

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.