



# HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF REVOLUTIONARY NATIONALISM IN TAMIL NADU: A CASE STUDY OF TIRUNELVELI AND THOOTHUKUDI DISTRICT

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## ABSTRACT

*Revolutionary Nationalism, an ideology of the Terrorists, not only sets forth the principals and values associated with the national movement from the view point of the colonized, but also justifies the use of extreme measures in uploading such concepts. Revolutionary Nationalism in Colonial Madras Presidency was a result of several inspirations, an indigenous as well as foreign such inspirations were more or less uniform throughout India. These revolutionary nationalists in Madras, like their counterparts in other regions of the country through attracted by such inspirations were nevertheless conscious of their relevance to their mother nation. The biographies on “Mazzini”, written in Tamil by Subramania Bharathi, “Garibaldi”, written in Tamil by V.V.S. Iyer inspired to young nationalists of Tamil Nadu and their series of articles on the contributions of Mazzini in Italy and Garibaldi of Turkey published in the India, a newspaper edited by Bharathi at Pondicherry, motivated the young revolutionaries of Madras Presidency.*

**Keywords:** *Vande Mataram, Revolutionary Nationalism, Madras Presidency, Bharatha Association – Ideology*

## Introduction

The Southern region of Madras Presidency made a valuable contribution to the destruction of the foreign rule. It became the citadel of revolutionary activities. Veerapandiya Kattabomman lifted the banner of local resistance against British imperialism. The Ashe murder by Vanchi Iyer at Maniyachi Railway Station in 1911 reflected the birth of revolution in the region. The region became the center of terrorist activities during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It witnessed many political uprisings and became the citadel of many activities. The birth of the modern freedom movement is rightly traced out from the foundation of the Indian National Congress on 28<sup>th</sup> December 1885, Mumbai. The period from 1885 to 1905 is described in the history of the Congress as a period of political mendicancy. During this period, Congress was wedded to a programme of peaceful supplication. In Madras, *The Hindu* and the *Swadesamitran* were started by G. Subramania Iyer in 1878 and 1882 respectively. They took the spirit of revolutionary nationalism to every nook and corner of the province. Thoothukudi district became the center of terrorist activities after 1905. In that year a lawyer of Thoothukudi by the name of S. Ramakrishna Iyer arranged a Swadesi meeting in Thoothukudi. The revolutionaries of South Tamil Nadu had constant touch with the Dawn society of Bengal. They had a plan of general up-rising on a particular day when all the jails were to be blown up with dynamite. A revolutionary training center was run by one Chellam Pillai at Veeraghavapuram. The above activities of the police and the formation of the Bharathamatha Society led to the cold-blooded assassination of collector Ashe at Maniyachi railway station. The revolutionary nationalism was spreading like a wildfire to every nook and corner of the country and it was but natural that South Tamil Nadu too should feel its

impact. Among the provinces of the Madras Presidency, the Southern part played a predominant role in the course of the freedom struggle. The region made a valuable contribution to the destruction of the foreign rule. It became the citadel of revolutionary activities. Veerapandiya Kattabomman lifted the banner of local resistance against British imperialism. The Ashe murder by Vanchi Iyer at Maniyachi Railway Station in 1911 reflected the birth of revolution in the region. The region became the center of terrorist activities during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It witnessed many political uprisings and became the citadel of many activities.

### Revolutionary Ideology

The publications on the revolts in Europe and America encouraged these nationalists to change the trend of the nationalist movement and gave the revolutionary nationalists a new conception and a new ideal of Indian Freedom Movement. Japan's encounter with Russia in 1904-1905 and the Russian Revolution of 1905 had its impact all over India. The revolutionary nationalists of India realized that the Japanese got victory because of their spirit of self-sacrifice, and that the Indians should learn to die for their motherland, the revolutionary nationalists argued that if Japan, a tiny island, could defeat a mighty Russia, the Indians could also drive away the Britishers from India. The victory of Japan enlightened the Indian revolutionaries as if it was a war between a White European nation and a black Indian. The socio-religious organizations like the Bhrama Samaj and Arya Samaj the Prathana Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission paved the way for the rise of Indian nationalism among the Indians in the nineteenth century. Dayananda Saraswati's true followers like Bipin Chandra pal, Balagangadara Tilak and Lalalajpat Rai, they drew sustenance from the Heritage of India and appealed to Indians by invoking religious nationalism. The nationalist spirit of Vivekananda and the activities of Ghadar party were also impressed the Indian Revolutionaries. Lalalajpat Rai was highly impressed by the nationalistic thoughts of Dayananda Saraswati. "The samaj stimulated his patriotic impulses and the spirit of self-sacrifice, self-reliance and self-help. The Congress Trio "Lal-Bal-Pal" propagated the ideas of Swaraj Swadeshi Movement. Lalalajpat Rai said "that an English hated nothing like beggary and that a beggar deserved to be hated nothing strongly disapproved of begging for rights and insisted that rights should be claimed. He encouraged young Indians to rise against their slavery and to shed blood for obtaining *Swaraj*". Further, he wrote an article in the *Young India*, entitled "A Study of Hindu Nationalism", he brought out the fusion of religion and politics. He had influenced the extremist leaders. The revolutionary nationalism was steeped in a religious spirit and mood. The ideology was truly followed by the extremists of Indian national movement. B.C.Pal, B.G.Tilak and Aurobindo Ghosh were the leaders of this new front. Aurobindo Ghosh said that Nationalism is not a mere political programme. Nationalism is a religion that has come from God. He praised the activities of V.O.Chidambaram Pillai through his article in the same paper on March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1908, "Madras has taken up the herd out of our hands and today it is over Thoothukudi that the Gods of the Mahabharatha over in their aerial care watching chances of the fight which is to bring back the glorious days". The writings of Bankim Chandra especially "*Anand Math* and his poem *Bande Mataram*" made a great impact on the Indian revolutionaries. The Goddess Durga was represented as the "*Mother of India*" by Aurobindo Ghosh in Bengal. "*The Mother of India* and the *Bande Matram*" thus both conveyed both patriotic and religious gospels of Indian Nationalism. *The Hindu* revivalists like B.G.Tilak, converted their metaphysical jargons into mass movement. B.G. Tilak was the pioneer of utilizing the religious festivals as the platforms of revolutionary nationalism in India. The Ganesha festival and Sivaji festival of Maharashtra organized by him are the best examples in this respect.

### Spark of the Fire in Tirunelveli District

The political opposition to the British rule began with the recalcitrant Poligars, for instance, Kattabomman, the Poligar of Panchalamkurichi earned the displeasure of East India Company. In the beginning, he regularly paid pesh cash to the company. But later on, they defaulted the payment of tributes to the company due to various reasons. On 31st December 1798, the arrears rose to 3310 pagodas. Hence Collector Jackson wrote letters in a language of reprehension and sent his servants to collect the arrears from the Poligar. But this effort of the collector did not produce the desired effect. In the meantime, Kattabomman joined with the Anti-British confederacy and started the famous South Indian Rebellion of 1800-1801. Kattabomman made wide preparation for a war against the British. His rebellion was the first significant revolt by the Poligars against the British Government. The rebellion spread to various places in the Thoothukudi, Ramnad and Madurai districts. After a prolonged military struggle and siege, Kattabomman was defeated and arrested in 1799. The British Government conducted a formal inquiry over the incident. Subsequently, Kattabomman was hanged to death at Kayattar as the Wrong-doer. The episode of Kattabomman is adjudged to be the virile beginning of the South Indian rebellion as of the Freedom Movement. The death of Kattabomman

marked a new turn in the freedom movement of Tamil Nadu. The legacy of Kattabomman was a continued struggle against the British by the Poligars after his demise. These Poligar rebellions of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries were the earliest Indian militant attempts to oppose nascent British domination over the country. These rebellions have made the Thoothukudi district proud of its love of freedom and heroic stand in the face of heavy odds. The Thoothukudi district had also produced a galaxy of patriots like V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, Vanchi Iyer, Subramania Bharathi and a host of others in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Origin of Revolutionary Nationalism

The birth of the modern freedom movement is rightly traced out from the foundation of the Indian National Congress on 28<sup>th</sup> December 1885, Mumbai. The period from 1885 to 1905 is described in the history of the Congress as a period of political mendicancy. During this period, Congress was wedded to a programme of peaceful supplication. In Madras, *The Hindu* and the *Swadesamitran* were started by G. Subramania Iyer in 1878 and 1882 respectively. They took the spirit of revolutionary nationalism to every nook and corner of the province. The partition of Bengal in 1905 by Lord Curzon fell like a bombshell and evoked strident criticisms from all quarters of Indian opinion. The swadesi movement was born. This was followed by the outbreak of terrorist movements in different parts of India. The terrorist movement in Madras Presidency, unlike in Bengal, Punjab and Maharashtra, was only sporadic. The favourable climate for the terrorist activities had already been set up by the spread of anti-British feelings aroused by Tilak, Lajpat Rai, B.C. Pal and Aurbindo Ghosh. Some of the terrorist occurrences since 1907 were the Thoothukudi bomb outrage of 1907 and the Kakinada Riot of 31st May 1907.

### Emergence of Revolutionary Activities

Thoothukudi district became the center of terrorist activities after 1905. In that year a lawyer of Thoothukudi by the name of S. Ramakrishna Iyer arranged a Swadesi meeting in Thoothukudi. This was the first step of the Swadesi Movement in the district. The attainment of Swaraj was their common objective. When Bipin Chandra Pal visited Madras in 1907, he found it a good place for organizing revolutionary groups and thus touring throughout the province. He was able to form the nucleus of a revolutionary organization. V.O. Chidambaram Pillai was the earliest recruit to this movement. V.O.C was primarily responsible for the propagation of swadesi sentiment in the district.

### Murder of Collector Ashe:

The imprisonment of V.O. Chidambaram and Siva could not be justified under any circumstances. While the Thoothukudi leaders were given severe punishments, the European fireman, David who was responsible for the murder of a punkah puller was given only a simple punishment. It was a clear case of a double standard, based on racial discrimination. Thus the estrangement of the local Indians by the white administrators became a first accomplish. Violent reaction set in. The arrest of the prominent leaders of the Thoothukudi district gave birth to a large number of revolutionary societies. Hence the Government of India passed the Seditious Meeting Act. The Governor of Madras Presidency Sir Arthur Lawley's government took stern actions against inflammatory speeches and writings. Accordingly, the Government of Madras Presidency ordered the prosecution of M.Srinivasa Iyenger, Editor of India for publishing seditious articles. Subramania Iyer, the editor of *Swadesamitran* was also prosecuted. The Government of Lawley was opposed in tooth and nail by the extremist. They thought that collector Ashe of Tirunelveli was mainly responsible for the failure of the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company and the arrest of V.O. Chidambaram and others. Ashe also played a prominent role in suppressing the people's revolt at Thoothukudi in 1908. Hence a group of extremists decided to assassinate Collector Ashe. A band of these extremists took shelter in Pondicherry. Keeping it as a base they had tried to spread 'seditious' literature in the Madras state. The printing press and office of the Tamil daily 'India' were shifted to Pondicherry. Meanwhile, some newspapers published from Pondicherry were prohibited under the press Act and nine persons were arrested in this connection. The suppression of the Press also led to the growth of many secret societies. Secret pamphlets were sent to the students through the post and Public servants were prevented by the government from attending political meetings. In this hour of crisis, the Bengalis residing at Thoothukudi spread sedition among the non-Bengalis. They encouraged them to enter into activities against the government. The Government inspected the activities of the Bengalis in Thoothukudi. Then additional C.I.D inspectors were posted in Thoothukudi. Unable to bear the suppressive measures of the government, Subramania Bharathi and M. P. Tirumalachari left for Pondicherry from Madras as they were not able to proceed to their native place. At Pondicherry the journal 'India' was published. Tirumalachari was associated with Subramania Bharathy till his departure to Europe in 1911. At Pondicherry Bharathy secured the friendship of Aurobindo Ghosh and V.V.S Iyer. When

Bharathy tried to escape from Pondicherry in 1918, he was arrested at Cuddalore and released soon. Even though he did not participate in the Thoothukudi Riot of 1908, his nationalist songs like those of Rabindranath Tagore inculcated a spirit of nationalism in the minds of the youths of the Thoothukudi district. The absence of Siva and V.O. Chidambaram in the freedom movement of Thoothukudi district for a while never stopped the activities of the extremist leaders of Thoothukudi district. They collectively organized various movements and secret societies. The secret societies selected a man in each village and town to start a revolution all over the country to kill the Englishmen. Tenkasi became the center of activities for these freedom fighters. Erukkur Nilakanta Brahmachari organized a secret society called "Bharathamatha Society". This was just like the Abhinava Bharat Society started by V.D. Savarkar in the North. This society was mainly responsible for the murder of the Tirunelveli Collector, Ashe. The members of the Bharathamatha society were Ragupathy Iyer, Chidambaram Pillai of Tenkasi, Sankar Krishna Iyer of Krishnapuram, Harihara Iyer and Dharmaraj Iyer of Shencottah, Madasamy Pillai of Ottapidaram and Arumugam Pillai of Thoothukudi. Its members took a blood oath before the picture of Goddess kali. 'Vandematram' was the oath. Each member read out the oath ritualistically and consumed red water. According to them, the red water symbolized the Whiteman's blood. It showed the radical spirit of the members of the society against the British. Its first meeting was held in April 1910. The second was in mid-July 1910. Another society with Sadhu Ganapathi Pantulu as its leader functioned at Veeraghavapuram. Its functioning was reported by the C.I.D. Inspector. Kuttalam Pillai and Somasundaram Pillai were its chief members.

The revolutionaries of Tamil Nadu had constant touch with the Dawn society of Bengal. They had a plan of general up-rising on a particular day when all the jails were to be blown up with dynamite. Meanwhile, the C.I.D. Inspector got this information from one Rajabahadhur of Pondicherry. He reported the names of certain members of the Tirunelveli Secret Society. A militant training center was run by one Chellam Pillai at Veeraghavapuram. It was also detected by the police. Fifty copies of the Tamil paper India were seized at Thoothukudi. The above activities of the police and the formation of the Bharathamatha Society led to the cold-blooded assassination of collector Ashe at Maniachi railway station. Ashe came to India in 1895. During the Thoothukudi riot, he was the Sub- Collector at Thoothukudi. Very soon he became the Collector and Magistrate of Tirunelveli. He was an efficient official. But he earned the hatred of the Indians by way of his bias to his home government. The revolutionaries of Thoothukudi thought that Collector Ashe stood as a stumbling block in their freedom struggle. The revolutionaries passed a death sentence on Ashe. In the lot as drawn among them, the choice fell on Vanchi as the assassin. He received revolver training from Madame Cama at Pondicherry. On 11th June 1917 morning, Ashe was shot dead by Vanchi Iyer alias Sankara Iyer of Shencottah, Tirunelveli district at Maniachi railway station. The assassin was tackled by the Collector's duffador. But he threw off the duffador and ran into the latrine putting the muzzle of the pistol into his mouth. The assassin shot himself to death. The body of Ashe was laid to rest in the cemetery of the English church, Palayamkottai. After this incident, the houses of Vanchi Iyer and his friends were searched. The houses of Mahadevasamy Pillai, Ramamurthy, K.V. Arumugam of Ottapidaram were searched and arrested. Resolutions condemning the murder of Ashe were passed at Palayamkottai, Srivilliputhur, Ambasamudram, Namakkal and Saidapet, Madras by the Europeans and some of the moderates among the Indians. The Salem branch of the Theosophical Society passed resolutions expressing regret over the shocking murder of Collector Ashe.

The fourteen persons were arrested in connection with the murder of Collector Ashe. The trial went on for five months the special Bench of the High Court convicted nine of the fourteen accused. They were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. The first accused Neelakanta Brahmachari was given seven years of rigorous imprisonment, the second accused Sankara Krishna Iyer four years rigorous imprisonment, the third accused Chidambaram Pillai to two years rigorous imprisonment, the fourth accused Harihara Iyer to three years rigorous imprisonment and all the remaining convicts were given one-year rigorous imprisonment. Thus the murder of Ashe was the direct outcome of the arrest of V.O.C and others. This murder was a significant landmark in the history of the freedom struggle of the Thoothukudi district. The Ashe murder case reflected the existence of terrorist activities in the Thoothukudi district. The Ashe murder case could be compared with the Chauri Chaura incident of 1922. It sowed the seed for future terrorist movements in the district.

### **Vanchi Iyer**

Vanchi Iyer was a native of Shencottah. His original name was Sankaran. He was otherwise called Vanchinathan. He got married at the age of 17. He secured a job in the Travancore Devaswom Board and later on, he became a forest guard. He was not satisfied with this job. In the meantime, he was influenced by

the visit of B.C.Pal and the political experiments of V.O. Chidambaram and Siva. Thereafter he became an ardent follower of the Swadesi movement. He was a sincere follower of V.O. Chidambaram and Siva. The arrest of V.O. Chidambaram and Siva affected Vanchinathan much. He thought that Collector Ashe was chiefly responsible for the arrest of V.O. Chidambaram and Siva. So he decided to murder the collector, Ashe. Maniyachi was a hectic railhead junction, at which incoming passengers from Tirunelveli changed for the Boat Mail train from Thoothukudi to Madurai. On the ill-fated 17<sup>th</sup> June 1911, Ashe accompanied by his wife on his way to Kodaikanal, a health resort reached Maniyachi station by train from Tirunelveli. Ashe remained in his compartment awaiting the Boat Mail.

In the short period that elapsed Vanchi moved to the scene and fired at Ashe who was comfortably sitting in the first-class compartment. Ashe succumbed to the wounds and died on the spot. A peon captured Vanchi, but he escaped and took shelter in the 'native passengers' 'Latrine'. There he died by shooting himself with the same pistol. A letter was found with the assassin. The text of the letter is as follows: "The English enemies have wrested our country and are destroying the imperishable samathanadharma (eternal religion) by trampling it underfoot. Every Indian is at present endeavouring to drive out the English, who is the enemy of our country and to establish dharma and liberty. In a country where once Rama, Krishna, Arjuna, Shivaji, Guru Govind, and others lived and ruled to make dharma thrive, grand preparations are being made with a view to crown George the panchama (George V) a foreigner given to eating the cow's flesh. To kill him (King George) the very moment he sets his foot in our country. We 3,000 Madras are had taken a vow. To make it known, I, the least of them did commit this act this day. This alone is the duty which everyone in Hindustan ought to do". The act of Vanchinathan did pioneering work in breaking away the caste barriers prevalent in South India at that time. When the Brahmins of the North took a lead in the extremist movements, their counterparts in the south remained so far as conservatives, god-fearing and loyal to the government. The attempt of Vanchi Iyer and his achievements were an exception to this. Thereafter the Brahmins and the Vellalas of the South began to take an active part in the freedom movement.

## Conclusion

The Militant Nationalism was spreading like a wildfire to every nook and corner of the country and it was but natural that South Tamil Nadu too should feel its impact. V.O. Chidambaram Pillai a Lawyer of Thoothukudi, a patriot at heart and an extremist in action took it upon him to keep this fire burning kindling it, nursing it and always trying to make it burn forever intensely. Even amidst the government bans the veteran freedom fighters violated the orders and distribute leaflets explaining the next course of action. The movement continued practically in every region but the number of persons offering support had varied enormously. C.R. Saradambal, wife of C. Ramasamy Iyer and Muthukumarasamy Pillai were arrested and convicted for satyagraha during the first half of April 1941. Muthukumarasamy was arrested and sentenced under Section 36 (9) of the Defence of India Rules and kept in Vellore central jail for three and a half months. During the second half of April 1941, there was not much enthusiasm for Militant Nationalism. The movement had been formally withdrawn at a meeting of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee held in January 1942. Thereafter Gandhiji became an advocate of mass action to drive the British out of Indian soil.

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