

THE ARCHITECT OF TODAY'S MADURAI

Remember I have done thee worthy service

SHAKESPEARE, *The Tempest*

Madurai is a very ancient city with a glorious history. Historians refer to it as India's Athens. Under the Pandya kings in the Sangam period it was a centre of learning. The last Tamil Sangam flourished here and the kings patronized learning. It was culturally advanced. Sangam literature gives us the picture of a high civilization. *Silappathikaram* presents a glorious picture of life in those days. After the Sangam period there was a decline. The city regained some of its glory under Thirumalai Naicker but that was only for a brief period.

1

When Kalaithanthai came to start his industry, Madurai was very backward. It was lacking in all the facilities that could make it modern. There was no industry worth speaking of, not many educational institutions, no telecommunication links, and not much transport. Madurai remained a Temple City enclosed within the four *Veli* (outer) streets.

Now the picture is different. Madurai has advanced in all respects. The credit for this must go to Kalaithanthai Karumuttu Thiagarasa Chettiar.

2

Industrial growth is indispensable for the development of a place. Before the advent of Kalaithanthai on the scene, the only industrial unit in Madurai was A & F Harvey Mills (later, Madura Mills and now, Madura Coats) in Madurai. But even that

had most of its factories outside Madurai - in Tuticorin and Ambasamudram. The owners of the Mills were foreigners, not very much interested in the development of Madurai. Madura Mills diversified but they preferred to start their new industries in other States. Even the headquarters of Madura Coats has been shifted to Bangalore now.

Kalaithanthai loved Madurai and did everything in his power to put it on the industrial map of India. Wherever we turn in Madurai, we find his mills or mills started by his friends, relatives and workers. How many thousands of families have benefited from them! And how many cotton farmers there are in Madurai and adjoining districts, who grow cotton required for these mills!

3

In the field of education Madurai was far behind Trichy. There were only two arts and science colleges— The Madura College and The American College. Raja Annamalai Chettiar's efforts to start a college in Madurai did not come to fruition. The Tamil Sangam, started in 1901, was not very active.

Today Madurai has a great university. By starting an arts college, an engineering college, a teacher-training college and a school of management, Kalaithanthai created more than a mere nucleus for a University. He wanted to start a university on the banks of the Vaigai near the Teppakulam on the model of the Cambridge University, but the government would not allow private universities.

4

In the field of banking, an indispensable concomitant of industry, it was Kalaithanthai who single-handedly put Madurai on the financial map of India. As a matter of fact, there were very few large-scale banks founded or run by South Indians. The one substantial exception was the Indian Bank, which had been founded by Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar. On the other hand, in the north, there were several banks promoted by Marwaris and Gujarathis who were business magnates also. Kalaithanthai founded a bank because he wanted a financial institution that would minister to the needs of the people here. He started the Bank of Madura and built it up by his own efforts.

Under him it rose to very great heights and now it has merged with the ICICI and has immortalized Madurai in the business world. If he had been alive he would not have allowed the Head Office of the bank to be shifted from Madurai. And he would not have let it lose its identity.

When the Bank of Madura started several branches in Madurai, other leading banks had to follow.

Kalaithanthai started a General Insurance Company in Madurai against the same background, and for the same reasons. It served the purpose very well but it also lost its individuality when it was nationalized along with other such companies.

5

Kalaithanthai also ventured into journalism, starting a Tamil daily, named *Tamil Nadu*, in Madurai. Kalaithanthai's one aim was to enhance the use of 'pure' literary Tamil in journalism and thereby check the debasement of the language. It was a successful venture and at one stage 30,000 copies were sold daily. This inspired Ramnath Goenka to start the Madurai edition of the *Dinamani* and *The Indian Express*.

The Madras Mail, published from Madras by the Amalgamations completed 100 years and the Amalgamations wanted Kalaithanthai to buy it along with P.Orr. & Sons. Kalaithanthai was not keen. *The Madras Mail* could not sustain itself in the face of competition from *The Indian Express* and *The Hindu*, though it managed to carry on till 1981. At about this time, the management of *The Hindu* bought their own plane and supplied their paper to the southern districts early in the morning and offset the competition from *The Indian Express*. Later they planned to publish *The Hindu* from Madurai also. They had their eye on *Tamil Nadu*. They calculated that it would be economical if they published a Tamil daily along with *The Hindu*. They approached Kalaithanthai and talks were initiated. The talks could not make much headway, as the management of *The Hindu* were not agreeable to the conditions laid down by Kalaithanthai and the principles he insisted on. Subsequently, *The Hindu* started publishing a facsimile edition simultaneously from Madurai and Madras. Later many

dailies came to be published from Madurai. The credit for this must go to Kalaithanthai, as his entry into the world of journalism was responsible for the competition.

6

Though Madura Mills had been in Madurai for over 50 years, they never thought of having telephone facilities. The first person in Madurai to have a telephone was Kalaithanthai (Phone No.1). He was instrumental in the installation of a telephone exchange in Madurai. He was also the first to have a post box in the Head Post Office in Madurai with Post Box No.1 as his address.

He very much wanted to beautify the banks of the Vaigai. When he started the Thiagarajar Arts College, he chose the banks of the Vaigai because he wanted it to become a university like the Cambridge University on the banks of the Cam. He asked the government to hand over the maintenance of the Teppakulam to him but the government would not.

By his success in different fields, Kalaithanthai changed the face of Madurai. He can well be called the architect of present day Madurai.