

PASSION FOR TAMIL

. . .for still I seem

To love thee more and more.

WORDSWORTH, I Travell'd among Unknown Men

Kalaithanthai was deeply read in Tamil Literature and was passionately interested in Tamil. It is astonishing that he could find time for Tamil studies in spite of the heavy demands of his business. He cherished the friendship of all Tamil scholars and patronised them like the old Tamil kings.

As a young man, when he was in Ceylon, he had the rare opportunity of learning Tamil under the great Jaffna scholar, Chitkailasa Pillai for three years from 1914 to 1917. That was the period when he came under the spell of Tamil Literature, and his interest never flagged since. He studied many Tamil classics with Chitkailasa Pillai. He never missed an opportunity of enriching his knowledge of Tamil Literature. When Arasan Shanmuganar of Sholavandan, a great Tamil scholar, came on a month's visit to Ceylon and was a guest of the Karumuttu family, young Kalaithanthai had many valuable lessons in Tamil from him. Later when Arasan Shanmuganar was working in the Tamil Sangam in Madurai, Kalaithanthai renewed his association with him and refreshed his Tamil grammar.

“Mahamahopadhyaya” was the highest title in Tamil in those days and there were only two mahamahopadhyayas - Pandithamani Kathiresan Chettiar and U.V. Swaminatha Iyer. Kathiresan Chettiar was from Mahipalanpatti near A. Thekkur. Kalaithanthai had the highest regard for him. Their relationship was like that between Kapilar (the ancient Tamil poet) and Pari (one of the small Tamil chieftains). Kalaithanthai knew the other Mahamahopadhyaya, U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, a man of the

most profound scholarship, a great researcher and a writer, who, by his strenuous efforts, rescued ancient Tamil Sangam works from oblivion. Another great Tamil scholar that Kalaithanthai liked was V.O.Chidamabaranar who had written commentaries on some ancient Tamil books. Kalaithanthai was particularly drawn to Dr Somasundara Bharathiar, who was both a lawyer and a great Tamil scholar. He had appeared for some cases for the Sree Meenakshi group of mills while in Tuticorin, and when he settled down in Madurai, Kalaithanthai constantly met him. He would call on Bharathiar every day on his way back from Tirupparankundaram and spend some time with him.

Another scholar he admired was Raya Cho (Raya Chockalingam) who was well versed in both Tamil and European literatures and could profusely quote Tamil poems from memory and give parallel passages from other literatures as well.

2

The word 'yarn' in English can refer to a cotton thread and also to a story. The corresponding Tamil word '*nool*' can refer to a cotton thread and to a book. There is an old Tamil saying that if a person is interested in cotton thread, he will not be interested in books. Kalaithanthai was an exception to the saying. He was as much at home in the world of books as in the world of textiles. He travelled widely in what Keats called "the realms of gold". His intimacy with ancient Tamil Literature was amazing. He always made a close study of the text. He had a very good library, which he constantly updated. He possessed all the books of Sangam literature and all the works on Saiva Siddhanta.

When the libraries of great scholars came up for sale, Kalaithanthai would invariably buy them. Thus he bought the libraries of Pandithamani Kathiresan Chettiar, Professor Ratnaswamy, Professor I.N. Menon, Professor Dastoor and many others. He had personal libraries in Madurai, Kodaikanal and Courtallum. The study is an important part of an Englishman's home as the room for worship is a part of Indian homes. When Englishmen living in Kodaikkanal left India for good, they would sell their houses to Indians and would leave their libraries also to the buyers. Almost the first thing the

Indian buyers would do was to sell the books, as they would not know the value of the books. Kalaithanthai would never miss an opportunity to buy them.

3

During interviews for the selection of English or Tamil teachers of his colleges, he would himself be present along with the Principal and the professor. The interviews would usually be long-drawn-out affairs. Kalaithanthai himself would ask the questions, often to the discomfiture of the candidates, and he himself would give the answers. The ease with which he could draw from the ancient Tamil texts and great English writers would amaze everyone - professors and scholars.

4

Kalaithanthai was never tired of expatiating on the richness of Tamil Literature. His enthusiasm was infectious. Many of his friends who had been concerned only with their business, money and family came to be interested in Tamil literature and in Tamil scholars after their contact with Kalaithanthai. He had learnt Tamil from Tamil scholars and wanted that others should appreciate the beauty of Tamil Literature.

Even when overburdened with work, Kalaithanthai found time to meet Tamil savants. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than literary discussions with them. He spent a few hours every day reading Tamil poems. Tamil scholars too enjoyed reading the poems with him and they were always struck by his taste and perception. He was alive to the nuances and subtleties in the poems.

He did not stop with studying Tamil literature himself. He made me also study it. He was particular that his children and grandchildren should get a good exposure to Tamil literature and arranged for them to move with Tamil scholars. During holidays, he took Tamil scholars with him to Kodaikkanal, in order to teach his grandchildren Tamil poems. He wanted the workers' families too to learn and appreciate Tamil literature. He planned to teach *Tirukkural* and *Tiruvacakam* to the workers and their children. And the supervisors he chose for the workers' colony were Tamil scholars with a deep knowledge of Saiva Siddhanta, like Kalyanam Pillai, M.R.P. Shanmugasundaram, and

K. Ramalinganar.

Kalaithanthai would not bear any criticism of Tamil traditions. Once Tirikuta Sundaram Pillai expressed the view that it was wrong of Kannagi to have burnt Madurai. Kalaithanthai joined issue with him, and published a reply in *Tamil Nadu*, condemning his statement.

5

One Tamil book that filled his whole being was *Tiruvacakam*. He had the firm conviction that in religious content, in spiritual wealth and in literary excellence, it surpassed every other book. So great was his devotion to the book, that he called one of his sons Manickavasagam, after the author of *Tiruvacakam*. It was at his instance that I chose to work on *Tiruvacakam* for my Ph.D. degree. When K.M. Balasubramaniam was the editor of *Tamil Nadu*, Kalaithanthai used to compare notes on the book with him. Later Balasubramaniam translated *Tiruvacakam* into English. Kalaithanthai knew the whole of *Tiruvacakam* by heart and recited verses from it every day. Even on his last day, he recited the verses.

Another book he threw his heart into was *Tirukkural*. He would often discuss the book with scholars. He would maintain that there was no other book equal to it in teaching ethics, statecraft, worldliness and love. Political wisdom, which one rarely came across in Plato and Aristotle, could be found in abundance in *Tirukkural*. Not only was he well read in the book, but he lived the precepts contained therein. Rajaji's translation of *Tirukkural* in English was released by Kalaithanthai at a function in Madurai Tiruvalluvar Kazhagam.

6

It was a turning point in the resurgence of Tamil studies in Madurai when Kalaithanthai brought Avvai S.Duraisami Pillai as a professor in the Thiagarajar College. By taking great Tamil scholars to serve on the faculty in the college, Kalaithanthai

enabled the Madurai Tiruvalluvar Kazhagam to have regular meetings and to organize lecture series. Arignar Annadurai once said that Kalaithanthai had organized another Tamil Sangam in his college, which was true.

Kalaithanthai loved *Tolkappiam*, which, he said, ‘laid down the principles of not only Tamil grammar but also of living’ and ‘was a unique work’. He studied *Tolkappiam* under Chitkailasam Pillai and Arasan Shanmuganar. When Dr Ilakkuvanar was working on *Tolkappiam* for his Ph.D. thesis, Kalaithanthai studied the book in depth. He financed the publication of the thesis in book form.

7

Kalaithanthai loved other Tamil books also. He particularly admired *Silappathikaram* and *Kamba Ramayanam* for the beauty of their language. He had memorised many poems of the Sangam period, like *Nedunalvadai*, *Kurinjippattu*, *Kalithogai* and *Tirumurugatrupadai*. According to him, it is a unique distinction of Tamil that there has been a continuous tradition of writings expounding the Ultimate Truth and stirring the emotions. *Tiruvacakam*, *Thevaram* and *Tiruvaimozhi*— what other language can boast of such collections of songs — songs that could move even the hardest-hearted, and remove the dross in them? And Sangam literature—is there any aspect of life that has not been touched by the great Sangam poets? Kalaithanthai loved nothing better than quoting from those poets. Before giving any lecture, he would himself choose appropriate passages to quote from the poems in order to emphasize his points. He would consult scholars to confirm their aptness.

8

Only scholars who had mastered ancient Tamil literature could find a place in Kalaithanthai’s literary coterie. Avvai S.Duraisamy Pillai was the foremost among these. Another was Varada Nanjiah Pillai who used to call himself the court poet of the Karumuttu house. In his old age, he spent six years with Kalaithanthai, who celebrated his Diamond Jubilee in Madurai and Salem. He was deeply read in Tamil literature and

grammar, Saivaite philosophy and astrology. Kalaithanthai had the highest regard for him.

9

Kalaithanthai was as meticulous in composing a letter as in preparing a speech or writing an article. He brought to it an analytical frame of mind and a capacity for clear expression. Whether it was a personal or a business letter or a letter to the government, he would spend hours composing it in his mind. He took as much care in writing it as he would a legal document. He would not be satisfied unless it was perfect in every respect. He valued conciseness and clarity in expression. If it were a business letter, he would consult the officers, insisting that they put everything in words. The letter or speech or article would occupy his whole attention, and nothing would distract him until he got it right.

In his speech there was depth of thought and elegance of expression, clarity and perfection. He would substantiate his point with illustrations from great writers. In his language, there would be no meaningless blabber; no unnecessary jokes, no inappropriate epithets, no redundant words. Words came from the depth of the heart. A man of convictions, he always spoke out his mind, not worrying whether his ideas would be acceptable to others.

10

Kalaithanthai's love of Tamil was recognized everywhere. He was the patron of over a hundred organizations devoted to the development of Tamil. He gave valuable suggestions for their proper functioning.

The Tamil Fine Arts Association was started in 1954 to organize World Tamil conferences, and Kalaithanthai was elected its vice-president. He took an active part in the activities of the association, regularly meeting the other office-bearers and offering valuable suggestions.

He had many suggestions for the growth of the Tamil Sangam at Madurai, but

because of internecine hostility among the members of the Managing Committee, nothing could be done. And it was mostly the Tamil faculty of the Thiagarajar College that rendered assistance for the celebration of the golden jubilee of the Sangam.

K.A.P. Viswanathan, the “Sentinel of Tamil” (*Tamizh-kkavalalar*), started a Council of Tamil Poets and Kalaithanthai donated liberally to it and invited the poets to Madurai and honoured them.

A Tamil festival took place in Madurai in 1942. As a member of the reception committee, Kalaithanthai assumed great responsibility. He insisted on prefixing ‘Thiru’ to the names of the addressees in the invitations and, though there was some opposition to it initially, he had his way. He also got Sage Vipulananda to attend the festival. It was the first visit of the sage to Madurai.

As a kind of prelude to the World Tamil Conference, the Tamil Development Council and the State Government organized a Tamil festival in Madurai in 1947. Kalaithanthai participated in it in a big way and made a liberal donation to the council. The secretary of the Tamil Development Council, Kalki R.Krishnamoorthy, was unstinting in his praise of Kalaithanthai’s great love for Tamil.

The Second World Tamil Conference was held in Madras when C.N.Annadurai was Chief Minister. Kalaithanthai contributed liberally to the conference and honoured all the delegates who visited Madurai.

11

After the Pachaiappa’s College in Madras and the Annamalai University, it was the Thiagarajar College that started the postgraduate course in Tamil. It produced many good Tamil scholars who made a name as public speakers and writers. Now the Tamil department in the college is a recognized research centre. Students from Mauritius, Malaysia and Singapore come here to study Tamil.

Kalaithanthai wanted very much to start a college exclusively for Tamil Studies. There was the Ganesar Tamil College at Melai Sivapuri run by the local Sanmarga

Sangam. The intake of students went down and the college could not function. Kalaithanthai offered to take over the college and shift it to Madurai. He said that there was no future for such colleges in small towns. There were precedents for the shifting of colleges from one place to another. St. Joseph's College at Trichy was originally at Nagappattinam. But the founders of the college were not interested. Kalaithanthai's desire remained unfulfilled.

12

Nowadays the State government organizes functions to commemorate poets. It was Kalaithanthai who was the forerunner in this. The Thiagarajar College was started in 1949. The very next year Kalaithanthai made arrangements for the celebration of a 'poet's festival' (*Pulavar Vizha*). A poet was chosen and students from the university area were invited to submit papers on the poet and a prize was given to the best paper. That was the first research paper competition in Tamil among colleges before the postgraduate course in Tamil was started in the southern districts. The festival became an annual feature. So far over fifty such festivals have taken place and great Tamil savants have given lectures on the poets.

13

Kalaithanthai had an innate affection for Tamil scholars. When he learnt that Thiru Vi.Ka. was ill, he hastened to send him a monthly stipend and forwarded the first cheque. Hesitant to accept any such help, Thiru Vi.Ka. politely declined and sent it back. Dr A.M.Paramasivanandam served the Thiagarajar College only for ten months, but he gratefully remembered his stay in Madurai. His association with Kalaithanthai was a turning point in his life, he said.

Professor Ilakkuvanar had been working in a college in Virudhunagar and had lost his job. He wanted to join the Thiagarajar College. Kalaithanthai was warned that he might, knowingly or unknowingly, create an embarrassing situation for the management with the government. Kalaithanthai took him on the staff. He saw in him only a Tamil

scholar in need of help. He advanced him money when he wanted to build a house at Tirunagar. Ilakkuvanar was grateful and called his house 'Karumuttu Illam'.

Father Heras was a Spanish monk and he came to Tamil Nadu to carry on research on the Dravidian civilization. He established the antiquity of Dravidian culture, which, he showed, had been prevalent in the Mediterranean countries. He called himself a Dravidian from Spain. In 1955, Kalaithanthai went to Madras to meet him. He was told that the Father was in Madurai and ill. Kalaithanthai immediately contacted his office and arranged to admit the Father in the Christian Mission Hospital. Later he made all arrangements for him to get back to Spain. The Jesuits Society in Bombay was grateful to him

When a Czechoslovakian Tamil scholar visited Tamil Nadu, Kalaithanthai invited him to Madurai and honoured him.

Kalaithanthai fully supported Maraimalai Adigal in his efforts to start a 'pure' Tamil movement. He also supported the activities of Devaneyya Pavanar who was following in the footsteps of Adigalar. When the Madurai Writers' Guild presented Pavanar with a purse to enable him to publish his books, Kalaithanthai made a substantial contribution.

It is an incontrovertible fact that Kalaithanthai played an important part in the development of Tamil in the twentieth century.