

CHILDHOOD AND LIFE IN COLOMBO

The promise of his greener days

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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’.