

THE MAN

He was a man, take him for all in all,

I shall not look upon his like again.

SHAKESPEARE, Hamlet

Kalaithanthai was a unique personality. In the preceding chapters we saw how he distinguished himself in whatever field he ventured into. As a labour leader in Ceylon he worked to alleviate the sufferings of the migrant Indians. Then he opted to become an industrialist and succeeded in building up a textile empire. Courageously he faced the competition from the British rivals in the field. He diversified into banking and journalism and left his stamp on them. A great visionary, he founded institutions of higher learning and helped in the development of the country. A nationalist to the core, he concerned himself with the various problems confronting the country and came up with suggestions for their solution. “Tamil was his life-breath.” and he played a key role in the Renaissance of Tamil. He was a devout Hindu and a true Indian. He was firmly rooted in tradition and was not swayed by Westernization. I shall here insert a few particulars that give us further insights into his personality.

1

Simplicity

The first thing that struck anyone about Kalaithanthai was his simplicity. He disliked publicity and was a model of humility. In assemblies, he never thrust himself forward. He never showed off nor sought respect. Under unavoidable circumstances, because of his concern for the country’s welfare, he would speak out. In this he was as dauntless as the proverbial Nakkirar, who even challenged Lord Siva.

He conducted himself in the same way through ups and downs. He was not haughty when he was prosperous nor demeaned himself when he was in difficulties.

He would not even wait for a lift but climbed the stairs without standing on formality. Once when he was returning from Madras, the assistant who was to meet him at the station did not turn up in time. Kalaithanthai walked the distance from the station.

Similarly when he attended the funeral of Pandithamani Kathiresan Chettiar at Mahibalanpatti, a small village surrounded by river, due to flash floods, cars could not reach the village, as there was no bridge. Kalaithanthai crossed the river in a bullock-cart.

He never had the habit of taking a motorcade with him when he travelled.

2

Equanimity

He had many setbacks in life but he always remained unruffled and faced both success and failure with equanimity. One is reminded of Hamlet's words:

A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards

Hast ta'en with equal thanks.

Once, the textile industry was afflicted with many troubles. Kalaithanthai did not give way to despondency but took efforts to overcome them. His words to a friend who marveled at his equipoise are memorable: "If we take care of the business, the business will take care of us".

The NTC (National Textile Corporation) had been formed in the public sector and there was a rumour that the government was going to nationalize the textile industry and take over all the textile mills. When some friends drew Kalaithanthai's attention to it he only laughed. "If we lose one business, there will be another opening". He had such faith in human effort and divine Grace.

Even in the face of critical moments in business, personal life or family life, Kalaithanthai never lost his cool, was never at a loss, never confused. He would display rare equanimity.

Once while talking to Professor Avvai S. Duraisami Pillai, the profound Tamil scholar and commentator, Kalaithanthai quoted the following lines from Goldsmith.

“Man wants but little here below
Nor wants that little long,”

and pointed to a similar thought in Nakkirar: “We eat but little food, we wear but a little cloth and even this little may slip out of our hands.”

He was always soft-spoken and never lost his temper nor raised his voice.

Dignity, Duty and Discipline were his watchwords. Personality cult, vanity, sycophancy, corrupt political leadership, spineless journals, and newspapers that spread falsehood were his abomination.

3

Dignity of Labour

He knew the value of work. He was ready to take up any work from masonry to gardening. There were occasions when he worked with the labourers.

He was a stickler for perfection and was meticulous about the minutest details. He left his distinctive mark on any work that he undertook. Even when he sent someone to get some flowers he would give a lot of instructions. This set him apart from the rest.

Relationship with Employees

He never tolerated indolence in any of his workers. When he came to know that one of his officers whose house was only a few metres away from the mill always waited for the car to pick him up, he promptly transferred him to another mill.

What he liked in his employees were hard work, diligence, courage and frugality.

In the initial stages, when the mill had only 25 workers, he knew all their family background intimately.

He never failed to recognize merit and reward it. This can be illustrated from the case of Thiru C.V. Rengachari, who was just a clerk in Sree Meenakshi Mills. The mills had been buying cotton from Rathilal & Co of Bombay. C.V.R. discovered while examining the accounts that some of the money sent by Meenakshi Mills had not been credited to the account of the Bombay Company. Thiru C.S.R., to whom he reported the matter, thought he must be mistaken. It was inconceivable that a company of that stature could be guilty of such a lapse. The clerk was sure of his ground and said that the company had not given credit for one lakh rupees. He turned out to be right when the company acknowledged its mistake. Kalaithanthai trebled the clerk's salary.

He never hesitated to support the deserving. And the help he extended was immediate and comprehensive. There was one Thiru Ganapathy Pillai, who was blind but who could compete with the computer in solving problems. Kalaithanthai felt that such a genius should not suffer poverty and arranged to give him an allowance from the Mills throughout his lifetime and also gave some good position in the Mills to his sons.

Attitude to Other Industrialists

Great industrialists, educationists, political leaders and intellectuals considered it a privilege to exchange views with him as he had clear ideas and articulated them in terse

and clear language. Most of them had been his guests enjoying his hospitality. But for himself, he would visit his business friends but would never stay with them, preferring to stay in hotels. He expected his family members and company officials to follow him in this. It was never advisable to stay in the house of persons whose connection, he would say, is only a business one.

6

Appreciation of Originality

Kalaithanthai was quick to appreciate original talent. It is from this that a friendship developed between Kalaithanthai and G.D. Naidu of Coimbatore.

A Japanese company invented a Super Hydraft System in Spinning Ring Frames. Kalaithanthai wrote a letter congratulating the company on the invention and he was the first to install them in India.

A youngman, Balasundaram, who had studied Textile Technology at Sheffield in England and settled in Coimbatore came forward to make textile machinery in India. He had started a company called Textool & Co. Kalaithanthai was happy and encouraged him. He lauded his intelligence and inventiveness. The frames he made had less width than usual and hence required less space for installation. This would bring factory building costs also.

7

Knowledge of Accountancy

Kalaithanthai had not even elementary education in commerce but he could study the balance sheets of the mills and could deduce everything about their working. He would get the balance sheets of all the other well-known mills in India and compare them with that of his mills. And he would ask several questions - How is it that we are paying more interest to the bank? How is it that they have claimed greater depreciation than us? Why did not our auditor do that? Is their machinery older than ours? How has this company paid less electricity charges than we have? Do they have generators? Or do

they get electricity at a concessional rate? He would throw all these questions at his officers.

8

Knowledge of Engineering

When he engaged himself in some activity that required technical knowledge, Kalaithanthai would consult engineering experts and learn about the nature of the machinery, their working, and the difference between one machine and another. He could easily understand technical details.

An engineer in Sree Meenakshi Mills was sacked because he disregarded Kalaithanthai's instructions regarding the installation of some machine. He went to court. His contention was that he was a qualified engineer and his boss, who had no qualification in engineering, could not dictate to him what to do. In his judgment, the judge said that this particular boss might not have a formal engineering qualification but he was competent to judge the ability and performance of a qualified engineer.

When Brown Bower & Co of Switzerland sent single gears instead of double helical gears that had been ordered, Kalaithanthai was furious. The company claimed that they had sent only double gears, but later they had to admit their mistake and replace the gears. Perhaps they thought that Kalaithanthai would not notice the difference.

9

Self-respect

Kalaithanthai had great self-respect. He would never demean himself for the sake of any gain. He expected his employees too not to demean themselves. Even at the most crucial moments, he was conscious of his good name and never gave up his self-respect. He was equally careful of the reputation of the Mills.

Between 1940 and 1943, Kalaithanthai started several new mills and also set about expanding the existing mills. He needed large quantities of iron and steel — about 500

tons. Since the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, iron and steel had been brought under the control of the government. The Iron and Steel Commissioner's Office in Calcutta was the sanctioning authority. The Commissioner then was Thiru Sundaresan, a Tamilian. An officer was sent to Calcutta with an application. He was also a Tamilian with the same name and from the same place in Tamil Nadu, Pathamadaai in Tirunelveli district. The Commissioner refused even to consider the application, as the steel position was very tight. The officer from the Meenakshi Mills persisted and succeeded in getting the sanction. Nobody knew how he got the order. After about six months, one of the officers in the Commissioner's Office in Calcutta spoke to Kalaithanthai on the phone on some business. And casually he complimented Kalaithanthai on having an officer who was a go-getter and who would adopt any means to succeed in his efforts. Kalaithanthai learned from him that Sundaresan, his officer, had prostrated before the Commissioner. He immediately sent for the officer and reprimanded him: "Why did you prostrate before the Commissioner? Is he a God? He is only a government servant whose duty is to allot iron and steel to those who want it, keeping in mind the overall good of the country. We ask for a particular quota. If he does not give it, we will take legal steps to get it. The employees of Sree Meenakshi Mills should not beg. We must establish our right and never demean ourselves. The name Sree Meenakshi Mills should inspire awe and respect in all. All I expect from my employees is that they should maintain self-respect. We should not beg. We should not fear."

10

Attitude towards ex-employees

He would not stand in the way of any worker who wanted to leave service to better his prospects. He would relieve him immediately. Even if the person did not disclose the reason, he would not mind. If anybody said that he was going to better his prospects he would give him his blessings. If for any reason a worker who had left wanted to come back he would take him back. P.N. Desikachari left to join the Mettur Mills, which

offered him a higher pay. Within a short time he wanted to come back. Kalaithanthai magnanimously took him back.

C.S. Ramachary was a very strict disciplinarian. He would not overlook even minor lapses. He would even go to the extent of sacking the defaulters. In such cases Kalaithanthai would not think of rescinding his order but he would give the sacked worker a generous compensation package. He took care of the sick workers.

That he had worked under Kalaithanthai was sufficient testimonial for any person. Any worker in Sree Meenakshi Mills - spinning master, cotton purchase officer, yarn sales officer, lawyer in the legal department, engineer, mason, gardener - was always welcomed with open arms in other mills. There were people who joined Sree Meenakshi Mills early in life, grew under Kalaithanthai and later turned their experience to account by starting mills of their own or by becoming advisors to mills.

11

Tolerance to human errors

In any big organization it is inevitable that there should be internal politics and bickering among colleagues. This would lead to talebearing. Kalaithanthai would never encourage it. When Sree Meenakshi Mills expanded, a lot of new people were appointed to high positions. Some of the old timers would often speak to Kalaithanthai against some of the new entrants. One day Kalaithanthai called all the high officials and told them that nobody was free from defects and they must all practice forbearance. If for one defect or other they were to send this or that man away, there would be only fools and idiots left in the organization.

12

High expectations from employees

Throughout his life Kalaithanthai was tirelessly active and expected the same trait in his employees as well. He was impatient with indolence and listlessness. It was hard for him to tolerate inactivity. He expected his high officials to have details at their

fingertips. What is the plinth area of Rukmini Mills, what is the speed of the ring frame at Manapparai; what is the construction cost of the Paravai Mills? Many developed talents for answering such questions.

13

Meenakshi Mills Stamp on the workers

Kalaithanthai took on his staff only talented people. Those who came to him at 18 or 19 grew to be experts in their field.

Sree Meenakshi Mills purchased Casablanca Drafting spare parts for the ring frames. They did not function properly. The company's attention was drawn to it. They said that the mill's engineers were experts and could carry out any minor modification required. It was a tribute to Kalaithanthai that the entire industry had a high opinion of the calibre of the engineers of Sree Meenakshi Mills.

The Indian government decided to send a six-member delegation from the textile industry to Russia, Czechoslovakia and other European countries to study the working of the textile industry in these countries. The NTC was in charge of selecting the delegates. The only delegate from South India was P.N.Desikachari, an expert in the spinning section of Sree Meenakshi Mills

14

Command of English

Kalaithanthai's knowledge of English was as profound as his knowledge of Tamil. He had studied in a renowned college (St. Thomas College) in Ceylon. He was careful about his English accent. He excelled in written English also. He had served as correspondent in an English newspaper run by Englishmen. He had the mastery to analyze the report of an English I.C.S. officer and pull it to pieces. Even after coming to Madurai, Kalaithanthai took daily lessons in English from Father Simon, Headmaster of St. Mary's High School. In summer while at Kodaikkanal he would read Milton and other poets with Father Simon at the Sacred Heart College, Shenbaganur.

The Europeans and Americans who met Kalaithanthai always thought that he had been trained in language in Oxford or Cambridge. Duke Wellington was the viceroy of India in 1931. Earlier in 1925 he had been governor of Madras Presidency. He once visited Madurai. As it was rare for a governor to undertake visits to places outside Madras, it was a great occasion. Several citizens' committees were formed to receive the governor. Each committee had a particular responsibility. The American Christian missionaries in Madurai were assigned the job of drafting the welcome address to be presented to the governor. They requested Kalaithanthai's help. This is a proof of Kalaithanthai's unparalleled command of English.

15

Dr Alagappa Chettiar

Kalaithanthai had a special friendship with the great philanthropist of the time, Dr. Alagappa Chettiar. His tenacity of purpose, mastery of English and wonderful conversation fascinated Kalaithanthai. He used to meet him frequently.

Alagappa Chettiar had a textile mill in Pudukadu in the Cochin area. It was a tax-free zone but still Alagappa Chettiar failed to make it viable. This was because he could not attend to the day-to-day administration. At his request Kalaithanthai took up the management of the mills.

Alagappa Chettiar was a great philanthropist and he started college after college in Karaikudi. After his death it was decided to dispose of the Alagappa Mills for the sake of the educational institutions. The trustees of the educational institutions A.M.M. Murugappa Chettiar and C.V.C.T. Venkatachalam Chettiar appealed to Kalaithanthai to buy the Alagappa Mills. Kalaithanthai consulted the high officials of the Meenakshi mills, who explained the difficulties that they might have to face if the mills were taken over. Murugappa Chettiar said, "This is not a matter in which you have to consult these experts. There are instances when we have used our common sense. If you don't help

now, the educational institutions will have to be closed down.” Kalaithanthai bought the mills without a word.

After the takeover, Kalaithanthai initiated steps to improve the mills and its finances amid serious obstacles. The company Lay Registrar took action against the buying, on the ground that it was illegal of Sree Meenakshi Mills to have acquired shares far in excess of the allotted amount. To escape action, Kalaithanthai floated a new company to buy the shares of Alagappa Mills.

The mills faced crisis after crisis. The textile commissioner and the Company Registrar sent notices that legal action should be taken against the ex-directors for various irregularities. Action was taken. The details are given in the director’s report issued after the 31-12-1960 meeting of the directors of the Alagappa Textiles. The income from the mills was not sufficient for running Alagappa Polytechnic Pudukkadu and Kalaithanthai brought it under the Thiagarajar Trust.

It was against this background that it was contemplated to change the name of the mills. Kalaithanthai and CSR had been to Madras. Alagappa Chettiar was gravely ill and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited him. Kalaithanthai and CSR went to see him. Alagappa Chettiar told Kalaithanthai that he was hard pressed for money and wanted Rs.10,000/=. Kalaithanthai immediately arranged with his Madras office to send the money. He visited Dr. Alagappa Chettiar after ten days. There was no improvement in his condition. CSR asked Alagappa Chettiar’s secretary Thiru V.S. Manian whether Alagappa Chettiar was happy to receive Rs.10,000/= sent by Kalaithanthai. The secretary said that the money was received but immediately sent to a preparatory school built in memory of MCTM Chidambaram Chettiar, a donation already promised by Alagappa Chettiar to the school. Kalaithanthai was touched by the gesture of Alagappa Chettiar. Nobody could be like Alagappa Chettiar who could think of his promise even on his deathbed.

Years later, Alagappa Chettiar's educational institutions became a university in his name and I had the good fortune to take part in its growth as the first vice chancellor and it was the Divine Will that brought it about as a result of the long true friendship between Kalaithanthai and Alagappa Chettiar.

16

Interest in Arts and Architecture

Kalaithanthai had a deep interest in various arts: architecture, sculpture, gardening, testing the purity of diamonds, music, and astrology.

He had an exquisite aesthetic taste and appreciated objects of great artistic value. He was well versed in fine arts. Even specialists acknowledged Kalaithanthai's discernment in matters of taste.

Kalaithanthai was passionately interested in architecture. He developed his own style. In all the beautiful buildings he had constructed for his mills and educational institutions, one could see his distinctive stamp. Constructing beautiful artistic buildings was a kind of hobby with him. All the buildings that he put up bore his characteristic stamp of elegance and magnificence. The campus of the Thiagarajar College of Engineering, for instance, is extensive and beautiful. The landscape is beautifully terraced, and the buildings are surrounded by ponds and pastures. Each building has its regular pattern.

The hostel buildings in the Thiagarajar Arts College face the river, and they are not walled in. When somebody asked him once why there were no walls, Kalaithanthai said: "I want my students to be free in their thinking. It is not a prison house. I won't agree to spoil the buildings by putting up Compound walls."

It might be said that he spent nearly a third of his time in drawing plans for buildings, holding discussions with civil engineers and making alterations to the plans and taking up new constructions. When engaged in this he would forget himself.

Experienced architects would come forward to draft plans for Kalaithanthai's buildings. His buildings followed the Dravidian style of construction. The pial of Chettinad and granite columns with sculptures found a place in most of his buildings.

Kalaithanthai wanted the gates of his buildings to be of brass. He wanted brass plates to be embossed with an elephant with a lotus in its trunk. These have held a high place in Indian architecture for ages.

Kalaithanthai would decide on the colour of the stone in various parts of the buildings. And all building work would be suspended till the particular stone was available. He would modify the elevation of the building according to the particular needs. Nagarathars would not use chairs. Mostly they would sit on the pial. Perhaps because of this, Kalaithanthai had pials and granite columns in his buildings. The stairs would be 24, 36, 45 and 48' wide depending on the nature of the building.

The walls should be straight. Even if there was the slightest deflection, Kalaithanthai would detect it. The mason would find him right. He was particular that the work must be neat and the building attractive. There would be no compromise on the standard of the work or the beauty of the building.

When constructing any building, he would take into account the use of the building and its beauty. When something that had been completed did not look perfect, even if it were a wall, he had no hesitation in demolishing it and building it anew.

When Sree Meenakshi Mills was started there was no electricity in Madurai. The mills made use of steam boilers. The chimney of the boilers in the mills was beautiful and was a great attraction.

In 1942 Japan bombed Madras. The District Collector of Madurai thought that the next target might be Madurai and in a meeting he convened, various prominent buildings in the city were considered. The collector and the higher officials of the mills feared that the tall chimney of Sree Meenakshi Mills could be easily spotted by the bombers. They tried to persuade Kalaithanthai to dispose of it for two lakhs so that it could be

dismantled. Kalaithanthai said that it was an artistic work and a symbol of the mills. He would not agree to have it removed for security reasons or for money. The chimney stands even now, a reminder of Kalaithanthai's high principles.

Thirupperundurai, also called Avudaiyar Koil, is a place sacred to the Saivaites. It was said that Lord Siva came there as Guru and bestowed divine initiation on Saint Manickavasagar. The temple has wonderful sculptures. Once when we visited the temple, Kalaithanthai pointed out the architectural beauty of the temple.

The temple had been recently renovated. Kalaithanthai said that the ventilators in the upper part of the sanctum sanctorum were unnecessary and they marred its beauty. He pointed out that the old temple architecture had been spoilt by the renovation.

After returning to Madurai, he had his judgment confirmed by a discussion with Avvai Duraisamy Pillai and Professor A. Sankaranarayanan. He wrote to the head of the Thiruvadudurai Adeenam also about the defects in the renovation work.

17

Kalaithanthai was very much interested in gardening. He had old books on gardening in his personal library. He wanted the gardens to be beautiful with plenty of trees and flower plants. He would say, "You are nearer Heaven in a garden than anywhere else on earth." He felt the presence of God in Nature. He particularly liked Nature poetry.

When he was building the mansion at Courtallum, he spent lavishly on the garden and the Tiger Falls. CSR subtly mentioned that they had exceeded the budget in Courtallum. Kalaithanthai smiled. "Ramachary, you and I have not seen Heaven. To me this is Heaven on earth", was his answer.

Kalaithanthai was fond of horse riding. He purchased beautiful horses at great cost. With all his love for horses, he never indulged in racing. But he knew everything about horses-their nature, their rearing, their breed, the difference between one horse and another. He was also interested in cars. He had a collection of vintage cars and also very modern cars including imported ones. Once G.D. Birla came to the Madurai bungalow as Kalaithanthai's guest and admired his collection of cars. But Kalaithanthai never used any flashy limousines — he used only a small car - a tiny Lanchester always.

Kalaithanthai was interested in music. He engaged Shanmugavadivu, mother of the music maestro M.S. Subbulakshmi to teach Veena to his daughters. They also acquired a mastery of the instrument.

He was interested in collecting ancient art sculptures. Paintings, marble statues, bronze statues, Ravi Varma's pictures - he bought many of them, unmindful of the price.