

# THE SWADESHI MOVEMENT OF TUTICORIN AND TIRUNELVELI IN MADRAS, 1905-1911

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## Introduction

The year 1905 marked the turning point in the history of national politics and the state of India. The date for the official separation of Bengal on 16 October 1905 was a day of great darkness. It was considered a day of fasting and prayer in many parts of India. This paper summarizes the movement for the liberation struggle in Tuticorin and Tirunelveli in Madras.

## Swadeshi Movement

Two years from 1905 to 1907 was a time of resistance and extremism, with nationalists waging powerful anti-English propaganda and indulging in the free use of language and pen. They did so with great self-sacrifice, and their protest was seen in full swing in the famous Swedish community. The Swiss were intended to use Indian-manufactured goods and to boycott British goods.<sup>1</sup> The year 1906 was declared the year of the Swadeshi. The response of the Office of the President of Madras to the Swadeshi organization has been very positive. The champion of this force in the Presidency was V.O.Chidambaram Pillai, a well-respected Tuticorin lawyer who was once hailed as the Tilak of South India. He founded the Tuticorin Industrial welfare Association and Dharma Sangam to promote the Swadeshi and Commerce industry. The National Emporium, a swimwear shop, and a spinning and weaving center were also established. Thanks to his efforts Swadeshi Steam Navigation Ltd. It was in Tuticorin. It was registered on October 16, 1906 with the alleged capital of ten lakhs of rupees under the Indian Companies Act of 1882 as Registration No. 13 of 1906. Its Registered Office was No. 85 on Great Cotton Road, Tuticorin. Swadeshi Steamer Sha Allum was to run between Tuticorin and Colombo. Most Indian sellers ship their goods through Swadeshi Steamer.<sup>2</sup>

The period from 1906 to 1911 was marked by violent protests, the first manifestation of a revolutionary speech campaign, which led to, in some cases, a very serious character riot. The arrival from Bengal of Bepin Chandra Pal, in April 1907 gave new impetus and direction to the nationalist movement in Madras. In the Province of Madras the people were enthralled by the great speeches of Bepin Chandra Pal.<sup>3</sup> In his lectures given in the City of Madras, Subramanya Aiyar and other facilitators played a significant role. Pal's powerful speech appealed to the younger generation who responded immediately to his call. Syathyamurthy, a Bachelor's student at Madras Christian College, frustrated by Pal's remarks about Swadeshi and strikes, lit a fire outside his tent. To Syathyamurthy and the men of his party Pal was the most beloved apostle.<sup>4</sup>

The government of Madras, fearing full effect, imposed certain conditions and Pal withdrew his last two addresses and left the City. In Godavari district Bepin Babu was received with great enthusiasm, especially by students from Rajahmundry College. For the students, their patriotic feelings were dispelled from their homeland, and Paul's arrival at Rajahmundry on April 19, 1907 was a godsend. His heartwarming remarks stirred up nationalism in the students of Rajamundry College. They flocked to his meetings and on the day of his departure they revolted against the college authorities and parted company with about two hundred even beatings.<sup>5</sup> In Canada, the capital of the region, the Regional Magistrate was greeted with a shout of "*Bande Mataram*" as he took to the streets. The eruption reached a climax on May 31, 1907, when a group of Europeans attacked a large group of Europeans, who inflicted heavy damage on property. The cause of the outbreak was an attack by a district doctor a few hours ago on a boy shouting "*Bande Mataram*". Fifty people were prosecuted for their involvement in the riots, and 13 were later convicted. Additional police officers comprising eighty-three men of all ranks were detained in one place in the city for six months.<sup>6</sup>

In the city of Madras the visit of Babu Bepin Chandra Pal was followed by daily meetings held at South Sea Beach and Moore Market to spread his teachings. Initially, the number attending the meetings meant nothing, but the attendance soon grew to several hundred, often keeping the procession in a public place where Europeans gathered on the street to blow their horns and shout. In 1908, V.O.Chidambaram Pillai was joined by S.Sramramanya Aiyar better known as Subramanya Siva, a native of the Madura region, and the two embarked on a formal public speaking campaign, a guaranteed success of the "*Swaraj*" business of "*Swadeshi*" and volunteers. From 3 February to 9 March 1908 Sivam and Pillai held daily meetings on the beach in Tuticorin, except for a few days when they did so elsewhere. People gathered in the thousands - tens of thousands of ordinary people - to listen. The main theme of these talks was fearlessness, support for the Swadeshi, the boycott of foreign affairs and a concerted effort to achieve national independence. As a result of these talks strikes broke out among the mill workers at Tuticorin.<sup>7</sup>

### **Movement in Tuticorin**

The people of Tuticorin became enthusiastic supporters of Swadeshi because of the speeches of Sivam and Pillai. Workers at Coral Mills, a British-owned textile unit in Tuticorin, began work on February 27, 1908 seeking higher wages. The mill made a huge profit and announced a 60 per cent stake in its British shareholders, while workers earned only subsistence wages, Chidambaram Pillai and Subramania Sivam supported the workers' goal. Andrew Harvey, the mill chief, sent his agents to the workers' quarters to receive their complaints and to urge them to begin work. The workers' determination to continue the strike forced the mill's agents to use force.<sup>8</sup> They arrested six machine operators and locked them in a basement. A committee of inquiry comprising K.J.R. Venkatarama Iyer, Balaji Rao and Padmanabha Iyengar met on March 1, 1908 and, after considering the issues, agreed unanimously that the workers had real grievances that the management was failing to address. V.O.Chidambaram Pillai intervened on behalf of the staff and the authorities agreed

to fix it. This agreement led to a major review of the wage structure. By striking a swaying Coral the Swadeshis proved that they were well-organized and, no doubt, owed their success to the national leaders. Fearing similar strikes, local government officials, Railways and other foreign-owned companies have increased their salaries by 50%. Employees get better benefits from their employers.<sup>9</sup>

These events not only contributed to the spread of the organization but also contributed to the change of attitude toward the English. The community felt that Europeans were the cause of their misery. The practice of striking workers to deprive their employers of their permits so far in northern India is now widespread in southern India. The strike was resolved amicably, adding to the tumultuous history of the Swiss leaders Chidambaram Pillai and Subramania Sivam.<sup>10</sup> Lawley used all the forces of repression at his behest to assassinate the Swedish party at an early stage. He described Swadeshi as a rebel and started a trial under the security provisions of the Criminal Procedure Code against the main leaders of the insurgent organization, Chidambaram Pillai and Subramaniya Siva, and this led to serious disruption of civil peace in Tuticorin and Tirunelveli. In Tirunelveli a mob stormed C.M.S College and Munsips Court, setting fire to a municipal office, a police station and a post office and destroying property in hospital.<sup>11</sup>

The mob's attitude was so threatening that police were twice forced to fire, killing four people. At Tuticorin the Divisional Officer and police officers were harassed by a mob that did not disperse until a fire broke out and several people were injured. Leading activists Chidambaram Pillai and Subramanya Siva were prosecuted under sections 124-A, 153-A and 505 of the Indian Penal Code and were convicted and sentenced to imprisonment. The punitive police force stayed in the troubled areas for six months.<sup>12</sup>

Arthur Tawley's government in 1908 persecuted a number of extremist forms of writing and speech. Action was taken against the following nine people:<sup>13</sup>

1. Ethiraj Surendranath Arya, member of the Executive Committee of Chennai Jana Sangam, a dangerous segment organization in Madras.
2. G.Subramanya Aiyar, editor of Swadesa Mitran.
3. G.Harisarvothama Rao, Owner of Swaraj newspaper in Bezwada.
4. B.Narayana Rao, editor of Swaraj news Paper, Bezwada.
5. P.Lakshminarayana, treasurer of the Swaraj newspaper.
6. M Srinivasa Aiyanagr, editor of India.
7. A.Krishnaswami Sarma, "Swadeshi" Lecturer.
8. L.Basavayya, Store Manager "Swadeshi", Bapatla, Kistna district.
9. M.P.Tirumala Chari, owner of India.

The Press Act came into effect on February 9, 1910. Offenses against the Act result in a person being held liable for foreclosure. The steps taken by the government of Sir Arthur Lawley to suppress the group led a group of terrorists to seek refuge in Pondicherry while trying to distribute letters of removal from the State throughout the Presidency. Newspapers namely, *India*, *Suryodayam* and *The Vijaya* as well as two pamphlets "Kanavu" and "Arilorupangu" by Subramania Bharathi, published in Pondicherry are closed under the News Act.<sup>14</sup>

## Tirunelveli Riot

Political unrest spread across the country and caused unrest in some areas. One such outburst was an unpleasant reaction in Tirunelveli. V.O.Chidambaram who led the Swadeshi movement in Tamil Nadu organized a public meeting in Tirunelveli on 9 March 1908 to celebrate the release of Bipin Chandra Pal which was denied permission. Violations of the prohibition law led to the arrest of V.O.Chidambaram Pillai and his deputy Subramania Siva on March 12, 1908. Shops were closed to all businesses, students from colleges and schools filled the streets. Crowds of people gathered on the highways and began marching towards the municipal office. Anger erupted in the municipal office. The mob rushed into the building, pulled out all the official records, and lit a huge fire. With a large flow of paraffin oil the whole building was burned.<sup>15</sup>

The police station was the target. The two officers in charge were politely asked to leave, and everything in the house was burned, eventually the building itself. The Munsiff Regional Court went on a rampage, and it was set ablaze. A purse with Rs. 500 found there was distributed among the crowd. The paraffin tank at Pennington market was then set on fire, burning for two days. Its smoke darkened the sky with huge clouds and hung over the city. At noon, the Collector and the District Magistrate, Wynch, somewhere, noticing some ornaments, asked the people there what to do. When one of them replied innocently that it was to celebrate Bepin Pal's release, he struck with Wynch's whip cutting the man's face. This infuriated the crowd, who only damaged property. But now the police were stoning. Police opened fire without warning and police used a revolver. The number of the day was four dead, one of whom was an innocent young man returning from the temple.

The riots lasted for three days, and then spread to Tuticorin and Tachanallur again. In Tuticorin, despite the ban on meetings, a public meeting was arranged in an open-air trailer. There were classes for the educated and hardworking at the meeting, which was very organized. However, after the start of the meeting, high-ranking police officers stormed the crowd without warning. The young collector Ashe played a key role in this action and made himself the object of public hatred. The tension was so great that many European residents of Tuticorin spent the night on a ship docked at Tuticorin. Indian workers such as barbers, washers and men who refused to serve European kings and Indians who supported the English.<sup>16</sup>

The Tirunelveli eruption prompted the Government to take strict security measures. Police have been ordered to arrest any suspect. In addition, all weapons licenses in the District have been revoked. The matter was brought to the attention of the Madras Legislative Council by B.Narasimheswara Sarma who criticized the officials' actions. But the Government pardoned the District Magistrate's action and related a series of events that led to L.M.Wynch ordering his dismissal. To alleviate the situation, Madras Mahajana Sabha appointed a subcommittee to consider the advice of an illegal commission to inquire about the Tirunelveli disturbance. The effects of the Swade arrests were felt as far as Canada, where people set fire to government offices to protest the act.<sup>17</sup> Rees, a British MP, also raised the issue on March 17, 1908. The media in Madras reacted strongly to the arrests of leaders and said the riots were caused by mistakes made by local authorities. The Coral Mills workers'

strike in Tuticorin was peacefully resolved by Chidambaram Pillai and his associates. The subsequent disruption in Tuticorin was caused by the reckless action of the police to prevent a public meeting and the celebration of B.C.Pal. If the magistrate and the police had not intervened in the matter, everything would have gone smoothly as in many other parts of the country.<sup>18</sup>

Papers such as "Bhavani", Nellore's weekly Telugu, "Veerakesari", Kannada fortnightly of Madras, "Nadegnnadi", Kannada weekly of Bangalore, "The West Coast Spectator" of Calicut, "Jananukulan", Tamil weekly of Thanjavur and the "Hindu Nesan" of Madras had very negative views of the authorities. They assert that oppression will not solve the problem. In short, the media looked at the incident with a different eye. Despite crying and whistling in the newspapers, official extremes continued under the boxing policy submitted by Governor Lawley. The year 1909 was marked by the first appearance in the office of President of the anarchist bomb. About a mile from Tenali in the Guntur region, an infernal machine buried on a public road exploded and killed the unfortunate one who was trampling it coolly. In connection with the incident, three people were arrested and charged with murder and other offenses under the Explosive Substances Act. Two of them were acquitted but a third was convicted and sentenced to ten years in transportation on a very minor charge, the Supreme Court set aside the sentence of murder.<sup>19</sup>

### **Ashe Murder**

In 1911, Chidambaram pillai persecution in prison had unintended consequences outside. Ashe regional collector has returned to Tirunelveli to be promoted to regional collector, and is believed to have been instrumental in getting the government to follow the line of repression, including the harassment of political prisoners in the prison and the police. Sad ending of Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company was started by V.O.Chidambaram Pillai. On a happy morning of 17 June 1911, Ashe, accompanied by his wife, boarded the Tuticorin-Madras train station at Tinnevelly Bridge to Kodaikanal, where her four children were staying. He was killed at a train station in Maniachi, a station on the South Indian Railway highway with a shotgun fired at him by Vankinathan, a member of a terrorist group on the same day. Vanchi Iyer of Shenkottah in Travancore, Ashe's killer committed suicide after achieving his goal. He had shot himself in the mouth and lay dead in the bathroom, with a shotgun in his right hand to escape British torture. Vanchi Aiyar killed himself by shooting himself. Sankara Krishna Iyer, who was standing nearby during the shooting, appeared in the room after the incident and fled. Sankara Krishna Iyer was identified on June 26 and arrested. Government repression measures secretly deported some of the extremists and others were deported to Pondicherry.<sup>20</sup>

In the case of Ashe's murder 14 people have been arrested in the Madras High Court. They were accused of plotting against the British and following that, assisting and supporting the assassination of Ashe by Vanchi Iyer on June 17, 1911. All these men except Muthukumaraswamy Pillai and Subbaiah Pillai were among them. Their twenties, the younger of the first defendants, namely Nilakanta Brahmachari, who was only 21 years old. They have all been charged under Sections 121-A, 302, 109 and 111 of the IPC. A key figure

in the conspiracy was Nilakanta Brahmachari, a former political preacher and activist involved in the "Rebel" journalism in Pondicherry as editor of the Vernacular paper *suryodayam*. Vanchi Iyer was a working partner of Nilakanta Brahmachari. The unfortunate assassination of Ashe, however, was a terrorist attack on the Madras Presidency that did not go unnoticed even by activists. With the overthrow of Bangalan division in 1911, terrorism almost disappeared from Indian politics.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

The Presidency of Madras has therefore not benefited political leaders of any size and size. From the beginning of the British rule, there were leaders who raised their voices for justice; and who doubted the discrimination perpetrated in India by the British authorities. During the search the martyrs like V.O.C, Subramanya Bharati and others were inexplicably tortured mentally and physically in an attempt to liberate their country.

## End Notes

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