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## CONTRIBUTIONS OF V.O.CHIDAMBARAM PILLAI TO INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT IN SOUTHERN REGION

**Dr. J. Barnabas Jacob**

Vice Principal

Department of History

St.John's College, Palayamkottai -2

Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli – 12)

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to highlight the role of V.O.Chidambaram Pillai to Indian National Movement in Tamil region. V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, popularly known by his initials, V.O.C, Va Voo Cee, Kappal Oottiya Tamilzhan, was an Indian freedom fighter born on 5 September 1872 in Ottapidaram, Thoothukudi district of Tamil Nadu State of India. He was a prominent lawyer, and a trade union leader. He gets credit for launching the first indigenous Indian shipping service between Tuticorin and Colombo with the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company, compacting against British ships. He was an Indian National congress (INC) member, later charged with sedition by the British government and sentenced to life imprisonment; his barrister license was stripped.<sup>1</sup>

### Key Words

V.O.Chidambaram Pillai, V.O.C, Kappal Oottiya Tamilzhan, Extremists, Tirunelveli Conference, Coral Mill Strike.

### Introduction

The supporters of Bal Gangadhar Tilak were considered as Extremists. V.O.Chidambaram Pillai was one of the prime extremist in Madras presidency. He also called "Tilak of Tamil Nadu". In the beginning of

twentieth century, Indian National movement spread rapidly in all over India particularly Tamil Nadu. V.O.Chidambaram Pillai played a significant role in Indian National Movement.

### **Role of V.O.Chidambaram Pillai**

Under Tilak a many-sided struggle was going on against the British Government. It spread the fire of patriotism in every nook and corner of Bombay Presidency. He made whirl - wind tours and collected a lot of money for the various national causes. He asked his audiences to work for Swaraj and get ready for suffering which alone could bring Searaj. At the same time the extremists under the leadership of V.O Chidambaram Pillai took the lead in Madras. Presidency. V. O. Chidambaram, a great leader from Tamil Nadu the disciple of Tilak boycotted not only foreign goods but also foreign merchant ships. He was born at Ottapidaram in Tirunelveli District on 5<sup>th</sup> September, 1872. He studied law and practiced in his home - town. He was honest and he never appeared in the court for false cases. The people respected him and fondly called him "V.O.C"<sup>2</sup>.

V.O. Chidambaram was not interested in his procession. Soon he joined in the freedom movement . All his thought, plans and actions now centered round India's freedom. To cripple the shipping business of the British, V.O.Chidambaram planned with his friends to by a ship and develop our trade. The shipping Company started by him 1906 was called the "Swade-shi steam Navigation Company". Since he was not able to pay the money for ship, he went to Bombay with his friends to get a ship on lease. He met BalaGangadharTilak and got his help to buy a ship. Finally he bought a ship from France and another from Bombay. They were "S.S.Leave and "S.S.Galleo". Trade went on successfully between Tuticorin and Sri Lanka.<sup>3</sup>

At this juncture Bipin Chandra Pal, a great patriot was released from prison. V.O.C. and his friend Subramania Siva led a huge procession to celebrate this release. The collector of Thirunelveli prevented them from doing so. But they refused to obey the order. The British arrested both the leaders to seven years by an appeal. They were treated cruelly in prison. They had to break rocks into bits. Above all V.O.C had to work in the oil press like a bullock. (He had to pull the NattuChekkus). He bore all this cruelty for our nation's sake. He had great courage<sup>4</sup>.

After his release from jail, he settled down in Madras with his family. He was eagerly looking forward to our Country's freedom. The Tamil people adore him as "Kappalottiya Thamizhan". He died on 18<sup>th</sup> November, 1936. The nation will remember his great sacrifices forever.<sup>5</sup>

## Tirunelveli Conference, 1906

In 1906, the Fourteenth Madras Provincial Conference was held at Tirunelveli bringing together important leaders from all over Tamil Nadu under the banner of Swadeshism. The leaders who spoke at the Tirunelveli Conference were G.Subramania Naidu, C.Karunakara Menon, Vijayaraghavachariar from Salem. V.Sanjivi Rao from Tiruchirappalli, N.K.Ramasamy Iyer from Thanjavur, Sethurayal from Kumbakonam, V.C.Seshadri and n.Krishnamachari from North Arcot, A.Rajaram Iyer and G.Srinivasa Rao from Madurai and Govindasamy Naidu from Chengalpattu. The district leaders who participated in the confewrence were V.O.Chidambaram Pillai, Paul Appasamy, K.R. Venkat Rama Iyer, Singampatti Zamindar, Gurusamy Iyer, N.R.Ramakrishna Iyer and Vedamoorthy Muidaliyar.<sup>6</sup>

In the Tirunelveli Conference, differences between the old party and the new party surfaced on a host of issues. The proceedings at Tirunelveli Conference reflected the views and pre-occupations of the Madras Mahahana Sabha. The 'memorial' submitted to the British Government by the president of the Conference fully reflected the old style politics of mendicancy.

"The elevation to high administrative posts of Indians who are themselves the product of English education and enlightenment and who are best fitted to act as interpreters in the government of the country, between the rulers and the ruled, will in the humble opinion of your Memorialists, deepen the foundations of British dominion in India and help to increase the material prosperity of the people.<sup>7</sup> The delegates not only affirmed full co-operation to the British government but also regulated the spirits of the members of the 'New Party' and the emerging 'Swadeshism' Members of the new party, dissatisfied with the proceedings held a parallel 'Swedeshi conference' at Palayamcottai, under the chairmanship of G.Subramania Iyer<sup>8</sup>. Here the new party determined to evolve its own approach to Swadeshim, irrespective of the Resolution passed in Tirunelveli conference.

The gap between their extremist members and others of the Madras mahajana Sabha widened as the Calcutta session of the Indian National congress in 1906 was approaching. Anticipating the strategy of the old party B.C Pal and Tilak wrote to the Chennai based extremist leaders asking them to attend the Calcutta Congress in order to strengthen their hands, Four persons were elected to represent the Tamil BNadu New Movement at Calcutta and one among them was Subramania Bharathi of composite Tirunelveli district.

The significance of the 1906 Calcutta session of Congress for the National Movement in Tamil Nadu is highlighted by two sets of comments from V.O.Chidambaranar, perhaps the central pillar of the New Movement in Tamilnadu. A few weeks before the Calcutta session, in October 1906 V.O.Chidambaranar had cautioned the people that Swadeshism must not be taken to mean a bnoycott of foreign manufactures. But three months after the 1906 Congress session, the concept was so changed that V.O.C himself declared that the Swedeshi Movement could not exist without boycott. It was not only foreign goods but everything foreign

should be boycotted, and if swadeshi and boycott were vigorously pursued the inevitable result would be the attainment of swaraj. Bipin Chandra Paul, one of the core extremist leaders visited Madras on 30 April 1907, accompanied by Subramania Bharathi. He was greeted with slogans like "Vande matharam." Though it was proposed that he would address the public in the districts, it was called off as a protest against the arrest of Lala Lajpat Rai. In the wake of Bipin Chandra Pal's visit, political atmosphere in Chennai and in the districts underwent a dramatic change

### **Tirunelveli conspiracy Case :**

In 1911 District Magistrate Ashe of Tirunelveli was shot dead at Maniachi by Vanchinathan. This was the only instance of assassination committed by Tamil terrorists nationalists. Vanchinathan committed suicide. Fourteen persons were accused. Nilakanda Brahmachari was the first accused and he was sentenced to seven years rigorous imprisonment another accused and he was sentenced to seven years rigorous imprisonment another accused Sankara Krishnan got five years and the rest shorter terms. Madasami, one of the accused and a close associate of V.O.Chidambaram Pillai of Tuticorin absconded and could not be discovered. But the master mind in the conspiracy V.V.Subramanya Iyer was not among the accused.<sup>9</sup>

### **Arrest of V.O.C and Riots in Tirunelveli District**

The Government decided to punish the leaders like V.O.C Siva and Padmanatha Iyengar who took the side of workers and helped them to get the increased wages against the wishes of their employers, who were whites. The Englishmen in the district, inclusive district Magistrate had begun to tease them in all possible ways. Their aim was to bind them over on "good behavior Under section 108 of the Criminal procedure Code. While they appeared before the magistrate the police illegally arrested them and remanded them to custody on charges of conspiracy against the English. This resulted in the Outbreak of riots in Tinnevely district under the leadership staunch nationalist who believed in creating the trend of terrorism.<sup>10</sup>

Some of the leading revolutionaries at that time were V.V.Subramania Iyer and Neelakanda Brahmachari. The collector of Tinnevely R.W.D.E.Ashe was assassinated by Vanchi Iyer for having ordered police firing at rioters of Tinnevely when there were riots. Then he ran for a while and shot himself dead. 14 persons along with Neelakanda Brahmachari as the first accused were tried and punished. But Mr.V.V.S.Iyer, the Mastermind behind the riots escaped from the prosecution. The murder of Ashe however was an isolated event of terrorism in Tamilnadu which proved the fact that the people were not willing to give their acceptance to terrorist activities.<sup>11</sup>

## His Life in Prison

V.O.Chidambaram Pillai was sent to the Central jail at Coimbatore on 9<sup>th</sup> July 1908. He was not treated like a political prisoner and he was treated badly for his love for mother country. He was made to drag the country Oil-exPELLER (Sekku) round and round to crush the seeds for oil instead of bullocks or any other drought animal. Because of this he earned the little from mental agonics and the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company demanded compensation from him. The company had been liquidated in 1911 and Chidambaram Pillai and his family lost all the wealth and property. Amidst his physical and mental agony Chidambaram was transferred to Cannanor prison and there he translated English Book As a man Thinketh of James Allen into Tamil. He was a prolific writer and good orator. In his auto bibliography he praised a lot on Vanchinathan.<sup>12</sup>

In October 1905, National Co-operative Society of Mumbai sent one of its members 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 common. 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 received another fillip in August 1906 when G.Subramania Iyer 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.<sup>13</sup>

## Coral Mill Strike

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 Mills struck work demanding reduction in working hour and a pay hike. The workers cause was espoused by V.O.Chidambaram Pillai. Relief centres were started by public contribution of feed striking workers. One day the Harvey brothers, the owners of the Mills, while travelling along Palayamkottai road were confronted by a jeering crowd which pelted them with stones significantly not a single member of the crowd was a Mill workers. 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.<sup>14</sup>

In early March, the workers of Burma Oil Company struck work following the beating of two workers. Veerasamy Naidu and Geopalam Naidu, by a member of the management. The workers complained to the District Magistrate demanding the dismissal of the person who assaulted the two workers. In the assessment of the District Superintendent of Police at Tirunelveli. P.P.Sweeting, the root cause of this rapidly growing

unrest was seditious preaching, not only in public but also unending behind the scene activities.<sup>3</sup> His report says "As far as I can judge the effect of these lectures on the lower classes is to decrease their respect of the European and the authority of the Government servants. Some of the classes attended the meetings to discuss subjects dealt with in the lectures, but few have much idea of them. They look upon the lecturers as bold patriots and admire them, believing that they are reaching them to better themselves. Some of the lower orders are doubtless prepared to follow any advice given by Chidambaram Pillai and Subramania Siva and such men are the mischievous persons"<sup>15</sup>

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.

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