

■ Uthukuli zamin descendants on a mission to protect heritage nurtured by 37 generations

Preserving 800-year-old rich heritage

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With every passing year in cosmopolitan Coimbatore, a slice of heritage and tradition that has been a part and parcel of this landscape, dissolves into oblivion, paving the way for modernisation.

At a time when even farmers' sons and daughters are moving to the cities to embrace technology, city-based manufacturer of bio-products Siddharth Kalingarayar, 37, one of the descendants of the Kalingarayan lineage whose ancestors are famous for having constructed the Kalingarayan canal in Erode, has been toiling hard to protect and preserve a heritage that dates back several centuries.

It is his life's mission to preserve a family heritage which can be traced back to 37 generations.

Mr Kalingarayar is actually preserving artefacts and monuments that speak volumes of the rich history and lifestyle of people in this part of the country that has, for all practical purposes, gone with the wind.

Located a few dozen kilometres from Coimbatore on way to Pollachi is the Uthukuli zamin. Here, Mr Kalingarayar's home needs no address: it is called aranmanai (palace), and his father Arun Kumar Kalingarayar, who currently lives there, is still addressed as 'raja'.



Set in a sprawling estate of three acres, the constructed area alone could be two-thirds of it and, according to the inmates, a significant portion of this palace could be around 800 years old.

"When we were children, I was unaware of the importance and wealth of all that was around me. From spears and swords that date back at least 500 years to copper coins that could be much older, to animals killed and stuffed by my forefathers, our home has been a treasure trove that was left uncared-for for generations. I am just restoring them," says the young Kalingarayar.

While his ancestors, who moved from Erode to Uthukuli several generations ago, owned thousands of acres and even commanded huge armies, according to historians, the palace was abandoned as modernisation swept over the zamin during the middle years of the last century.

"For at least 30 years, this palace was unoccupied. We just visited here for family functions and get-togethers as my father, his brothers and cousins moved elsewhere seeking a better fortune. Sometime in the '70s, my parents moved back and my mother inculcated in me the importance of my heritage," he says.

Now, when palaces and rajas are merely 'stuff' read in historical fiction and seen in films, the youngster and his two cousins Hariraj Kalingarayar and Vishnu Kalingarayar, the present heirs to the palace, try to balance the burden of a rich lineage with the madness of the present times.

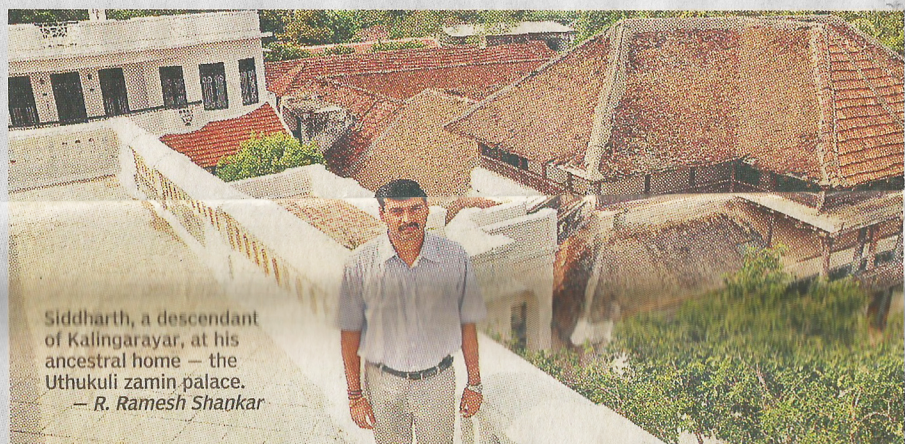
"When we were children, the palace was a lot of fun. It remains a fascinating place to me and anyone who visits it," says Mr Hariraj Kalingarayar, actor and wildlife photographer based in Chennai. As Pongal dawns, Mr Siddharth Kalingarayar is back in zamin Uthukuli, celebrating the festival with the villagers.

While much of history is getting lost to modernisation, at least this bit is in safe hands.

■ Kalingarayan canal stands test of time

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■ The Uthukuli zamin stands out for its contribution to society through the Kalingarayan canal that has been aiding agriculture across acres of arid lands in Erode district and beyond



Siddharth, a descendant of Kalingarayar, at his ancestral home — the Uthukuli zamin palace.
— R. Ramesh Shankar

A serpentine tale of a canal

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COIMBATORE, JAN. 14

While there are several zamindari families in this part of the country who share a similar fate as that of the Kalingarayan family, the Uthukuli zamin stands out for its contribution to society through the Kalingarayan canal that was constructed more than 725 years ago, and still remains strong, aiding agriculture across acres of arid lands in Erode district and beyond.

Unlike other canals built during the time, the Kalingarayan canal has so many curves and bends that it resembles a snake. As with all historical monuments, several tales are spun explaining the peculiar path of the canal.

According to Mr A. Vadivelu, author of the book, *The ruling chiefs, nobles and zamindars of India*, the builder of the canal, Sathanthai, was upset about the dry arid lands in his region when he had a dream one night. "An old sage appeared in his vision and asked him to construct an anicut on the Bhavani and dig a channel," he writes. "A peacock has run chasing a snake from a certain point on the



Kalingarayan canal was built by Sathanthai some 725 years back after he got a vision in which a sage asked him to construct an anicut on Bhavani

Uthukuli zamin, as a form of homage to the peacock in the dream," says the book, published in 1915.

After the canal's construction, the Kalingarayan family moved to Uthukuli and established a village which they have been ruling for around 800 years. The palace at Uthukuli has its own tale.

bed of the river Bhavani. There are traces left. Take the course," the sage told Sathanthai in his dream.

Legend has it that Sathanthai found traces of the snake chased by a peacock and, hence, the canal was named Kalingan canal

after the serpent. Sathanthai was given the title of Kalinga Rayar for completing the canal successfully, a construction that has been functional for eight centuries. "And peacock became the emblem of the

