The Embodiment of Master Entrepreneur in Kerala

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An entrepreneur is a person who starts an enterprise - an undertaking or adventure. This quality of entrepreneurship is often used in the context of the readiness and initiative of an individual in undertaking a new project, Entrepreneurs, in this sense, are not a very unusual breed. Every age brings out its own entrepreneurs.

There are, however, certain periods in history when entrepreneurs play a critical and dynamic role. They are then the harbingers of change. They symbolise the transition from one age to another. It is not that they bring into being some more new units. They are rather symbols of a cultural change. It is not that they are just part of history. It is rather that they make history or become instrumental in bringing about changes that lead to the emergence of new trends in society. These people may operate in science and technology, literature, education, agriculture, industry or in some other field. It is the consequence of their coming into being and the changes that they initiate that make society move forward.

It is in this larger sense that Janab Thangal Kunju Musaliar was an entrepreneur of an unusual kind in a particular period in the history of this State of Kerala. His activities were a harbinger of the changes that Kerala was to witness in subsequent years in the social, economic and educational sectors.

Industrialisation and the emergence of capitalism in the western world were marked by the establishment of new enterprises by entrepreneurs. These new enterprises took different forms. The great sea voyages undertaken by different Portuguese, Spanish and British sailors in the Elizabethan period in British history were symbolic of this kind of entrepreneurship. The industrial revolution in Britain and its consequent emergence as the empire where the sun never set were a followup of this spirit of entrepreneurship. In India, this kind of entrepreneurship was witnessed in the activities of the early industrialists such as the Tatas, Birlas, Modis etc.

During the early decades of this century Kerala had a predominant agrarian economy. These agrarian activities were mostly related to food production. This was related to cultivation of paddy, coconuts and the like. Its remote geographical location and existence of the Western Ghats practically cut off the State from the rest of India. It was, therefore, natural that the early endeavours at industrialisation witnessed in Bombay or Calcutta totally evaded Kerala in the early decades of this century. Even though Kerala had an active history of trade relationship with many European nations in the past centuries, in its social and economic life Kerala was very feudal. Feudalism as it is understood in the

West, may not be the best way of describing the state of affairs in Kerala. Yet large elements of this feudal culture with its local variations existed in Kerala. It took several decades before the social and economic changes that were taking place in Bombay and Calcutta and later, in Madras and other parts of India overtook Kerala, at least partially. Even though Kerala had trade relationship with several western countries long before they colonised India, in its social and economic life the people of the State continued to live their traditional life. Feudalism, as the word is understood in the West, may not be the most appropriate way to describe the State and society in Kerala in these decades. Yet large elements of the feudal culture with its local variations existed in Kerala at this time and continues to exist even today.

Within Kerala, the early decades of the century witnessed certain changes in its economy. This was particularly evident in the erstwhile princely State of Travancore, in the Southern part of Kerala. The increasing pressure of population growth and the spread of Christianity made large numbers of this community in the western coastal areas, where their social and economic conditions were not very happy, migrate eastwards. They undertook the cultivation of cash crops such as rubber, tea, coffee, cardamom, pepper, etc. Tapioca became the main foodcrop to be cultivated in these areas wherever paddy cultivation was not easy. The total effect of this was a change in the economy of the State. From a stagnant economy with little trade and commerce, the State was gradually moving into a new era. Cash economy was on the upsurge. Education was spreading, thanks to the Christian churches first and later under the auspices of the State Government. Land ownership patterns were changing. The lower caste groups among the Hindus became more selfconscious of their dignity and social status. New political aspirations appeared among the different groups.

It was in this changing social, economic and political context and unrest that Janab Thangal Kunju Musaliar was born as a member of a poor Muslim family. Among the different religious and caste groups in the State at the time, the Muslims could be described as the most backward, economically and in terms of education. Janab Thangal Kunju Musaliar had very little formal education except the traditional one imparted to Muslim children. And yet, Janab Thangal Kunju Musaliar evidenced a certain restlessness of spirit even in these early years. As the eldest son of his parents, he felt he had a great responsibility to his large family.

The spirit of entrepreneurship and adventure was evident in Thangal Kunju Musaliar from the very beginning of his life. His decision to go abroad in search of a means of livelihood for his family was an indication of this. He left for Ceylon (Sri Lanka) at first. From there, he left for the F M S (Malaysia and Singapore).

It was during his years in the F M S that the country began to experience some political stirrings which finally led to independence. The Indians were the smallest ethnic group in the F M S at that time. Malaya was at this time emerging as a major rubber producer. Most of the Indians worked in the rubber plantations, though there were a few in Singapore also in other jobs.

Janab Thangal Kunju Musaliar began his years in F M S as a labourer in a rubber plantation, and was made a supervisory shortly afterwards. He, however, gave up this job and became a contractor, undertaking small public

work contracts in the rubber plantations. This was in evidence of his spirit of independence and ambition. During his years in F M S he also saw for himself the first stirrings of industrialisation.

It was this rich experience that he put to good use on his return to India after his decade long stay abroad. He returned to Quilon. Quilon was, at this time, one of the major commercial centres of the erstwhile Travancore State. As a princely State, Travancore was empowered to levy customs duty on goods imported into the State. A very large amount of goods in wide use in the State like tobacco, textiles and even umbrellas came from the neighbouring Madras Presidency mostly from such centres as Virudhanagar, Madurai, etc. These goods were transported by the Southern Railway and mostly unloaded at Quilon from where they were sent to the northern centres of the State like Alleppey and Kottayam. Thus it was that Quilon became a major commercial centre in the State.

Travancore was at this time predominantly agrarian in nature. Even today, the situation is not much different. The primacy of the agriculture sector accounts for a much larger percentage of its G D P than what is for the whole of India. This is largely because of its commercial crops. But the crops such as rubber, pepper, tea and coffee were only just beginning to be grown in the State in the 1930.

There were few industries in the State. In the absence of cotton, even the textile industry which transformed the Bombay or Madras Presidencies could not make any headway in Travancore, Alleppey, lying some fifty miles north of Quilon had the coir industry. But, apart from one or two factories like Darasmail and Aspinwall, the coir industry was mostly run as a cottage industry. Similarly, Quilon was also known at that time for its commercial rather than industrial activity. The only organised factory was the A.D. Cotton Mills, but the spindlage of this factory never exceeded 1,000. It was a tiny factory. The tile industry was only beginning to develop in Quilon.

The cashew industry for which Quilon became famous subsequently was also at this time in its infancy. It was only a cottage industry. There were only two cashew factories in existence at this time. The earliest was the one run by W.C. Anderson, an Englishman. P.V. Swaminathan who was a stenographer cum accountant to Anderson was the founder of the second factory. But, these were factories only in name. They functioned as larger cottage industries. The only difference was that instead of people working at home the workers came to the factory and worked. The technology was the same.

It was in this context that Janab Thangal Kunju Musaliar started his first cashew factory in 1932. Prior to this, the cashew workers had taken the nuts home, roasted it there and processed it. There was no assurance about uniform quality, productivity and other related factors. Janab Thangal Kunju Musaliar's decision to set up the cashewnut factory was thus a turning point. Janab Thangal Kunju Musaliar set up 26 cashew factories during the next two decades.

It was not only in respect of setting up the cashew factories that Janab Thangal Kunju Musaliar proved himself to be an entrepreneur. His farsightedness as an entrepreneur and industrialist was also evident in the way in which he handled his workers. At a time when there were no organised trade unions and collective bargaining he evidenced generosity in the pay packet he offered to his workers.

He went to the extent of offering them festival allowance at a time when there was no practice of giving bonus to workers.

He evinced care and shrewd business sense in organising raw materials, in introducing a systematic Tylorian way of processing the nuts and in the marketing of the finished products. This was particularly evident in the way in which he organised his exports. His activities were, in this respect, far ahead of his time.

This vision of the future was also evident in the way in which he diversified his activities. He showed interest in setting up cashew and rubber plantations. This was in one sense a vertical integration of his business.

In spite of the limitations he had with regard to formal education, he turned out to be an excellent finance manager. The attitude that he adopted in the case of the liquidated Quilon National Bank by paying back in full to the Bank all his dues even after the liquidation modification, enhanced his reputation among the banking community. The shrewdness and foresightedness that he showed in his export activities were also evidence of his efficiency as his own finance manager.

The entrepreneurial skill of Janab Thangal Kunju Musaliar was also evident in the diversification process that he undertook in the cashew business. He took interest in the extraction of cashew nut oil from roasted cashew nut shells. He similarly set up a sawmill to make wooden packing cases. And a tin factory to make cans for packaging processed cashew nuts for exports.

Janab Thangal Kunju Musaliar evinced interest in several other activities apart from industry. He proved himself to be a successful writer. He authored two books, set up a press and publishing House and brought out a newspaper.

Of more enduring relevance was his contribution to the field of education. The initiation of the revolution for the spread of education in the old Travancore State was by the Christian churches. The emergence of the Christian community in the State as a powerful economic and political force was on account of the spread of education among them. The schools and colleges set up by the Churches were mostly in areas of Christian domination, even though they benefited other communities as well. The example set by the Christian churches was later followed by the Nair community, mostly through the Nair Service Society and by the Ezhavas through the Sree Narayana Trust. The emergence of the Christians as a powerful economic force and the spread of education naturally led to political movements and demands for their due representation in Government. The 'Niwarthana' movement was a consequence of this. It must be noted that this movement was in a way the harbinger of the Travancore State congress.

These changes were duly noted by the more enlightened among the Muslim population. Among the major religious and caste groups in Travancore, the Muslims were the most backward. This was mostly on account of the lack of education among them. Population-wise the Muslims were nearly 12 per cent in the State, but in recruitment to public services their representations was minimal. The only Arts and Science College set up by Muslims in the State begun under Muslim initiative was the Farook College at Feroke near Calicut. This was in 1948. Since then, all efforts to set up another College for Muslims, especially in the southern part of Kerala had fizzled out. The State Government offered enough land to set up a College at Aluva but the Community could not raise even the

Rs. 10,000 that had to be remitted to take over the land. It was in this context that Janab Thangal Kunju Musaliar decided to set up an Arts and Science College in Quilon. In 1952 Janab Thangal Kunju Musaliar had to go to the Vellore Medical College Hospital for some treatment. It was at this time that Janab Thangal Kunju Musaliar took the firm decision to start an Arts and Science College in Quilon. The acquisition of the required land at his birth place at Kilikolloor in Quilon came in quick succession. The Thangal Kunju Musaliar Trust was registered in 1956. However, on the advice of Sri Joseph Mundassery, the then Education Minister of Kerala in the first Communist Ministry of the State instead, it was decided to start an Engineering College. The Government even offered to meet 50 per cent of the total expenses of Rs. 30 lakhs needed to start the Engineering College, The College came into existence in 1958. The Arts and Science College was set up subsequently.

The entrepreneurship of Janab Thangal Kunju Musaliar was thus of the kind that germinated from a wide vision that covered several fields of activitity. In the same way as he was successful in starting the cashew nut factories, he was a great success in his other endeavours also. Certainly, he played a remarkable role at a critical time in the history of the State. His wide range of interests, determination to get things done, organisational ability, vision of the future and above all his humanism were all in evidence in his life and activities. His enthusiasm for change and his inner urge to do things and ability to achieve them make him one of the most remarkable persons during his time. He remains a beacon light for entrepreneurship in the State.