



SWADESHI MOVEMENT IN TIRUNELVELI DISTRICT – A STUDY

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Abstract

The partition of Bengal in 1905 was resented by the people of the whole country. Anti-partition feeling ran high in the districts of Tamil Nadu. The leadership of Tamilnadu's new agitational policies comprised largely of young people in their twenties and thirties. They were S. Srinivasachari, S.N. Tirumalachari, M.P. Thirumalachari, C. SubramaniyaBharathi, V.O.ChidambarMPillai (Hailing from Ottapidaram of the present Thoothukudi district which a formed part of erstwhile Tirunelvi district), V. ChakkaraiChettiEthiraj and SurendranathArya. These leaders came from varied social and economic backgrounds. SubramaniaBharathi, Brahmin, by birth lived in poverty till his death. Bharathistarted his chequered career at the Ettayapuram Zamindar's Court. He became a sub-Editor of 'Swadesamitran', a tamil newspaper started by G.SubramaniyaIyer, the founder of "The Hindu". Later, he edited Tamil Weekly; India'.

Keywords: - Swadeshi movement, Partition of Bengal, Zamindars

Swadeshi Movement

In October 1905, national Co-operative Society of Mumbai sent one of its member's to Tirunelveli to deliver lectures on the Swadeshi Movement. He spoke on topics such as Separation of Executive from judiciary, Representation of Indian grievances in the House of Commons, the demand for an equal share in higher appointments for Indians and the curtailment of expenditure on the Indian army. These speeches enabled the people to gain some ideas about the issues deliberated at the national level. The Swadeshi movement in the district received another fillip in August 1906 when

G. Subramaniaiyer visited Thoothukudi to preside over the Swadeshi anniversary meeting. In 1908 when an European circus company, the Abel Circus, performed in Tirunelveli town, it was totally boycotted by the people as it was foreign. Following Tirunelveli example, the people of Nagapattinam and other towns also boycotted the circus.

Coral Mills Strike

By the end of the 19th Century three large spinning mills were started in the composite Tirunelveli district in Ambasamudram, Thoothukudi and Koilpatti. Working conditions of workers in these mills were bad. On 27 February 1908, the workers of the Thoothukudi Coral Mill struck work demanding reduction in working hours and a pay hike. The workers' cause was espoused by V.O.Chidambaram Pillai. Relief centres were started by public contribution to feed the striking workers. One day, the Harvey brothers, the owners of the Mills, while traveling along Palayamkottai road were confronted by a jeering crowd which pelted them with stones, in which not a single member of the crowd was a Mill worker. It showed the public sympathy for the strike. Workers in mills and factories in and around Thoothukudi, as well as in other parts of Tamil Nadu went on demonstrating their solidarity with the Coral Mill workers.

In the Swadeshi movement the students of the district in particular, the students of the M.D.T. Hindu College, Tirunelveli, inspired by the speeches of V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, Subramania Siva and others took part in a big way.

Tirunelveli Swadeshi Coins

The Congress split at the 1907 Surat session had an important impact in the politics in Tamil Nadu. G. Subramania Iyer, the extremist leader visited Tirunelveli in 1907. The people of Tirunelveli extended warm reception to him. Bharathi published his first collection of political songs in a volume, 'Swadesa Geethangal'. His songs stressed the importance of unity, condemning casteism and urging the people to form a united front against the British. Nationalistic thoughts were imbibed in the people by swadeshi lectures, discourses and coins. Swadeshi coins were manufactured as an ornament. These coins were minted in Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi and Chengalpattu in Tamil Nadu. Several types of swadeshi gold coins were in circulation. One type of coin had the word Swadeshi with letters being encircled by a wreath with legend, "Chastity over household divinity". "On the reverse was inscribed 61/3 MJDS 1907" again encircled by wreath etched with faith, hope and success. A second type of coin carried on one side the word "South India" encircled by an ornamental wreath on the reverse was found the figure of the Goddess Lakshmi. On a third type of coin the words 'Indian Gold' appeared, encircled by a wreath with legend God Bless Five Neck Jewel 1907' On the reverse was the Goddess Lakshmi in a standing posture with legend "Lakshmi in Lotus". Two of the patriotic goldsmiths who were engaged in making these coins in Tirunelveli district were Narayana Asari (Palayamkottai) and Shanmugamchetty (Tirunelveli).

The Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company

From the time of the palayakkars to the late eighteenth century, the people of Tirunelveli had earned a reputation for their pronounced anti-colonial feelings. The way they responded to the Swadeshi Movement and the Indian Nationalism reflected their characteristics of resistance and struggle. The first clarion call to the Swadeshi Movement in Tamil Nadu belonged to Ramakrishna Iyer, a Tirunelveli based lawyer who in 1905 addressed the people to boycott the foreign made goods. The Swadeshi movement gained momentum after the entry of V.O.C. in to politics.

V.O.Chidambaram Pillai floated a Navigation Company called Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company to pursue the objectives of Swadeshism and boycott with exceptional vigour. In the process, he transformed the Tirunelveli district into a hot bed of extremist politics to the dismay and anger of the colonial authorities. V.O.C's navigation Company was registered at Thoothukudi. This venture earned him the title Kappalottiya Tamizhan (The Tamil who sailed a ship) the ship was plied between Thoothukudi and Colombo. The quick progress of the Company was a rude shock to many European merchants. The patronage extended by the Swadeshi merchants enabled the Swadeshi Company to earn profits five times to that of the British Navigation Company. This created great animosity between the British Navigation Company and the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company. The rivalry between the British and the Swadeshi Steam navigation Companies led to a further estrangement between the colonial rulers and the people causing much anxiety to the Madras Government.

The 'Tinnevely Riots' of 1908

A major confrontation between the patriots of Tirunelveli district and the District authorities was brewing owing to many factors including the V.O.C.'s Navigation Company, Mill strikes and the fiery speeches of nationalists. From January 1908 onwards, a series of political meetings were conducted in the dry beds of the river Tamiraparani in Tirunelveli town. The British Intelligence Reports noted the socially diverse nature of the meetings which were attended by people from widely divergent class backgrounds. Speeches delivered at the meetings invoked the concepts of Swadeshism, boycott and Swaraj and were anti-imperialistic in tone and spirit. The bureaucracy swung into action. L.M. Wynch was the then Collector. V.O.Chidambaram, Siva and Padmanabhalyer, who were delivering fiery lectures, were asked by the Collector to appear before him in Tirunelveli on March, 1908 to bind them over on 'good behaviour' under Section 108 of the Criminal Procedure Code.

After the Coral Mill strike in Thoothukudi, the centre of action shifted to Tirunelveli. On Monday, 9 March, V.O.Chidambaram, Siva and Padmanabha Iyer appeared before the Collector, Wynoh in Tirunelveli. Wynoh demanded guarantee for the 'good behaviour' and the trio refused to offer any such guarantee.

On the evening of the same day, V.O.Chidambaram, Siva and Padmanabha took part in the celebration of B.C. Pant's release, organized in Tirunelveli town. The next day the celebration was organized in Thoothukudi. After attending the Thoothukudi celebration, once again appeared before the Collector Wynch on March 10. During the hearing which continued till March 12, Wynch decided not to leave the agitating leaders. As the legal provision required, V.O.Chidambaram, Siva and Padmanabha offered guarantee for their good behaviour on March, 12, but, Wynch refused to accept it and remanded them to the district jail adjourning hearing until April.

The people of Tirunelveli got infuriated by the acts of the Collector and the district became engulfed in riots. The Hindus condemned the arrest of the leaders as illegal and observed that it was the immediate cause of the riot.

March 13, 1908

The following day, shops in Tirunelveli town were closed and thousands of angry people gathered on the streets on Friday 13, March 1908. Sweeting, the District Superintendent of Police, Tirunelveli, met the Collector by 11.00 A.M. and requisitioned the services of Reserve Police from Palayamkottai and Tiruchirappalli. The people began to attack government buildings in the town and the Collector's bungalow located at Veeraghavapuram. The Municipal office building, post office and police station of Tirunelveli town were set on fire and a number of street lamps were smashed. In the melee, the police party became sandwiched between sections of hostile crowd while from neighbouring housetops stones and bricks rained down on their heads. It was at this point that Wvncn gave the order to open fire. Four persons were killed on the spot and several others wounded. In a telegram to the Government immediately after the shooting episode, the District Superintendent of Police, Sweeting remarked that the harsh punishment had been imposed on the people of Tirunelveli keeping in mind the lessons of 1899 and to drive home the point that the Government was not as feeble as the popular idea and sedition monger imagines., the 1899 incident Sweeting had referred to was the Sivakasi riots' which ended in the death of about 21 persons and destruction in fire of a large number of buildings. From Sweeting's note, it appears that the repressive action against the agitators was pre-decided.

The arrest of V.O. Chidambaram and the consequent repressive acts were aimed not only at restoring law and order in a politically conscious region of Tamilnadu, but also designed to remove the threat to British commercial interests and to the British hegemony posed by the Swadeshi Movement in Tirunelveli. The fatal offshoot of the repressive measure was the dwindling down of the fortunes of V.O. Chidambaram's Steam Navigation Company. It became non-existent by 1911. The failure of the Swadeshi Navigation Company, the first major swadeshi enterprise in southern India, was a setback, albeit temporary, to the cause of indigenous capitalist development and the swadeshi movement.

In the years 1906-08 Tirunelveli and the port town, Thoothukkudi emerged as important centres of nationalist mobilization focused on Swadeshi initiatives. The events in Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi in March 1908 were to acquire powerful symbolic value in Tamilnadu. At one level, they could be seen to usher in a historic defeat; in their wake, the colonial authorities invoked a range of repressive measures and there was a receding of the nationalist tide. It was in this context of set back and disarray that revolutionary terrorism could surface in Tirunelveli district in the years immediately after 1908. But, the combative anti-colonial spirit that characterized the Swadeshi movement in Tirunelveli was not so easily crushed. The images of struggle and National assertions left behind by V.O. and his talented lieutenants continued to inspire the people of Tamilnadu.

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