

## Chapter 4

### The Pioneer - Kandathil Mathulla Mapillai

#### Birth to childhood

The year 1794 is a milestone in the history of our family; it was the year Moothedathu Kocheapen Tharakan's third son, Mathulla, the founder of Kandathil family was born

The little boy's first brush with education was under Kallupara Kanjiravelil Asan. As he grew older, he was sent along with other children to Chenganoor to study under Poovathur Varkey Asan. The well-read and learned Varkey Asan was so much a man of his times that he was a great influence on Mathulla. Because of the Asan's high standards of excellence, Mathulla's erudition and sense of responsibility were way ahead of other children of his age.

One of Mathulla's skills was penmanship for which he was much sought after. People who approached him to script legal documents at the Tiruvalla court admired his calligraphic skills. He soon became a frequent visitor to the court and some of the most important events in his life took place because of his close association with the court. For instance, once when the Tahsildar wanted someone with good writing skills to prepare a legal document, Mathulla was summoned for the purpose and his work impressed the Tahsildar so much that he began to flood him with documents.

The Tahsildar kept Mathulla so busy that he often had to work late into the night. Getting back to Kallupara at late hours was not safe; even the bravest were reluctant to walk through the narrow lanes lined by thick undergrowth on both sides. And, Mathulla had only a servant as companion.

Aware of the young man's predicament, Kurien of Kanjirakattu in Tiruvalla invited Mathulla home one night. Kurien thought it was a privilege to take home a person who had won the Tahsildar's respect.

#### On to marriage

Kurien was very impressed by Mathulla and when he learnt that the young man hailed from the Moothedathu family, he knew his eldest daughter, Mariamma, could not ask for a better match. His wish was soon to be granted.

Kanjirakattu the ancestral home of Kodyattu, one of the prominent Christian families of Tiruvalla to which Kurien belonged. Mariamma was the eldest of his three daughters. His second daughter was married into the Valakuzhiyil family in Mallapalli, and the third in Thundathil, Tiruvalla. Kurien had three sons from his second marriage: the eldest, Kurien, stayed at Puvanakunnel; the second, Kochucherukan, lived in Kodyattu and the third, Idikula, in Madathil. Puvanakunnel Kurien's son became Fr Yakob and was known as Kodyattu Valiachan. Punoochen from Mazhuvangattil in Tiruvalla was Kochucherukan's son. Idikula had only daughters. So his branch of the family survived through adoption cum marriage.

Mariamma had a strained relationship with her stepmother and so her paternal aunt who lived in Koukara in Tiruvalla took her home, after her marriage to Mathulla, for her confinement. Thus the couple's first child was born at Koukara. This was the basis of the strong friendship that blossomed between the Kandathil and Koukara families. When Mariamma returned to Kandathil after the delivery, she brought along her aunt's grandson Kochuchandychen, who later fathered Chathoth Kochkunju.

### **Mathulla– the name**

Mathulla Mapillai got his name from his father's brother who, through his adoption cum marriage, lived in Kanjirapalli. 'Mathulla' was a modification of the name 'Mathen', which was a throwback from the Paruthimoodu family.

In 1819, when Mathulla moved to Kandathil in Vallamkulam, he had two sons, Eapachen and Keevarchen. An exceptionally intelligent and knowledgeable man like Mathulla was not content with farming alone. He wanted to explore new avenues and set his eyes on the trading business.

### **Trade and business**

Mariamma's family was into tobacco wholesale business in Tiruvalla and Mathulla joined them. He started tobacco business by purchase of substantial quantity from

Thiruvalla and selling at Vallamkulam in small lots. It was the beginning of a great venture for he soon branched out on his own by sourcing the tobacco himself. In those days, Purakkad was the major harbour and business hub of Travancore. Mathulla procured tobacco from there and sold it in Vallamkulam, and he became the most successful tobacco trader of Travancore. The profits he made from this venture formed the foundation of Kandathil family's prosperity.

Anecdotes about his luck and business acumen are plenty. On one occasion there was an excess of low-quality tobacco in the godown at Purakkad. The government ordered the officers in charge of the godown to dispose of the old stock as two shiploads were expected to arrive soon.

So when the traders came to buy tobacco, the godown officers pressurised them to buy more than their usual quantity. But the traders had not brought enough money to buy the extra lot. This angered the officers and they began to harass them. The traders were made to bend down and a heavy stone placed on their backs and they had to undergo this ordeal in the scorching sun.

This merciless sight greeted Mathulla when he came in to do business. He abhorred the treatment meted out to the traders and resolved to set things right. Taking courage, he approached an officer and offered to do anything to avert the torture and end the agony of fellow traders. The officer replied that he would have to buy the entire lot of tobacco in the godown. Mathulla agreed to.

The officer was aware of Mathulla's reputation and had faith in his word. He ordered the stones to be removed from the backs of the traders and sold all the stock to Mathulla. As Mathulla did not have enough money to pay for the entire lot, The officer offered him his gold waistband Mathulla and told him to pawn it for the required sum. That is how Mathulla completed the business that day.

While he was busy loading his boat with the tobacco, new instructions arrived from the government. The ship bringing fresh stock had sunk; The instruction was to hold the stock in the godown and sell it in small quantities to the traders at a high price. But the tobacco had already been sold to Mathulla! Lucky Mathulla was able to sell off the

entire tobacco at a higher price to the traders. You can imagine the profit he made out of the deal!

When on the subject of tobacco trade, let us not forget to mention Mathulla's faithful companion, Oolethu Uthapan, who always travelled with him to Purakkad.

The boat that Mathulla used for his trade was later preserved by Late Sri K.C. Mammen Mapillai, then chief editor of the Malayala Manorama, in honour of his enterprising forefather.

Besides tobacco, Mathulla traded in arecanut and jaggery, and cultivated sugarcane. He would buy arecanut from Vallamkulam and surrounding areas, employ workers to dry and process it, and sell it to Muslim traders in Kadakattu to make a tidy profit. The sugarcane crops also brought him profit.

### **Mathulla Mapillai's generosity**

Many stories abound about Mathulla's generosity and kindness. Once, a man bought a buffalo from Kandathil. Unfortunately, on his way home, the buffalo broke its rope and made good its escape. The distressed buffalo buyer came crying to Mathulla. And Mathulla readily returned the money to the plaintive buyer. Amazingly, three months later, the buffalo came ambling into the Kandathil house! There is yet another interesting incident. A chettiar (Tamil trader) came to Kandathil to buy jaggery. That day, it was Mathulla's youngest son Pothachen who was keeping count of the jaggery being weighed and sold. The chettiar and Pothachen counted separately, and when it was over, the numbers did not tally. The chettiar argued that he had bought one measure less than what Pothachen claimed. Pothachen, hotly, disagreed. Mathulla heard them out, disregarded his son's opinion, accepted the chettiar's claim to be true and concluded the business. However, the boat that carried the chettiar's jaggery sank, plunging the jars of jaggery into the river. The distressed chettiar ran back to Kandathil with the sad news. Pothachen said it was God's punishment for lying about the measure. Reprimanding his son, Mathulla returned all the money to the chettiar and sent him away happy.

When the water in the river receded, Mathulla was able to recover most of the jars of jaggery. So well had they been sealed that the jaggery remained intact. The cost of

jaggery had risen by then, so Mathulla was able to sell it at a much higher price and make a tidy profit. Luck was his mate. All his businesses flourished beyond expectations and his fame spread far and wide.

### **Family life**

All his children – six sons and two daughters – were good-looking, healthy and strong. Mariamma and Mathulla raised them with love and care. The elder sons, Eapachen and Keevarchen, were sent to Kallupara for their studies. The other four studied at home under the tutelage of Koshy Asan from Karipuzha. Mathulla, quite unlike the people of the times, was particular that his daughters should also be well-educated.

The siblings were close to one another. The elder brothers were respectfully called achen and that is why 'achen' is added to their names.

The youngest son Pothachen was born in 1832. The same year, Mathulla's eldest son, Eapachen, married from the Kurundhotathu family in Ayroor. Pothachen was still very small when his sister, Mariamma, was born, so he was looked after by Kunjandamma, Eapachen's young bride. Pothachen grew very close to her.

### **Mathulla's financial status**

Mathulla acquired land and paddy fields in many places and had a flourishing dairy business. The Kandathil property, 50 paras of paddy fields and some land, were all that he had received as inheritance from his father. Mathulla gave this land to his sister for sugarcane cultivation. Of the paddy fields, he gave away 14 para to Chembakassery (Vadakkemuriyil Kandathil) Varughese Mapillai and 16 para to Kochupotha. The remaining 20 para was given away to the family member who stayed at Moothedathu. Every Sunday, the entire Kandathil family used to assemble at Moothedathu for lunch after church. It is for this hospitality that Mathulla gave him the land.

In 60 years Mathulla's assets multiplied. A land tax receipt of 1838 (1014 Avani, first day) states that he paid Rs 85 as tax for his property which included 33 plots. Of course, the value of land cannot be compared to what it is now. Nevertheless, Rs 85 was a large sum and it gives an idea of the extent of property he had. Mathulla bought

Kerathnalloor, part of Kandathil property, for 60 sovereigns. Today, its value has increased a hundredfold. Mathulla's other assets also appreciated with time.

After his death, his wife, Mariamma, bought the 'Ezhambagam' property for Rs 1 lakh. Mathulla's business acumen was inherited by his sons, and in this way the family's wealth multiplied.

### **Good deeds**

Mathulla's life was exceptional. For a Christian – hailing from a remote village – to use his smartness and ingenuity to rise to such success and fulfill his destiny, was an achievement indeed!

Put it down to his distinguished personality. Tall and not so fair, Mathulla had impressive looks. He wore dhoti with a towel over one shoulder, a silver shield and a knife tucked into his waist, a wooden stick veetti rod in his right hand, and an umbrella in his left. The sight of him commanded awe and respect. He was left-handed, and his youngest son, Pothachen, was his splitting image.

Mathulla was a religious man. Apart from daily prayer, he observed weekly fasts (Friday and Wednesday). Attending Sunday service was a practice that he looked forward to with joy.

His eldest son, Eapachen, believed that it was because of his father's deep devotion to God that Kandathil family escaped tragedies like untimely and unnatural deaths and terminal illnesses. This good fortune lasted for over 40 years. He termed it as 'blessings showered on the family' because of his father's good deeds.

Generosity remained Mathulla's bedfellow right up to his last days. On his death bed, he asked for the files that contained the accounts of the poor people who owed him money. He not only waived their loans but also got the files destroyed, ensuring complete removal of the records.

Indeed, 'I will bless your descendants forever', as written in the Bible, came true for Mathulla and his family.

**Mathulla's end**

Mathulla was diabetic. He died at the age of 61, in 1855, and was laid to rest in Kallupara church cemetery. His death plunged the family into grief. One of his grandsons, Maninattu Kochirupootti, was so inconsolable that he grew a beard for a year in mourning. Mathulla's wife, Mariamma, lived on for 12 more years in a prolonged state of mourning.

The vastness and greatness of the Kandathil family, as it stands today, are due to Mathulla. He was the bedrock of our existence. Generations will remember him. As on date there are more than 1500 family units and the population is well above 4000 we have come to 10<sup>th</sup> generation

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