



# CHENPAKARAMAN: AN INDIAN REVOLUTIONARY NATIONALIST

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## Abstract:

In India, geared up the spirit of Nationalism, people emerged against the British adopting different methods of resistance. Chenpakaraman organized Indian Diaspora in the West and organized them against the British in India. He with the aid from Germany, in an attempt to throw out British in India, made strenuous efforts during World War I. Patriotic activities of Chenpakaraman and his Emden attack on Madras still stands as a remarkable milestone in the history of freedom movement in India. He passed away on May 28, 1934.

**Key Words:** Revolutionary Nationalism in India – Chenpakaraman – First World War – Hitler – Emden – Madras Attack – Last Day

## Introduction

In the early twentieth century, a new aspect was added to India's struggle for independence by the emergence of revolutionary groups. These groups emphasized the use of revolutionary terrorism as a political weapon and attracted a number of youth from all over the country adding spirit to nationalist movement. Bhagat Singh, B.K. Dutt, Chandrasekhar Azad, Chenpakaraman Pillai, Surya Sen and others, represented the character of the revolutionaries. The revolutionary nationalism was to counter the moderate ideology of Congress. The Congress adopted non-violent methods whereas these revolutionaries felt that passive resistance could not be the method for British. In order to drive away British from India, they adopted violent methods. <sup>1</sup> These Indian revolutionaries followed the path of Russian Nihilists and Irish nationalists and indulged in violence to show their rage and anger in order to overthrow the British in India. This monograph tries to account the career and nationalistic activities of Chenpakaraman. This is based on both primary and secondary data and presented without any bias.

## Chenpakaraman into Nationalist Politics

Chenpakaraman Pillai was born to Tamil parents, Chinnaswamy Pillai and Nagammal at Kerala on September 15, 1891. He was from a respectable family and he was dragged into nationalist movement influenced by foreign revolutionaries and Indian national leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak. <sup>2</sup> When Tilak was arrested, and sentenced to transportation, he dedicated himself to the cause of India's freedom. He addressed many political meetings. His thirst for freedom is explicit from his acts which includes, greeting his friends of Trivandrum's Maharaja College with the term '*Jai Hind*' which means 'Victory to India'. The term '*Jai Hind*' was coined by him. India, to Chenpakakaraman, is a divine land equivalent to mother. He wanted to drive away whoever insulted *Bharat Matha* (Mother India). <sup>3</sup>

## Leaving India

Meanwhile, Chenpakaraman came into contact with an Englishman named Strickland, and with his help, he left India and reached Italy when he was seventeen years old. He sailed out in September 1908 with Strickland, and reached Italy via Colombo. After having studied in Italy, he went to Germany to complete his education. An engineer with doctorates in Political Science and Economics, he obtained employment in the German foreign office. He was proficient in English, French, German and other language.<sup>4</sup> He had planned to topple the British in India with the aid of Hitler, the Chancellor of Germany.

## Nationalist Committees in Abroad

As a student in Berlin, Chenpakaraman formed the 'Aid India International Committee' that campaigned for India's liberation. When World War I broke out, he established the 'Indian Independence Committee' and the 'Indian Voluntary Corps'. He also set up an army camp at Mesopotamia from where he established secret contacts with Indian Nationalist leaders.<sup>5</sup> Chenpakaraman Pillai, then set an organization called 'International Pro-India Committee' at Zurich. Chenpakaraman launched Pro-India, a monthly published in German and English from Zurich, Switzerland, through which he highlighted the glorious past of India. Another institution founded by him at Berlin was the 'Orient Club'.<sup>6</sup>

## Outbreak of First World War

First World War started from 28 July 1914 and lasted till 11 November 1918. The war was fought between the Allied Powers and the Central Powers. The major allies were Britain France and Russia. The United States joined Allies after 1917. The Central/Axis powers were Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria. When World War I was prolonging, Chenpakaraman persuaded the German government, to give military assistance for the freedom struggle in India. He served in the famous German submarine Emden which inflicted heavy losses on British shipping in the Indian Ocean.<sup>7</sup>

During the World War I in 1914, Chenpakaraman established namely the Berlin Committee in Germany. He intensified his revolutionary activities on the eve of the war. By 1914, he had organized and created a revolution movement in Zurich with the support of the German Counsel for his activities.<sup>8</sup> After 1915, it was renamed the Indian Independence Committee. The organization was formed by Indian students and political activists who resided in the Germany. The organization was established with the aim to promote the cause of Indian Independence. This Berlin-Indian Committee played an instrumental part in the Hindu-German conspiracy. Chenpakaraman Pillai, Chatoo, Prabhakar, Hafiz, Har Dayal, TharaChandar Das, VirendranathChattopadhyaya, and Abinash Bhattacharya were the key members of the committee. These members got into Berlin either through USA or Switzerland.<sup>9</sup>

## Emden's Attack on Madras

The Emden was a light cruiser belonging to the Imperial German Navy. Emden, the German warship, from August 13, 1914, for three months travelled 30,000 miles across the Indian Ocean, sinking or capturing 23 merchant ships and two warships, inflicting damage worth more than Rs. 20 crore. On September 22, 1914, as the residents of Madras prepared to turn in for the night, a German ship sneaked into the waters just off George Town and brought World War I to its shores.<sup>10</sup> The SMS Emden, piloted by Captain Karl Von Muller approached Madras aided by the city's lights. The operation was particularly dangerous as British warships were in the Madras harbor. Fort St George's 5.9-inch guns could have easily wrecked the light cruiser.<sup>11</sup> Despite, these dangers, the Emden sailed into the Madras Harbor, after spectacularly maneuvering past the massive British Navy fleet in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, and dropped nearly 130 shells on the harbor in 30 minutes.<sup>12</sup>

There are number of references about Emden attack. Historian ShrabaniBasu, in her book, 'For King and Another Country: Indian Soldiers on the Western Front, 1914-18', writes, "Panic spread in [Madras] and nearly 20,000 left every day. Crowds went out of control and the railways had to summon special police. Those who could not get the train took the road, leaving on carts and on foot. Prices of commodities shot up".<sup>13</sup>

There was panic in Madras. People fled their homes, looting ensued, and the police had to be brought in to restore order. The *Emden* didn't inflict heavy damage. But, shells had spread as far as Poonamallee High Road, Choolai, Casa Major Road and Nungambakkam, while a few unexploded ones were also lying around. In this rampage, three people died and 13 were injured.<sup>14</sup> However, another account states that five people had lost their lives. Still it has been recorded as a milestone in the history of Indian freedom struggle. Prior to its arrival in Madras, the warship had destroyed several merchant vessels belonging to the British, Australians and even the Italians. It destroyed nearly 350,000 gallons of oil stored by the Burma Oil Company. Besides the ships and harbor installations, it even damaged the buildings of the Port Trust, Madras Sailing Club, the General Post Office and a series of important roads leading up to the harbor front.<sup>15</sup> The Madras Presidency Government was not prepared for such an attack. Even though Lord Pentland, the Governor of Madras, assured residents that the dangerous battleship would not arrive, the ship made a tremendous impact at Madras.<sup>16</sup>

### Post-Emden Mission

In the Provisional Government of India, Raja Mahendra Pratap Singh of Kabul became the President and Maulana Barkatulla became the Prime Minister. Chenpakaraman Pillai became the Foreign Minister of the Provisional Government at Afghanistan in December 1915. The hope of the revolutionaries fled away with the defeat of the Germans in the World War I.

During the First World War, he is said to have printed and dropped pamphlets from airplanes among the Indian soldiers in France, exhorting them to turn against the English. Responding to 'Fourteen Points' of the then President of the United States Woodrow Wilson, Chenpakaraman came up with an Eight Point proposal for Indian independence. His proposal demanded that other European powers should also leave India.<sup>17</sup>

He organized the League of Oppressed Peoples to work for the liquidation of colonialism. He also became an active member of the Pan-German Nationalist Party which was considered a great honor for a foreigner in Germany.<sup>18</sup>

### Last days of Chenpakaraman

Raman Pillai initially enjoyed a cordial relationship with Hitler, whose prominence was rising. However, during a press meet on August 10, 1931, Hitler said that if non-Aryan Indians were ruled by the British, it is their fate. This irritated Pillai. On December 4, 1931, Hitler said, "Britain losing India would not augur well for any nation, including Germany".<sup>19</sup>

Chenpakaraman wrote to Hitler, 'You seem to attribute more importance to the color of the skin than blood. Our skins may be dark; not our hearts'. Chenpakaraman gave a deadline for Hitler to withdraw his statement and apologize. Hitler sent his secretary to Chenpakaraman to apologize, but also expressed his irritation at being attributed with a black heart. Chenpakaraman said that Indians would tell the truth even in the face of death.<sup>20</sup> One day after the deadline set by him, Hitler expressed his regret for his comments; the rift between the two leaders thus developed into a complete breakdown of relations that would never be mended. In January 1933, Hitler became chancellor and in June, he became an autocrat usurping power and establishing his unquestioned influence over Germany. Nazis soon raided and arrogated Chenpakaraman's house in Berlin. He was also manhandled and bundled out from his dwelling. He moved to Italy for treatment where it was found that blood had clotted in his brain. By that time, he did not have the financial means to afford good treatment required for his cure. He passed away on May 28, 1934.<sup>21</sup>

### Conclusion

There are laurels from the nationalists of India for the patriotic missions of the revolutionary nationalist Chenpakaraman Pillai. Jawaharlal Nehru has mentioned about Chenpakaraman in his autobiography as, "One of the exiles in Berlin whom we met, prominent member of the war-time group was Chenpakaraman Pillai. He could think in terms of nationalism only, and shrunk away from the social or economic approach to a question".<sup>22</sup> The Tamil Nadu Government, on its part, in a way to honor him, erected a memorial at Gandhi Mandapam in Adyar in 2008.

**Endnotes**

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