

Courtallam – a confluence of significances

By A. Rangarajan

While in London recently I had the occasion to glance through some old records and papers pertaining to India collected during the British Raj at the erstwhile India Office. One of them pertained to a curious legal battle that raged between the trustees of the Thirukuthalanathaswami temple on the one side and the Colonial administration, represented by the collector and conservator of Forests of Tinnevely, on the other. This legal battle that dates back to the first decade of the 20th century intrigued me, as one hailing from Tirunelveli. Even more significantly the Madras High Court had granted leave for the petition to be filed in the Privy Council in England in 1916. As most of you may know that only cases of extra-ordinary significance were allowed to go to the Privy Council. It was the ultimate court of appeal and the Trustees of the Kuttalanathasami temple had chosen to go to London, perhaps after losing in the high court. The dispute was over control of certain lands with each party claiming entire rights to administer -the area under dispute. The Colonial Government's petition spoke at length about the salubrious nature of the weather in Courtallam. They had anticipated that many Europeans would choose to settle there.

By book marking this page from the history of this abode in the South Western Ghats, one can recognize the significances Courtallam held. Its nature and celebrated 'season', the temple and Tamil heritage that was loosely associated with the Kuthalanathaswami temple mark these.

Talking about nature, as one follows the course of the Western Ghats Southwards, after the Srivilliputtur forests that lie to the South of Vaigai, one sees increase in the biodiversity of these majestic mountains. Beyond the ranges of Sivagiri, Chellapuli, Vasudevanallur and Puliangudi as one approaches Ambasamudram hills and in the vicinity of Manimuthar and Tenkasi, rich forests become even richer. It is in this lap of luxuriant nature lies nestled the Courtallam hills. Known for its plant life diversity, the ancient Tamil Medicinal system of Sidha surely saw Courtallam as a special abode in the Western Ghats. Thus the confluence of

significances saw these three aspects as defining- Nature, Tamil and its Weather. The famous Nature chronicler and wildlife photographer M. Krishnan had observed lion tailed macaques (LTM) in Courtallam. Not only did he observe them, he photographed them on the ground and thus Krishnan showed that LTMs were not rigidly arboreal. These forest are known to be rich in Orchids and even arboreal snakes. The bio-diversity is a topic in itself and needs much elaboration.

The Macaques provide a convenient point to switch our thoughts towards the literary legacy of Courtallam from its Natural wealth. The famous Kuttrala Kuravanchi celebrated monkeys. These sweet Tamil verses were meant for easy committing to memory and recitation whenever one felt like. Vanarangal kani koduthu manthiyodu konjum.... In former days Kuttrala Kuravanchi revered as an important body of literary work which was often quoted. Closer to modern times Tamil Literature had another reason to celebrate Courtallam along with the personality of the great TKC. Rasikamani TKC as he was popularly known was a giant of personality on the Tamil literary scheme and he chose Courtallam as the place to live and explore Tamil literature. He was a great expert on Kambaramayana and could talk eloquently on this epic rendered into Tamil by Kamban. Kambaramayana was not just a great religious epic, the Maga Kavi did not translate it but he transformed it with great literary taste and depth befitting the great Tamil literary traditions. And TKC was one of its foremost exponents. Rasikamani TKC was so keen on literature, literary discourses and literary discussions that he encouraged one and all to sit in the 'Thinnai' and discuss 'Ilakkiyam'. For those who know Tamil literature well and treasure it, TKC was a great man and is remembered as such.

Turning now to the conducive climate with which most people associate Courtallam with, it is well known for the many waterfalls and 'season' which is celebrated over time. Even for those who are not familiar with TKC, or the Lion Tailed Macaque or Kuttrala Kuravanchi the 'season' is very familiar, that is why it brings people by the scores to Courtallam. The phenomenon of the drizzle made the 'season' such a welcome phase in a year. This happens

whenever the South West Monsoon is in full swing, sitting on the eastern rain shadow face of the Western Ghats the drizzle or the 'saral' spills over in Courtallam, bringing with it a special and salubrious weather. Thus if the pious thronged the Kuttalanathaswami temple, the pleasure seekers thronged the waterfalls and the air in general.

Today of course much of the crowds indulge in unregulated tourism, often mindlessly spoiling the beauty of the place. Going through the legal papers of 1916, it appears to have been a problem even then! Combined with deforestation and land grabbing in the region, unregulated tourism poses a serious threat to these hills. If we are to preserve this unique heritage in the Southern part of Tamil Nadu, exceptional in its natural and cultural significance, for posterity, we all need to something. The Government, local bodies and the well-meaning public, especially the learned and well placed in the society, should all come forward and do our best and arrest this downward slid. Courtallam could as well be the litmus test for the entire Southern Western Ghats.

Courtallam with its heritage and links to literature, Sidha medicine and great literary men of yester years makes us stand tall. Our Thru Courtallam indeed is a jewel in the Southern part of Tamil Nadu unique in its natural and cultural significance. Along with the many places of interest and heritage in Tirunelveli district, Courtallam has a wealth of history and aesthetic appeal for the discerning visitor. Let us celebrate it, enjoy it and preserve it for the future generations.