

SERVICE TO EDUCATION

...For his bounty

There was no winter in 't; an autumn 'twas

That grew the more by reaping

SHAKESPEARE, Antony and Cleopatra

“Earn the means first — God surety will contrive

Use for our earning.”

These two verses from Robert Browning seem specially true of Kalaithanthai. By the time India became independent, Kalaithanthai had put behind all his sufferings and was making a huge fortune. The patriot that he was, he hit upon a way of contributing to the building-up of a new India. *Nagarathars* have been great philanthropists, but by and large, they spent their money on temples — constructing new temples and renovating old ones. Some of them, of course, turned to education. Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar, for example, started Sree Meenakshi College in Chidambaram in 1920, which later blossomed into the Annamalai University. Dr Alagappa Chettiar started a group of colleges in Karaikkudi.

The idea of starting educational institutions or temples of learning, as he always called them, took hold of Kalaithanthai very early in his life, even as he was struggling to establish himself in business. During most of 1932 and 1933, those years when he was facing crisis after crisis, business took him often to Bombay and Calcutta. During one of his trips to Calcutta, he had a chance to visit Santiniketan, founded by the poet, Rabindranath Tagore. He also met Tagore. As he went round Viswabharathi University,

Tagore's dream-child, Kalaithanthai felt inspired. He came back from Santiniketan with his mind full of ideas. He had decided how he was going to use the millions he was sure he would earn one day.

2

To translate his views into action, Kalaithanthai started many trusts as charities. He bought properties in their name. The first trust was the Thiagarajar Endowment, started in 1944. It had shares in many mills. The second was formed in 1948 - Thiagarajar *dharma vanigam* - Thiagarajar Business Charities. Kalaithanthai ensured that the income from this business should be spent only on charitable acts like education. The third was the Thiagarajar College Endowment Trust started in 1951. The fourth was registered in 1962 as the Thiagarajar Charities. The fifth was the Thiagarajar Educational Trust intended to meet the expenses of the Polytechnic and Management School. He formed a separate trust for the welfare of children.

3

Thiagarajar Arts College

The Thiagarajar College was the first institution of higher learning that Kalaithanthai started. Kalaithanthai bought the Sethupathi Palace on the banks of the river Vaigai for housing the college and constructed additional buildings. He chose the building for the beautiful Mariamman Teppakulam it overlooks. The College started functioning on 7-7-1949. It was formally inaugurated at a colourful function by H.E. Bhavanagar Maharajah, the Governor of Madras on October 12, 1949. The first principal was C.D.S. Chetty who had been Registrar of Andhra University. Dr I.N. Menon, of the Cochin royal family, who had studied Philosophy in Oxford and had been Director of Higher Education, succeeded him.

In his welcome address to the Governor at the inauguration (vide *Appendix 4*), Kalaithanthai described the college as 'a small and humble endeavour' on his part to provide proper educational facilities to the country's youth. As Kalaithanthai conceived it, the College was to be the nucleus of a Tamil University, on the lines of Oxford and

Cambridge, which would recapture the glory of Madurai with its ancient Sangams. It was to be a centre of teaching and research in the Humanities with a special emphasis on the ancient literature and culture of Tamil Nadu. When he chose the location, he visualized colleges springing up all round the magnificent Teppakkulam.

Initially, the College offered only Humanities subjects at the graduate level, science subjects being confined to the Intermediate level. It kept this up for the first six years, starting courses like Philosophy, Psychology, and Geography, subjects that had been discontinued in other colleges 'for lack of demand'. Kalaithanthai wanted to make the institution a unique one, not just one more college. The college offered Sanskrit as a Second Language. Geography was offered in only one other college in the entire State — the Presidency College in Madras.

Kalaithanthai's aim was to make it every way the best college. He selected people of outstanding merit to serve on the faculty. He offered higher scales of pay than were prevalent then. He built up a fine library. Even though science subjects were offered only at the Intermediate level, the laboratories had very advanced equipment. A well-equipped museum was built in the Zoology Department and it is even now the pride of the college. Beautifully terraced and with beautiful lawns and ponds, the campus was highly inspiring.

The very next year, Kalaithanthai wanted to introduce the three years' Honours Course, but the Madras University did not think much of the colleges outside Madras and Trichy and did not want to 'dilute' the standards. It required all Kalaithanthai's efforts to persuade the University to send a Commission to inspect the colleges in Madurai. The Commission was satisfied with the infrastructure in the colleges in Madurai and recommended the starting of a University Study Centre in Madurai. The Study Centre came into being in 1957, paving the way for the creation of the Madurai University. Post-Graduate courses were started in *1958*. Thus within ten years of its inception, the College became a post-graduate institution, offering postgraduate courses in Tamil, Economics and Zoology to begin with. Soon, it started PG programmes in other subjects

like Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Botany. In 1961, PG course in English Language and Literature was introduced — a real triumph for the college. Kalaithanthai had an Oxonian to head the English department.

Kalaithanthai visualized a Tamil University in Madurai. With several distinguished Tamil scholars like Avvai S. Duraisamy Pillai, A.K. Paranthaman, and A.M. Paramasivanandam on its staff, the College soon came to be recognized as a centre of Tamil learning. It played a part in the resurgence of Tamil in the fifties and sixties.

In the five decades of its existence, the College has grown steadily and is now one of the premier institutions affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University. It offers 11 UG and 8 PG Courses. It also offers M.Phil. Programme in several subjects. It became 'Autonomous' in 1987 according to a policy of the UGC to allow institutions of proven excellence to devise their own courses of study, to plan the curriculum and to conduct their own examinations. Since then the College has grown by leaps and bounds. Autonomy has given a new dynamism to the staff and students, which is reflected in the innovative courses they have devised. In keeping with the changing academic perceptions, the college has introduced a number of vocational as well as job-oriented courses. Several departments are recognized for research and take scholars for doctoral and post-doctoral work. In 2002 the NAAC awarded the College the Five Star Status. The day is not far off when it will graduate into a Deemed University, thus fulfilling at least a part of Kalaithanthai's dream.

4

Thiagarajar College of Preceptors

In 1956, seven years after starting the arts college, Kalaithanthai founded the Thiagarajar College of Preceptors. It was the first teacher training college to be started in the district. It is on the western banks of the Mariamman Teppakkulam. Kalaithanthai had ambitious plans for the college. He wanted to expand it into a Post-Graduate college of Education and also establish a separate training college for women. But he could not

realize his dream for lack of sufficient space for expansion. A premier teacher training institution, the college has been selected by NCERT to do some of its projects.

5

Thiagarajar Model High School

Kalaithanthai started the Thiagarajar Model High School on the southern banks of the Teppakkulam, as an adjunct to the Preceptors' College. The school was intended to provide the training ground for the students of the Preceptors' College.

6

Thiagarajar College of Engineering

An Engineering College had been long in Kalaithanthai's mind. Late in 1956, the Indian Council of Technical Education (now, AICTE), which was the Authority to sanction new engineering colleges, informed Kalaithanthai that the Council was meeting in two days' time and suggested that he send in a formal application. The application was approved and the College was started in 1957 with the Preprofessional Course, on the premises of the Thiagarajar Arts College. It moved to its own beautiful campus at 'Tirupparankundram the next year.

Kalaithanthai examined the hillock near Tirupparankundram several times from several angles with his officers before choosing the present site. Some of the civil engineers he consulted discouraged him, declaring that it would not be feasible to put up buildings on the slopes. Kalaithanthai was sure of himself and he constructed beautiful buildings with several tiers depending upon the elevation of the land. Spread out over a total land area of 56 hectares with the towering Tirupparankundram hill in the background and with its imposing buildings, the Engineering College stands as a great monument to Kalaithanthai's aesthetic taste and knowledge of architecture.

When it started, the college had or its rolls 120 students and offered the B.E. Course in three Branches — Civil, Mechanical and Electrical Engineering. And its progress in four decades has been truly tremendous. It has now 10 graduate programmes

and 10 Post-graduate programmes, including M.Sc. Applied Sciences and M.C.A. It offers both full-time and part-time programmes. All the departments specialize in research projects, which they take up in collaboration with industry. The college has MOU with national and international companies like SISCO, IBM, Sterling Infotech and National Instruments. It has the greatest number of IBM Certificate holders. It has close association with the Carnegie University in New York. Honeywell, a multi-national company engaged in software development programmes in instrumentation, has a centre in the college. It trains the students and in turn its recruits are taught by the teachers in the college. The college had entered into an MOU with DRDL, Hyderabad, for on-line research projects – at least 10 projects are on. It had own NBA award.

On the whole, with its band of dedicated and enthusiastic teachers, the College is surging forward to scale new heights in the new millennium.

7

Thiagarajar School of Management

Kalaithanthai had wonderful foresight. He knew that Management Studies would assume great importance and started the School of Management in 1961, the first of its kind outside Madras. It conducted part-time diploma courses in Industrial Management and Business Administration and was a godsend for the industrial personnel in the area. Later it moved to its own building. Now it offers a two-year M.B.A. course – full time and part time.

8

The Thiagarajar Polytechnic, Salem

The institute was started in 1958 and offers certificate courses in civil engineering, electrical engineering and mechanical engineering. Textile technology was introduced in 1959. One of the foremost polytechnics in Tamil Nadu, the institute has blossomed into the Sona College of Technology.

Primary Schools

Kalaithanthai founded many primary schools too. Even here one could see his stamp. To give just one example, he thought of teaching some craft to the children in the schools run on the Meenakshi Mills premises. In 1940 he appointed a qualified hand to teach the children the making of hand-made paper.

10

Kalaithanthai was keen on founding a university in Madurai. He said, “I will consider no sacrifice too great to have a university established in Madurai.” He wrote to C.Subraminam, M. Bhaktavatsalam and K. Kamaraj expressing his wish. But the government’s policy in those days was that private individuals should not be encouraged to establish universities. But Kalaitlianthai spared no pains in getting a University for Madurai.

The Tamil Nadu government has been paying the schoolteachers’ salary directly since 1963. Earlier, the school managements were paying the salary getting a little grant from the government. Many schools were not able to carry on. Kalaithanthai offered to take over any such school. It was thus that the Konapattu Saraswathi High School came under the trust.

Kalaithanthai spent over sixty million rupees on the educational institutions. In addition he bought several properties and made several investments in the name of the trusts. These institutions have added to the glory of the man. It has to be mentioned that he spent his own money and never took donations from anybody and even now his institutions never accept donations. Kalaithanthai did not start the institutions to get favours from the government or to make money. Actually, he gave the staff higher salaries than the prevailing government scales. He offered free education before it became a political slogan.