

# THE KARUMUTTU FAMILY

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*The glorious worth of my descent*

SHAKESPEARE, Richard II

**K**alaithanthai Karumuttu Thiagaraja Chettiar came of an affluent family of *nagarathars*, or Nattukkottai Chettiars, as they are generally known. The *nagarathars* are a close-knit business community, concentrated in ninety-six villages around Kunnakkudi in Ramanathapuram district in Tamil Nadu. They have a history going back three thousand years. There is historical evidence to show that they had once lived in modern Nagaland and in Mohenjo Daro. They appear to have migrated south and been a flourishing community in Thondainadu (modern Kancheepuram and its surroundings) and Poompuhar in the Sangam period. Around 700 A.D. they seemed to have come down further south and made their home in Ramanathapuram. The area they settled in came to be known as Chettinad.

The *nagarathars* have always been a prosperous community and have occupied a very high place in the social scale. They went abroad to seek their fortune, carrying on their business in Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka), Burma (Myanmar), Malaysia and Singapore. They were successful and made big fortunes. But wherever they have been, they have preserved their identity. Even now we can see the community prospering in Malaysia and Singapore. Back home they built huge mansions in their villages and the Chettinad architecture that developed is a marvel. *Nagarathars* have been known for their frugality, but they have been great philanthropists as well. They are deeply religious and their life is closely bound with temples, which are an essential part of Hindu religion

and Tamil culture. In the olden days, kings looked after their construction and maintenance. In the modern days, it has been mainly the *nagarathars* who have taken it upon themselves to preserve these symbols of our culture. They are Saivaites, and it is their custom to set apart a portion of their earnings for Lord Siva and use the money for constructing new temples and renovating old ones. In this way, they have played a crucial role in preserving our religious and cultural heritage. They started and maintained several Veda patasalas, traditional residential schools for teaching the Hindu scriptures.

## 2

The ancestral home of the Karumuttu family is Karungulam, a small village on the outskirts of Pattamangalam in the old Ramanathapuram district. One of the ninety-six villages or small towns that have been the traditional homes of *Nagarathars*, Pattamangalam is sacred to Lord Siva, who is worshipped there as Dakshinamoorthy, the Universal Teacher. In the form of Dakshinamoorthy, the lord sits in an informal pose, with one hand raised in a gesture of explanation. The place is celebrated in Manickavasagar's *Tiruvacakam* as Pattamangai. Kalaithanthai's forebears lived in Karungulam, and, in Athikkadu Thekkur, to which they moved later, they are even now referred to as '*Karungulathars*'.

The Karumuttu family moved to Athikkadu Thekkur in the second half of the nineteenth century, but they have kept up their connection with their old ancestral place. They visit Karungulam at Least once a year, generally around Mahasivarathri, and offer worship at the shrine of their family deity, Thottiathu Karuppar at Kathapattu, close to Karungulam. It is their custom to conduct the tonsure and cradle ceremony for newborn children at the shrine. They offer this deity *ghee* made from the first milk obtained from their cows after the birth of a calf. They periodically set aside money for the temple, which they take with them when they go to worship there. They regularly make vows to the family deity and fulfil them. They make it a point to worship at the shrine on

important occasions - before functions in the family, before going abroad, when starting any new business and particularly on Sivarathri days.

It is these customs that preserve the family's link to their ancestral home.

The Karumuttu family deity, Thottiyathu Karuppar, is also known as "Malayalathu Thottian", Thottiam being a place in Kerala. Karuppan, Muthukaruppan and Karuppiyah are common names in the families here.

Kalaithanthai's grandfather was Karuppan Chettiar and father was Muthukaruppan Chettiar. The family name *Karumuttu* is a portmanteau word formed by joining the first parts of the two names - grandfather's and father's.

Muthukaruppan Chettiar's mother was from Athikkadu Thekkur. She died when he was still a child, and Muthukaruppan Chettiar stayed back at Thekkur with his maternal uncle. Thenceforth, Athikkadu Thekkur became the Karumuttus' home. Athikkadu Thekkur got its name from being south of Athikkadu, a forest abundant in *Athi*, a plant sacred to Lord Siva.

### 3

The *nagarathars*' traditional business is money lending. It used to be said, albeit in jest, that a chettiar's main interest lay in the interest his money would fetch and in making money breed money. Muthukaruppan Chettiar thought differently. He was firm that no member of his family should do money-lending business. Determined to break the tradition, he chose to enter textile business. Those were days when fabrics had mostly to be imported from England. The Karumuttu family imported different types of clothes and sold them in Ceylon and India. They had a shop in Nagapattinam. They had a business house in Colombo, too, known as the "Karumuttu House". Muthukaruppan Chettiar was progressive in his outlook and was a man of high principles. A strict vegetarian himself, he infused vegetarianism in his children. He undertook several projects for the good of the community. He laid the road connecting A.Thekkur with the Madurai highway and attempted to connect Thekkur with Peria Maruthupatti in the south.

Muthukaruppan Chettiar's first wife was Meenakshi Achi. After her death, he married Vinaitheerthal Achi from the Al.A.Al. family of Kandavarayanpatti. She bore him ten children - four sons and six daughters. Kalaithanthai was the youngest. All the children distinguished themselves and brought fame to the family. All of them were full of a reformist spirit and did much to fight many of the social evils prevalent in the community.

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Kalaithanthai's eldest brother was Karumuttu Arunachalam Chettiar. He possessed great business acumen. He had a deep interest in architecture. He was very knowledgeable about textiles; by merely looking at a fabric he could tell the quality of the yarn used, its count and weight. He was an expert in assessing the quality of diamonds too. He looked after the family business at Colombo.

The second brother was Karumuttu Alagappa Chettiar. He passionately loved Tamil and Tamil Literature and patronized Tamil poets and scholars. He was the founder- president of the Melai Sivapuri Divine Life Society. He was in charge of the temple renovation undertaken by the family at Sikkal. He was interested in social reform and set himself to rid the community of certain bad customs. It seemed to have been the practice in *nagarathar* weddings for an elderly man to tie the *tali*. Thanks to Alagappa Chettiar's persistent campaign, the practice was given up. He also brought about changes in the dress code of the women in the community. They didn't use to wear a blouse or top before. He was a friend of Pandithamani Kathiresan Chettiar, and worked with his brother Chinniah Chettiar to bring about the reforms. He campaigned, unsuccessfully though, against the custom of sacrificing animals at temple festivals. He was a member of the taluk board at Tirpputtur. He laid the road from Thekkur to Kandavarayanpatti.

Ramanathan Chettiar, the third brother left for England in 1904 - the first from the community to go to London. He started a business there in 1908 and, two years later took his two sons with him. The family lost touch with him. He seems to have carried on

business in Europe and America and returned to India around 1940 to settle in Pune. He is said to have supplied the equipment for the commissioning of the first AIR station in the country.

Muthukaruppan Chettiar had six daughters - Nachammai, Meenakshi, Kalyani, Seethai, Kannathal and Unnamalai. Of these, Seethai Achi married into Poolankurichi and the others into Kandavarayanpatti. Seethai Achi's son V.S.Rm. Valliappa Chettiar was a member of the Madras Legislative Council. He, his sister and sister's husband Karumuttu Sivalingam Chettiar were members of the Ramnad District Council. All three were grandchildren of Muthukaruppan Chettiar. It was a rare distinction for any family in those days.

## 5

Kalaithanthai's eldest son, Sundaram Chettiar, graduated in Commerce from Calcutta University and assisted his father in his business. He was the secretary of Sree Meenakshi Mills and correspondent of Thiagarajar College for several years. Very humane in his approach to people, he was loved by workers and students alike. He was deeply interested in Tamil Literature. He was instrumental in starting the Lions Club of Madurai and was its president and later district governor.

Manickavasagam Chettiar, the second son, studied at Loyola College in Madras and got the B.A. degree. Having studied Tamil Literature under Varada Nanjaiah Pillai, he was deeply interested in literary research and wrote several books. His book on *Kambaramayanam* was widely acclaimed. He was secretary of Thiagarajar College and Thiagarajar College of Engineering for many years. He took an active interest in education and was mainly responsible for the introduction of postgraduate courses in colleges outside Madras. He carried on a campaign for abolishing Pre-university courses

at colleges. Kalithanthai made him editor of *Tamil Nadu*, the Tamil daily that he started. He was president of the Madurai-Ramnad Chamber of Commerce and also of the Mill Owners' Association. He was district governor of the Rotary Club.

Of the daughters, Meenakshi Achi married M.S.Chockalingam Chettiar of Poolankurichi. They have three sons and three daughters. Saraswathi Achi married C.S.N.L.Narayanan Chettiar of Kandaramanickam. They have four sons and two daughters. Rukmini Achi married M.Shanmugam Chettiar of Kallal. They have five sons. She was the first woman graduate in the *nagarathar* community. All the three daughters are highly accomplished and cultured.