

## COURTALLAM

### - THE HEAVENLY ABODE

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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.