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## OFFICIAL LANGUAGE CONTROVERSY

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*...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.