My Finest Days with the Venerable Industrial Magnate Thangal Kunju Musaliar

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A few days before winding up the last year session of the B.A. Economics class, where I was a student, Professor Mathew Tharakan, the then Member of the Planning Board and Professor of Economics in S.N. College, Quilon, posed an interesting question to the students: "who is the greatest economist in Kerala of the day". Quick answers were yelled out, scores of names in the realm of the science of economics: all the names pronounced by the students were those of persons of high degrees of academic excellence and who wielded high positions in service sectors and academic and intellectual fields. The names emerged from the students were seen disapproved; it is marked by negative nods. Even the boys and girls sitting on the front row were perplexed and guessing who he would be the greatest economist as they all failed to satisfy the criterion contemplated by the wise professor. After a pause the Professor declared "It is Thangal Kunju Musaliar, the genius in the realm of economics and the greatest economist of the day in Kerala". This pronouncement of the Professor was met with mixed feelings and thoughts in the minds of students and it seemed to have been the opinion of the majority that it is a prejudiced choice of the Professor. A student of high calibre in economics theory rose up with an agitating frame of mind and queried how the professor had conferred the title of 'greatness' on an ordinary business man, like Musaliar, who possessed no academic qualification whatsoever.

The Professor with his vast knowledge and expertise in the science of economics and practical experience gained as a member of Planning Board, marshalled facts and figures to show the superior quality of Musaliar in the realm of applying the theoretical aspects of economic activities in many fields in promoting scores of industries throughout the length and breadth of Kerala State and adduced his reason step by step then explained how Musalair established an International market for him in cashew export and earned an enviable position in the world market. And the Professor came on generously on a comparative study of himself in relation of Musaliar in many fields of economic activities and slowly took momentum: at first he compared and contrasted him with Thangal Kunju Musaliar in the fields where they engaged and then the professor touched the topic of academic qualification versus experience that could be acquired through self-study – studying things by way of trial and error method - probing, observing and experimentation. Musaliar, he observed, might be lacking in formal education, nevertheless;

the realm wherein he acquired knowledge, experience and expertise is superior to the knowledge we acquire through the conventional methods – I mean through educational institutions.

The Professor concluded his discourse thus: If I were assigned the task of taking over the charge of hundreds of Musaliar's factories, thousands of labourers and dealing and tackling with tens of traders world wide as Musaliar would do, imagine what would be my position: it is quite natural the whole edifice of cashew industry would crumble like a pack of cards. What I mean to emphasise is that it is the skill, talent and entrepreneurial abilities and business acumen that are the basic essentials to a genius in economic activities. A thunderous applause reverberated in the classroom and the Professor admonished against such an untowardness and at the same time he smiled it away. Applying the standards, Musaliar is a great soul, deserving the title of the Greatest Economist in Kerala, as conferred by the learned Professor Mathew Tharakan and Kerala has never seen such an industrial magnate and what he did in the field of promoting technical education and defraying funds on philanthropic purposes is laudable.

On my part, the speech made by the veteran Professor instilled a lasting impact in my life especially the vivid narration on the varied phases, facets and aspects in the life of Thangal Kunju Musaliar. My memory goes back to my finest days with the venerable Musaliar. In this context, let me state that I have had a good opportunity to work in the ambitious project run under the banner of "Janakshema Samajam"; project mooted and executed by Musaliar with a view to promoting self employment and developing co-operative living. I was put in charge of the Poultry Farm that formed part of the project.

The Samajam and the Poultry Farm situated in an expansive piece of land with an area of 3 acres and consisting fifteen poultry pens, an office and a palatial mansion: all situated at Kilikollur, two miles east of the commercial city of Quilon.

The *Janakshema Samajam*, was a welfare society established for the purpose of forming groups of people to usher in Small Scale Industries, village based handicrafts, poultry development, egg production, starch making etc. All the projects were meant for the welfare of the needy and the people from the lower and middle echelons of the society.

The scheme of things as visualised by Musaliar was one of the grand projects ever conceived in Kerala and if executed on the lines contemplated by the veteran the scheme would have increased egg production by threefold.

On a fine day the great man Musaliar, pointing a chair, asked me to sit by his side and, of course, at that moment his younger brother Najumudeen Musaliar was standing behind him. He made the young man Najumudeen Musaliar also to sit facing his brother. Musaliar in a low voice divulged on a project to increase the egg production by three-folds. As young men in our prime, we failed to comprehend all that had transpired yet we understood the contents quite well. Musaliar explained the concepts of fertilisation and defertilisation of eggs at first, and then he dealt with how fertilization could be improved and defertilization could be effected for the preservation of eggs for a long period without decaying. The fertility rate of eggs in Kerala is very low, the reasons he enumerated were many. The

conventional way of hatching eggs with the help of brooding hens is not an effective method for meeting the growing demand for eggs.

How it could be made possible? Musaliar himself said that the best solution was the application of incubator in the process of hatching eggs in millions a day. We were astounded on hearing the citation of the astronomical figure. Large incubators as used in the U.S.A is never suitable to Kerala environment, he said, as we lack the infrastructural facility, want of funds as well as defective power generation and interrupted power supply.

After a cup of tea, he resumed his lengthy conversation and suggested a solution. It was inventing an experimental device (incubator). Musalair took considerable pains in making us understand the technical aspects of the incubator. I felt enthralled at his minute technical knowledge and the infinite patience in transmitting the knowledge to us.

Najumudeen Musaliar and myself did accomplish the tiny project within a short span of three-months' time. The brain behind the success in making an incubator was Musaliar's. Twelve chickens emerged from the experimental device though we put 18 eggs in the hatchery. The percentage of hatching would have been higher but for a small technical snag. I leave the technical aspect as it were. On the same pattern Musaliar made a score of schemes in the development of poultry in every nook and corner of Kerala. The Farm he maintained was an exemplary one; the stock consisted of White Leghon, Black Minorca, Sussex, Rhode Island Red and another twenty varieties: the birds were veritable show-piece for the bird Lovers.