

PROPAGANDA AND PICKETING OF FOREIGN CLOTH SHOPS IN MADURAI, 1929-33

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The Lahore Congress of 1929 resolved that the aim of the Congress should be the attainment of Purna Swaraj and in order to achieve this goal the Congress Working Committee which met at Sabarmati in February 1930 authorised Gandhiji to start civil disobedience at a time and place of his choice. Gandhiji decided to launch the Civil Disobedience campaign by defying the salt laws in the country while directing the Civil Disobedience campaign in the country Gandhiji requested the people not only to defy the salt laws; but also to picketing of foreign cloth shops.

Sagotharigal Sangam

Gandhiji felt that women could play a significant role in the boycott of foreign cloth and this idea of Gandhiji was put into practice by the Sagotharigal Sangam in Madurai. It is also known as Sisters Association. The members of this association including Subbulakshmi Amma, Thayammal, Padmasani Ammal and Dr. Pitchaimuthu Ammal made intensive propaganda for the boycott of foreign cloth¹. The propaganda for the boycott of foreign cloth at first did not bear fruit. Madurai imported foreign cloth from Madras and as trading in foreign cloth was the work of Sourashtra community which supported the congress movement by offering regular monthly subscriptions, the congress in Madurai was not able to undertake the picketing of shops selling foreign cloth.² Leaflets regarding the propaganda of boycott of foreign cloth were distributed and foreign cloth dealers were asked not to import cloth. Many traders agreed in principle to stop the import of foreign cloth but they did not stop the import of goods for which orders were made in the past and hence the congress volunteers were not able to affect a complete stoppage of foreign cloth sale in Madurai district. But it has been reported that during the early phase of the civil disobedience campaign in Tamilnadu picketing of liquor shops was generally more successful than that of shops selling foreign cloth.³

Striking of Picketing Foreign Cloth

The movement of boycotting foreign cloth gained momentum in Madurai after the settlement of 5 March 1931. One propaganda committee for picketing foreign cloth shops functioned in Madurai with its office near Thirumalai Nayak Palace. Many public meetings were held at which the speakers appealed to the people to use khaddar and boycott foreign cloth. Peaceful picketing of shops selling foreign cloth was held at East Chitrai Street, Amman Sannathi, Venkalakadai Street and South Masi Street. The most striking feature of these picketing was the large scale participation of women in them. By May 1931, picketing

of foreign cloth shops was very active in Madurai town and K.Basham, a congress leader of Madras, he witnessed the peaceful picketing in Madurai greatly appreciated the work of Madurai picketers.⁴ The picketing of foreign cloth shops remained suspended for some days owing to the holding the Tamilnadu Youth Conference in Madurai on 6 June 1931. This conference held under the presidency of Mrs.Rukmani Lakshmipathy of Madras. She expressed its profound faith in the boycott of foreign goods especially British goods and called upon the youths to carry on the picketing of foreign cloths.⁵ The picketing activity was resumed from June 10 onwards. From the beginning of September, the picketing operations were very active. A.Vaidyanatha Iyer, Chinnasamy Naidu, Sivaramakrishna Iyer, Vedarama Iyer, Haji Mohammed Maulana Sahib, N.M.R.Subbaraman, Subramania Iyer, Sangiliah Pillai and A.S.Lakshmana Iyer were among those who took part in these activities. The merchants of Ezhukadal Street cloth shop motivated by the peaceful picketing campaigns of the congress volunteers offered to stop the sales of the foreign cloth stocks with them and also agreed not to make fresh orders for the purchase of foreign cloth. Boycotting of foreign cloth shops was so active that the Calcutta shop in Amman Sannathi declared its solvency and people did not even come forward to take part in the auctioning of that shop.⁶

Picketing was the most common form of open activity in Tamilnadu and other parts of the country after the resumption of Civil Disobedience in January 1932 and it was concerned mostly with the foreign cloth shops in the towns, Madurai, Madras, Viruthunagar and Ramnad were the main centres for the urban picketing of 1932 in Tamilnadu.

Dictators Picketing Operations

As the Madurai District and Taluk Congress Committees were declared unlawful by the Government, the Congressmen appointed "dictators" to direct the picketing operations. There were 43 dictators took part in the picketing operations in Madurai from January 1932 to January 1933 and they were all arrested. The names of the arrested dictators included N.Balaier, P.K.Ramachari, P.Sundaram Pillai, Venkatarayalu Iyer, Kumarasamy Iyer, Ramanathan, Sowmiya Narayanan, Narayana Konar, Ayya Pillai, Ponniah Ambalam and A.Palanisamy Konar.⁷ There were three women dictators namely as Thayammal, Kamalabhai and Padmasani Amma were arrested on 11, 15 and 22 January 1932 respectively. The dictators along with a group of volunteers marched through the principal streets of Madurai town holding national flags and raising boycott slogans. They picketed the foreign cloth shops of Haji Moosa Sait Shop and New Bombay Hall in East Chitrai Chitrai Street, Amman Sannathi, Ezhukadal Street and South Masi Street.⁸

In the Thirumalai Nayak Palace are T.K.Rama was serving as the captain of the Congress volunteers.⁹ A.S.Ramudu Iyer was another congressman who assisted in organising the picketing operations in this area. One Lajpati Nilayam founded in 1930 served as a great centre for the congress volunteers who took part in 1931 and 1932 picketing operations in Madurai. Jatin Das Memorial Reading Room was also housed in this Nilayam and congress volunteers and leaders used to assemble at this Nilayam daily and held discussions about the picketing programme. V.Irulappan Servai was stay near the Lajpati

Nilayam took much effort in organizing the volunteers for picketing the cloth shops in Madurai.¹⁰ On some occasions volunteers from other places visited Madurai and took part in the picketing operations. Vaikom Rajavarma, Chittarji Solomon, Subramania Iyer. They were belonged from Tirunelveli District. Ratnasamy Nadar from Virudhunagar, Arumuga Pulavar from Mudukulattur, Rathnammal from Bodinayakkanur, Jeyaram Sundarraj from Rajapalayam and Kanniappa Mudaliar from Tiruttangal were belonging to this category of volunteers.¹¹ The picketing operations were done quite peacefully and there was no breach of peace by the picketers. However, as the Prevention of Molestation and Boycotting Ordinance of January 5, 1932 had made all forms of picketing illegal, the picketers were lathicharged by the police in the alleged attempt of dispersing the crowd.¹² Some dictators and a number of volunteers were badly wounded by the lathi-charges. Various Newspapers had reported about the numerous lathi-charges made during 1932-33 picketing operations in Madurai. On some occasions the volunteers were dragged on the ground for a considerable distance. In a picketing operation in January 1932 volunteer Ayyasami was severely beaten and this question was raised in the Madras Legislative Council on 24 March 1932 by K.R.Venkatarama Iyer of Madurai. In his reply the Home Member admitted that picketer Ayyasamy might have been beaten in the course of the dispersal of the unlawful assemblies.¹³

Contribution of People's Hospital

There was one Congress Hospital at 155, South Masi Street, Madurai for treating the volunteers injured by the police attacks. It was called People's Hospital and L.Krishnasamy Bharati, M.A., B.L., was the supervisor of this hospital. People donated liberally to this hospital and many patriotic doctors attended it for giving free treatment.¹⁴ The Madurai District Congress Office was located in the premises of the People's Hospital at one time; but it was shifted to another house in the distant street in December 1931. Yet the District Magistrate, Madurai considered the Congress Hospital building as the de facto office of the unlawful association comprising the Madurai District Congress Committee. He felt that there was no real need for a people's hospital as there was ample accommodation for all the injured persons in the Government hospital in the town. The district magistrate, therefore, notified the peoples hospital under the Sub-Section 3 of the Unlawful Association Ordinance, 1932 (Ordinance IV of 1932) and the police took possession of the house and the movables found in the hospital on 3 February 1932. At the time of seizure of the hospital there was one volunteer undergoing treatment for some injury due to picketing and he was sent to the government hospital for further treatment. The seizure of the people's hospital was an instance of repression by the local authorities in Madurai.¹⁵

L.Krishnasamy Bharati, the supervisor of the peoples Hospital was the 40th dictator. He along with a group of seven volunteers took part in the picketing of foreign cloth shops on 5 December 1932. Their procession started from the Pillaiyarkoil at the junction of North and West Masi Streets.¹⁶ The dictator sang some inspiring songs and after reaching Amman Sannathi they picketed the shops selling foreign cloth. The police arrested Krishnasamy

Bharathi and took him in a van. It is said to one that volunteers N.Ramarathinam and cycle shop Balasubramanian who accompanied Krishnasamy Bharathi for the picketing were brutally lathi-charged by the police. P.N.K.Subburam, a Sourashtra Congressman succeeded L.Krishnasamy Bharathi as the 41st dictator and his band of volunteers too picketed the foreign cloth shops in December 1932. They held a procession and carried placards having the slogan "success, to the congress, we want nothing British". They were arrested near the Bombay Hall Cloth Shop and sentenced.¹⁷

For of Individual Civil Disobedience

Sequel to the arrest of all leading Congressmen, there had been a marked decline in the civil disobedience activities in the country even before the beginning of the 1933. Moreover as Gandhiji showed great concern for the Harijan welfare, the congress suspended the civil disobedience campaign in July 1933. A satyagraha campaign in the form of individual civil disobedience was organised in August 1933 and during this month Madurai witnessed some picketing operations before the foreign cloth shops. The arrested satyagrahis were, however, let off after some warning. In October 1933, picketing by a batch of youths had become a daily affair in Madurai. The volunteers raised the boycott slogans and picketed the cloth shops in the Amman Sannathi Street. The police arrested 13 picketers – Bothiraju and 12 others and the city magistrate of Madurai convicted all of them. Apart from the 13 convictions in Madurai in October 1933 there was no other conviction in the whole of Tamilnadu on grounds of civil disobedience. By the end of October, 1933 the Civil Disobedience activity virtually ceased in Tamilnadu with the exception of one or two cases of spasmodic picketing in Madurai. Madurai, thus, played a leading role in Tamilnadu in the picketing of foreign cloth shops during 1932-33 and the success in the picketing operations was manifested in the appreciable sale of khaddar in the Khaddar Vastralaya and other cloth shops in Madurai.¹⁸

It has been reported that the Madurai Congressmen apart from their active picketing operations in their home town, visited many outstations and did much propaganda for picketing and other civil disobedience activities. Srinivasa Varadhan, D.Konda and Thiyagaraja Sivam of Madurai made propaganda for picketing campaigns in Tirunelveli. Some volunteers from Madurai took part in the picketing campaigns in Madras and Cuddalore.¹⁹ Lakshmana Perumal Pillai and his wife Sornathammal visited many villages in Madurai and did much propaganda for boycotting foreign cloth. Krishna Kunthu made a propaganda tour in Tirupuvanam Taluk and Srinivasa Varathan and his wife Padmasani Ammal did the same in Tirupasethi, Samayanallur, Sholavandan and Paravai villages.²⁰ A.Vaidyanatha Iyer, President of the Madurai District Congress Committee, visited Tiruparankundram and spoke in the meeting, as to how to conduct toddy shop and foreign cloth shop picketing peacefully. N.M.R.Subbaraman, N.Balaier and T.K.Rama visited Tirumangalam, Sattur, Virudhunagar and Sivakasi in a Congress propaganda tour. N.Subramania Iyer visited Alagarkoil and made two days of propaganda.²¹ During March 1933 a batch of 10 volunteers from Madurai visited on foot the villages of Paravai,

Thodaneri, Pothumbu, Kumaram, Achchampatti and Alanganallur and made propaganda for civil disobedience. They also distributed congress pamphlets for a no-tax campaign. They were arrested near Cholvandan and sentenced to 2 months RI. Subsequently five more batches of volunteers were sent from Madurai to perform this propaganda work. They were led by Lakshmana Raja, P.N.Rajagopal Iyendar, P.S.Sanjeeva Raju and others. Most of them were arrested and sentenced.²²

The foreign cloths formed the special features of the Civil Disobedience Movement. The ordinary features of this movement consisted of holding processions and mass meetings, singing of national songs and hoisting of national flags in defiance of prohibitory orders. One significant feature of these activities in Madurai was that they were all held in a perfectly non-violent manner.

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