



LIFE AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF RAJAH SIR ANNAMALAI CHETTIAR

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ABSTRACT

Annamalai Chettiar was the great man of vision and statesman. He was an industrialist, banker businessman legislator educationist philanthropist, and serve to Tamil Music, temple etc., Annamalai Chettiar received many such titles for his excellent career. In recognition of his best services as the chairman of Karaikudi Municipality, the Government of Madras conferred on him the title of 'Rao Bahadur' in 1913.³⁵ In 1922, recognizing his services in educational and political sphere, the title 'Diwan Bahadur' was given to him. In 1923, after the establishment of Sri Meenakshi College, the British government conferred the 'Knighthood' on him.³⁶ In appreciation of the social and educational services 'Sir' title came to him. King. George V conferred the hereditary title 'Rajah' on 4th March 1929.

KEY WORD: Philanthropist, Tamil Music, Education.

INTRODUCTION

Every one during and after his life time realized and praised him as an outstanding philanthropist and pointed out that his services to education in South India were without parallel. This realization will be there for a longtime to come as the University represents his munificence and foresight. The need to make a biographical sketch of these great men² was felt and expressed by the last Governor General of India, C. Rajagopalachari. He said, while referring to Annamalai Chettiars outstanding gifts of leadership, that he was just a man whose biography should be written. Such a need has to be fulfilled with a historical background.

THE BIRTH AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The segmented Indian society produced great excellence and contributed much to the development process on the one hand and on the other hand it created many barriers and obstacles for the growth and development of the segmented section in other walks of life. By the closing decades of the 19th century, the social and religious reforms initiated by the movements made an impact on modernization with the combined effort and result of British rule in India. In the same decades the heritage of Tamil reemerged with the light of bringing the Sangam literature. At the same time the question of political and social freedom began to trouble the minds of the educated youth. Some of the



British administrators displayed racial arrogance towards Indians but there were others who loved India. One such was Lord Ripon who was acclaimed by Indians as our father (Ripon Engal Appan). When Lord Ripon was appointed the Viceroy of India in 1880³ the process of political power descended to the grass root level and commenced through local self-government.

In such a background of social and political environment prevailing at the end of 19th century, the arrival of Lord Ripon in 1880

and the birth of another shining star Dr. Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar in a family of Nattukkottai Nagarathar took place almost in sequence.

He too earned a great name and brought glory by his munificence. The heritage of his community was a very renowned one. They followed the ancient Tamil saying “Thiraikadal Odiyum Thiraviyam Thedu” (scour the seas and amass wealth) earn money by going overseas. The Nagarathars of Nattukkottai followed this in their life to a great extent. They were traders from time immemorial. They lived in Nagaram that is a city. The Silapathigaram, a Tamil classic, tells us how the sons of traders and the ruling class used to play together on the seashore of Poompukar. It shows the equality which prevailed in the society.⁴ Long ago the Nagarathars migrated from Poompukar to an inland area known as Kanadukathan, that is the present Chettinad. They excelled every one in trade and commerce and in philanthropy. By hard work they became the backbone of South India and rendered services to the society. With such a great heritage of an Indian and Tamil society, Annamalai Chettiar was born on 30th of September 1881 at Kanadukathan in the District of Ramnad⁵. He was the Fourth Son of Muthiah Chettiar and Meenakshi Achi a rich and influential banker of this community. His family heritage is traceable from his forefather Ayangudi Vellaiyan Chettiar. Hence the family came to be known as V.S. family. Later Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar family came to be called S.R.M.M.A. family (For Genealogy table see page No.279). Annamalai Chettiar had three elder brothers namely Chidambaram Chettiar, Ramaswamy Chettiar and Arunachalam Chettiar.⁵

EARLY EDUCATION

As per the tradition in India, generally the upper strata of the society had a lineage with education. By a traditional ritual, known as ‘Atchara Appiyasam’ ‘**ml;rumg;gpahrk;**’ i.e., letter writing education, starts at the age of five for them. The merchant classes of India always gave importance to their professional education. As per the dictates of the tradition of the Nagarathars the education of Annamalai Chettiar commenced at five with religious initiation by invoking Lord Ganesa and the Goddess of learning, Saraswathi. He had his schooling at Kanadukathan and Karur.⁶ Here he studied subjects in Tamil. The subjects were 1. Ennchuvadi (Number and Numerals) and Kilvailokkam (Mathematics) 2. Nalvazhi (an ethical poems). These subjects are basic and very essential. Here in this school he memorized the saying of the great woman poet Avvaiyar, along with his class master. These sayings had a great impact on him for moral well being. His early schooling had no possibility to learn English. However, his father saw the importance of English in accordance with the changing times. Hence he wished his son to study English. He made arrangements for it. One T.P. Ponnusamy, a clerk in Telegraph office, was his English tutor in the beginning.⁷ Annamalai Chettiar learnt this language, with a quick grasp. Very quickly he started to read the English newspaper. This knowledge became basic for his progress and achievement. He became a good speaker in English and it helped him very much in his professional and public life.

Marriage

In those times early marriages were common, Girls and boys were married at a young age. When Annamalai Chettiar was 14 years old, in 1895 his marriage was conducted in the bride’s residence at Pallathur near Kanadukathan.⁸ It was an arranged marriage. His wife Sita was the daughter of M.A.R.M.P. Palaniyappa Chettiar. The marriage celebration was held on a grand scale.⁹

Turning a New Leaf

The tutelage and care of his father helped Annamalai Chettiar very much. He acquired all skills for business and knowledge for future responsibility to family, to the clan, to the society and to the nation. He was very close to his brother Ramaswami. His brother read Tamil deeply. He had a hard time in introducing Annamalai Chettiar to the Tamil Classics. In 1900 before the demise of his father, as per the custom, the family property was partitioned among the brothers. After this partition, he became independent and conducted his business and financial enterprise in Kanadukathan. His brother Ramaswamy Chettiar selected

the holy town Chidambaram, famous for the dance of Lord Nataraja, for his business,¹⁰ and his contribution to this town was immense.

His Family

The tradition of India always gave importance to the family. It was a role model for creating a happy family. The family was a very important institution in the society. There are many proverbs, which praise the character of father and mother. Following in the foot-steps of his father, AnnamalaiChettiar created a happy model family. He was a good husband and patriarch. He had three sons and four daughters, namely MuthiahChettiar, RamanathanChettiar and M.A. Chidambaram Chettiar,¹¹ValliammaiAchi, MeenakshiAchi, Unnamalai and Lakshmi Achi.¹²

Political Life

As the scenario of Indian politics created more scope for public opinion by spreading the English education, the Indian National Congress founded in 1885 began to spread her branches all over India.¹³ However, it was very soft in the beginning stages with the Britishers (1885-1905). During the same period and the following decade, there was a growing awareness among the Non-Brahmins in South India especially in Madras Presidency and the Idea of Dravidian heritage has gained popularity among the educated youth of the Non-Brahmin classes. The origin of the present day Dravidian parties is traceable to the Justice party.

The Dravidian heritage and Tamil heritage moved him more and more towards politics. He utilized the local self-government regulations, passed and implemented by Lord Ripon. He became the chairman of the KaraikudiMunicipality in 1910.¹⁴ He held this office till 1913. As chairman, he carried out the work of the Municipality with seriousness and sagacity and within three years, Karaikudi town witnessed a remarkable development. Every day in the morning, as municipal chairman he paid visits to the wards of the town and gave attention to public hygiene. Later he became the chairman of the District Board of Ramnad District. The Headquarters of the District was then at Madurai.

His Dravidian lineage and his position in business earned him great respect. When he was 31 years of age the Coronation Darbar was held in Delhi in 1912 for King George V, AnnamalaiChettiar received an invitation to attend the Darbar.¹⁵ He went to Delhi and attended the same. The British nominated him as a member of the Madras Legislative Council in 1916 and he served on it till 1920.¹⁶ When Montague Chelmsford Reforms Act was passed in 1919, he contested the election and became member of the Provincial Legislative Council in 1921.¹⁷ The others who were elected were V.S SrinivasaSastri, Mr.K.V.RamaswamiAyyangarand DewanBahadurRamabhadra Naidu. He served as a member of the Council for 15 years till 1935. When Mahatma Gandhi started the Non cooperation movement some of the leaders of the congress like Dr.Annie Besant and her supporters were satisfied with the prospect of Dominion status. V.S. SrinivasaSastri of the Servants of India Society, SrinivasaAiyangar, C.P. Ramaswamiyer, Aiyangar G.A Natesan, L.A GovindaraghavaAiyar and others formed what came to be known as the Liberal Party. They invited AnnamalaiChettiar to join the party which he readily did.¹⁸

In 1921, the Justice Party formed the government. He groomed his son Dr. Muthiah and his son-in-law in politics. He was a very popular and powerful leader. His NattukkottaiNagarathar community and other communities of South India supported and honoured him. When the Congress gained more ground in the Presidency, the Justice party started to decline. In spite of this trend, during this time AnnamalaiChettiar did a lot of good things to the people by being close to the administration and by using his personal clout and influence, till his death in 1948. He had close contact with British officers. They really had a great regard for him. Some of his associates and friends were members of Servant of India Society founded by Gokhale in 1907. They were Rt.Hon'ble V. SrinivasaSastri G.A. Natesan and Sir C.P. Ramaswamiyer . Every leader of repute at that time in the Madras Presidency had great respect for him. In Tamilnadu, the Congress leader S.Satyamurthy was very close to him. He always held him in great esteem. He had contact and friendship with all leaders of different sections of the society. This he was able to achieve since he showed the qualities

of a statesman “Politics to AnnamalaiChettiar was only a side line. His real interest outside his business lay in education which he felt was in a backwater and required re furbishing and revitalising”.¹⁹

The Problem of Burma

The Indian Merchant class had trading interests in Ceylon, Burma and the countries in the East. The British had Burma under their control since the time of Lord Dalhousie.²⁰ But the merchants of India especially of South India and particularly NattukkottaiNagarathars had trading interest and traded with Burma from the days of Cholas (an ancient Tamil ruling dynasty). The British began to think of separation of Burma from the time of the return of Lord Simon. The third Round Table conference gave further impetus for separation. Through official legislative majority in the Burma Parliament the act for separation was passed and Burma was separated in spite of the fact that the people of Burma and the people of Tamil origin were living peacefully in Burma. Now all the financial investments made by the merchants faced difficulties. They requested Rajah Sir AnnamalaiChettiar to lead a delegation. He immediately agreed. The others on the delegation were Mr. Mirza Mohamed Refi, Bar-at-law and an Ex-Mayor of Rangoon; Mr. Soorma (Bar-at-law), Mr.S.N. Haji of the ScindiaSteam Navigation Co. Mr. Desai was Secretary who was assisted by Ramanathan Chettiar.²¹

The Delegation reached London on 23rd February, 1935. The delegation met the Right Hon’ble Secretary of State and Mr. R.A.Butler, the Under Secretary for India. Rajah Sir AnnamalaiChettiar was able to impress both of them about the Indian case. The Delegation also had the opportunity to meet Lord Sir Malcolm Hailey. The delegation impressed upon them the need to change the clauses relating to land alienation and Indian immigration. Now the British government clearly explained its opinion relating to the above clauses. The government was interested in restricting only the immigration of unskilled labour into Burma. Again the Delegation pointed out the serious omission in the safeguarding provisions of the Bill. “While a certain degree of security in regard to the carrying on of trade and business and connected matters was guaranteed to subjects of British India, those belonging to Indian states. (native states) were forgotten. Knowing the commitments of the Chettiars of the Pudukkottai state and of the large number of men from the states of western India, who had been carrying on business in Burma for generations, the omission was painful and he forthwith took the matter up with the secretary of state”.²² After hearing the promises of the British, the Delegation trusted them and filled with hope they returned to India. Rajah Sir Annamalai pleaded for separate representation of the NattukkottaiChettiars Association in the Burmese Legislature. The government readily accepted his suggestion. Mr. R.A. Butler, Under Secretary of State while moving the amendment, said: “The Chettiar association has a very important position in Burma. It is composed mainly of merchants, bankers who perform services absolutely vital to Burma. It occupies a very important position in the national life and performs duties which Burma can ill afford to lose”.²³ Thus came recognition to the merchants of India in Burma.

Another mounting headache in the affairs of Burma was the complications of Income tax. Sir Girija Shankar went to Burma to reach an understanding but finally India was let down. ‘ A big meeting was held in the Gokhale Hall, Madras, at which all Madras was present – The old Guard was there in full force and among them were Rajagopalachari (Rajaji as he was affectionately known), Sir Kumara Venkata Reddy, Sir Mohammad Usman and other well known personalities of Madras.²⁴

When Burma was separated from India on 1st April 1937, it began to tax the agricultural income to treat agricultural income derived from Burmese land in 1936-37 as assessable to income tax, ignoring the fact that Burma was during that period a British province, governed by the revenue law of British India and taxed in accordance with it. Sir Annamalai presented the Indian case and got nothing except promises to look into it. India was rapidly becoming a step – child and her case were a cry in the wilderness.²⁵

On 4th November, 1941 Rajah Sir AnnamalaiChettiar made a speech on Indo – Burma Agreement. He said, “What we have to remember is that this agreement has pleased no one in the country, there may be exceptions. The Agreement denied to Indians the treatment which Burma willingly gives to the nationals of other countries. Indian interests have not received the consideration that they deserved. Indians have

invested enormously in Burma. Valuable rights have been acquired by Indians as a result of their substantial contribution towards the trade, agriculture and industry of Burma, Sir, it is only bare justice that these should be respected".²⁶

He also said that this Agreement is opposed to the assurances given to the Burma Indian Delegation which went to England in 1935, at the time of the passing of the Government of Burma Act. He demanded that this agreement should be considerably modified so as to make it acceptable to the Indian public. Some of the discriminatory clauses like that outrageous Clause – Clause 14 which imposes unheard of penalties, must go. He said that Government of India should be firm and protect the just rights of Indians.

All the efforts of Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar did not produce the desired result with regard to Burma, on account of the gruesome Second World War. However, this clearly shows his influence with the British to protect the interests of the Indians.

Educationalist

It is known to everyone that, basically for all reforms, education is the foundation which will help progress and understanding. When modernization commenced in India, the need for Western education was felt very much. Swamy Vivekananda took up the task of providing education through Ramakrishna Mission to bring about change and progress. Similarly Annamalai Chettiar really made a revolution for the cause of Tamil language and literature, though there was no sign in his physiognomy to identify him as a revolutionary. He did bring about a revolution in his life in a very natural way, through educational endeavour.

There were Sanskrit Colleges in ancient and medieval India. The hoary past of the Tamil speaks about the Tamil Sangam. But after the commencement of modernization, there were attempts only for the revival and retrieval of the Tamil classics. No great attempts were made for the propagation of Tamil Language, Literature and Music through modern methods by establishing Colleges²⁷ and Universities.²⁸ His background, heritage, tradition and his vision with a mission enabled him to achieve a splendid success in the field of education and through it a thorough socio – economic change was effected. The following poem in Tamil in praise of him authored by Dr.V.Sp.Manickam shows this

epy;yhjbry;tj;ijepiyf;fbra;jhd;
eP';fhjfiyg;g[ul;rpepuk;gbra;jhd;
,y;yhj g[yth;fis ,Ug;nggh; Mf;fp
fhzhjbgU';fHfk; fsj;Jitj;jhd;
,izahjjkpH; g[fiH<;of; bfhz;lhd;
bty;yhjbraypy;iyvd;Wnghw;w
tps';fpatd; kd; mz;zhkiyahd; thH;f²⁹

Apart from the establishment of Annamalai University in 1929,³⁰ his support and donation provided to various educational institutions deserves mention. They were

- Financial support to Raja's College, Madurai³¹
- Financial support to the construction of American College students Hostel, Madurai.
- Donation to National High School, Tiruchirappalli
- P.S. High School, Chennai
- Indian Public School, Dehradun
- Irwin School, New Delhi
- Many of the educational institutions in Burma and Colombo.

All the above financial aid provided by him amounts to one and a half crore rupees.

Banking and commerce

The Nagarathars were highly reliable businessmen and financiers. They had their own systems of money transaction, credit systems to the changing economic conditions of the modern times. AnnamalaiChettiar showed natural instinct in financial endeavours. He was highly reliable in the financial world. He was one of the Founder members of the Indian Bank which was established in 1921 with its branches in Bombay, Bengal and Madras. Recognizing his merits in the financial world, he was appointed the Governor of the Bank.³² He served this bank in the same capacity for many years and later he served the bank as Director till the end of his life.

His Service to Tamil Music

He was an ardent supporter of Tamil Music but it never means he hated all other music. To bring back the glory to Tamil Music, he did the following, Started the Music College in 1929.³³ Patronized scholars to propagate music Encouraged Research in Tamil Music. Organized conferences and Music concerts to popularize .Tamil Music. He had the desire to hear the Tamil Music all over the country. He took all efforts to realize this goal. By his efforts, the glorious past of the Tamil Music was brought to light. He started the Tamil IsaiSangam in Chennai. Sir R.K. ShanmukhamChettiar and himself were the presidents of the Sangam. One KachapakesaMudaliar was the secretary. This Sangam founded by him celebrated the golden jubilee in 1973. This association arranged regular concerts. His patronage to Tamil music was continued by his worthy heirs.

Service to temple

The glory of South India is reflected in a big way by the lofty temple towers. The institutions and the buildings of these sacred establishments have survived, because of grants and endowments made and donated by rulers, merchants, women, and common men. In this connection, NattukkottaiChettiars have made many such endowments and grants and took up the renovation of several temples of South India. Dr.Rajah Sir AnnamalaiChettiar was responsible for many such services. Some of the temples are in good condition today because of the renovation done by him. Like his father who did renovation and conducted Kumbabishakam in 1891 for Lord Nataraja Temple and other shrines of that temple, in 1931 he renovated the famous ThillaiGovindarajaPerumal temple located within the enclosure of ThillaiNataraja Temple. The above shrine was in a very bad condition, with roofings giving way to sun light. He also renovated the front, mandapa in front of Lord Nataraja shrine. He also renovated the temple of his family deity at Ilayathankudi. The Pasupatheesvarar temple at Karur was renovated by him. He donated money for the temples in Colombo and also to the Siva temple at Tiruvannamalai.³⁴

Honours and Titles

One of the yardsticks to measure the greatness of a man is the honours and titles showered on him. AnnamalaiChettiar received many such titles for his excellent career. In recognition of his best services as the chairman of Karaikudi Municipality, the Government of Madras conferred on him the title of 'RaoBahadur' in 1913.³⁵ In 1922, recognizing his services in educational and political sphere, the title 'DiwanBahadur' was given to him. In 1923, after the establishment of Sri Meenakshi College, the British government conferred the 'Knighthood' on him.³⁶In appreciation of the social and educational services 'Sir' title came to him. King. George V conferred the hereditary title 'Rajah' on 4th March 1929.³⁷ Thereafter he was known as Rajah AnnamalaiChettiar of Chettinad.educationalHonours

In 1932, the University of Madras in appreciation of his services in the field of education and service to the Burma Indians conferred the degree of 'Doctor of Law' on him³⁸ and it was a great recognition. The Annamalai University in recognizing his services to the University as Founder of the University conferred on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature in 1947.¹³⁹ He served the University for more than 19 years with great care, complete devotion and dedication till his death on 15th June 1948.⁴⁰

He has become immortal by virtue of his services to the society in general and to the Annamalai University in particular. Men may come and men may go but Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar remains forever for the vision he had and the mission he carried out. He himself explains his life's motto.

rptk;k;

_ eluh\$ bgUkhidj; jpde;njhWk; tz';Fntd;/ mz;zhkiyrh;tfyhrhiyapd; tsh;r;rpiax;bthWehSk; rpe;jpg;ngd;/ jkpH; ehbl';Fk; jkpHpirKG';fntz;Lbkd;gJvdJMty;/ <l;Yk;. fhj;jYk;. tFj;jYk; vd; thH;f;ifapd; bfhs;if⁴¹- K/mz;zhkiybrl;oahh;

He was a man of vision and mission and deeds. His life's motto was,

1. Worshipping Lord Nataraja every day 2. Thinking about the growth of Annamalai University. 3. Tamil Isai. 4. The mission of the merchant class or a message of quality of an individual to lead a better life. He carried this ambition to its full realization. He was man of realization and a proud 'Dravidian' and Indian, an example for generations to come to imbibe his good qualities of honesty, sagacity, integrity, etc.

"Every year, the anniversary of his birth, the 30th September, is observed as a day of remembrance and thanks giving. This thanks giving service ensures a magnificent future for the purpose which Annamalai Chettiar held dear⁴²

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