he was hard pressed for money and wanted Rs.10,000/=. Kalaithanthai immediately arranged with his Madras office to send the money. He visited Dr. Alagappa Chettiar after ten days. There was no improvement in his condition. CSR asked Alagappa Chettiar’s secretary Thiru V.S. Manian whether Alagappa Chettiar was happy to receive Rs.10,000/= sent by Kalaithanthai. The secretary said that the money was received but immediately sent to a preparatory school built in memory of MCTM Chidambaram Chettiar, a donation already promised by Alagappa Chettiar to the school. Kalaithanthai was touched by the gesture of Alagappa Chettiar. Nobody could be like Alagappa Chettiar who could think of his promise even on his deathbed.

Years later, Alagappa Chettiar's educational institutions became a university in his name and I had the good fortune to take part in its growth as the first vice chancellor and it was the Divine Will that brought it about as a result of the long true friendship between Kalaithanthai and Alagappa Chettiar.

16

Interest in Arts and Architecture

Kalaithanthai had a deep interest in various arts: architecture, sculpture, gardening, testing the purity of diamonds, music, and astrology.

He had an exquisite aesthetic taste and appreciated objects of great artistic value. He was well versed in fine arts. Even specialists acknowledged Kalaithanthai's discernment in matters of taste.

Kalaithanthai was passionately interested in architecture. He developed his own style. In all the beautiful buildings he had constructed for his mills and educational institutions, one could see his distinctive stamp. Constructing beautiful artistic buildings was a kind of hobby with him. All the buildings that he put up bore his characteristic stamp of elegance and magnificence. The campus of the Thiagarajar College of Engineering, for instance, is extensive and beautiful. The landscape is beautifully terraced, and the buildings are surrounded by ponds and pastures. Each building has its regular pattern.

The hostel buildings in the Thiagarajar Arts College face the river, and they are not walled in. When somebody asked him once why there were no walls, Kalaithanthai said: "I want my students to be free in their thinking. It is not a prison house. I won't agree to spoil the buildings by putting up Compound walls."

It might be said that he spent nearly a third of his time in drawing plans for buildings, holding discussions with civil engineers and making alterations to the plans and taking up new constructions. When engaged in this he would forget himself.

Experienced architects would come forward to draft plans for Kalaithanthai's buildings. His buildings followed the Dravidian style of construction. The pial of Chettinad and granite columns with sculptures found a place in most of his buildings.

Kalaithanthai wanted the gates of his buildings to be of brass. He wanted brass plates to be embossed with an elephant with a lotus in its trunk. These have held a high place in Indian architecture for ages.

Kalaithanthai would decide on the colour of the stone in various parts of the buildings. And all building work would be suspended till the particular stone was available. He would modify the elevation of the building according to the particular needs. Nagarathars would not use chairs. Mostly they would sit on the pial. Perhaps because of this, Kalaithanthai had pials and granite columns in his buildings. The stairs would be 24, 36, 45 and 48' wide depending on the nature of the building.

The walls should be straight. Even if there was the slightest deflection, Kalaithanthai would detect it. The mason would find him right. He was particular that the work must be neat and the building attractive. There would be no compromise on the standard of the work or the beauty of the building.

When constructing any building, he would take into account the use of the building and its beauty. When something that had been completed did not look perfect, even if it were a wall, he had no hesitation in demolishing it and building it anew.

When Sree Meenakshi Mills was started there was no electricity in Madurai. The mills made use of steam boilers. The chimney of the boilers in the mills was beautiful and was a great attraction.

In 1942 Japan bombed Madras. The District Collector of Madurai thought that the next target might be Madurai and in a meeting he convened, various prominent buildings in the city were considered. The collector and the higher officials of the mills feared that the tall chimney of Sree Meenakshi Mills could be easily spotted by the bombers. They tried to persuade Kalaithanthai to dispose of it for two lakhs so that it could be

dismantled. Kalaithanthai said that it was an artistic work and a symbol of the mills. He would not agree to have it removed for security reasons or for money. The chimney stands even now, a reminder of Kalaithanthai's high principles.

Thirupperundurai, also called Avudaiyar Koil, is a place sacred to the Saivaites. It was said that Lord Siva came there as Guru and bestowed divine initiation on Saint Manickavasagar. The temple has wonderful sculptures. Once when we visited the temple, Kalaithanthai pointed out the architectural beauty of the temple.

The temple had been recently renovated. Kalaithanthai said that the ventilators in the upper part of the sanctum sanctorum were unnecessary and they marred its beauty. He pointed out that the old temple architecture had been spoilt by the renovation.

After returning to Madurai, he had his judgment confirmed by a discussion with Avvai Duraisamy Pillai and Professor A. Sankaranarayanan. He wrote to the head of the Thiruvadudurai Adeenam also about the defects in the renovation work.

17

Kalaithanthai was very much interested in gardening. He had old books on gardening in his personal library. He wanted the gardens to be beautiful with plenty of trees and flower plants. He would say, "You are nearer Heaven in a garden than anywhere else on earth." He felt the presence of God in Nature. He particularly liked Nature poetry.

When he was building the mansion at Courtallum, he spent lavishly on the garden and the Tiger Falls. CSR subtly mentioned that they had exceeded the budget in Courtallum. Kalaithanthai smiled. "Ramachary, you and I have not seen Heaven. To me this is Heaven on earth", was his answer.

Kalaithanthai was fond of horse riding. He purchased beautiful horses at great cost. With all his love for horses, he never indulged in racing. But he knew everything about horses-their nature, their rearing, their breed, the difference between one horse and another. He was also interested in cars. He had a collection of vintage cars and also very modern cars including imported ones. Once G.D. Birla came to the Madurai bungalow as Kalaithanthai's guest and admired his collection of cars. But Kalaithanthai never used any flashy limousines — he used only a small car - a tiny Lanchester always.

Kalaithanthai was interested in music. He engaged Shanmugavadivu, mother of the music maestro M.S. Subbulakshmi to teach Veena to his daughters. They also acquired a mastery of the instrument.

He was interested in collecting ancient art sculptures. Paintings, marble statues, bronze statues, Ravi Varma's pictures - he bought many of them, unmindful of the price.

COURTALLAM

- THE HEAVENLY ABODE

This other Eden, demi -paradise.

SHAKESPEARE, Richard II

Courtallam is a small township in Tirunelveli District almost on the Kerala border. To its west are the Western Ghats. The Goddess of Nature reigns supreme there. With a light drizzle, mild sunshine and gentle breeze, it is a magnificent health resort. The silvery waterfalls and the panoramic view of the place attract a lot of people. Kalaithanthai was enamoured of the place and he used to say that if ever there was a heaven on earth, it is Courtallam.

Kalaithanthai's very first visit to Courtallam was for health reasons. He suffered from occasional attacks of asthma and Dr P.N.Ramasubramaniam, a leading doctor of Madurai, suggested his spending some months in Courtallam, as the salubrious climate would be beneficial to his condition.

Kalaithanthai stayed for two seasons in the doctor's house. The temple there with its splendid sculptures and the sylvan surroundings fascinated him. He was also cured of his asthma.

2

Kalaithanthai decided to build a beautiful house in Courtallam. He bought 10.5 acres of land and started the construction. It took him twelve years to finish the mansion, which he called Meenakshi Bungalow. He personally attended to the minutest details and made it an architectural marvel. He imported Italian marble columns for the pial and verandahs. For the doors and doorframes, he had teakwood specially cut and planed so that the rings would be visible. At every stage he took great pains to make it the best of

the mansions he built. It stands as a monument to his aesthetic taste and knowledge of architecture. He was keen that the distinctive Tamil or Dravidian style of architecture should be encouraged and preserved. The mansion is situated near the hills and commands a good view of the mountains. It is so constructed that from whichever direction one looked at it, one would feel that that was the entrance. The garden too was beautifully designed. Those who saw it admired the house and lauded Kalaithanthai's contribution to the renaissance of Dravidian architecture.

3

The Siva temple in Courtallam is famous and is celebrated in *Thevaram* and *Tiruvacakam*. Kalaithanthai would go to the temple daily and recite the devotional songs (*Thevaram*). Kalaithanthai was fond of talking about the various references to the temple in literature. He knew all the flora of Courtallam and the names by which they are referred to in Sangam Literature. Once he started to talk about the flora and fauna, he would refer to what the *Tolkappiam* says on evolution. First to arise were grass and plants with a single sense developed - the sense of touch; next came organisms with two senses - touch and taste; third, organisms with three senses developed - touch, taste and smell; fourth, organisms with four senses - touch, taste, smell and sight; fifth, organisms with five senses developed - touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing; and finally man, in whom in addition to the five senses, a sixth sense, the mental faculty appeared. His knowledge would amaze even scholars.

While in Courtallam, Kalaithanthai would visit the Muruga shrine at Tirumalai in Panpozhi. This temple is situated in idyllic surroundings close to the Western Ghats. The poet, Pandarathiah of Senkottai, composed the *Tirumalai Murugan Pillai Tamil* and Sanakarapandianar of Nagaram composed the *Tirumalai Kumaraswami Tiruppugazh* on the deity. Kalaithanthai also used to worship at the Muruga shrine at Ilanchi nearby, a shrine celebrated by Saint Arunagirinathar.

Back in 1954, the Tiger Falls in Courtallam was not easily accessible. The pathway was overgrown with thickets and bushes. It was in a protected forest area. Kalaithanthai got permission from the forest department and had beautiful waterfalls constructed there. He provided separate bathing facilities for men, women and children. He put up a small cottage for the convenience of the bathers. There was an Ayyanar temple near the Tiger Falls, which had long been neglected. Kalaithanthai took up the renovation work and performed the consecration in 1955.

Kalaithanthai had a passion to make the lovely surroundings lovelier. At some distance from the bungalow, there were the Kattaru Falls, a really fantastic sight. Kalaithanthai planned to further beautify the place and lay a 3-km road to it. In July 1974, he contacted the Town Planning Committee and took them around the place to explain his plans. It was a steep climb and for over two hours, he climbed up and down, looking at the place from different angles and expatiating on his plan to the Committee members. Those who were following him could not keep pace with him and many were gasping for breath. They could only stand, stare and marvel at his agility. The strain was too much for him though in his enthusiasm, he was not aware of it. This perhaps hastened his end.

He had also plans to carve some of the scenes described in *Silappathikaram* and *Tiruvacakam* on the rocks adjoining his mansion. He visited the Ajanta and Ellora caves and studied the carvings and paintings.

At Courtallam, there was a castle belonging to the Setupatis of Ramanathapuram - the Sethu Castle - on a 25-acre ground adjacent to the Travancore Palace. Kalaithanthi had an idea to start a rural university at Courtallam. He had finalized a proposal after consulting the then Chairman of the University Grants Commission. The Sethu Castle was coming up for sale at that time, and he bought it for the Thiagarajar Trust, with the idea of developing a rural university. But that was not to be. Kalaithanthai's plan did not

materialize, though the State governor strongly recommended it. The Central government was not keen. However, the castle is used for art festivals and conferences even now.

MY MASTER

The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul

Of all my moral being.

WORDSWORTH, Tintern Abbey Lines

I count it a great blessing that I had the privilege to be moulded by Kalaithanthai, a multi-faceted personality of versatile knowledge, profound scholarship and an embodiment of culture and divine wisdom.

Our marriage took place in the Muruga temple at the picturesque Ilanchi close to Courtallam. The great musician Lakshmana Pillai, the Tamil critic T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar (popularly known as T.K.C.), and Professor Pannirukai Perumal Mudaliar attended the wedding and gave their blessings.

At Courtallam, T.K.C. would visit us almost daily and expatiate upon the beauty of Tamil and the literary greatness of *Kamba Ramayanam*. I had never known Tamil before, but still I would listen fascinated.

When I entered Kalaithanthai's bungalow in Madurai, I felt that I was entering a Tamil temple. I was happy. The members of the household were very kind to me and pleasant.

In our long life together, all the gains were mine. He was my master, a great scholar whom I looked up to, and a teacher who showed me the way to knowledge. Owing to him, I, who had been born into another language, learnt Tamil and have been able to acquaint myself with its ancient and rich literature. Inspired by him, I studied the religious and spiritual literature of Tamil.

Because of his devotion to Saivaite religion and his absorption in the lives of the Saivaite saints, Kalaithanthai called our first son Kannappan, after the great devotee of Lord Siva, who gave his eye to the Lord. He called our second child, a daughter,

Lakshmi. Both the children grew to be religious, and learnt the devotional songs, *Thevararn* and *Tiruvacakam*, dear to their father.

Kannappan graduated in Business Administration and is looking after the Thiagarajar Mills at Kappalur and the Virudhunagar Textiles. He has won the central government prize for export several times. He married Umayal, daughter of Kandaramanickam Meyyappa Chettiar who is settled in London. They have two daughters and a son.

Lakshmi took the B.A. degree in English Literature. She married Mr. Murugesan, a grandson of Sivalingam Chettiar, who was the son of Arunachalam Chettiar, the eldest brother of Kalaithanthai. He was related to Kalaithanthai in another way also. He was the grandson of Kalaithanthai's elder sister, Seethai Achi of Poolankurichi. Lakshmi and Murugesan have two sons.

Kalaithanthai was deeply interested in Tamil Literature. With all his preoccupations with industry, business, money matters and legal problems, he found time to study Tamil poems and loved to discuss them with friends and scholars. Born into a different language, I had no previous knowledge of Tamil. Kalaithanthai revealed to me the beauty of Tamil language and literature. And he arranged for me to learn Tamil.

I was thrown headlong into Tamil literature, to manage as best I could, 'to sink or swim'. One day Kalaithanthai got Avvai S.Duraisamy Pillai to our bungalow and asked him to teach me Tamil systematically. And the text to begin with was Parimelazhagar's commentary on *Tirukkural!* Avvai suggested beginning with elementary texts and later going on to the literary works. Kalaithanthai said, "She is a complete stranger to Tamil. She will have difficulty in reading any text. She had better start on Parimelazhagar." Avvai started teaching me. The introductory part was very difficult and I despaired of ever learning Tamil. When I told this to Kalaithanthai, he smiled and said, "It will turn out all right; you will soon understand."

As he predicted, I learnt Tamil well. I studied Tamil Literature. Kalaithanthai would occasionally sit with Avvai and elucidate particular passages. His enthusiasm was infectious and I learnt Tamil with a passion.

Of all the great treasures of Tamil Literature, Kalaithanthai was particularly drawn to *Thevaram* and *Tiruvacakam*. *Tiruvacakam* especially was the very breath of his life. He knew it by heart. He would recite verses from it every day. Lines from *Tiruvacakam* would come naturally to him during conversations. I was also drawn to the poem and have read it with Kalaithanthai several times. It was at his instance that I did my doctoral research on *Tiruvacakam*.

Kalaithanthai rendered great service to the cause of education, starting educational institutions and spending money generously on them. The experience and knowledge I gained in my association with those institutions under Kalaithanthai's leadership gave me the courage and vision to take up the vice-chancellorship of the Alagappa University later and make a success of *it*. Kalaithanthai had been a close friend of Dr Alagappa Chettiar, who had founded the Alagappa group of colleges, the nucleus of the university. And it was in the fitness of things that I should be the first vice-chancellor of *the university*

Kalaithanthai held that industries and educational institutions should work in close association. And I was able to give shape to his ideas by starting several industry-oriented courses in the university.

Kalaithanthai not only enabled me to master Tamil Literature but associated me with the management of the mills and the educational institutions as well. Later I had to take up several responsibilities as the managing trustee of the Palani Andavar Temple, as the vice-chancellor of a university, as the managing director of textile mills and as the president of many of the educational institutions he started. It was his training and encouragement that gave me the strength to shoulder those responsibilities.

MY GURU

And gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche.

CHAUCER, *Canterbury Tales*, 'Prologue'

The fourth of November 1958 was a great day in my life. It was the day that proved to be a turning point in my intellectual life. It was the day I was 'baptised' into a new language. It was the day Tamil won its sway over one who had been born in a different state and into a different language.

On that day, Kalaithanthai called Professor Avvai S. Duraisamy Pillai, the great Tamil scholar, to our house, and placing a copy of *Tirukkural* with Parimelazhagar's commentary into his hands, entrusted him with the task of teaching me Tamil. I still remember the bewilderment in Avvai's eyes as he received the book and looked at Kalaithanthai, me and the book.

He started with the Tamil alphabet and then straight plunged into the introductory portion of Parimelazhagar's commentary. What a stentorian voice he had! But I became apprehensive and trembled like a deer in the forest. I had to go through the book letter by letter and it all seemed daunting and far beyond me. I did not feel equal to the task and was in despair. Avvai was all sympathy and encouragement. "It will all be easy as time goes on." He proceeded slowly, and gently led me into the golden realm of Tamil Literature. To enable me to follow easily, he explained everything mostly in English in the beginning. He unlocked the treasures of Tamil Literature for me. Soon I started feeling at home in Tamil Literature. He taught me without haste, without becoming cross with me when I faltered, with a pleasant face and without deviating from his purpose.

I was really blessed in having Avvai as my *guru*. His profound scholarship, great mastery of Tamil literature, nobility and humility filled me with amazement. To listen to his explication of a text was a treat. He was very sensitive to the nuances of literature and

was able to make me respond to them. There might be countless teachers and countless students. But, Avvai as a teacher was unparalleled and a class by himself. Once he started his lessons, he would forget himself. He would never get tired. He had undertaken the work of teaching me Tamil and looked upon it as a mission. He did his job with enthusiasm, true devotion and dedication. If only we could get one such dedicated teacher today!

Totally absorbed in his work, he would not know the passage of time. I would get tired and try to give him a hint. I would ask him the time. He would just say, "I have no watch," and go on. After some time, I would openly ask him, "Could we stop here?" His invariable reply was, "Just a few more pages." But for his indefatigable enthusiasm and unrelenting effort, I would not have acquired what little knowledge I have of Tamil. His eagerness to teach me was more than my readiness to learn. He was a great teacher. I can say of him what Wordsworth said about his sister: "He gave me eyes, he gave me ears". Tamil poetry, especially Tamil religious poetry, cast a spell over me.

RESEARCH IN TIRUVACAKAM

In Nature's infinite book of secrecy

A little I can read.

SHAKESPEARE, Antony and Cleopatra

As I was studying Tamil Literature and works relating to Saiva Siddhanta, I was drawn to Manickavacakar's *Tiruvacakam*. I used to listen to Kalaithanthai reciting the verses every morning and the verses cast a spell on me. I began reading it closely. The *Tiruvacakam* has a special place in Tamil Bhakthi literature. It would move even the hardest heart. The more I read it, the more was my feeling that the book embodied the profound spiritual experience of Manickavacakar. It is not only a record of his spiritual experience but also a source of a similar experience for the right kind of reader.

The book touched strange chords in my heart. I saw it described the different stages in the experience of a seeker. I tried to relate the different strands of that experience to Western mystic literature. I remembered Wordsworth's description of a mystic experience, in his Tintern Abbey Lines. While reading *Tiruvacakam*, I was "laid asleep in body" and became "a living soul".

I made a close study of Manickavacakar, and the result was a dissertation, A Study of Mysticism in *Tiruvacakam* in English, which I submitted to Madurai-Kamaraj University for my Ph.D. degree. It was a 'highly commended' thesis of the university. The university published it as a book and the vice- chancellor released it at a special function.

Fascinated by the reception of the book, I ventured on a Tamil translation, with the title, *Tiruvacakathil Aruliyal*, which was published by Vanathi Pathippagam. The Tamil edition was released at a function presided over by the Hon'ble Minister of HREC, Thiru

RM. Veerappan. His Holiness Sundara Swami gave his blessings. Many Tamil scholars offered felicitations.

All these distinctions, I owe to my mentor, Kalaitanthai.

UNTO ETERNITY

The rest is silence.

SHAKESPEARE, Hamlet

The third week of July 1974. It was a week of high festivities in our bungalow at Courtallam. There was a family get-together. All three of Kalaithanthai's daughters had come with their husbands and children. There was a lot of merriment and laughter. To add to the joy, we had Dr. M.Varadarajan, Vice-chancellor of the Madurai-Kamaraj University and some syndicate members as our guests. Kalaithanthai was very happy and all mornings and evenings were devoted to literary, religious and sometimes political discussions. The talks were naturally rambling and ranged over a wide field. There seemed no end to the delight.

The Sunday preceding the fateful day was particularly full of literary pursuits. There was a discussion on the ancient judicial system and Kalaithanthai recalled the story of Manuneethi Cholan. To render justice to a dumb animal, the king had run his chariot over his only son. We were all delighted to hear Kalaithanthai quote the relevant stanza from Periapuranam describing the event.

A little later, Mu.Va, who was just leaving for Madurai, happened to refer to a poem in *Purananuru*, by the poet Mosikiranar. The poem concerns the poet Mosikiran and the Chera king, Peruncheral Irumporai. The poet had come to visit the king who happened to be away. Being very tired, the poet laid himself on the *murasukkattil*, which was vacant as the *Murasu* (drum) had been taken out for *abishekam*, and fell asleep. It was an outrage. The king who returned saw the poet sleeping on the *murasukkattil*. Far from getting angry, the king began fanning him with a *samaram*. Such was his regard for

Tamil and Tamil poets. Mosikiranar woke up and he was touched by the king's kindness, and the outcome was a beautiful poem. As Mu.Va. gave an explication of the poem, pointing out the subtleties and nuances in some of the lines, Kalaithanthai was delighted. That night Kalaithanthai recalled the poem and the conversation. "Is there anything in the whole world to equal Tamil culture as embodied in the poem?" he wondered. He wanted me to read it to him again. I had great difficulty in spotting those lines from the bulky volume. He instructed me to copy it down the next day. I marked the poem and laid the book aside. But the copying was not destined to be done.

That night the moon shone brightly and our bungalow and the garden were bathed in moonlight. It was a vision of delight. Kalaithanthai stood for a long time on the balcony and was thrilled by the glory of the night and murmured, "How beautiful, how beautiful!"

The blow fell the next day July 29, 1974. In the morning, Kalaithanthai got up as usual, recited the *Tirumurais* and went for his morning stroll. He walked majestically towards the Tiger Falls—it turned out to be his last stroll in the garden he loved most.

What a glorious death it was! There was no ailment, no pain, no suffering. He gently walked into the arms of death. He was greater in death than in life. His end came in Courtallam, the place he adored most.

He is gone forever. And we who remain behind can only mourn in vain. He lived a full, glorious and purposeful life. He lives in the institutions he built up, in the temples of learning he established and in the hearts of his countless fellowmen for whose welfare he tirelessly strove. To adapt poet Shelley,

...till the future dares

Forget the past, his name and fame shall he

An echo and a light unto eternity.

APPENDICES

A WHITEWASHING COMMISSION

FOREWORD

This criticism, dealing with a report on the condition of Indian Labourers on the Estates in Ceylon by N.E. Marjoribanks Esq., I.C.S., and the Hon'ble Khan Bahadur A.K.G. Ahamad Tambi Maraikkayar Sahib Bahadur, has already appeared in the Indian and the Ceylon Press. The "Madras Mail", the "Times of Ceylon" and the "Ceylon Observer", who resented my independent inquiry, have neither published this criticism nor have they remarked on it. I am afraid that in this case it is not true that 'silence gives consent'.

Karumuttu Thiagarajan.

I. SUPPRESSION OF FACTS

1. **Introductory:** The commission to inquire into the methods of recruiting and conditions of Indian labour on the estates in Ceylon and Malaya sent in its report last February. Few perhaps have taken care to study it. In doing so, these can hardly have not felt the painful impression that the Commission has palliated defects rather than pointed them out.

2. **Notes of Evidence Absent :** A report, such as this is expected to be, ought to furnish us with notes of evidence taken on the spot, which form the basis of conclusions arrived at by the trusted Commissioners. But such notes of evidence as one finds in carefully drawn up reports, are not forthcoming. A striking contrast is that whereas we have many pages of statistics drawn from a variety of sources, there is no record of evidence drawn from the lips of coolies - no questions put by the Commissioners to the

poor labourers, and no answers to them - to bear out the general statements set down in this report.

3. **Ceylon Section:** I am dealing only with this portion of the report.

4. **Only Six Estates Visited:** We should have expected the deputed enquirers to visit a large number of estates in order to pass a fair and true judgement upon them; it is dangerous to generalize from a few particular cases. But these commissioners confess (paragraph 1) to having examined but a few estates. There are about 2,000 estates in all in Ceylon; but they have visited only 6! To visit 6 estates, perhaps the 17 days spent in Ceylon by one Commissioner and 22 days by the other Commissioner might have sufficed; but they were content to give no more time than this when the hard and important task was committed to them by the Madras Government of scrutinizing the condition of things in an island containing about 2,000 estates.

5. **Recruiting:** Only one Commissioner, the Hon'ble Khan Bahadur Ahmad Tambi Marakkayar was deputed to consider (par.1) how the recruiting was done; while the other Mr. Marjoribanks, remained in Colombo "getting statistical and other information." To do fair justice to the task entrusted to them, we should not have supposed that the commissioners would have thought of saving time by inadequate work, but would have conjointly instituted enquiries regarding the methods of professional recruiters, and allotted sufficient time to it. It was very necessary that in such an important question as recruiting, both Commissioners should have made special enquiries. Let us see how Mr. Marakkayar has done his work. Here the report, we should have imagined, would be at its very best. It tells us (para.18) that the Kangany defrauds the labourer recruited, by paying him less than he is entitled to, say Rs.10 instead of Rs.30. This is a very great evil indeed. But is it all? Is it likely that the rogue who thus defrauds the labourers recruited, does not also recruit them under false pretences? Now, there was a very general complaint in the press that workmen were seduced from India to Ceylon under false pretences. But the Commissioners, who ought to have known what the general complaint and grievance was, should have made a point of investigating the matter. In this respect

one looked forward to a more faithful accomplishment of duty. They do not tell us whether the charge brought against the recruitment is true or false.

6. **Wages:** We may next take up the question of wages and see how far the Commissioners have acquitted themselves of their charge. Compare their report with my own observation:

Wages of	According to	
	Commission's Report (para.36)	My Observation (para.4)
1. Pruners	40 to 45 cents	40 cents
2. Pluckers	25 to 30 cents	25 cents
3. Factory labourers	50 to 60 cents	40 cents

The difference between the figures is striking. Nor is this all. Pruners have higher wages, it is true, but only at certain seasons of the year when there is work for them, and not all through the year. The rates I have set down are the standard wages given all over Ceylon estates. Apart from the fact that the wages given to pruners and factory labourers are not nearly so high as those stated by the Commission, and that pruners are given higher wages only when there is pruning possible at certain seasons of the year — pruners and factory labourers are The number refers to a paragraph in my report dated February last 100 cents make one rupee.

the few, and the non-pruners and non-factory labourers are the many, and these get only 33 cents a day. This important fact finds no place in the Commission's Report. Can we overlook this serious omission? If we are to consider whether the pay is sufficient, we must consider not the few but the many, not what goes on only a few months of the year, but what is general all through the year.

7. **Cost of Living:** Is the cost of living cheaper in Ceylon than in India? If we are to rely upon the Commissioners (v. para.39) as they have relied upon one Superintendent of '25 years' experience' it is as cheap to live in Ceylon as in India, given that money bears the same value in both countries. But living is much cheaper in India than in Ceylon. So that if one had the same pay it would be better for him to live in India. Well then, are we to base ourselves upon the statement of one Superintendent who tells us that 6 rupees a month is enough to live in Ceylon? My investigation, made not before one Superintendent (Superintendents are not able to tell of the expenses of a coolie's kitchen) but before coolies who have to buy provisions week after week from the shopkeeper, leads me to the conclusion (v. my report para.5) that a man needs not less than Rs.8 and Rs.10 a month to enjoy the bare necessities of life. Kanganies themselves, who are better able to speak of this matter than a Superintendent, bear out my statement. Mr.A.L. Crossmann, Police Magistrate, Ratnapura, when giving evidence before a Commission appointed in 1916 by the Ceylon Government to inquire into the condition of Indian labourers in the Province of Sabaragamuwa, states that his own investigation shows that a coolie ordinarily requires a little over Rs.4 in addition to the rice allowance which amounts to about Rs.5 — making the total more than 9 rupees a month.

8. **Coolies to Be Fed Like Prisoners!** — A curious remark is made in the report (para.39) after the statement about Rs.6 as the amount required for a coolie to live decently in Ceylon. Is it not strange to speak of prisoners in jail being fed on 73 rupees per head per annum, i.e., 6.1.4 a month? Are coolies to be fed like prisoners? They may as well go and get fed in jail where they will not be deliberately overworked as they are on the estate, which we shall show later on.

9. **Should the Coolie Emigrate?** — It thus appears at least that the wages in India and in Ceylon are nearly the same, but as the cost of living is dearer in Ceylon than in India, it is better for the provident coolie to stay at home. But what makes it still more advantageous for him is that though the wages per day in theory is the same in both fields of labour, the emigrant can practically earn less in Ceylon than in India, as the

evidence recorded by the Sabaragamuwa Commission shows. The state of affairs in one province is not very different from that in the others. This is by the way. Mr.R.N. Thaine, Government Agent, Sabaragamuwa, in a report to the Ceylon Government on the hardships of coolies writes:

“As regards the complaint that the coolies never had enough money or wages to enable them to purchase sundries, & c., it is a fact that in the majority of cases coolies only receive as their wages at the end of the month small sums varying between 75 cents and Rs.3.”

Moreover, some opinions incidentally expressed in the present report, too, strengthen our case; such as (para.39):-

“Our impression is that while the average labourer and his family make enough to feed and clothe themselves quite as well, if not better, than in India, they ordinarily do not accumulate appreciable sums as savings.”

Now then, does not the coolie leave his home because he expects something better than he can find by staying in India? If it is not so, why should the coolie emigrate at all?

10. Slavery: There is another important fact that has to be considered immediately after the point just mentioned. It is impossible for a coolie to start life on Ceylon estates without a debt. The report very honestly admits this evil. It says (para.11):-

“This sum [money advanced when recruiting] together with the amount of the emigrants’s traveling expenses and food till he reaches the estate in Ceylon forms the debt with which each labourer starts life in Ceylon”.

Not only does “the state of indebtedness” act “as a deterrent to thrift and industry” as the Commission says, but it soon reduces the coolie to a state of veritable slavery. The report indirectly admits this fact. For it tells us in all fairness (para 27):-

“Many estates early realised that the labourers were at the mercy of the Kanganies in the matter of their indebtedness“.

And in another (para.34):-

"The labourer thus is free to leave his employer at a month’s notice, or at any time for reasonable cause. But under the kangany system described above, whereunder the labourer

is a kangany's debtor, and the latter in his turn indebted to the estate, taken in conjunction with the conservation of the Tamil labourer, it is not surprising that the labourer does not realize his legal position. That the kangany considers that he has some sort of proprietary right in the labourer and that the labourer accepts this position is abundantly clear from the manner in which the labourer is, and allows himself to be, taken from employer to employer by his kangany and accepts the increasing load of debt thrust on him in the process".

The report continues to give truthful testimony (para.35):-

"Thus a labourer who has not the capacity or opportunity to rise to the position of a kangany or subkangany, remains on an estate under a debt which rarely diminishes but often increases."

For the poorly paid coolie, frightfully defrauded by the Kangany and finding it difficult to keep soul and body together, to repay the heavy "debt" is certainly out of the question; and to resort to law to seek freedom, he is too ignorant, nor has he got the means and facilities. So some try to escape the heavy burden of debt and slavery by "bolting". The Commission readily admits that "In 1915 the number of 'bolters' from federated estates was 8,894", a fact that certainly does not speak highly of the contentment of coolies. As a result, most, if not all, die like slaves.

And yet Ceylon emigrant is 'free', not 'indentured'!

11. **Coolies Are Overworked:** The report says nothing of the 10 continuous hours of work a day from 6 A.M. to 4 P.M., without break. The Superintendents honestly admit this condition of affairs. The evidence recorded in the Sabaragamuwa Report too bears out this fact. Coolies in India do not work for more than 7 or 8 hours at the utmost a day, and that not without a break of 2 hours. Important as this matter is, the Commission does not appear to have considered the question.

12. **Starvation of Coolies:** The law binds the estate to treat and nurse the coolies during illness. But the estates neglect them. "The first point which I would emphasize is the scandalous neglect with which the sick coolies have been treated" are the pathetic

words of the judgement in P.C. 28, 196 of 1914 of Ratnapura. Mr.A.P. Boon, District Judge, writes (January 1914):-

“40 coolies started prostrating themselves in front of us and saying they were starving ... The coolies were obviously being starved. Many of them were fit only for hospital.. He (Dr. Perera), too, told me that from all sides he was hearing similar reports that they were unable to resist such diseases (hookworm) owing to being under-fed.. I was also told that 4 deaths had occurred .. from starvation from what I saw I can believe it“.

Dr. Lunn, Inspecting Medical Officer, refers to a number of half-starved coolies, in his report dated January 1914. The Sabaragamuwa Commission finds such allegations wholly true; not to speak of my appalling experience. I must here reiterate that the conditions are not very different comparing one province with another. Startling as this revelation of the existing state of things is, the commission ignores the question and passes over the matter in silence.

13. Judicial and Extra judicial Administration: Acts of Injustice and Atrocity: We expected the Commission to strongly condemn the so-called law which sentences to rigorous imprisonment those coolies who fail to work or who leave the estate without the permission of the Superintendents; why it even sentences those who harbour the coolies merely out of compassion. But the commission is, unfortunately, silent upon this point.

Nevertheless, the report truly admits (para.44):-

“Most estates appear to inflict small fines for petty neglects or bad work. Such fines seem however to be illegal having regard to the provision of section 6 of Ordinance 13 of 1889”.

Acknowledging as the Commission does, on the one hand, that the small fines imposed upon coolies are frequent, and on the other, that they are illegal, it does not, however, lay much stress upon the point, or suggest any remedies against an evil which may appear small to the master but is very hard on the coolie. If most estates are acknowledged to have committed positive acts of injustice of this kind in small matters,

one may not claim that they are not immune from the propensity to commit acts of greater injustice.

The report says (para.31):-

“Large increase in a laborer’s account in the past were noticeable on account of the relatives who had died or absconded, the amounts of their debts being added to that of the family or sometimes, even of the gang”.

Note the apologetic expression “in the past”! Probably this evil was not noticed at the time the Commission visited the estates. Hence the expression “in the past.” This grave illegality not only existed “in the past” but exists even at present. A debt of this nature is certainly not recoverable in any Court of Law in Ceylon or in India. Alas! The illiterate coolie does not understand his legal position.

The Commission states in passing (para.44):-

“Corporal punishment is recognised to be illegal and is certainly not common or usual though of course there are bad masters in the island as well as bad servants”.

The Commissioners, however, do not set in relief the fact that there are atrocities of a serious nature committed on the estates from time to time. There is, at all events, need of emphasizing the point if the object of the Commission is to bring help to the poor coolie from high quarters, seeing that he cannot do anything himself, while his rich and influential master can take the law into his own hands and has the means to escape the punishment of the Court.

I cite three instances from the well-known Ceylonese:

- (i) *“According to Muniyamma, an eye witness, the accused [an estate watchman] came up with a gun to the coolie lines, and asked the deceased, among others, why she was not at work. The woman replied she would go to work the next day. The accused then shot her dead, and ran off, but was soon secured by some coolies and handed over to the authorities. Karupai, Soccala Naran and Mariamma, all of them eye witnesses, told much the same story ... The jury*

brought in a verdict of not guilty of murder, but guilty of a rash and negligent act. His Lordship pointed out ... that the act could not have been both rash and negligent, and.. the panel submitted a verdict of guilty of a rash act. His Lordship... imposed a penalty of one hundred rupees” (7 January 30th, 1917).

(ii) “A planter was convicted of having caused grievous hurt to a coolie in his employ. That was a very serious offence according to our Law. But the Magistrate who convicted the planter shocked the public conscience by fining him ten rupees and detaining him at the Bar till the rising of the Court”.

(iii) “The accused [a planter] is reported to have said that he told the complainant, the Kangany on his estate ‘to go on his hands and knees. ‘And by way of speeding the parting guest the accused called him a ‘nalla madu’. The accused ordered the complainant to kneel down. If he had refused... accused is reported to have stated that ‘he would have killed him’ ... The Magistrate considered the accused ‘technically guilty’ of wrongful restraint, and fined him ten rupees. (April 25th , 1917).

May cases of such revolting natures be passed over in silence? The report tells us (para 41):-

‘An employer has no power of arrest in respect to a servant who absconds or rather offends”.

But the estates employ watchmen and supply them with arms to prevent coolies from leaving the estate. Say more, the estates advertise, offering rewards for the arrest of “bolted” coolies, and males and females are arrested without Court warrants by private individuals.

Instances like these are not to be quietly ignored by an impartial Commission, but rather to be commented upon.

The Commission remarks with reference to the year 1915(para 43):-

“The total number of cases against labourers (4,409) and against employers (26) is very small in comparison with the size of the labour force (about 4, 00,000 workers) and the number of employers (over 2,000).”

If the Commission had considered the question whether coolies enjoy sufficient facility for proceeding to Court to lodge complaints, it would not have come to such a satisfactory conclusion.

14. **Hardships at Mandapam:** The report says nothing of the complaint in the Quarantine Camp at Mandapam Whether the Coolies are well-fed, properly housed or not. The Commissioners instead of investigating and reporting on the complaints give us (para. 20) a bare description of the official version.

15. **Some Contrast:** A remarkable contrast with the grave omissions is the space-given (para 4 to 12) to the strength and distribution of the labour force and its sufficiency to meet the demand; as if the poor slaves could take advantage of the competition for labour. Three pages are devoted to it out of 22 pages, not counting the statistics. Again one page is allotted (*para.55*) to the description of hook-worm disease besides an extract of 3 pages (pp.76 to 78) in the appendix. Had Lord Pentland’s Government wanted information of this nature it would have easily got it from one of the Doctors in Madras. It surely has not sent out Commissioners to get information available in Madras.

It is to be concluded, from a consideration of the foregoing, that the Commissioners have taken a hasty view of things in Ceylon and that a more mature Judgement would have altered greatly not a small number of their statements; or is this report to be taken in the light of an apology for the planting interest as opposed to labour interest?

So much for *suppression veri*. Tomorrow we shall consider some statements made in the official account.

II. MISTAKEN IN PORTRAYING FACTS

Today I undertake to show that even such facts as are recorded in Messrs. Marakkayar and Marjori-bank's Report are not quite correct.

16. Federation : The report says (para.28):- "Only some 75 per cent of the estates in Ceylon joined this Federation"; whereas up to April, 1915 only 853 estates had joined it — it must be, I reckon, about 42 per cent. Since 1915, the number must be on the decrease. For it worked so badly that it has of late been abolished

The report states (para.31):- "The debts of deceased labourers are now written off by all federated estates" This is by no means a matter of course. Compare the rule of the Federation, which I quote:

"Rule 28. On the certified death of any registered coolie (not Kangany) his or her individual debt not exceeding Rs.50/- shall be written off against the Estate and the remainder of the debt shall be debited to the Kangany or written off at the discretion of the agents or Proprietors on the recommendation of the Superintendent".

Needless to say that seldom is a recommendation of this nature made or accepted. It is rarely that a coolie owes the estate anything less than Rs.75, and the balance which the kangany has to meet is without exception recovered from the cooly's family.

Do not the above statements of the Commission disclose some lack of seriousness in the writing?

17. Island Free from Foul Diseases:

The report says (para.62)

"Cases of plague, cholera and small-pox are rare amongst the estate population. In fact, these diseases are not prevalent in the island".

But if it is true "these diseases are not prevalent in the island" how could the

Chairman at the meeting of the Colombo Municipal Council on the 25th May last, announce 169 cases of plague in the year as compared to 69 in 1916 and to 33 in 1915?

18. Housing and Sanitary Conditions: The report says (para.45) that housing and sanitary conditions are quite satisfactory. My experience is that it is not so. Ventilation has not been specially cared for. More than four persons occupy a room of 12 feet by 10 feet. Dr. Lunn, Inspecting Medical Officer in the Civil Department, refers in his report to the insanitary state of certain lines he visited. The Sabaragamuwa Commission says that it visited a large number of estates in the Ratnapura District and “many did not come up to the standard of sanitation.” Dr. T.S. Nair, Assistant District Medical Officer, when giving evidence before the same Commission says the coolies “are kept too overcrowded.” Look at this picture and on that!

19. Gifts after Childbirth: The law requires the estate to bear all expenses during the month after confinement. The report, therefore, says (para 57):- “The general practice is to give the mother Rs.2, and half a bushel of rice.” In my investigation, however, I found that this Rs.2 is debited to her account; and the Sabaragmuwa Report corroborates this fact. It says:

“This practice of debiting the woman or her husband with the cash advance given to her after confinement appears to us to be contrary to the Law.”

20. Gifts to Children: The law also urges on the estate to see that children under the age of one year receive proper care and nourishment. So, the report says (para.57):-

“Some estates give all non-working (i.e. non-earning) children one meal a day free at four in the afternoon. On other estates children not yet of an age to do any work are mustered once a month and each mother is given 1/8 bushel of rice. On some estates, a mother is given a bonus (Rs.5 or more) if her child lives to be one year old”.

When speaking of “some estates”. “other estates” and again “some estates” in the above quotation, it is not very clear whether the Commissioners mean to give an account of all the estates, or a few. I do not think even a few estates do what the Commission

says. I did not hear of any of these facts during my investigation. Nor is there any record of any of them in the Sabaragamuwa Report. Is this the practice? Or is it a regulation that remains a dead letter?

21. Statistics Misleading: The Commission says (para.6):-

‘A large proportion (about 40 per cent) of the labourers going to Ceylon through the Labour Commission during the last few years is composed of persons who have been in the island before’.

Now what would be the reader’s impression after his perusal of this statement? He would be tempted to smile at those speaking of the ill-treatment of the coolies. For how could the coolies think of returning if they are ill-treated? What is the fact? Do they return willingly? This is what we should consider. Circumstances force them to return. They place a substantial security before leaving, without which they cannot go from the estate. Mr. A.L. Crossman, when giving evidence before the Sabaragamuwa Commission says”

“In the case of Tamils, when one is allowed to go someone else of the family is detained. I remember one case, 28, 705 in which Mr. Berry of Delwella, stated with regard to a small gang, consisting of a husband, wife and two children, that he would not allow all the gang to go to India together” .

When a man goes back to India, leaving a wife and children behind, is it surprising that he returns? Can we conclude that he is drawn back to Ceylon by love of the estate and the Kangany? From the statement quoted above, made by the Commission Report, it will appear that the Commissioners have been misled into the insinuation that the labourer returns to Ceylon because he loves to do so. And the reader is apt to conclude the same, whereas the labourer returns because he is morally compelled.

22. Repatriation:

“Some labourers, no doubt, return to India permanently after ... finding the condition unsuitable”.

So says the Commission (para.6). But can those who are said to find the conditions unsuitable return to India permanently. Compare that remark with what the report says by the way (*para.65*) and see whether it is easy for the coolie to return to India:

“The debt which practically every labourer owes his kangany or his estate prevents him leaving except for short visits to India with the leave of his employer or except by ‘bolting;.’”

Now, not some, as the Commission says, but the vast majority of the coolies find the condition unsuitable, as the unscrupulous Kangany recruits them only under false pretences. Can they all or even some of them return to settle down in India? It is impossible except in very rare cases, as they cannot repay their debts to the estate. Quite recently, as late as February 28th last, “Devadas” bore testimony, not without proofs, in the columns of the popular “Hindu” how a mechanic was enticed away to Ceylon and forced to do coolie work; how and with what difficulty he managed to get home after his relatives in India had paid Rs.50-12-0 to the Labour Commission at Trichinopoly for his passage. Again, all the coolies examined by the Sabaragamuwa Commission complained that the conditions are absolutely different from what they expected them to be and begged the Commission to send them home. The writers of the report are not cognizant of this.

The Commission reports (para.65):-

“Labourers who break down in health and become unfit for work on the estate are usually sent back to India at the expense of the estate, but there is no law on the subject and no special organisation to control the matter”.

Note the benevolent tone “are usually sent back”. When the planters do not do what they should do according to law. (see paras. 12, 13 and 20 of the present article) is it at all likely that they practise philanthropy when there is no law or special organization to control the matter?

Mr. Fritz Kunz, Principal of Ananda College Colombo, in the course of a heartrending description of “A victim to our labour system” tells us (see Ceylonese, February 4, 1917):-

“On account of his frequent illness he was asked by the Kangany to leave the estate. It should be noted that he was regarded as a chattel because he owed the estate nothing. He left the estate a sickly man and the possessor of 25 cents in Ceylon money ... What state is Ceylon in when sick men can be cast out like dogs when their usefulness is at an end, and turned away from the natural asylum of the sick?”

23. Sex Ratio: - The percentage of men and women among the arrivals for 61 years is 73.45, and 16.75 respectively (and children 9.80) — a fact which the Commission tries to explain away. It argues (para. 6): -

Comparing this with the proportion of males and females among the Tamil labour force in 1911(234, 594 males and 205, 708 females) it is evident that a low proportion of women among each year's immigrants does not necessarily mean a low proportion of women in the resident immigrant population”.

If the proportion was somewhat fair in 1911 does it necessarily mean that it will be so in the following years as well, especially, too, when the percentage of women in the subsequent years is very poor.

The Commission observes (para.6):-

“The men return after a time and go back again with their women folk in many cases thus getting counted twice over”.

But compare this with what the same Commission says (para.65):-

“Leave from the employer [to go to India] can be readily obtained by those settled down to family life on the state, but probably not easily by others.” How then can the unmarried men return to India and get back to Ceylon with their womenfolk “thus getting counted twice over”? Again do men alone return and go back “getting counted twice

over”? If we compare the percentage of women who arrive in Ceylon to that of women who depart from the island, we find the latter to be greater than the former. Comparatively a greater percentage of women depart than arrive. So whereas 30,000 men and 5,000 women arrived in 1900 in Ceylon, 10,000 men and 2,500 women departed in 1901. So, if a certain number of men is counted twice over, a comparatively larger number of women is also counted twice over. Why overlook the latter fact, which is obviously more conspicuous, and observe only the former which is comparatively less remarkable?

“The women more often settle in their new homes and their daughters grow up, many and settle there too. Thus in course of time the inequality in numbers between the sexes tends to disappear”.

plead the Commission (para.6). That the inequality has not disappeared in the course of 61 years has also not struck them nor the fact that the percentage of women arriving every year continues to be very low. The Commission do not discuss the present proportion of the sexes in the manner of the critical historian.

“...The sexes are fairly evenly matched in the Tamil labour population” declare the Commission (para.68). According to the census of 1911, the Commission says, “there were 239,111 males and 209,038 females”. Even if we accept this to be quite correct for our special purpose, every seventh or eighth man has no wife. Can we then say that “the sexes are fairly evenly matched”? In face of the fact that the proportion of women in the world is greater than that of men it is very significant and regrettable that on the Ceylon estates the proportion of men to women is roughly 7 to 6—a very large and unsatisfactory proportion, indeed — the significance of which the Commissioners rather underrate.

“Excepting new arrivals, the labourers live in families on the estate and there are no undesirable features due to a lack of women,” the Commission reports (para.68). But what about the “new arrivals”? Are those “new arrivals” above ordinary

human weakness? Had the Commissioners used more discretion, they would not have committed themselves to such discordant and dangerously broad statements.

24. To Sum Up the Work of the Commission: The notes of evidence required to clinch statements are conspicuous by their absence. General conclusions may be arrived at only by the examination of fairly good proportion of particulars; but the Commission has visited only a few estates. Important as the system itself of recruiting is, it does not tell us whether it is an evil or not, in its method of working. It sets down rates of wages which on verification prove to be incorrect. Easy as it is to find out the cost of living, the Commissioners, however, have underestimated it. Does the coolie gain by going to Ceylon from India? This question is unanswered. Again we are not told whether the emigrant retains his liberty or becomes a slave. One might think after reading the report that he is not overworked, whereas facts point quite the other way. The Commissioners speak of the law that the coolie must be fed during the illness, and are silent regarding its frequent infringement with impunity. The law in Ceylon is extremely hard on the coolie and benevolent towards the master, and yet the Commission maintains silence on the subject. Many are the hardships of the quarantine camp, they are not dwelt upon, nor referred to. Relevant points are skipped over, and irrelevant points, such as, the supply of coolies meeting the demand are dilated upon. The debts of deceased labourers are not entirely written off by Federated estates. The Federation has unfortunately, been abolished since. Rare though plague is supposed to be in the report under review, there were according to the Municipal Chairman's statement 169 victims to it in 1917. Its notion of sanitation must be narrow, if a house 12 feet by 10 feet for four coolies with their children, is considered a satisfactory condition. Whatever it may say of gifts to women after childbirth and to children, there is no evidence that they are given to children and that that the practice as regards women is contrary to law. The statistics are presented to us in such a manner that one is apt to conclude that the coolie returns to Ceylon after his visit to India because he likes to return, which impression the Commission itself creates; whereas a close study of the figures leads us to quite a different inference. Again it magnifies the situation of the suitability of the conditions

to the coolie, and minimizes the difficulty of his being repatriated. The fact is few, if any, return, it being next to impossible for the coolie to get back to India when once he has bound himself to the Kangany and the estate. It does not blush to say that the proportion of the sexes, which is a very important question — is “fairly evenly matched”, when a scrutiny of the figures reveals to us the alarming truth that there are only 39 women to every 61 men! Can I not, therefore, be excused for calling it “A Whitewashing Commission”?

Now to turn to the good side, little though it be, of the report, the Commission is very liberal in exposing the ‘unscrupulous’ Kangany and his worse methods. Another praiseworthy feature is that it refers to the “suicidal policy of issuing tundu” (a kind of leaving certificate mentioning the debt on payment of which he will be relieved from that jail — estate) — which is the cause of the chronic debt of the forsaken coolie.

25. Conclusion: I have dealt with a number of the flaws in the report, though not with all nor in complete detail. Even those I have indicated show, I am afraid, that Mr. Marjoribanks, who may be supposed to have written the report, has however unintentionally, used the whitewashing brush freely, and the Honourable Khan Bahadur has, with energy, seconded his innocent efforts. The report, indeed, is meagre and not very creditable.

The public, we may conclude, was right when it anticipated from the men chosen to be Commissioners that the burden of work committed to them was above their strength. Nor has it been disappointed. Who is to blame? The Commissioners are to blame if they accepted a task to which they felt themselves unequal. The selection of gentlemen was not a happy one. Had the Government chosen more qualified men we should now be in possession of more historical facts; the sufferings of the coolies would have been made public, and called for redress from the British Government which is chivalrously striving to right wrongs.

The *Madras Mail*, the *Ceylon Times*, and especially the *Ceylon Observer* have censured me for the offence I had committed in privately investigating and reporting on

the condition of the poor coolies on Ceylon estates. I consider that their remarks spring not from self-interest but from a Commission report, hastily drawn up, and rather uncritical. The Ceylon Government also seems to have suspected my motives, and instituted enquires regarding my person and character. I have naturally incurred the displeasure of the Planting interests of Ceylon. But I regret this less than the attitude of the Government and the Editors who are expected to judge impartially and to give both sides a hearing, and especially me who am quite disinterested in the matter and but wish wrongs to be righted. I, therefore, indulge the hope that the present review may throw light on the subject and draw the impartial Government and the Editors of those papers to the side of human suffering, and play the Samaritan to the forlorn coolie.

Athikadu Thekkur,
Ramnad District,
August 23rd, 1917.

Karumuttu Thiagarajan

APPENDIX - 2

EVIDENCE-IN-CHIEF OF KARUMUTTU THIAGARAJA

CHETTIAR BEFORE THE IMMIGRANT LABOUR

COMMITTEE

QUALIFICATIONS:

I was a member of the Subject Committee of the 32nd Indian National Congress. I am the Secretary of the Madras Presidency Association, Madura-Ramnad branch. I have proposed resolutions affecting the lower classes at several public conferences. I have published three pamphlets on “Indian Emigrants on Ceylon Estates”, and one on “Ceylon Quarantine Regulation Difficulties”. I have also spent three years in studying the present question and made sure of the facts by personal investigation.

INTRODUCTORY

The present system of recruiting Indian labour and its management on the estates is based on fraud and maintained by force. It has caused enormous suffering; it has broken up families; it has driven men to crime and women into lives of shame; it has resulted in frightful mortality. It is virtual slavery.

I shall consider the subject under four heads — the Recruiter, the Planter, the Government and the Labourer.

I. RECRUITER

Fraud is the Recruiter’s strongest weapon. He is paid 10, 20 or even 45 rupees (vide page 40 of Sabaragamuwa Commission Report) for a single labourer. Therefore, he tries by hook or by crook to get into his clutches as many labourers as he can. The recruiter does not represent the true lot of the labourer on the estate, but entirely misrepresents it, by holding out to him golden prospects - false, of course. I say, therefore, that the stream is poisoned at the source.

(All the labourers, without any exception at all, examined by the Sabaragamuwa Commission bitterly complained that they were all absolutely misled. Further, this charge is admitted by 30 out of 35 planters examined by the same commission).

II. PLANTER

Not a few planters neglect and ill treat their labourers. The death rate and particularly child mortality are abnormally high. In 1913, the death rate on a certain estate was 238 per thousand. In 1914, the average for all estates was 42.3 per thousand, while it was only 27.4 per thousand in Colombo. In 1916, the rate of infant mortality on estates varied from 182 to so much as 450 per thousand in some districts, and the general average was 256. The rate in the whole colony was 194 per thousand. When we consider the fact that epidemics on the estates are unknown, these figures are striking, and point conclusively to insanitary conditions of labour and lack of satisfactory medical aid.

The planters seem to have the right of private arrest, as if the labourers were actual slaves. They also reserve the right of punishing, fining, caning etc., and they use it with impunity. They make use of corporal punishment-which is sometimes very severe, going so far as to cause grievous hurt and bleeding, for such trivial reasons of disobedience, absence from the estates without leave, etc.

III. GOVERNMENT

The Courts attach no weight to the statement of the labourer. If the labourer reports to the Court the ill-treatment of himself by his master it punishes him for having made a "frivolous" complaint (vide "Ceylon Observer" — 31-1-1918), justifying the ill-treatment of the labourer on the ground that it is necessary to maintain discipline. If the victim appeals to the Supreme Court his case is thrown out as "very suspicious" (vide "Times of Ceylon" 10-3-1917). Perhaps the Court wonders how a labourer manages to approach it! The Law sentences the labourer to imprisonment with hard work for such trivial offences as negligence, impertinence, and drunkenness. If the intending emigrant were only aware of this law he would not come here at all, however ignorant and resourceless he might be.

IV. LABOURER

The labourer is absolutely misled. He does not at all realise the conditions of the new life before him. Nor does he start with the deliberate intention of making for himself a home in the new country. He goes because he is uncomfortable at home. He may have quarrelled with his parent and left home in pursuit of work. Many are not recruited in their villages. The recruiter picks up the loiterer and induces him to emigrate by relieving his immediate wants, and setting splendid prospects before him.

The labourer, however, realises the difficulties by and by. He is first unnecessarily detained at Mandapam. What is worse, as long as he is kept there, he is ill-fed.

When he reaches the estate, he finds things absolutely different to what the Kangany has portrayed them to be. He is compelled to live in a very small room 10x12 feet with three others. He is forced to work 10 hours continuously, without break for a mid-day meal. Very poor wages are paid, only 33 to 40 cents to men, and 25 to 30 cents to women. The wages paid on rubber estates are somewhat better. Even when the labourer is ill he is driven by the Kangany to the field for work, as otherwise the Kangany will lose the commission of 6 cents which he gets for every day a labourer works. When he is too ill to work he is often neglected. His children are generally deprived of all education; they are all fated to live and die as ignorant coolies. The men who come to Ceylon are more numerous than the women — a disproportion not calculated to improve the morals of the labourer.

The labourer may be shifted from one estate to another, but he cannot return to India. The Kangany has put on him a heavy debt which binds him with chains from which he cannot free himself. The average debt of a labourer is said to be Rs.700, and sometimes from 200 to 300 rupees. Time only increases the debt. It cannot be repaid or even reduced. The debt of the deceased or the run-away relation is added to it. The debt puts him in a hopeless condition. It converts him into an actual slave under the tyranny of the Kangany. The law is very favourable to the labourer in this respect. A debt of this character is not recoverable in any Court of law in Ceylon or in India, so says the Labour

Commission that sat in 1908. But aside from the fact that this leniency of the law is not usually known to them, “the high standard of honour which generally prevails amongst these people” as that Commission rightly observes, does not allow them to repudiate the debt.

On account of personal suffering, however, every year thousands of labourers try to get back to India, sometimes perishing with cold and hunger on the way, if they were not caught and taken back to the life from which they are fleeing. In 1915 the number of “bolters” from Federated Estates alone was 8,894. Labourers do not run away for mere pleasure, or out of wickedness. This is standing witness against the system for all time.

In a word, a will-o’- the-wisp created by the Kangany lures the labourer out of India, and sets him where he is illfed, hard-worked, under-paid, laden with a heavy debt, and practically bound as a slave for life.

OTHER SIDE

I will now turn to the argument which is usually adduced in favour of the present system, namely, if the system is so bad how is it thousands of labourers go back to India and then return to the estate? The reason for this is, that they have been compelled to leave in Ceylon part of their family as security, for the heavy debt contracted, before leaving and naturally they return to recover them (vide page 155 Sabaragamuwa Commission Report).

REMEDIES

It is rather difficult for one person to suggest suitable remedies for abuses on such a large scale. I, therefore, propose arbitration, consisting of a committee of two representatives for the labourers and two for the planters with a neutral member as judge, who shall be accepted by both parties, to decide the question. My own present views are, however, as follows:

ROOT OF THE EVIL

As the real remedy lies in bettering the condition here, I shall first treat this before going to recruiting.

I. WAGES

“Cheap labour is dear.” The present wages are insufficient to attract labourers emigrate. Therefore, the wages should be increased to 60 to 75 cents for men and 40 to 50 cents for women. These would be fair wages for those who leave their country and go abroad to better their economic condition. Further, to make labourers stick to one estate for sometime without constantly changing, they may be given a bonus. In the first year, they will have received freepassage. In the second year, the bonus may be 20 rupees, with an increase of 5 rupees for each successive year of service up to a maximum of 35 rupees.

The commission of 6 cents paid to the Kangany for every day a labour works should be abolished. Instead of the Kangany, have Supervisors who will be paid a monthly salary.

II. TASKS

Labourers should not be worked for more than eight hours a day, not including two hours interval. No child should begin work until his fourteenth year.

III. LIVING

Each family should occupy a separate room. A certain proportion in sex ratio should be maintained. The restriction on the quantity of rice should be done away with. The labourer should be given the quantity he requires, since he pays for it.

The law about sanitation, medical aid, education and the like should be strictly observed.

IV. PROTECTORS

There should be an Indian Protector in each district to see to the interests of the

labourers. There should be also Indian representatives in the Legislative Council for safeguarding labour interests.

V. RECRUITING

The Kangany and the commission system should be totally abolished. Instead, labour bureaus may be formed in important centres in India. They should have salaried men to recruit labourers. The labourers should be persuaded to emigrate only by the offer of terms. A booklet giving all possible details, including exact figures of wages should be handed over to the intending emigrant before he emigrates. The labourer recruited should get a pass from the Headman of the village, counter-signed by the Magistrate of the Taluk. The labourer should be given free passage. If he leaves his estate within one year the cost of passage might be recovered from him.

ABOLITION OF “SLAVERY”

Before things are put on a new basis, the present labourers should be assisted by Government to wipe off their debts. It is manifestly unfair to both planter and labourer to expect the latter to pay his debt under prevailing conditions.

APPENDIX – 3

AN INTERVIEW WITH SHRI KARUMUTTU THIAGARAJA CHETTIAR

By

Shri S.Y. NANAL,

Editor, “The Textile Digest”

Shri Thiagarajan Karumuttu, Managing Director of the well-known Meenakshi Group of Mills in South India, was born in 1893. He was educated in St. Thomas College, Colombo, and then joined *Morning Leader* as an apprentice journalist. He reported extensively on the poor conditions of the labour employed on tea plantations in Ceylon. He founded a Labour Union for plantation workers and was its Secretary and was responsible for improving their working conditions. In 1914, he plunged into the Nationalist Movement in India; became Secretary of Provincial Congress in 1916 was elected to All India Congress Committee in 1917.

Starting with Sree Meenakshi Mills in 1924, Shri Thiagarajan has established now 18 Mills, spread in Madras and Kerala. His mills are one of the most modern, well planned and well maintained in this country. He has constructed cheap and good housing for labour near the mills. He has also many other interests.

An eminent educationist, he has founded Engineering Colleges and Polytechnics in Madurai, Salem and Alagappa Nagar and runs them.

He is a connoisseur of art and sculpture.

[The *Textile Digest* is grateful to Shri Thiagarajan for permitting this interview]

Interviewed by SHRI. S. Y. NANAL

Q. *Good Evening, Sir. Let me start with the burning topic of the day. You would agree that the cotton textile industry is currently passing through one of the worst crises in recent times. In your opinion, what could be the reasons for the same?*

A. Yes. There is a serious crisis, and Spinning and Weaving Mills, producing coarse and medium count yarns and cloth from Indian Cotton, have been the worst hit. The reasons are:

- (i) Non-availability of the required quantity of cotton at the ceiling prices, due to successive droughts and poor crops;
- (ii) Credit squeeze by the Reserve Bank;
- (iii) Heavy excise duty on coarse and medium fabrics;
- (iv) Rising labour costs; fall in the purchasing power of common consumers due to steep rise in the cost of living;
- (v) Border troubles;
- (vi) Power-cut (in South India).

Q. *What remedies do you suggest so that the industry can turn the corner?*

A. First and foremost, cotton must be made available by directing all energies to improving the low yield. If the yield is increased,

- (i) the grower gets better returns;
 - (ii) the Mills, cheaper cotton;
 - (iii) the consumer, cheaper cloth;
 - (iv) artificial restraints and controls become unnecessary;
 - (v) foreign exchange on import of cotton is saved; and
 - (vi) it will help to earn more foreign exchange from exports.
- Even a 25% increase (which is not difficult to achieve) will work this miracle. Secondly, the Government should remove all controls; abolish excise duty on the

poor man's coarse and medium cloth; give substantial tax-holiday to sick mills and help modernisation and rehabilitation by long-term loans at concessional rates.

Thirdly, the industry must put its own house in order, by rehabilitation and modernization of machinery, by efficient and economic working, and by adoption of healthy administration and sound business organisation.

Fourthly, the labour must realise the difficulties of the industry and accept rationalised workloads and scientific methods of wage fixation.

Unless everyone - from Government, to management and labour - is prepared to make sacrifices and put forth his best effort, the industry cannot survive.

Q. *You just mentioned about the low yield of cotton in this country.*

A. Yes. Our average yield per acre is only 112 lbs. as against 665 lbs. in Egypt, 650 lbs. in Russia, 517 lbs. in U.S.A., 239 lbs. in China and 229 lbs. in Pakistan. We are the lowest here in the world.

Q. *The cotton textile industry's first concern naturally is to improve this yield, and the only way to do is to use better seeds, have irrigation, spray pesticides and use fertilisers. All this needs money and technical know-how. How can our poor farmers get the money for this?*

A. Are you suggesting that the mill industry should finance the farmers? I am afraid the financial position of the industry will not permit this at the present time.

Q: *I would even then suggest mills entering cotton cultivation in a big way. In the sugar industry — to quote and example — loans are given to farmers through banks for a period of 3 to 4 months for cultivation. Why should not a similar system be adopted for cotton farmers? Recently the banks have agreed to make easy loans available for agriculturists. If these loans are routed to farmers through mills, who would guarantee*

to buy the cotton at a certain price and if the mills offer technical assistance for securing better seed, etc., will 1101 cotton yields improve?

A: What you say is well worth trying. The banks must approach well-reputed mills for this experiment; and these mills should open up an agricultural department for helping the farmers. This experience, if conducted with full seriousness, may lead to success.

Q: Allow me to change the subject to the textile machinery manufacturing industry. Almost all machines for spinning and weaving, except a few like combers, automatic cone and pirn winders and multi-color automatic looms are now being made in the country. As a customer of this industry, are you happy with the products of this industry?

A: No. I am not at all satisfied. The Cotton textile industry has suffered because our manufacturers, until recently, have not come out with the latest machinery. The world is having HP cards; we have to be content with a semi- HP card and that too without the latest accompaniments. The spindle speed in the West and in Japan is as high as 15,000 r.p.m. Our Ring frames, made hitherto, work so poorly that with the increase of speed to 11,000 r.p.m. spinning becomes bad. Few indigenous manufacturers make satisfactory high-speed rings. How can our industry survive in the world market working such machinery?

Q: What way do you suggest so (hat the cotton industry always gets modern machinery?

A: I am in favor of foreign collaborations for manufacture of machinery and in allowing certain amount of machinery to be imported, where the local manufacturer does not come up to the expected standard. There should be an organization jointly of Government, Indian Cotton Mills' Federation and Textile **Machinery Manufacturers' Association**, who should go into the complaints against indigenous machinery, and where it is proved that the complaints are genuine and the mills have been put to loss, the machinery

manufacturer should be suitably penalized and the mills compensated. I have instances in our Group where Japanese and British manufacturers have either replaced their machines free of cost or paid compensation for their unsatisfactory performance. But, our manufacturers, with some exceptions, turn a deaf ear to complaints.

Q: I feel the only good the present slump will do is to weed out those firms who do not make quality machines; but such of the mills who have bought machines from them will of course suffer. Let me come to another burning question — that of the weaker units. Should these be re-started? If so, who should run them — the Government or private parties? What minimum concessions should such units claim from Government

A: If the conditions I give below are satisfied, most of the weaker mills, at least in Madras State, can be run efficiently:

The prime condition is that the Government, management and labour all must agree to sacrifice; for once a mill closes, none of them will benefit and all stand to lose.

The Government must exempt such units — for a period of five years — from payment of excise duty and sales tax; provide working capital and capital for urgent rehabilitation on easy terms where there is some security, supply cotton at ceiling prices, and offer concession in electric charges. The management should forego remuneration until the mill turns the corner. The labour should agree to accept 50% of dearness allowance till such time as the mill is financially sound; agree to rationalized workloads and put forth their best efforts.

Then coming to this question about who should run such mills, I am of the firm opinion, that the Government should not enter business; managing textile mills is not as easy as it apparently looks and I believe the Government is learning this from their recent experiences. Only reputed private parties, with managerial experience, may be invited to work such mills in association with the Government.

Q: These are the most practical conditions I believe there could be, but, I believe neither the labour nor the Government want to sacrifice. If my information is correct, the re-started mills have to pay excise duty and wages at the same rate as any other mill. Could I change the subject? As an eminent educationist, how close should be the liaison between mills and textile colleges? I am particularly asking this question because I am not very happy with this relationship as it exists in Bombay.

A. I feel there should be the closest possible liaison; then the staff of the Institute will gain rich experience; the same can then be passed on to the students, finally resulting in providing better technicians to the industry. We are beginning such a relationship with the V.J.T. Institute in Bombay and I am sure it will be mutually profitable.

Q: Do you have any specific suggestions w make for the textile colleges?

A: Yes I think if we can have a textile Engineering Course, run on a sandwich basis with mills' co-operation, it would be advantageous for training good maintenance engineers. A BE (Mechanical) should spend half the day in a mill and half the day in a textile mill processing. May be in a year or so he would pick up enough of textile processing.

Q. Last but one question before I stop. The Textile Association down South does not appear to be as active as in Bombay or Ahmedabad.

A. I am prepared to give whatever help we can to organize Seminars, Lectures, etc. We can even think of a Madurai Branch. I welcome all technical activities.

Q. *Last question, could I have a message from you for our members?*

A. My message is for hard and sincere work, up-to-date scientific knowledge, modern ideas, and technical efficiency in the interest of industry and the country.

Q. *Thank you, Sir. May I express my sincere thanks for sparing so much of your time and sharing your thoughts with us? Thank you.*

A. Thank you.

Madurai, July '67

APPENDIX - 4

INAUGURATION OF THIAGARAJAR COLLEGE

Welcome Address

By

Sri Karumuttu Thiagaraja Chettiar

Founder - President

Your Excellency,

Welcoming to our College such a distinguished personage as Your Excellency is to me a proud privilege. It is, indeed, very kind of Your Excellency to have graciously consented to inaugurate the new temple of learning, a favour for which we offer our heartfelt thanks.

Madurai, a historic city of the Pandyan Kingdom, is a seat of learning, noted for its ancient culture, whose Tamil literature as a fine art has thrived with the existence of three Sangams from 9940 BC to 50 AD. The object of learning in those early ages was not merely to help one to win his bread, but more to acquire culture and knowledge to love God and men. To revive that great tradition of culture in a pure, spiritual, and academic atmosphere, and as a realization of a long pent-up dream of a Tamil University, this shrine of culture has been erected, on a picturesque site on the banks of the sacred river Vaigai, and opposite to the famous Teppakulam, which is of great historical and religious importance.

As a second step to achieve this coveted object, eminent men of high qualifications and long experience have been appointed as Principal and Professors. Thirdly, another fillip is that this Temple is to be inaugurated formally and with due Solemnity, not only by a distinguished head of the Government and the University, but also of a great royal house noted for its patronage of letters.

The formal ceremony of inauguration of the College, now, at the commencement of the second term was due rather to secure the honour of such a dignitary to inaugurate it than to complete the get-up of the buildings. Even now the accommodation is poor and does not satisfy our earnest desire to make it more comfortable to our dear students but we hope to increase it gradually with the help and co-operation of your Government. Needless to say, any laudable object of this kind is well worthy of State help and support, as India's first and foremost need is true learning — to produce good citizens of culture. This gives wealth to the poor, honor to the rich, aid to the young and support to the aged.

It is commonly admitted that the present system of education is flagrantly defective, and the reforms proposed by politicians appear to be even worse. I shall not here enter into the vexed question of enforcing Hindi as our national language and thus making our poor children study three languages, in addition to different crafts like carpentry and smithy. While material constructions are safely entrusted to experts, spiritual and intellectual constructions, such as study and language, are lightly entrusted to and laid on laymen's shoulders, instead of educationists of experience and eminence. That this danger will be averted and the change will be for the better is the fond hope of all educationists and parents.

Madras with a population of over fifty millions has only three Universities. This is very inadequate. The establishment of another University in Madurai, the heart of Tamil Nadu with its four Colleges — and within a radius of 100 miles, with 12 more colleges in Trichinopoly, Ramnad and Tirnelveli Districts — will considerably help and enhance higher education in Tamil Nadu.

This scheme I have already proposed to the government and even offered my little contribution, believing as I do, that the highest form of service to one's country is the provision for Its youth of proper educational facilities. This Institution is but a small and humble endeavour in that direction.

The pleasant task of welcoming Your Excellency and briefly showing the purpose of this new institution is done. So I invite Your Excellency to convey to our expectant ears your kindly message and pour into the heart of this new College the blessed stream of your encouragement and consolation.

APPENDIX - 5

A LETTER TO C. RAJAGOPALACHARI

To

The Hon'ble Sree C. RAJAGOPALACHARIAR,
Prime Minister to the Government of Madras,
Madras.

Dear Sir,

May I introduce myself as an old and loyal Congressman who though without publicity, has worked and sacrificed not a little? To mention only a few instances, which occurred after I withdrew from the political field in 1921, to take to industry— when officials of Madura came to The Sree Meenakshi Mills Ltd., which is under my management, in 1929 after Gandhiji's Dande March, to distribute pamphlets among the labourers of our Mills, - prompted by patriotism, and pride that Gandhiji first wore his loin cloth as my guest I made bold to say that no facilities would be afforded the Government to carry on counter propaganda against a great national movement inside our Mills. Mr.J.F. Hall, I.C.S., then Collector of Madura, with a threat of imprisonment under the Arms Act for not depositing my revolver in time in the absence of renewal of license, took a letter of undertaking from me that I should dissociate myself from the Congress and refrain from financing it. Again when Sir R.K. Shanumgam, kt., then President of the Assembly, wrote to me in 1934 to support his candidature, I curtly replied to the illustrious Justice that I could not do so owing to my sympathies with the Congress. As I had two votes, there was great pressure from all quarters. I disobeyed the "order" of the late Mr. E.M. Viswanathan Chettiar who held 1/16 share of the Company and was besides financing the mills to the extent of five lakhs. Next an "injunction" from Dewan Bahadur A.M. Murugappa Chettiar then a Director of the Mills, and Sir

P.T.Rajan, then Development Minister, to cast at least the vote of the Company in favour of Sir Shanmugam, met the same fate. Your esteemed colleague, Dr. Subbaroyan was present on the latter occasion. My sufferings for such little things were greater than even courting imprisonment. Mr.N.M.R. Subbaraman will speak to the part I played, silently, in the last general election to support the Congress. These unhappy incidents I have the unpleasant task of recounting if I am to merit your sympathy as a staunch Congressite. In the sincere hope that you may, therefore, have some consideration for the words of a true Congressman, and that you as Prime Minister, will be open-minded, sympathetic and conciliatory, I approach you in a friendly spirit to write about the burning topic of the day in our Presidency.

I have read carefully all that has been said for and against compulsory Hindi. I am still unconvinced by the arguments advanced in favour of it. When the matter has been discussed for the last fifteen months in the Press and on the platform at the expense of a great deal of eloquence and energy in arguing the pros and cons of compulsory Hindi, it may indeed seem to be superfluous to raise the point again here. However, as the matter is so important, kindly permit me to touch it, presenting a view with no bias against the well-meant measure.

In the first place if Hindi had been made an optional subject there would have been no opposition against it, at least on the part of unprejudiced intelligentsia. What has given a momentum to the widespread agitation is that the language was made compulsory. Therefore, we shall first examine this preliminary issue.

Is it always right to make a good thing compulsory? True, we do want primary education to be made compulsory. This is already a hard and laudable task that the Congress intends to undertake. This does not, therefore, need to be made harder still, by compelling the study of Hindi in the Secondary School, among the children of a generation, which is hostile to it. Even when primary education has not yet been made compulsory in this poor miserable land, where 96% cannot speak their thoughts fairly in

their own mother tongue, can an alien language be made compulsory in a Secondary School?

When one is put under compulsion to do a thing, he looks upon it with suspicion, and Hindi, though a widely spoken dialect of great India, will forfeit the natural love that it might otherwise engender.

If and when a need arises for a thing it will certainly overcome all obstacles and will secure and hold its own. Why then force it prematurely? Secondly, Hindi has been made compulsory to bring solidarity between province and province. Has it achieved this desired good effect? No! It has, on the other hand, produced a misunderstanding between us and our beloved North Indian brethren, who are suspected to have a design to dominate over us, and, what is worse, it has created a split in our own province itself. It has unfortunately revived communal feelings that were fast receding into the background. We have offered our opponents a first class political issue to fight us and are thereby making them great heroes. Are we not responsible for this? But for this unfortunate step they would have rested in peace. Having now given them new life to fight, we have had to make use of a much-condemned weapon, the Criminal Law Amendment Act, as a defence against them. To correct one error, one is apt to fall into a greater. Mistake follows mistake, which adds strength to the opposition. It would be another mistake to belittle or underrate the movement. If it had not strength we need not have had recourse to the Criminal Law Amendment Act, bitterly condemned by us. The use of this violent Act is a logical proof of the strength of the movement. If there was no case, however great and influential a leader might be, he could not have a sustained following. Outside our province the Hindi — Urdu controversy has also taken a communal turn. Bengal, Punjab and other provinces may add to this commotion when they are faced with this controversy.

Has language always united people? Are not the Hindus of the South and the North speaking *different* languages more united than the Hindus and Mohammedans of the North speaking one language? Religion has more influence to unite people. But we

cannot think of a national religion. One's mother-tongue is as dear as mother. Interference with language or religion may only lead to disruption. Repression we have seen, can only delay a people's triumph.

Coming to the merits of the question, has India the common characteristics of a distinct nation, for us to think of a national language? India is a little continent, embracing different races and communities. Europe without Russia is about as large as India, and yet does not boast of one language — great as it is, it does not derive its greatness from one language. Canada, South Africa and Switzerland each uses different languages, and yet each is united itself, - nor does History shows that the solidarity of any nation or empire grew out of oneness of language? The British Empire, too, embraces a great medley of languages, which have not for centuries broken its unity. All the provinces and states too, have not come to an agreement on this important point. And the chance of all the provinces and states coming to an agreement is yet very slight and remote. The Congress also has come to no conclusion on this point and has given us no mandate. Yet in this province, there is much ado about this, mixing up politics with education, and adding to our complications, when there is no urgent need for it.

Even when Federated India decides upon Hindi as the language of the Central Government, still there will be no need to make Hindi *compulsory* in the Secondary Schools in all provinces. It can then be introduced as an optional subject in the College. It can be specialized in two years during Arts Course or any other special course in Politics, Journalism etc., just as French and classical languages are studied as a second language for higher studies. There would be no opposition to the study of Hindi as an optional subject in the College classes. The leaders will learn Hindi out of necessity.

The study of an alien language in secondary schools will do not good. It will only be a waste of time, unless it is pursued during the college course and also afterwards put in practice.

It is vainly argued that in England, Latin and Greek are taught compulsorily and that they have not spoiled the English language. It is not correct to say that they are

compulsory subjects in England now. And there is no parallelism between these ancient dead languages with their marvellously rich literature, and Hindi, which scarcely has any literature at all. The suggestion of a comparison between the two would give offence to a classical scholar. It would be like comparing an eagle and a poor crow. Latin and Greek are closely allied to English and they are taught in order to enrich it. Greek and Latin are also read to unearth and to enjoy the hidden treasures buried in those ancient rich classical literature. Hindi is not a language allied to Tamil and it is also not a classical language like Greek or Latin or Sanskrit that can enrich our Tamil with its literature.

Whether Hindustani or Hindi is sought to be made the national language is not clear as yet, for Hindustani is different from Hindi. The worst part of it is that Hindi has no script of its own and we have yet to decide on this point, which bristles with difficulties. If Hindi is permitted to be learnt in three different scripts namely, Devanagari, Urdu and Roman, so far as writing is concerned, the three scripts would be like three languages which one would have to learn to read a script which may be any one of the three! Thus we sink lower and lower in difficulties. Besides, when a language is learnt in different scripts it will soon turn into different dialects that will not be easily understood. A uniform pronunciation in speech will require a practical knowledge of phonetics. Again, Hindi, it is authoritatively stated, has already several dialects, and none of them has yet been cultivated.

A word about the explanation that Hindi will not endanger our rich language and its great culture. Has not English, that has spread very little, done irreparable harm to Tamil? Do we not write and speak in English even in our own homes? Have we not thought that if we did not speak in English it would be below our dignity? Has not English education broken through our customs and culture? Are we not shining in borrowed feathers? Where would we have been, if our great leader, Gandhiji, had not redeemed us and made us return to our own ancient culture and learning? And yet, can we, in fairness, say that the learning of Hindi will not interfere with Tamil and its

culture? It is needless to dilate upon ancient Tamil and its unique culture as they are not disputed.

On the one hand, we want a national language to make this continent of great India into one nation, and on the other hand, we also want to divide the existing provinces into smaller ones on a linguistic basis. Is this not inconsistent? Can we not at least postpone controversial questions such as that of a national language, until we have made India a real nation? Then it will be time to think of a universal language.

At first, it was said that Hindi would be the *lingua franca* of India. But a mixed jargon can never become a state language. Gandhiji now prefers to say that Hindi would be the Rashtrabasha of India. The leaders have not yet placed all their (linguistic) cards on the table. As the Congress is against secret diplomacy they should soon tell the public in detail what position they want Hindustani to occupy under Congress rule.

Article XIX (a) of the Congress constitution only says that the proceedings of the Congress and its Committees shall ordinarily be in Hindustani and (b) that the proceedings of the Provincial Congress Committee shall ordinarily be in the language of the Province. This in itself is clear and allowable. And if the Congress Election Manifesto had only stated that Hindi would be made a compulsory subject, the voters, in their great enthusiasm for Swaraj, might not have noticed or even minded the consequences of such 'gifts', and it would have then stood the Congress Ministry in good stead, to introduce this measure as approved by the people. It would have relieved the Ministry of this very important constitutional issue, as the electorate would not now say that the Ministry had no mandate from them to make Hindi a compulsory study. But instead of this frank avowal, which would have gained by truthfulness and sincerity, the Manifesto openly and emphatically declared that the Congress would not interfere with religion or language.

It has been further argued that according to the Congress constitution, Hindi is the national language. It is not (vide Article 19). On the other hand, the A.I.C.C. has at its last meeting rejected the question of a common language.

No foreign language, however good or elastic, can ever become the language of hundreds of millions speaking some hundreds of languages or dialects, and perhaps not sprung from the same stock. The fruit sought from oneness of language cannot be gathered till all these hundreds of languages or dialects offer a victim at the altar of Hindi. For the sake of an uncertain, if not utopian ideal, shall we run the risk of prizing so little the rich inheritance of language bequeathed to us by our venerable ancestors, that we are prepared to make a sacrifice, even the least, of that certain ancient pledge on behalf of a would be national Hindi. Hindi, in any event, is an alien language to Tamilians, and should never be made the subject of compulsory study.

It is said that English is compulsory in schools and colleges, and that no objection is taken to it. English schools and colleges were started by the British Government, Missionaries and other philanthropists to satisfy the need felt by the people to learn the King's English to take service under a foreign Government. Others learnt it for business. English is a highly cultivated language, made international. It affords every facility, and urges all nations to learn it out of necessity. We wanted Swaraj in order to be masters of our own affairs and to retain the culture of our languages, and not again to have to use a language like Hindi, which is as foreign to us as English. We do not want to substitute one foreign language for another, even if Indian. For we want Poorna Swaraj, for our Province also, with our own culture in our languages.

True, students have recently passed a resolution in their Conference in Madras favouring the study of Hindi as a compulsory subject. They are said to be the future citizens of India. Hence it is argued plausibly that it should be taught compulsorily. If it is a wise measure to consult the young generation that will make the citizens of tomorrow, on this political question, for a similar reason, we might consult their inexperience and romantic tendencies on other political questions as well, and take their answers as our decisions in the conduct of Government. So too, since students, now have caught the infection of strike, we shall also commend strikes, and do away with all laws that are not acceptable to immature minds! Would this be sound wisdom or logic?

One more point and this letter is concluded. Our educational system is very defective. Existing curricula are so heavy that they paralyze the energy of the students and make too many of them unfit for any useful purpose after they leave the schools and colleges. They cannot even earn their living. Their illiterate brothers fare far better in this respect. It will be cruel to add to the syllabus and burden of our children with an additional language that will not help them either temporally or spiritually. The worthy object of the Congress Government to adopt the mother tongue as medium of instruction is unhappily less appreciated than it deserves, precisely because it is obscured by the controversy about Hindi.

Our ancient system of education can be profitably introduced. Religion, absolutely necessary for spiritual development, finds no place in our present curriculum: nor music either. We should move in this right direction to help our young children who are not born merely to live and die.

Millions are starving. This issue and other important ones are shelved. We are accused by those in distress of fiddling while Rome is burning.

It is indeed unfortunate that the popular Ministry, so early in its life, should be forced into this unpleasant controversy. Language is so sacred that dallying with it will have fatal consequences. Should we not end this internal strife before the gulf is too widened? Can we afford to have fresh quarrels within when we have greater battles to face without?

The intensity of my love for Tamil makes me hope sincerely that this letter, coming as it does from a lover of the country, may effect what hundreds of resolutions passed at public meetings have failed to do.

If you are pleased to discuss the matter personally, I shall be glad to wait on you. If the interview converts me to your opinion I shall certainly bear your message to Tamil Nadu.

As you are an esteemed countryman of mine, I have ventured thus far to address

you with frankness which kindly excuse in one who, though familiar, means to be respectful.

With an apology for being so insistent in my earnest appeal to you I conclude, resting on my unbounded love for my mother tongue and my mother country, and feeling confident in your happy possession of the power and the goodness needed for generosity to end this unhappy episode by a stroke of the pen.

I remain,

Yours truly,

Karumuttu Thiagarajan

Madurai

1st May 1939

APPENDIX - 6

A LETTER TO MAHATMA GANDHI

26th June 1946.

Dear Mahatma,

May I congratulate you on having attained Independence for India in your lifetime by long suffering? Who will not be proud of it?

As the chief architect who planned Independent India, you have large responsibilities for setting various details of great complexity regarding religion, language, finance etc.

There is little to quarrel about with you on your happy attitude of strict neutrality to religion — a sacred possession.

I wish you took the same tolerant view about language, which also is a matter of supreme importance. But unfortunately it is not so, owing to your anxiety to have a united India. Your views about a national language, which are undoubtedly well meant though idealistic, need to be clarified, and, if necessary even modified so as to avoid trouble and fatal consequences. Let us not make fresh quarrels.

When you were in Madura I wrote you a letter dated the 1st February 1946 (copy enclosed herein) requesting you kindly to define “Rashtrabasha”. It still remains unanswered, either directly, or indirectly through your “Harijan”. It is unanswerable says my learned friend, Dr. Sir. Lakshmanaswamy Mudaliar, the popular Vice-Chancellor of the University of Madras. The very same remark was made concerning my letter to Rajaji on the same subject by my friend the great lawyer, the late Mr.S. Srinivasa Iyengar, who envisaged the Independence of India which you have now won, after a long bloodless battle.

Recently you advised Indians to read the Cabinet Mission’s report in Hindustani (not in their own vernacular) saying that even you were not quite familiar with English. True, it is very hard to master a foreign tongue. The text of the Cabinet Mission’s statement is not in Hindustani, but in English, and one should read the original if possible instead of translation, which is rarely quite true and accurate. Surely if it is to be read in the vernacular by those who do not know English sufficiently it should be read by them, each in his own language. Now what about the poor people who cannot read Hindustani? You will readily answer that they should all learn Hindustani. It is again, a foreign language to many people, and here the quarrel starts. I would, therefore, beg of you to define “Rashtrabasha” before the matter can be further discussed.

As stated in my last letter, if you want Hindustani to be the Lingua Franca or the common language of India or even the Court language of the Central Government, there may be no objection. But if you want to force it as the State or Court and official language of all the provinces there will be bloodshed, as no one will offer his mother tongue — his richest inheritance — as a victim on the altar of Hindustani.

As Hindustani has not character of its own, a common character is talked of. If Devanagari is not suitable, another character for Hindustani has to be evolved or adopted. But it does not follow from that, that a common character or script should be adopted for all the ancient languages that have an adequate and scientific script of their own. Advocates of common script seem to think that the only difficulty is to learn the characters of a language and that once the characters are learnt, the rich literature of the language can at once be enjoyed. This view may be dismissed as puerile.

With reference to another problem that must be met in the new regime, that of finance, kindly permit me to touch upon another of your favourite topics, that of total prohibition. Looking at it from a practical point of view, I have no hesitation in saying that such a policy will cripple India's finance without, however, conferring any commensurate benefit.

It is difficult for students of history and literature to believe in total prohibition by a statute. They can believe only in temperance through propaganda. The United States of America and Canada tried in vain to enforce total prohibition for about ten years. So total prohibition has been tried and given up in other countries. Why should we not take a lesson from these experiments?

“What existed will always exist, and What did not exist will never come into existence”.

so says Bhagwat Gita. Are we not attempting the impossible?

The sacred Kural, which is unparalleled in the whole world, very strongly condemns drink as deadly poison, but it says,

fspj;jhidf; fhuzq; fhl;Ljy; fPo;ePHf;

Fspj;jhidj; jPj;JhP, aw;W

“Like him who, torch in hand, would seek one sunk beneath the wave

Is he who strives to sober drunken man with reason ings grave “.

Furthermore the evil of drinking is compared with and ranked next to love.

The Divine Book (Kural) says;

cs;sf; fspj;jYq; fhz kfpo;jYq;

fs;Sf;fpy; fhkj;jpw; Fz;L

*“Gladness at the thought, rejoicing at the sight
Not palm-tree wine, but love, yields such delight”.*

So we might as well make laws to turn all people into saints. Is this possible?

Do you not consider eating meat a great crime and sin, beside which the evil of drinking vanishes? Then why not pass legislation to prevent this?

After all, is drinking always, in whatever measure, so awfully bad as it is often painted? It is said that the labourer is relieved of his fatigue if he takes a little of it after his hard day’s work. It becomes bad only when it is abused. What indeed, is not bad when used immoderately? Even water, milk and food, so essential to life, become bad when the virtue of temperance is violated.

You condemn the revenue from excise. This income comes only from the control of the evil. The State makes drink costly and rare by imposing a heavy tax and great restrictions. Instead of allowing every coconut or palm tree in the country to be tapped, the State permits this only in a few places; nor are toddy shops allowed to be opened everywhere. The State can only go so far. If the State totally prohibits liquor, the result will be illicit liquor and breaking of the law.

Rationing of liquor can be tried as in Sweden, with fair hope of similar success. Owing to the previous attempt at prohibition the great Tungabadra Scheme seems to have been dropped, which would have saved the Madras Presidency from the present severe famine.

Far worthier and more judicious subjects for serious consideration are the following:

To introduce compulsory education — to remove illiteracy from the country, to develop irrigation and shipbuilding — to further the agriculture, industry and trade of the country. Instead of helping the homeless naked millions who are dying of starvation, instead of saving the revenue wasted upon total prohibition to spend it upon the urgent reform of separating the judiciary from the executive and upon the other great reforms besides, why should the State focus its concern upon comparatively few mad drunkards?

I am here only pleading for millions of my brethren — I, who have never tasted a drop of liquor in my life, nor have I any vested interest, in so pleading.

India earnestly and humbly entreats you to lead her forward with other progressive countries, and, far from dashing against the current, follow its direction.

Begging you to excuse this letter, coming as it does when you are in the midst of heavy planning and with kind regards,

I remain,

Yours sincerely,

Karumuttu Thiagarajan

APPENDIX - 7

ANNAMALAI UNIVERSITY
FOUNDER'S COMMEMORATION DAY ADDRESS

Delivered on October 17, 1960

By

SRI KARUMUTTU THIAGARAJA CHETTIAR

Mr Vice-Chancellor, Members of the Faculties,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first express my sincere thanks to the Vice-Chancellor for the honour of being asked to deliver the Founder's Commemorative Address.

On this memorable day, I deem it a privilege and a pleasure to join a learned body in paying homage to the revered memory of the illustrious Founder of the Temple of Learning in this ancient city hallowed by the cosmic dance of Lord Natarajar.

After 30 years of successive tributes and encomiums showered on him by eminent men, including Chief Ministers and High Court Judges, it may look a repetition for me to extol the great and noble qualities of the Father of this University.

I have had, fortunately, unique opportunities of knowing the late Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar for four decades. He was noted for his piety, simple ways of life, winning manners, remarkable courtesy and princely hospitality. He was fortunate in his domestic life, being blessed with a pious, devoted partner and loving children. I have admired his rare capacity for hard work, business acumen and wise statesmanship.

Annamalai University itself is an abiding proof of his creative genius and patriotic inspiration. It is the first University in our country to be founded by private benefaction. Unitary, Residential and Teaching, it is a synthesis of the old and the new, the East and the West, providing facilities for Research in all subjects, particularly Oriental culture.

The Founder's farsightedness and vision have helped to revive not only Tamil literature, but also Music and Arts. The Tamil Isai movement owes its revival entirely to the late Rajah. He has laid the country particularly Tamil Nadu, under a deep obligation by his unexampled munificence, generous philanthropy and cultural achievement.

We are bound to repay this beneficence.

It is the duty of the learned teachers of this self-contained academic center, by their devotion and example, to produce generations of alumni, noted for knowledge and culture, for skill and efficiency, for discipline and character and for loyal service of God and country.

Students, emerging hence thus endowed into the amphitheatre of life, can add lustre to their *Alma Mater* by so utilizing their talents and opportunities as to be worthy citizens of the land.

The parents and the public, by appreciating the varied activities here, may cooperate, in every possible way, towards the development of this University.

It is indeed heartening to see that this Centre of Learning, so nobly and firmly founded, has grown steadily under the fostering care and personal attention of the present Pro-Chancellor, Dr. Rajah Sir Muthiah Chettiar who spares no pains for its expansion. He is thus proving himself to be the worthy son of a great father who continues to live in his University. It has been fortunate also in its successive Vice-Chancellors, a galaxy of brilliant men down to Sri T.M. Narayanaswamy Pillai, who is now ably presiding over its destinies. Everything thus augurs well for the future of Annamalai University.

True to the Founder's wish to make this Centre of Tamil Studies, the role of the Annamalai University is becoming increasingly conspicuous with the elevation of Tamil to the status of Official Language of the State.

Of all the original languages, Tamil can claim to be the oldest and the richest. Even what survives of our ancient learning, despite the ravages of water, fire and white ants, remains a treasure that can excel the best in any country.

No language can take such pride as Tamil in her wealth of devotional songs like *Thevaram* and *Tiruvacakam*.

The *Tirukkural*, offering unrivalled counsels, is a masterpiece on stagecraft. Planning, Taxation and Budgeting, which engage our attention today, are beautifully condensed in one and three quarter lines:

,aw;wYk; <l;lYk; fhj;jYk; fhj;j

tFj;jYk; ty;y juR

*“A king is he who treasure gains, stores up, defends,
And duly for his Kingdom 's weal expends.”*

The qualities pre-requisite in an Ambassador, embodied in 10 stanzas are applicable to present-day requirements. One of them refers to personality:

mwpTU Muha;e;j fy;tp,k; %d;wd;

nrwpTilahd; nry;f tpidf;F

*“Sense, goodly grace, and Knowledge exquisite,
who hath these, three for envoy's task is fit.”*

That the Government should be based on the will of the people is aptly stressed in the following:

Ntyd;W ntd;wp jUtJ kd;dtd;

NfhYJ}ck; Nfhlnjdpd;.

*“Not lance gives kings the victory,
But sceptre swayed with equity.”*

It denounces official begging:

NtnyhL epd;whd; ,Lvd;wJ NghYk;

NfhnyhL epd;whd; ,uT.

“As ‘give’ the robber cries with lance uplift,
So kings with sceptred hand implore a gift.”

Are there parallels in other languages to such noble, practical, moral counsels?

As literature, *Pathu Pattu*, *Ettu Thokai* and *Aymperum Kaviyam* reign supreme.

The references to the administration of justice in *Silappathikaram* are remarkable. As soon as King Pandian realized the injustice of his hasty decision, his life became extinct.

Cholan imposed unsparing punishment upon his only son for a fault of negligence.

Are not these instances of the high sense of justice that once prevailed in Tamil Nadu?

The eminence of Tolkappiam as a treatise on grammar is undisputed. Not only does it provide rules for letters and words, but also for human conduct.

Such is the beauty and variety of our dear mother tongue. It was unfortunately neglected so long as a foreign flag flew over us. With the dawn of freedom, however, Tamil was expected to come to the fore, not only in the scheme of studies in our Educational Institutions, but also in the Government. After twelve years of independence, the Mother tongue is still struggling for its due place.

And the reason is not far to seek. Hindi is competing with English for the honour of becoming the Official Language of the Union. How one regional language, spoken by only 36% of the population, can serve as the Official Language of the entire country baffles all understanding. The union government, which is expected to treat all languages alike, is partial to Hindi and discriminatory in spending large amounts on its development and propaganda. The ostensible excuses for favoring Hindi are that it is spoken by a majority and that a common language is necessary for the unity and solidarity of the country. Linguistic troubles all over India clearly prove that this policy is suicidal. When a medicine reacts badly on a patient, the wise Doctor changes the treatment. Why should not men at the helm of affairs, with some respect for languages other than their own, endeavor to establish friendly linguistic relations between the North and the South and between State and State?

It should be possible for them to imitate Switzerland which, with a population of 4¼ millions, 73% of whom speak German, 21% French, 5% Italian and 1% Romansh, recognizes all the four tongues as official languages without forcing the language of the majority, namely, German, upon the minorities. By such manifestation of justice, statesmanship and deference to the feelings of others, Switzerland flourishes to-day as a closely-knit home of freedom and liberty. Other examples of the same enlightened policy are Canada, Belgium, South Africa and even Russia, where more than one official language finds recognition.

The proper course, therefore, would be to accept each regional language in India as the respective State Language, while honoring all the State Languages as the Official Languages of the Federation. If four Official Languages can serve for 4 1/4 millions, fourteen Official languages would not be too many for 400 million people. Are not all

the languages of Member nations recognized for official use in the United Nations' Assembly?

Yet, one language, Hindi, in which literacy is lowest, is being thrust on the whole country. This language is comparatively poor in literature, and has no adequate grammar or vocabulary. One single word, "surka", is pressed into service to express four different ideas — tax, duty, customs and assessment; whereas in Tam ii we have different words for each; viz., for tax, for duty, for customs and for assessment.

It is difficult to visualize the possibility of this infant language, Hindi, ever becoming the language of our Law Courts, when even such a cultivated language as English, has to borrow phrases and expressions from a foreign language for the sake of precision, e.g., will and testament, res judicata, de jure, de facto, etc.

A language should be capable of stirring the human soul, filling the memory, stimulating the mind and inspiring the imagination, with great truths, noble ideas and beautiful imagery. Hindi cannot accomplish this, until poets, saints, artists and scientists are born to enrich it.

The exaltation and imposition of Hindi has arisen out of a single casting vote of the Chairman of the Constituent Assembly! As one interested in Hindi, it would have been fair and proper if he had abstained from voting in an equally divided House. Nor is it seemly, for those that seek to force their own language down unwilling throats, to raise the cry of parochialism and provincialism.

As we do need a means of inter-State communication, we cannot possibly think of a more suitable medium than English. It will also help us in our international contacts. English is the World Language today, rich in literature, immortalized by Shakespeare, Milton and others. It is the only vehicle of scientific knowledge for us. English has been the language of Indian unity, whereas the very mention of Hindi spells disunity. Andhra, Gujarat and Maharashtra have had to shed blood for their linguistic rights. English, therefore, should not be replaced by Hindi, but should be retained as our second language, occupying an honoured position next only to the Mother tongue.

The younger generation owe it to their country to study topical problems, such as these, intensely but dispassionately, striving to understand and appreciate them in their true bearings.

It is incumbent on us to realize that our culture and civilization is more important than any temporal matters, being deeply rooted in religion.

Continuance of individual religious practices, of prayers and meditations, moral instruction of a general nature, should find a place in our Schools and Colleges, and also in our Universities. In Oxford, Cambridge and other Western Universities, which grew up under religious auspices, there are chapels where services are regularly held for the benefit of their staff and students. It should not be difficult for separate religious practices of the different faiths of our land to be permitted in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of our Centres of Learning. I am happy that a sacred place of worship exists within this University campus.

Our literature echoes, our architecture reflects, our music inspires the devout Love of God that is the beginning of Wisdom:

*“No fruit have men of all their studied lore,
Save they the Purely Wise One’s feet adore.”*

APPENDIX - 8

EXCERPTS FROM
KALAITHANTHAI'S LETTERS TO C.S.R.

Between 1932 and 1935 Kalaithanthai mostly stayed in Bombay as he was engaged in forward trading in cotton. At that time he kept up a regular correspondence with C.S.Ramachari who was looking after Sree Meenakshi mills. Following are some excerpts from the letters.

Somehow we have to run the mills efficiently. God should sustain us till we are able to make some arrangement. I am praying to Him day and night and hope He will not let us down. You go to all the temples daily and pray for His succour. The believer never comes to harm.

Without God's benediction, no man's help will be of any avail. Only He can save us. Let us put our trust in Him.

How profound are the words of Thayumanavar when he speaks of the transience of life. What is this life? We are here today and are gone tomorrow. We should consider every day as perhaps the last day of our life and act accordingly.



.....

All my desires have come to nothing. I have now ceased to entertain any desire. I am praying to God to get me out of the situation I am now in.

If after all this, the book shows loss, disallow my salary and commission and somehow show that there is no loss.

By now the machinery might have arrived. They must be promptly installed and run before June 30. At all costs, we must make Rs 1000 per day from July 1st.

The buildings must be completed before December 1935. Another 10000 spindles must be commissioned before January 1936. Take steps for this.

We have to raise Rs. 100000 before the end of this month. What is to be done?

If somehow cotton prices come down and we are able to procure cotton, we can raise the money from some source. Otherwise we will be in trouble. May Goddess Meenakshi help us.

Our troubles will last only up to June 23. Then everything will come out all right. I have no doubt about it. Goddess Meenakshi will help us. We will make all efforts and persevere. Perseverance pays.

But I often fear unforeseen obstacles. I am worried. But God is great. Things will turn for the better. "There is providence in the fall of a sparrow. Readiness is all." We shall accept suffering. I have been facing only troubles all these eighteen years. I do not know how long this will go on. I shall be happy if I can manage the mill without trouble.

I go on living in the hope that God will help me and will not let me down.

We had overreached ourselves and that has got us into trouble. But who can control fate? There is no point in regretting. We shall be careful hereafter...

Go round the mills in the morning and in the evening. Economize. Look after the production. See that cotton is not wasted. We must have 45 bales every week. We must exercise great care in procuring cotton and selling yarn. Follow the reports on cotton...

We are not inferior to the Japanese.

Be careful about income and expenditure. See that there is no shortage of funds. Integrity is more important than profit. It is the soul of business. With integrity, we can earn money later. We should not allow ourselves to suffer for short gains.

We are procuring 1000 bales of cotton every month. If we got it for five rupees less than Harvey mills, we could save Rs 5000. We can get cotton for less price at Coimbatore we can sell the yarn at a higher rate, and we can make extra money. It will come to Rs 5000 for 40000 bales.

There is no better place than Madurai for spinning mills. If, with 25000 spindles here working day and night, we cannot make at least Rs 25000 after allowing for depreciation, we will incur losses in other places...

We should not compromise on quality. Use only good grade cotton.

It is very hot now in Bombay and Calcutta. Infectious diseases like smallpox and cholera seem to be prevalent. Still I go there, hoping to collect share capital...

We had the help of Harvey mills and a chance of good relations with them, but it did not last...

We had the luck to buy cotton, silver, copper and rubber freely, but that too we lost...

The mills had a liquidity of up to Rs. 400000. Now we seem unable to raise even Rs. 10000.

What hard luck! I do not know how God is going to help us. Nothing is in our hands. Let us do all we can without losing heart. "God helps those who help themselves."

We must be careful not to let others see our sufferings.

When we have to find money for cotton, the machinery also has arrived. We have to make up Rs 100000.

How are we to pay the taxes now? Write to Ramasamy Iyer to refer to the High Court.

If we pay the chit instalments regularly and get the money, we can adjust later.

You might have read the story of the newspaper magnate, Pears. He fell several times before he rose to his high position. Almost all the rich people have gone through hard times. So we must not lose heart. If we did, we might never recover.

Here even the smallest cotton merchants are well versed in the market conditions. We must be thorough in our knowledge of cotton business. There is no harm in our spending half our time on this. For this, we must get all the concerned journals and reports, read them carefully and take notes. We must manage the mills economically.

The mill premises should be clean. Goddess Lakshmi prefers only clean places. The mill should have a majestic appearance too.

To demand from us a tax of Rs 30000 now is unjust. I don't intend to pay it. If we paid the government now, other creditors would start pressing on us. Where are we to go for money?

People will admire my guts when the mill affairs are in order.

Once the affairs of the mills are brought into some kind of order, I intend meeting the governor and the viceroy about the tax. If I can't get justice from them, I am resolved to court imprisonment to expose the unjust attitude of a tyrannical government. God's will be done. It would be a good service to the country I am looking forward to the settlement of the affairs of the mills.