

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.