

A. Thangal Kunju Musaliar (1897 -1966)

A Profile

Indeed we run short of appropriate adjectives when we write of some people of real greatness. There might be a few epithets that go normally with those names. But the more we delve deep into the multi-faceted saga of their lives those over-used labels, though meaningful for easy identification of their main areas of achievement become frustratingly inadequate for the delineation of their many-splendoured greatness. Especially when the greatness has emerged from the stratum of society that we least expected to produce such a human phenomenon. Our feeling is of pleasant surprised at the sight of a shrub in marvellous bloom in the most unlikely place and in an odd season.

Early Life

The life of Thangal Kunju Musaliar is a rare case in illustration of such a marvel. Musaliar was a legend even when he was alive. The legend still lives and exudes more meanings as years go by. Several of his initiatives, innovation and achievements in trade, industry, education and social advancement have assumed prophetic character in the changing national and global scenario. Many projects he envisaged and executed with his characteristic farsightedness and practical sense in the first half of the just ended twentieth century has grown in greater

significance now than when they were envisaged and implemented. Indeed they are the living monuments of the remarkable man that he was. No wonder that his reputation as a creative, highly original, eminent, honest leader of the world of industry and commerce still reverberates in the corridors of time.

Musaliar was not the product of any famous school of Business Management in India or abroad. As a matter of fact his formal schooling did not go beyond the primary stage. Nor was his a case of school drop-out wayward boyhood. Slow decline in the slender income of his father necessitated the stoppage of his school education as the responsibility of winning the bread for a growing family fell on his none too strong young shoulders. But he had a level head on those shoulders. He rose to this occasion with unusual courage and determination for a fledgling boy, and fulfilled his duties in very trying adverse circumstances. This early education in the university of adversity stood him in good stead throughout his career. The steely strength of will that he acquired in the various vicissitudes of life was an armour that helped him to face any challenging situation in personal, business or public life.

The aphorism that 'character is destiny' is an overused one. However, it has a real

significance and great relevance in the life of Janab Musaliar. He didn't have any favourable factors when he started life on his own at a very early age forced by the sudden change of fortunes of his traditionally religious but liberal scholarly middle class family whose ancestry is traced back to Malik ibn Dinar, the great Muslim missionary who pioneered the spread of Islam in Kerala. Thangal Kunju Musaliar belonged to the fourteenth generation of this distinguished line of scholar missionaries whose work left a deep imprint in the socio-cultural life of the south-western coast of peninsular India. The long and rich cultural heritage of the family had inculcated in the young Musaliar a toughness of spirit and a heightened sense self-respect that helped him to react to the challenges of life in more and more creative ways.

Born on 12th January 1897 in Kilikolloor, a suburb of Kollam town as the son of Ahmad Kunju Musaliar and his spouse Beevikunju of Chittanikkara House, Musaliar lived in this area except for nearly ten years when he was away in Ceylon Brunei and Malayan Peninsula in his early youth. There was very little left of the hoary history of the family and its old comfortable material circumstances at the time of the birth of the boy who was named Mohiyuddin. True to the long-standing family custom the young child's religious education preceded regular secular schooling. When he was half-past five he was admitted to the nearby Koyikkal primary school where he showed keen interest in learning. But for his early end of education the boy would have blossomed into an academically productive young man as he showed sure signs of his sharp intellect and diligent habits at school. However he had to put an end to his formal educational career with the primary stage and engage himself in any gainful work available

for a raw young boy in the economically stagnant suburban society of Kollam of those days.

Life Abroad

That he could not make any substantial contribution to the none too satisfactory income of the family inspite of his willingness to take up any work was not his fault. Avenues of employment were few and the income meagre in those difficult days when organised economic activities were marginal. This depressing experience at home compelled him to think of going abroad to the then Ceylon and Malayan Peninsula both of which were considered eldorados for Malayalees in those days. In fact many indigent and enterprising young men from Kerala had found their way to these countries and made their fortunes there. No wonder that the young eighteen year old Musaliar who was intelligent, enterprising and above all hardworking decided to leave the country in search of work. Sailing to Ceylon first Musaliar reached Ratnapura where there was considerable gem mining activity, though in a primitive and traditional condition. However, he soon learned the intricacies of the work and secrets of the trade and easily rose to the position of a supervisor through his shrewd and honest work. But with the outbreak of the World War I the whole mining work and export trade in gem fell on evil days. But the young man did not lose heart.

There was then the Malayan Peninsula in his dreams where busy development work like building of roads, bridges, ports and other infrastructural facilities were going on. Then, for a young man of Musaliar's independent and adventurous nature to be a wage earning labourer in any work place was an unlikely long-term proposition. Though the contractors

who realised the organising skill and management efficiency of the young Musaliar gave him supervisory post to which he did not stick long, the inherent dynamism kept him moving from place to place seeking better options and opportunities. Fortunately or unfortunately this decade-long sojourn did help him earn nothing but some rich experience and in one fine morning he returned to Chittanikkara with out a penny in his pocket. Really it was on the foundation of this vast and varied experience Janab Musaliar later built up the super structure of his projects and rose to the dizzying heights of success.

From Modest beginning to Global Market

That the phenomenal growth of cashew industry of India from its primitive unorganised state into a modern one in a little more than two decades was the handiwork of a single individual is the legendary aspect of it. And that this was not a windfall triumph is proved by the series of successes he made in various fields of journalism, education and social development that he later entered. For one thing his mind wasn't a single track one. The uniqueness of the multifaceted rich personality of Musaliar lay in the rare combination of the reflective and the pragmatic, the visionary and the missionary, the highly individualistic and deeply social attributes of his mind. This reconciliation of the apparently opposite traits of his mind in a harmonious blend was the natural outcome of a long family tradition of spiritual interests, scholarly pursuits and social engineering. Musaliar always keenly observed and studied his environment in all its intricate aspects wherever he was, learned things quickly and endeared himself, with his qualities of head and heart, to everyone he came into contact with. Highly independent in spirit, daringly innovative in conception, ruthlessly

thorough in execution, deeply humane in approach, uncompromisingly honest in all dealings Musaliar could not but have been a living legend. Legends like him have made Indian industry and society proud.

A Shining Model of Integrity

One instance that illustrates the rock-like solid reputation that Musaliar built in the matter of unchanging ethics of business comes to mind. It was a few days after the demise of Musaliar. The venue was the Cashew Club of Kollam. A trade delegation from the former Soviet Union had come all the way to the town to pay homage to the memory of Musaliar. At the Club a reception was accorded to the trade delegation by the cashew exporters of the town. The speech Mr. Aphronin, the Soviet Trade Representative of Bombay made in the meeting was a glorious tribute to the high standard of ethics of business that Musaliar unswervingly upheld. He nostalgically recalled the past when Musaliar was alive and doing business with him was a matter one could precisely look forward to. "When you do business, do like Musaliar. He never asked for extension [of contract] or change of assortment [of various grades]. He supplied goods promptly on time agreed upon", he added.

This was no courtesy compliment that Mr. Aphronin paid on a formal occasion of a day of remembrance but a spontaneous expression of gratitude and admiration for a man of transparent honesty, uncompromising ethical standards and absolute dependability in all matters.

Twenty six cashew factories where nearly twenty five thousand workers were directly employed was an industrial phenomenon which couldn't go unnoticed and unrecognised

by the world of business of the mid-twentieth century. The famous *Fortune* magazine then identified Thangal Kunju Musaliar as the single employer who gave direct work to the largest number of people in the world. As early as 1947 export of ninety nine percent of processed cashew was from India. Only one percent of the export was the share of Mozambique and other African countries. This near monopoly position of India was built up by the entrepreneurial genius, management efficiency, business acumen and above all the visionary mind of Janab Thangal Kunju Musaliar. The ancient Indian ideal of 'simple living and high thinking' informed all his life and activities.

Articulation of ideas through Books

Though in actual life he looked a man of more than life size with his white turban and serious visage there was within him a sensitive highly contemplative mind which, when not engaged in matters practical and pedestrian, reflected profoundly on man and the universe. The philosophical quality of the mind that is capable of probing deep into man's situation in this universe and evolving a well-integrated view of life is remarkably manifested in his first book originally in Malayalam which was later translated into English under the title *Man and the World* and published by a reputed publishing house of the United States of America. The book was so well-received critically and otherwise, in India and abroad that a second edition was soon called for. The keen philosophical eyes with which he looked at the physical phenomenon and the human life gave him a deep insight into their working. An integrated theory of man and his relationship with the world is the result of this long, deep and free thinking of Musaliar.

Later when he wrote another book *Communism, Socialism and Capitalism in the*

Present Context the mind he applied in its writing was that of a social and political thinker. The ideas are at an altogether different level, and his concerns are of a different character. The ideologies that he chose for close examination of their relevance in the contemporary socio-economic context are the ideologies which contended for supremacy in the world. Though it appears capitalism has triumphed temporarily relegating both social democracy and communism, particularly of the Soviet model communism in the limbo of history, the ultimate outcome of this ideological fight for political supremacy is a little too difficult to predict now. Even those who may not agree with his considered views on the subject will find it extremely difficult to effectively contradict some of his closely argued opinions. The only thing is that his arguments and writings lacked an academic sophistication and intellectual casuistry. At the level of original native wisdom and straight forward statement of it the writings of Musaliar are unparalleled. He brings to bear a deeply perceptive original mind on all his writings without any obfuscation of any kind. One can see a close correlation between his thought processes, his principles of life and his gigantic achievements in the world of trade, commerce and industry. The impression that he gives to any one who tries to understand him is that of a totally integrated figure hewn out of a huge single stone. This monolithic character of his life, personality and achievements is too striking to ignore.

Prabhatham and its relevance

In everything Thangal kunju Musaliar did, 'professionalism' was the buzzword. He had a keen eye to spot talents needed for each work, and he entrusted the work to the most suited person with a close but not unnecessarily

meddling watch over them. When he decided to enter to sphere of journalism he formed a formidable team for editorial and managerial work. Begun as a weekly, *Prabhatam* (means dawn) printed in the Vinjanaposhini press he established for the purpose and published from Kollam, soon became a daily. During the nearly twenty years of its life *Prabhatam* both as a weekly and later in its incarnation as a daily exerted a literary, social and political influence over the newspaper reading public disproportionately deeper than its circulation particularly when compared to a couple of long established daily publications of the State. The success of *Prabhatam* was evidently due to the liberal progressive and even radical views on society literature and politics the publication promoted without any restraint or inhibition. The editorial freedom that he gave to the hand-picked professional team was at the root of the success of *Prabhatam* as a liberal publication of those days which was a magnet of progressive writers on politics, literature, culture and society. That was a period of great ferment in Malayalam literature. The week-end edition of *Prabhatam* particularly represented entire spectrum of new literary ideas with all the reputed writers belonging to various shades of literary theories writing in its columns.

Extensive travel is by itself the best liberal education. Thangal Kunju Musaliar more than compensated his deficiency in formal education by undertaking world wide tours. These travels were evidently for purposes of business. But his eager, open mind went beyond the bounds of business interests and studied the societies of the countries he visited with the incisive analytical mind of a born social scientist. He could easily identify the strengths and weaknesses of each society. And

he often compared these foreign societies with his own and enthusiastically propagated the virtues of those nations among his people through his writings and through the columns of the weekly and daily that he published. The deep mark of an eclectic, progressive, liberal mind can be seen on everything he spoke, did and wrote. And his later concern was the regeneration of our stagnant, traditional society and change it into a liberal, forward-looking industrialised society. The main motive of Musaliar's journalistic endeavour was to disseminate new ideas that will act as catalysts in the process of transformation of Indian society. A strong economy with productive participation of all sections of society, in his considered opinion, is the *sine qua non* for a well-knit, enlightened nation state.

Janakshema Samajam

It is true Thangal Kunju Musaliar left behind a business empire of which, when he was alive, he was the unquestioned monarch. But the legacy of meaningful educational work that he bequeathed will ever remain as the lasting monument of his vision and firm commitment to realise that vision. Like Rajaram Mohan Roy and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan who are considered as the great leaders of Indian Renaissance, Thangal Kunju Musaliar also in his time came to the conclusion that education is the indispensable input in the political, social, economic and cultural development of any community. But, at the same time he was fully convinced that the quality of education that is imparted is a decisive factor that determined the nature of development. The existing system of education with an overdose of liberal arts and science education has to be reorganised and reoriented with greater content of engineering and modern technologies.

He was particularly grieved of the deplorable educational backwardness of his own community the scar of which was deep on its face.

In spite of his legendary success in trade, commerce and industry. Musaliar would not have been remembered by posterity but for his deep social consciousness and fervent commitment to the cause of the welfare of the society to which he belonged. This commitment manifested itself in the formation of *janakshema samajam* (People's Welfare Society) the aim of which was to pool the resources of the poor people and involve them in productive work on a co-operative basis. At a time when the co-operative movement was not in existence in this part of the country Musaliar's pioneering ideas and work caught the imagination of a large number of the leaders of the society, and they joined hands with him in translating them into reality. Musaliar has given clear expression to his ideas of social development through common economic endeavour of the people with marginal help and support from the government. In collaboration with Gandhi Smaraka Nidhi the society took up several projects including popularisation of Japanese method of paddy cultivation. Sri. Pranalal S. Kapadia, leader of the Gandhi Smaraka Nidhi delegation that came here was very much impressed by the work of the society and promised technical help.

Liberal Social outlook

The plight of the Muslims of Kerala was pitiable as they were educationally and socially backward. To instill in them a new sense of awareness for socio-economic advancement through educational efforts an organisation called *Muslim Majlis* had been

formed with a large number of local committees. Musaliar's leadership was a great source of strength for the *Majlis*. They could create a new stir in the community which resulted in accelerated educational activities in the community. The comparatively heightened educational awakening among Muslims of Travancore is undoubtedly the legacy of the work of *Majlis* and the leadership of Musaliar in the organisation.

No less interested was Musaliar in the social and educational progress of the then similarly backward sister communities like Ezhavas. The SNDP Yogam of those days was the spearhead of a powerful social movement for the emancipation of all backward sections of society caught in the cobweb of the inhuman traditional caste system of Kerala. Musaliar actively associated himself with the educational activities of the Yogam, especially the establishment of Sree Narayana College, Kollam. Never did narrow religious and other sectarian considerations influence his social outlook, and was ready to extend his help for any good cause in which he believed of any religion, caste or creed.

Builder of Educational Institutions

To Musaliar no idea or thought was valid if it were not translated into reality. Therefore when the idea of modern education germinated in his fertile mind, in the first instance he boldly embarked upon the task of starting a college in the private sector in the State. This was not a mere venture as it perhaps has become today; it was a daring educational adventure at that time in the eyes of Janab Musaliar who was a perfectionist in every thing he did. And a College of his conception required great organising skill, management expertise, help of a large team of experienced

teachers and above all massive capital investment. But dauntless was his courage in executing such ambitious projects, and Musaliar plunged into the work headlong, and the dream of a college in the very place of his birth came true when the first President of Indian Republic, Dr. Rajendra Prasad laid the foundation stone of the Thangal Kunju Musaliar College on February 3, 1956 in Kilikolloor.

Later, the events took a historic turn leading to a change of plan and decided to start first an Engineering College instead of Arts and Science College mainly due to the sagacious advice and guidance given by Prof. Joseph Mundassery, the then Minister for Education, Kerala and a few other likeminded men. Thus the first ever Engineering College in Kerala in private sector, was formally inaugurated by Prof. Humayun Kabir, the then Union Minister for Scientific Research and Cultural affairs, on July 3, 1958.

This is an important milestone in the annals of educational development in Kerala particularly in the history of the rather tardy growth of technical education in the State when compared to the relatively fast growth in the neighbouring states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. This disparity in the development of technical education continues even now. At a time when engineering graduates were needed in large numbers to meet the requirements of the industrial development of the early decades of fast growth rate period the TKM College of Engineering produced thousands of graduates who played key developmental roles in Kerala and outside. A large number of them who passed through the portals of this premier institution of the State now occupy high positions in India and

abroad. They are grateful to their *alma mater* and its founder, the legendary hero of several Herculean achievements.

The need for a feeder institution that provides quality education in Arts & Science was felt by Musaliar, and with no loss of time he started an Arts and Science College in the close vicinity of the campus of the engineering college in 1965. This has also grown into one of the best Arts and Science Colleges affiliated to the University of Kerala. Musaliar did not forget his modest elementary school to which he went in his early boyhood. His munificence helped to upgrade the Koyikkal school into a high school with its own buildings of course built by this great patron of learning. True to the tradition built by Thangal Kunju Musaliar his successors are now holding the torch of learning aloft by establishing new institutions in the fast emerging branches like IT and management education. Opening of the Thangal Kunju Musaliar Centenary Public School is also worth mentioning. This diversification of educational endeavours is the fitting tribute that his inheritors can pay to the memory of their mentor.

The Great Legacy

In spite of the legendary success in all fields of multifarious activities he entered, Musaliar remained the same simple man till his last moment. His punctuality was proverbial, his capacity for hard work remarkable, his honesty unparalleled. One instance alone would be sufficient to illustrate his scrupulous honesty in business dealings. Musaliar had taken loans from the Quilon National Bank, which suddenly crashed. The Bank went bust due to the political conspiracy hatched by the then Dewan Sir. C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer to reduce the political clout of Christians in the

erstwhile state of Travancore. Thousands of depositors were in distress. Those who owed money to the bank were not prepared to repay the loans that they had taken from the Bank. In this situation Thangal Kunju Musaliar went to the Bank, repaid the amount he owed to the Bank in full and got the receipt for the repayment. This unusual honest gesture on the part of Musaliar surprised the Bank officials more than all others but that action established his honesty and credibility in business dealings forever.

“Some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them”.

Twelfth Night Act II Sc. V, 158

This intensely meaningful observation has been perhaps over-quoted. However it remains as meaningful today as at the time when it was written. Of these three types of greatness Musaliar who passed away peacefully on February 19, 1966 undoubtedly falls in the second category, which is really true greatness worthy of adulation and emulation.