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# SIKKAL SINGARAVELAR TEMPLE

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*Much to cast down, much to build, much to restore*

T.S.ELIOT, Choruses from 'The Rock'

It was in 1920 that the K arumuttu family took up the renovation work of the Singaravelar temple at Sikkal. Though Kalithanthai was not directly involved in the work, it deserves a separate chapter, as it gives us a glimpse into the devotion of the family to public work.

In taking up the renovation work, the family was only following the *nagarathar* tradition. After the ancient Tamil kings, it was the *nagarathars* who had been in the forefront in preserving our temples. In the pre-industrial times, life in the community centred round the temples. 'Don't live in a town that has no temples,' says an old Tamil maxim. Thousands of temples are scattered all over Tamil Nadu. Most of these temples had been built by the ancient Tamil kings and chieftains at different times. With the passage of time and with foreign invasions, many of the temples were neglected and tended to fall into ruins. According to the *agama sastras*, the temples should be periodically renovated and consecrated. The *nagarathars* took it upon themselves to do the renovation. They developed their own style of architecture and rebuilt the old temples. They selected Siva temples celebrated in the devotional songs of the *Saivaite* saints and took up the reconstruction work with dedication. The beautiful *mandapam* with the sculptured pillars in the Sundareswarar *sannidhi* in the Sri Meenakshi Temple at Madurai was built by Vainagaram Nagappa Chettiar and his brother some three hundred years ago.

Sikkal is close to Nagappattinam in the old Tanjore district where the Karumuttu family had their business. The word *chetty* in Tamil refers to Lord Muruga, and as members of the *chettiar* community, the Karumuttu brothers undertook the renovation work of the Singaravelar temple at Sikkal as it was close to their place of business.

According to *Kanda Puranarn*, Lord Muruga was born to rid the world of Surapaduman, a demon king, who had been terrorizing all the three worlds. According to the story, Muruga's mother, Parasakthi gave her son a spear (*Vel*) for killing the demon. And it was in Sikkal that Muruga received the *Vel*.

The Singaravelar temple is part of the Siva temple at Sikkal and it stands on an artificial hillock. It was built by the Chola king, Kocchengotcholan in the fourth century A.D. The construction seems to have taken thirty-five years. Later kings who ruled from Tanjore, notably the Nayaks, seem to have made endowments to the temple. It is a temple that has been sung by Tirugnanasambandar and Saint Chidambaranar of Kanchi. The name of the god is *Navaneetheshwarar* and the goddess is *Velnedumkannal*. Sikkal is known as an abode of Lord Muruga, and He is here with his two consorts, Valli and Deivanai, and with a *Vel* in his hand. There is a festival here connected with the giving of the *Vel* to Lord Muruga (*Vel vaangudal*) by Parasakti. What happens during the festival is beyond our comprehension, and one might not believe it "without the sensible and true avouch" of one's own eye. At the time when the son rushes to his mother to receive the *Vel*, beads of perspiration can be seen on the idol of Singaravelar. We can only say with Hamlet,

*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than arc dreamt of in your philosophy.*

The renovation work undertaken by the Karumuttu family took ten years from 1920 to 1930. Kalaithanthai did not take active part in the work. It was his second brother Karumunu Alagappa Chettiar who supervised the work and completed it to everyone's admiration. The family spent a million rupees on it, which will easily be equivalent to a hundred million today. The floor was paved with Italian marble. The chief tower has seven tiers and has a majestic appearance. The family also made gold mounts (*vahanas*) for the idols. These were the admiration of the foreign delegates of the Second World Tamil Conference at Madras, some of whom were keen to take them to their country to be exhibited at cultural festivals.

During the festivals, music concerts would be conducted on a grand scale. For such concerts and for celebrating marriages, Alagappa Chettiar constructed a permanent hall with iron pillars. This did not satisfy the aesthetic taste of Kalaithanthai, who, in a lighter vein, ascribed the not-so-good construction to Alagappa Chettiar's fear of the evil eye.

There are statues of Karumuttu Alagappa Chettiar and his wife in the temple.

Kalaithanthai tried in 1946 to get back the hereditary trusteeship of the temple and rebuild it but did not succeed. However, God's blessings have no limit. The Karumuttu family have been able to participate in the periodic renovation of the temple. And now, in 2003, my son, Karumuttu T Kannan, along with Alagappa Chettiar's grandson, Sri Murugappan, has undertaken the renovation of the temple.

Perhaps it was the family's devotion to Lord Muruga and their successful renovation of the temple at Sikkal that got me the position as the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Palani Dhandayuthapani temple. My son T. Kannan too has been equally blessed: he has been Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Tirupparankundram Subramanyaswamy temple twice in the last decade.