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VEGETARIANISM

How can he expect Grace, who fattens himself

on the flesh of other creatures?

Tirukkural

Saivism and Tamil were the twin passions of Kalaithanthai.

1

According to Kalaithanthai, Saivism includes not merely following the practices of the Hindu sect worshipping Lord Siva but also adopting of the food habits of a Saivaite. Saivaite food is vegetarian food. He was a vegetarian all his life and offered only vegetarian food to all his guests and made no exception even in the case of foreigners. He was firm on this.

During festivals it was the practice in village temples to sacrifice cocks and goats. Melai Sivapuri Sanmarga Sabhai (Divine Life Society) started a campaign against the practice. Roy Chockalingam and S. Murugappan were active in this and in his young days Kalaithanthai joined in their efforts at the Konnaiyur Mariamman Temple at Koppanapatti. He tried to put an end to the practice at the Ayyanar shrines of village deities at Kathappattu but was unsuccessful, as the other devotees opposed him.

Many of the *nagarathars* are non-vegetarian. It was Kalaithanthai's belief that this had not always been so. He held that as long as *nagaratthars* were in Kaveripoompattinam they had followed vegetarianism as a principle. They lost the habit only after their immigration to Chettinad, perhaps influenced by the Mukkulathors living there. It was significant that immigrants to other places from Kaveripoompattinam called themselves 'Saiva chettiars', to distinguish themselves from Nattukottai Chettiars

In places like Devakottai, *nagarathars* remain strict vegetarians. This, according to

Kalaithanthai, is evidence of their ancient tradition. Devakottai is only a modification of Devikottai. There was a Devikottai on the outskirts of Kaveripoompattinam and those who had emigrated from there and settled in Devakottai might have called the settlement Devakottai.

Kalaithanthai felt bad when he saw hotels in big cities bearing the name “Chettinad Military Hotel”. He considered such things a blemish on the *nagarathars* who built temples in foreign countries and spread Saivism.

2

In the hostels of the colleges established by him, he insisted on having vegetarian mess only. He never compromised on this. On one occasion, students of the Thiagarajar College of Engineering started an agitation for the introduction of non- vegetarian mess. Kalaithanthai refused. The boys complained to the Director of Technical Education. The Director told Kalaithanthai that he was depriving the boys of their right to eat the food they liked and that he had no right to impose his convictions on the students. Kalaithanthai did not budge. He argued, “The colleges run by Jains do not serve non-vegetarian food. They do not even offer courses like Zoology, involving dissection of animals. Still the government did not object to that. And power is measured in terms of horse power, but the horse is only a vegetarian.” The Director had no answer. Kalaithanthai was firm that he would not serve non-vegetarian food in his hostels. He would rather close down the mess.

Once Kamaraj was Kalaithanthai’s guest at Courtallam for a few days. He was accustomed to non-vegetarian food. This was the first time when he took vegetarian food for a few days together. He said that one could give up non-vegetarian food if one could get vegetarian food as in Kalaithanthai’s house.

Kalaithanthai participated in vegetarian conferences and helped the vegetarian movement to publish its magazines regularly. He was also an active member of the Animal Welfare Board. He was never tired of quoting the relevant chapters from *Tirukkural* to enforce his views.