

PUBLIC SPIRIT

... to the public good

Private respects must yield.

Milton, Samson Agonistes

Kalaithanthai was an industrialist *par excellence*, having worked his way to the top by dint of hard work and perseverance. But his thoughts went beyond his own private interests. From his early days, he had interested himself in public service. In Ceylon, he took up the cause of the Indian plantation workers and strove hard for the mitigation of their suffering. The main motive-force for his desire to start a textile mill was his concern for the Harvey Mill workers who had lost their jobs after a strike. By starting textile mills, he made his own contribution to the industrial development of the country. From the profits from business, he established several charitable trusts and started several educational institutions under them, which disseminated knowledge to the less fortunate sections of society. He was a nationalist and joined the Indian National Congress and actively took part in its activities in the beginning. After Independence, he took active interest in the goings-on in the different fields. He thought of the country at large, of Tamil Nadu, of Tamil language and Tamil culture. He had answers to most of the problems of the country and did not miss any opportunity to go public with them. And he articulated his views fearlessly. What he said was not always palatable to the authorities, who tended to ignore them. That did not deter him.

2

Prohibition was an article of faith with Gandhiji and the Congress party under him. The Congress party wanted total prohibition to be introduced in free India. Kalaithanthai was opposed to prohibition. He wrote several letters to Gandhiji on it. He felt it would be an unwise step, which was sure to 'cripple India's finances without conferring any

commensurate benefit'. Total prohibition had been tried in other countries and given up as being impossible of enforcement. His point was that the government should try to bring about temperance through propaganda. One of his letters to Gandhiji is given in Appendix 6. One might not agree with some of his arguments but the fact remains that the few States, including Tamil Nadu, which had introduced total prohibition and had set up the necessary machinery to enforce it, have had to relax it or give it up.

We saw how Kalaithanthai was strongly opposed to the imposition of Hindi and how he used different fora for making his views known. He wrote open letters to Rajaji and other leaders. He had the letters printed and distributed throughout the land. He was widely misunderstood. Yet, it is a fact that Rajaji who had introduced compulsory Hindi in schools as Chief Minister came to oppose it later and carry on a crusade for the retention of English as the official language.

It was Kalaithanthai's interest in Tamil and his desire to prevent Tamil being debased that led him to start *Tamil Nadu*, and run it against heavy odds for 22 years. It cannot be denied that he brought about a remarkable change in the Tamil newspapers - in their language and get-up.

3

It is now rare to see people who hold fast to principles in the face of opposition, obstacles and impediment. Engaged in the struggle for life, one hardly remembers one's principles or ideals. Principles are often thrown to the winds for other considerations.

Kalaithanthai was of a different mettle. He never compromised on principles. He never failed to fight against injustice. When governmental action was against industry, he went to court seeking justice. The entire industry benefited.

4

He never remained indifferent where public welfare was concerned. He wanted public institutions meant for the good of the people to be started and run properly. For

example, he was very happy when the government decided to start an agricultural college in Madurai. He visualized an agricultural college flourishing amidst green fields. He offered 400 acres of his own land at Uchappatti for the college. But the government did not accept it and started the college on a dry stretch of land at the foot of the Yanaimalai. They did not pay heed to Kalaithanthai's argument that the place was not suitable for an agricultural college because of the radiation from the hillock.

The same thing happened when the Madurai University (now, Madurai-Kamaraj University) was formed. In Kalaithanthai's view the University should be located in a place full of natural beauty. An area on the banks of the Vaigai in Sholavandan seemed ideal to him. Kalaithanthai took the three-member committee appointed to examine different locations to the place and pointed out its distinct advantages. But again, the government chose to start the university at the foot of the Nagamalai hills.

5

When renovation work was done in the Sri Meenakshi Temple in 1963, P.T.Rajan was the chairman of the renovation committee. He approached Kalaithanthai for a generous donation. Kalaithanthai offered to have the renovation of one of the towers done lavishly at his own cost by his own men and in keeping with traditional architectural principles. P.T.Rajan did not agree. He said that Kalaithanthai might be an authority on textiles but must leave the renovation work to others. Kalaithanthai followed the renovation work carefully and was disappointed with the slipshod manner in which it was being done. He objected to the bright colors that were being used for the *gopurams*. He did not also approve of the renovation committee passing over the *Thiruppani* carried out by the Vainagaram family of Amaravati Pudur. The family had completed the Northern Tower three hundred years ago and this was not mentioned in the slab fixed at the foot of the tower during the renovation.

To the last, Kalaithanthai concerned himself with the welfare of Tamil Nadu and its people. He carried on a crusade for it. Sometimes he succeeded, sometimes he did not.