



SWADESHI MOVEMENT AND RIOT IN TINNEVELLY AND THOOTHUKUDI DISTRICT IN TAMILNADU

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Abstract

The fire of Swadeshi Movement, started in Bengal, soon spread to Tamil Nadu. *Swadeshism* captured the imagination of the Tamil extremists. They encouraged boycott of foreign cloth and products and supported swadeshi goods. The Industrial Association established warehouses to store and sell swadeshi products. The Swadeshi League carried the message of Swadeshism to the masses. The Balabharath Association arranged popular discussion and debate in support of the mass movement. Similarly, *Swadeshivastu Pracharini Sabha* popularized the sale of locally made goods. A National fund was raised in support of the movement. Subramania Bharati's patriotic songs fanned the fire of Swadeshi Nationalism and his articles in 'India' demonstrated that the Swadeshi Movement had struck deep roots in Tamil Nadu. Particularly in Tirunelveli District. More important, the launching of Swadeshi steam Navigation Company by V.O.Chidambaram Pillai in 1906 challenged the maritime might of the British imperialism and the Company "marked the most spectacular development in the history of the movement."

In March 1907, V.O.C. visited Madras to raise more money for the Steam Navigation Company. In this regard, G.Subramania Iyer and Bharathi arranged a Public meeting on the South Beach, Madras. V.O.C expatiated on the advantages of the Swadeshi Movements, and criticized the policies of Lord Curzon. He insisted that the Swadeshi Movements could not exist without boycott. It was not only against foreign goods but everything depend on foreign should be boycotted. If Swadeshi and boycott movements were vigorously pursued then the result would be the attainment of "Swaraj". He requested the public to resort to boycott in every branch of life. In use, if it was carried out effectively, the British would have soon left the Country. Bharathi, the another speaker sung on the National songs and spoke on the above theme.

The ill-treatment on V.O.C and Subramaniya Siva further added fuel to the Swadeshi fire. The youth of this district were gathered under the leadership of Nilakanda Bramachari, Arumugam, Madasamy Pillai and others.



They planned to form a secret society to ventilate terrorism against the British officers. On 10th April 1910, the ‘Bharath Matha Association’ was formed by Nilakandan, Vanchi Iyer and others of Thenkasi and Senkottaih. After forming this association, they executed a master plan and assassinated R.W.D.E. Ashe on 17th June, 1911 at Maniyatchi Railway Station in Tinnevelly District.

The anti-partition agitation flowered into Swadeshi Movement. Though the Congress readily responded to the Swadeshi Call, it was hijacked by the Extremists. The movement was a combination of several small struggles like boycotting of foreign cloth, picketing of shops, public meetings, processions and so on. Many methods of mass mobilization were adopted. The movement was multi-faceted. It involved several sections of society. It soon spread to other parts of India. True, the movement could not be continued for several reasons. But it must be recognized that the movement was the forerunner of mass struggle. It was the fountain-head of subsequent National agitations. The legacy of the Swadeshi Movement lasted long.

KEY WORDS: *BAL LAL PAL, BHARATHA MATHA ASSOCIATION, MANIYATCHI RAILWAY STATION, SWADESHI MOVEMENT, V.O.C.*

Introduction

The object of Swadeshi was to use Indian goods, self-help and self-reliance. It was used as “an economic, political and spiritual weapon”. In mass meetings pledges were taken to use homemade articles and abstain from the use of foreign goods. New associations like Swadeshi Samraj were set up to look after constructive work. Volunteers were organized to advance the cause of Swadeshi. Large sums were collected to promote the movement. Many textile mills, soap and match factories, National Banks and Insurance companies were opened in both urban and rural areas. It was a mass movement.¹

Swadeshi movement

The Causes of the anti-partition agitation may be stated as follows:

1. The announcement that Delhi was to replace Calcutta as British India’s Capital, consequent upon the Partition of Bengal
2. The disadvantaged status and loss of opportunities which Bengali Hindus feared within a divided Bengal
3. Negligible progress in redressing the grievances of the Bengalis
4. Insensitivity with which the scheme of partition had been thrust on the unwilling throats of the people of Bengal
5. The partition plan was decided without consulting the governed and

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6. The traditional Bengal unity and identity which cut across narrow interest groups, class, as well as regional or religious barriers.

Partition of Bengal, 1905

Bengal Presidency consisting of Bengal proper, Bihar, Orissa and Chota Nagpur was indeed unwieldy – Boundary adjustments of Bengal had been a subject of discussion for about four decades prior to the arrival of Lord Curzon in India as its Viceroy (1899-1905). Scared by the growing Bengal Nationalism Curzon decided to divide Bengal and destroy the fountainhead of freedom struggle. He, therefore, announced the partition scheme in December 1905. At one stroke Curzon wanted to reduce the administrative area and drive a wedge between Hindus and Muslims in Bengal.²

With dogged perseverance Lord Curzon pursued his goal. When the Bengal leaders called for the preservation of the unity of Bengal he sharply reacted that such a plan would “tend to consolidate the Bengali element...and would produce the very effect that we desire to avoid...” When Curzon toured East Bengal in 1904 to canvass Muslim support he assured his audience that his partition plan would “invest the Mohammedans in Eastern Bengal with a unity they have not enjoyed since the day of the old Mussalman viceroys kings”.

Contributions

The partition of Bengal provoked the Swadeshi Movement. The following are the major contributions of the Movement: 1. The Bengal militants added a glorious chapter in the history of the Indian freedom struggle. They clarified their objectives, taught people the virtues of self-confidence, self-reliance and self-respect. As a result, the outlook of the younger generation had been changed from one of the mendicancy to militancy. 2. Though the Swadeshi Movement originated in Bengal it evoked All-India sympathy. It spread beyond Bengal, Punjab and Maharashtra to new seats of politics like United Provinces, Bihar, Orissa Gujarat and Madras. It kindled the patriotic fervor in the hearts of younger generation in these regions. 3. There was a spontaneous outburst of literary effulgence in Bengal. A spate of patriotic songs, poems and dramas enervated the patriotic sentiments of the Bengalis and enlisted the support of the people to their struggle against the alien government. Entire Bengal was enlivened by popular literature. 4. The swadeshi Movement freed people from the fear of police, arrest and jails. It taught the people to challenge and defy the authority of the Government openly. Imprisonment became a badge of honour. Receiving lathi charges considered to be an act of valour. 5. After the Partition of Bengal people realized that petitions, protests and prayers must be backed up by force and pressure and the agitators should be capable of suffering and sacrifice. This new spirit was regarded as the salvation of the country. It made the people manly. It was considered by Lala Lajput Rai as the Common Religion of United India. The agitation was such the Government of India was forced to nullify the Partition of Bengal in 1911.³



Swadeshi movement 1905-07

The fire of Swadeshi Movement, started in Bengal, soon spread to Tamil Nadu. *Swadeshism* captured the imagination of the Tamil extremists. They encouraged boycott of foreign cloth and products and supported swadeshi goods. The Industrial Association established warehouses to store and sell swadeshi products. The Swadeshi League carried the message of *Swadeshism* to the masses. The Balabharath Association arranged popular discussion and debate in support of the mass movement. Similarly, *Swadeshivastu Pracharini Sabha* popularized the sale of locally made goods. A National fund was raised in support of the movement. Subramania Bharati's patriotic songs fanned the fire of Swadeshi Nationalism and his articles in 'India' demonstrated that the Swadeshi Movement had struck deep roots in Tamil Nadu. Particularly in Tirunelveli District. More important, the launching of Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company by V.O.Chidambaram Pillai in 1906 challenged the maritime might of the British imperialism and the Company "marked the most spectacular development in the history of the movement."

The Swadeshi boycott, and National Education Movement spread to Bombay and Madras. Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Lajpat Rai propagated the ideas from 1906-1909. National Education made progress in U.P., Berar. A National College was opened at Masulipatanam by the Andhra National Council of Education in 1909⁴. This period also saw the use of traditional festivals as a means to reach out to the masses. Tilak organized the Ganpati festivals spreading the Swadeshi and Nationalist messages. The Moderates wanted the National struggle to be carried out secular lines and they disapproved of the masses being included at this stage in the National Movement.

The Liberals, whilst believing in self reliance did not want to lose sight of the British connection. It was understood that the boycott and Swadeshi Movement would loom large in the congress Pandals. The boycott resolution proved to be a bone of contention. In the 1906 Congress session, the Extremists within the Congress forced the Moderates to pass a resolution on Swadeshi and National Education. Ultimately four drafts were agreed upon and passed in the open session. The Congress session of 1906 reiterated its Resolution of its 1904 and 1905 sessions in condemning the partition of Bengal.

A great deal of heated arguments arose over the boycott resolution which reads as follows. "That having regard to the fact that the people of this country have little or no voice in its administration, and that their representations to the Government do not receive due consideration, this Congress is of opinion that the Boycott Movement inaugurated in Bengal by way of protest against the partition of that province, was and is legitimate". This resolution was moved by Ambika charan Majumdar and was seconded by Pal. Moderates like L.A.Govindaraghav Iyer did not think that boycott could be used ordinarily in other provinces. Madan Mohan Malaviya and Gokhale felt that the Congress could not be committed to the views of Bipin Chandra Pal. But the resolution was carried.⁵



The resolution on Swadeshi was also passed stating “that this Congress accorded it’s most cordial support to the Swadeshi Movement and called upon the people of the Country to labour for it’s success.” Then the resolution on National Education had been passed for boys and girls. The most important resolution on self government. In order to avert a major split, Dadabhai Naoroji decided to attempt a compromise which was in keeping with the liberal tradition. This step was taken in the interest of the Moderates so that they may not lose their grip on the politics of the day.

Discerning from the turn of events, the Liberals were uneasy and alarmed. They felt that their positions were threatened especially in the wake of Pal touring the country to increase the Extremist impact. His lectures were calculated to develop the quality of grimness and strengthen discontent. So Gokhale too toured round the country to canvass support for the Moderate cause. He chose Lucknow and Allahabad and secured the support of Malaviya and Motilal Nehru.⁶ He tried to secure the neutrality of Lala Lajpat Rai. It was against this background that the Congress session of 1907 took place. The leading opponents were Gokhale and Tilak.

The legacy left by the 1906 manifested itself in the controversies between the Extremist and Moderate groups in this session. It gave rise to the fear that the Moderates may recover some of the grounds they had lost in the Calcutta provincial conference of Surat, April 1907 had excluded Boycott and National Education from it’s discussion. This was due to the influence of Pherozeshah Mehta. It was decided by the Calcutta session of 1906 that the following annual session would be held in 1907 at Nagpur. During the discussions on the preliminary arrangements, there were pointed differences between the two groups especially over the question of selection of the President. As a result the meeting was broken. The next venue was to be Surat. The Extremist interpreted this move to be incited by the Moderates as Surat was considered to be the bastion of the Moderates who were followers of Pherozeshah Mehta. Further, the differences of opinions over the selection of the next President continued. The Extremists initially chose Aswini Dutt. But since Aswini Dutt was not an All India figure, his name was dropped. The Extremists next suggested Lala Lajpat Rai’s name. The Moderates would not accept the suggestion and therefore chose Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh. Lala Lajpat Rai withdrew his name. The Extremists were further irked by the fact that the list of subjects taken up for discussion did not include self government, boycott and National Education.⁷

The Extremists were truculent and the Liberals were adamant. If both sections had given up their stiff postures, perhaps the Congress session would not have ended in a split. Tilak wanted that an assurance be given that boycott, Swaraj, Swadeshi and National Education would be discussed in the sessions. Gokhale’s statement that it was difficult to print draft resolutions before the next congress session was baseless. He gave an unconvincing assurance that the Extremist topics of Swaraj, Swadeshi, boycott and National education would be discussed. This resulted in a pandemonium. The schism which began in the 1890s now became a reality. This ended the first phase in the National organization. The entire split took place because of fear. The liberals could have helped to allay the fear by taking the Extremists into confidence regarding the topics they were to discuss, when



Tilak promised to withdraw his opposition if the four subjects were discussed. But, the Liberals did not come forward for a compromise. Between 1907-1916 the Congress did not really represent the National views as it did not include the Extremists.

Relationship between Tilak and V.O.C.

Valliappan Olaganathan Chidambaram Pillai mentioned V.O.C and Robert William D' Escourt Ashe mentioned R.W.D.E. Ashe.

V.O.C, was known contemporaneously as the 'Tilak of the South'. Not surprising considering that he was Bal Gangadhar Tilak's staunchest lieutenant in the southern part of the country. However, V.O.C's close relationship with Tilak awaits a detailed documentation and an interpretative narrative.

.Forgotten narrative

In a memoir on Tilak written in English in 1927, V.O.C recollects that he had began to follow Tilak's writings from as early as 1893. There's evidence to show that he had been elected a delegate to the Congress session of Madras (1898) and Tilak too had attended it. But their meeting apparently did not take place. The tryst was delayed by a decade.

Curzon's infamous partition of Bengal set afire the Swadeshi movement with its programme of native industry, boycott of foreign goods and National education. While Swadeshi enterprise across India was limited to such tokenisms as making candles and bangles, in Tuticorin it took the spectacular form of running nothing less than a steam shipping company — an enterprise that propelled V.O.C, until then a modest pleader in the local court, to National attention. V.O.C had galvanized the local merchants to launch the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company in late 1906 and gave the British shipping company a run for its money. The swadeshi company ran steamers between Tuticorin and Colombo and V.O.C spent considerable time in Colombo raising share capital and organizing the company. Probably it was this connection that led to his later association with Virakesari.⁸

By then he was closely aligned to the Extremist faction of the Congress led by Tilak. V.O.C's efforts to buy two steamships took him frequently to Bombay. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, a visit to Pune, Tilak's hometown, never materialized.

The Moderates' attempt to sideline the Extremist was increasingly getting desperate. And the stage was set in Surat, the venue of the Congress in December 1907, for a showdown. V.O.C wired to Tilak and Aurobindo proposing Lala Lajpat Rai for the presidency of the Congress. In the event, Rash Behari Ghosh, the Calcutta moderate was set to take the presidential chair. All the while Tilak had tried to avoid the inevitable split. But the Moderates' sly attempts to tamper with the letter and spirit of resolutions passed in the preceding Calcutta



session of the Congress was the last straw. The Congress conference ended in pandemonium with blows exchanged and chairs and shoes thrown. Tilak proposed a committee of one member each from both factions from every province to affect a compromise. V.O.C was Tilak's handpicked choice from the Madras presidency, and he was also nominated Secretary of Tilak's new party. There was little doubt that V.O.C was the spearhead of the Nationalist movement in the South.

The months following V.O.C's return from Surat were full of intense Nationalist activity. The swadeshi shipping enterprise grew from strength to strength. V.O.C led a major strike in the European-owned cotton Coral Mills of Tuticorin. Swadeshi meetings with fiery Nationalist speeches, probably for the first time in the Tamil language, led to widespread Nationalist mobilization. Colonial ire was turned on the Nationalists. V.O.C and his colleagues were arrested on March 12, 1908, which in turn led to an insurgent uprising in Tuticorin and Tirunelveli.⁹

Evidently the guru was following his disciple's exploits, for; Tilak's English weekly Mahratta regularly reported the events in far-off Tirunelveli. By the time a draconian double life sentence was imposed on V.O.C in July 1907, Tilak himself was jailed. While V.O.C languished in prison for the next four and a half years (on a reduced sentence on appeal) Tilak was transported to Mandalay (Burma).

Not surprisingly, the two lost touch during their imprisonment. Barely a few days after Tilak's release, V.O.C wrote from his Mylapore home on June 19, 1914. Addressing Tilak as 'Respected Brother' he congratulated him on his release. He offered condolences on his wife's death and expressed the desire to meet him in a month or two. After enquiring about his intellectual output during the prison years, he signed off 'obediently' with the words 'I prostrate before you and offer my *Namaskarams* to your Holy feet'. V.O.C's deep respect for Tilak is palpable.

V.O.C's promised visit did not materialize for many months. V.O.C arrived in Pune on the day of Gokhale's death (February 19, 1915) and spent a week with Tilak as his house guest. The two deliberated on how to use the ongoing First World War to India's benefit, and in this connection Tilak even discussed a secret message from Indian revolutionaries abroad. Such was his trust in his disciple.

When Tilak launched his All India Home Rule League in 1916, V.O.C took an active part in it, organizing and conducting meetings in Chennai. However Tilak's close association with Annie Besant caused some friction, with V.O.C neither being able to overrule Tilak's advice nor stopping his campaign against her. The struggle within the labour movement between V.O.C and the Besant-its took on bitter propositions.

Tilak's critical attitude to the Montagu-Chelmsford reform proposals were faithfully echoed by V.O.C. When Tilak canvassed the senior leader C. Vijayaraghavachari's support for the Bombay special Congress session



(August 1919), he specifically stated: 'I have fully explained my position to Rajaji and V.O.C. and they will be able to give you further explanations...''

Tilak invited some Congress luminaries after the Bombay special session to Pune and V.O.C was among the invitees to discuss the future course of action. When VOC rose to speak he was 'loudly cheered'. Motilal Ghose, the venerated editor of Amrita Bazar Patrika, who was present on the occasion, expressed his desire to see the hero of Swadeshi days and warmly hugged V.O.C.

Momentous times

Tilak's case against Chirol and his campaign for Home Rule in England consumed the next fourteen months, months that were momentous. The passing of the Rowlett bills and the Jallian wala Bagh Massacre, and Gandhi's conversion of the Nationalist movement into a mass movement signaled the end of the Tilak era. The Calcutta special Congress's endorsement of Gandhi's Non-Co-Operation programme was only a fait accompli. And in an event pregnant with symbolism, Tilak had breathed his last barely weeks before the Calcutta session. Tilak's followers were deeply demoralized. V.O.C resigned from the Congress on his return from Calcutta. While many of his Maharashtra disciples — G.S. Khaparde, B.S. Moonje and others — drifted into Hindu communalism, the germ of which was very much in Tilak's ideology, VOC's politics kept clear of it. He continued to play a part in the Nationalist movement, labour movement, the Non-Brahmin movement and the social reform movements.¹⁰

The role of the District in the Swadeshi Movement

The Palayakar's uprising in the south was closely followed by the Vellore Mutiny in the North Tamil Nadu in the year 1806 which became a damp squib against the British though about 800 Indian soldiers died, 600 imprisoned, some were hanged and some were blown from the guns. It was the rehearsal for the Great Rebellion of 1857 in which the role of Tamil Nadu was conspicuously absent.

Early Modern Nationalist Movements

The earliest modern political organization in Tamil Nadu was the Madras Native Association founded in July 1852. Its branches were opened in the districts including the composite Tirunelveli. This institution could not gain much ground and began to brittle away.

The Madras Mahajana Sabha was started on 16 May 1884. In the next year, in December 1885, the Indian National Congress held its first meeting in Bombay in which the leaders from the composit Tirunelveli District

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participated. The Madras Mahajana Sabha, though, a year older than the Indian National Congress, made it a point to work closely with the All India Organization.

The Rise of Extremism in the District

The first generation of the Congress leaders were moderates and their style of functioning invited criticism from the leaders like Bala Gangathar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai and Bipin Chandra Pal which resulted in the split of Moderates and Extremists in the Indian National Congress.

Among the extremist leaders of Tamil Nadu were C.Subramaniya Bharathi and V.O.Chidambaram Pillai, the two National leaders who earned immortal glory for the district in the history of the country's National Movement.

The growing rift between the 'old' and 'new' parties (moderates and extremists) in Tamil Nadu became apparent after the launch of the Swadeshi Movement in the wake of the 1905 Congress Session. In June 1906, Fourteenth Madras Provincial Conference was held at Tirunelveli. The differences between the moderates and the extremists came to forefront in the conference as the memorandum passed in the conference reflected the old style of functioning neglecting the spirit of Swadeshism. Hence, the extremist members held a parallel Swadeshi Conference at Pakayamkottai under the chairmanship of G.Subramaniya Iyer. Here the new party determined to evolve its own approach to Swadeshism.

The Calcutta Congress 1906

The division among the Tamil Nadu Nationalists was brought to open at the 1906 Calcutta Congress. Though the Madras Mahajana Sabha was cautious enough not to give upper hand to the extremists in the Calcutta Congress, Bipin Chandra Pal and Kaparde, the right hand men of Tilak wrote to the Madras based Extremist leaders asking them to attend the Calcutta Conference in order to strengthen their hands. Among the four extremist leaders elected to participate in the 1906 Calcutta Congress was C.Subramaniya Bharathi. Bipin Chandra Pal and his supporters proposed the resolution to the Swadeshi Movement which was not supported by the Moderates. L.A. Govinda Raghava Iyer argued against the resolution. Immediately a small group from Tamil Nadu including Subramania Bharathi voiced its opposition to L.A. Govinda Raghava Iyer's argument. The group supported Pal's resolution and pledged to implement it in Tamil Nadu. V.O.Chidambaram Pillai and Bharathi were the central pillars of the Movement in Tamil Nadu.

Swadeshi Movement and Riot in Tinnevelly

The Swadeshi movement in Tinnevelly was started by Ramakrishna Iyer, a Lawyer in September 1905. Subsequently Swadeshi lectures were delivered by many Nationalists like G.Subramania Iyer, Bharathi,

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V.O.C, Subramaniya Siva on the subjects like the separation of ‘executive’ from judicial functions; representation of Indian grievances in the House Commons; the demand for an equal share in high appointments for Indians etc., During April 1906, the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company came into existence. From June 1906, V.O.C. began to continue a series of lectures on Swadeshi Movements. In August 1906, Swadeshi anniversary meeting was arranged under the president ship of G.Subramania Iyer, the founder of *The Hindu and Swadesamitran* in Madras. He appealed to the Indians on the encouragement of Swadeshi Industries and the boycott of English goods. He also urged the need of unanimity among the Hindus.¹¹ The Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company was officially registered at Tuticorin on 1st October 1906 with a nominal capital of Rs. 10 lakhs. V.O.C was its Assistants Secretary and Pandithurai Thevar of Madurai was its President¹². The Company issued public shares to the people and collected a sizable amount for the cause.

In March 1907, V.O.C. visited Madras to raise more money for the Steam Navigation Company. In this regard, G.Subramania Iyer and Bharathi arranged a Public meeting on the South Beach, Madras. V.O.C expatiated on the advantages of the Swadeshi Movements, and criticized the policies of Lord Curzon.¹³ He insisted that the Swadeshi Movements could not exist without boycott. It was not only against foreign goods but everything depend on foreign should be boycotted. If Swadeshi and boycott movements were vigorously pursued then the result would be the attainment of “Swaraj”. He requested the public to resort to boycott in every branch of life. In use, if it was carried out effectively, the British would have soon left the Country.¹⁴ Bharthi, the another speaker sung on the National songs and spoke on the above theme.

On 17th April 1907 the first Swadeshi Steamship ‘S.S.Gallia’ arrived in Tuticorin, although another steamer had some time previously been chartered which was withdrawn from service. As soon as the streamer began to run regularly to Colombo a tough competition began between the new Company and the British India Steam Navigation Company.¹⁵

G.Subramania Iyer made another Swadeshi lecture in the Tinnevelly District in the second week of July 1907. He said that there were three vital disadvantages under the British Government, which benefited the white people only. They were [1] The British denied to the Natives the higher appointments under the Government [2] They did not consult them even in the matters affecting their interest and [3] They did provide them enough food.¹⁶

V.O.C. was going on lecturing on Swadeshi movement. On 9th January 1908, , Subramaniya Siva, whose real name was B.Subramania Iyer, delivered a lecture on Swadeshi enterprise at Tinnevelly. He travelled to the entire Tinnevelly District preaching the advantage of Swaraj, the necessity for National Education and the advisability of getting the Arms Act repealed. Subramaniya Siva, a native of the Madurai District, who studied up to Matriculation, during his stay at Tinnevelly, he made an acquaintance with V.O.C. By that time, Gurunatha Iyer, an ex-head constable of Tinnevelly District was appointed as Cargo Superintendent in the Swadeshi Steamship Company. He was a close follower of Swadeshi Movements.¹⁷

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Subramaniya Siva, and V.O.C. both joined hands and continued the Swadeshi lectures in Tuticorin. They publicly protested on the 17th January 1908 that a *sangam* or Association should be formed to administer “Swaraj” in Tuticorin. Among other matters with which the association was to be concerned were the development of the Swadeshi spirit, unanimity and courage, the organization of “Swadeshi” volunteers and the raising of funds.¹⁸ An executive committee of 20 members including V.O.C. and Gurunatha Iyer was formed. On 19th January, Subramaniya Siva addressed to the audience upon the dangers arising from a foreign Government and also referred to the assassination of the King and Crown prince of Portugal, and tried to justify it. V.O.C. followed him to urge everyone to join the “Swaraj Sangam” and remarked that it was unnecessary to be afraid of Europeans. He said that about three millions of Indians died every year out of starvation; it would be a good thing if they could agree to die at once when the 50,000 Europeans in India would be no large number for them to deal with. All Indians should join together and earn happiness or die together in the struggle. Meetings continued to be held daily at Tuticorin.¹⁹ In his speech on 26th February, Subramania Siva referred to the deportation of Lala Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh. He said that they were deported for taking up the cause of their brethren, who were unjustly taxed and ill-treated. He then went on to say that the success of any enterprise rested with the labourers. If the coolies stood out for extra wages European mills in India would cease to exist. There were two ways of injuring the mill owners; one was by doing mischief to machinery and the other by going on strike. He declared that he wished them to adopt the second course. As a direct of these speeches 200 operatives of the Coral Cotton Mills in Tuticorin struck work and in consequence the mill was closed.²⁰

On 1st March 1908, a large gathering was held. Padmanabha Iyengar was the speaker. He urged to boycott of everyone who did not join the Swadeshi movement.²¹ Again on 7th March another large meeting was held in Tuticorin. Subramaniya Siva said that no one could find fault with the philosophy of man’s rights of Swaraj and that no Government could say that this was against sedition. V.O.C. also said that he proposed to bring out a newspaper called Swaraj. He said that there was a revolution coming on in India which was for their benefit and that it was necessary to have a paper to communicate in Tamil that transpires all over India. He said that Swadeshi, Boycott and the avoiding of the law courts were the weapons to attain Swaraj.²²

The result of these meetings created a very critical state of feeling in Tuticorin against Europeans generally and the classes who are well disposed towards the Government. The District Magistrate endeavoured to enlist the co-operation and support of the more responsible and Moderate members of the Swadeshi party and the leading inhabitants but in Tuticorin his efforts did not meet with much success.²³

V.O.C. and Subramaniya Siva proposed to conduct a procession on 9th March to celebrate the advent of Swaraj and plant its flags. On 8th March the District Magistrate issued notices under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code to V.O.C and Subramania Siva prohibiting them from holding any such procession on 9th and to the public generally prohibiting from attending any procession in Tuticorin.²⁴ On the evening of the same day,



he caused notices to be served on these two persons and on Padmanabha Iyengar under Section 112 calling upon them to appear before him in Tinnvelly on 9th to show the cause why they should not be bound over under Section 108 to be of good behavior. A largely attended meeting was held on the evening of 8th March at which these notices were discussed.²⁵ The general drift of the speeches was that the notices were illegal. V.O.C., Subramaniya Siva and Padmanabha Iyengar went Tinnevelly on 9th and declined to enter into bonds to be good behavior as required by the District Magistrate. They again went to the court at Tinnevelly on 10th and the case was adjourned to 11th.²⁶ On Wednesday 11th March the hearing was proceeded with and a considerable body of evidence relating to the inflammatory speeches was recorded. On Thursday, the Superintendent of Police laid before the District Magistrate information regarding the events which had taken place at Tuticorin on Tuesday the 10th.²⁷ Reports had also been received of the speeches made had been held in the same place each evening on the rising of the Court. The District Magistrate then determined to proceed under Section 107 Cr.P.C. as it was obvious that a breach of the peace or a serious riot might occur at any moment. They parties were present in court and notices were served upon them. They did not admit the truth of the information and the District Magistrate proceeded to record evidence. An application was again made for an adjournment to move the High Court and Security was offered under protest, which the District Magistrate declined to accept. After recording a certain amount of evidence another hearing was adjourned until 1st April to enable the parties to move the High Court as prayed for and the three persons were remanded to custody.²⁸ Then they offered to give the security demanded under Section 107 and said that they did not want to show cause. The District Magistrate deferred passing orders on the application and removed the prisoners to the District Jail. A large crowd had collected outside the court and considerable demonstrations were made. Application was at once made to the session's court to admit the parties to bail and a large mass meeting was held on the river bed.²⁹

On the Application to the High Court, V.O.C. was released on bail, on 25th March but was immediately rearrested on a charge under section 124A and 153A I.P.C. Two cases were instituted against him one for abetting Subramaniya Siva and one in respect of his own speech on 9th March.³⁰ He was convicted and sentenced in both cases transportation for life. He was at once sent to the Coimbatore Jail. On appeal the High Court reduced the sentence to 6 years.³¹

Meanwhile, the speeches at Tuticorin were delivered by prominent Nationalists on 11th and on the same day the municipal sweepers struck work. Many jutka drivers also refused to work even for "Anti Swadeshi" Natives. On 12th, all the private sweepers struck work. On 13th March 1908, all shops were closed at the request of Gurunatha Iyer. A large crowd gathered and began to break lamps and threw stones.³² Then they set on fire to the Municipal Office and the kerosene stores. Moreover, they attacked the Police Station, Post and Telegraph Office. A large mob continued to retire slowly in front of the District Magistrate and there were crowds in the nearby streets on either flank. The mob threw stones from all directions. The District Magistrate then gave the shooting order. In this encounter, one man was killed. Later, in the afternoon, the joint Magistrate issued an order prohibiting all meetings in the town. The Sub Divisional Magistrate marched to the troublesome place



with a party of reserve constables on the contrary; it could not disperse the crowd. The Police resumed firing. In this connection, Gurunatha Iyer of Tuticorin was arrested on 14th March, 1908.³³

The Madras Government imposed punitive Police force on the places of riot. The Government also prosecuted. V.O.C, Subramaniya Siva and Padmanabha Iyengar under section 124A, 153A & 505 of I.P.C. The arrest of V.O.C, Subramaniya Siva and other regional Swadeshi leaders led a series of disturbances in the Tinnevelly District. Wynch, the District Magistrate of Tinnevelly District appreciated the services of R.W.D.E. Ashe, the Joint magistrate, who stationed at Tuticorion. V.O.C and Subramaniya Siva were illtreated in the prisons.³⁴ The ill-treatment on V.O.C and Subramaniya Siva further added fuel to the Swadeshi fire. The youth of this district were gathered under the leadership of Nilakanda Bramachari, Arumugam, Madasamy Pillai and others. They planned to form a secret society to ventilate terrorism against the British officers. On 10th April 1910, the ‘Bharath Matha Association’ was formed by Nilakandan, vanchi Iyer and other of Thenkasi and Senkottaih. After forming this association, they executed a master plan and assassinated R.W.D.E. Ashe on 17th June, 1911 at Maniyatchi Railway Station in Tinnevelly District.³⁵

Supression of the Swadeshi Movement 1908-1911

The Swadeshi movement spread like wild fire in southern Tamil Nadu. Sensing the danger of the movement going out of control, the Government decided to stem the tide. The shops suspected of dealing with Swadeshi goods were raided. Meetings and demonstrations were prohibited. Newspapers were proscribed. Sub-Collector R.W.D.E. Ashe fired into striking workers at Tirunelveli (1908). V.O.C organized a massive mass procession in Tirunelveli to celebrate the release of Bipin Chandra Pal. He and Subramania Siva spoke at a mammoth meeting held in front of the office of the District Munsif and passionately praised Pal. Subsequently, V.O.C, Subramania Siva and Padmanabha Iyer were arrested by the *Collector Vinch* of Tirunelveli on charge of sedition. They were tried and V.O.C was sentenced to 40 years of imprisonment. He was incarcerated in Coimbatore prison. His appeal against the court verdict was of no avail. However, the Privy Council in London reduced the life imprisonment into rigorous sentence. He was then transferred to Kannanur jail in Kerala. V.O.C was treated as a criminal in the prisons. He was finally released on Dec.1912.³⁶

Criticism

The Swadeshi Movement has been criticized on various counts. First, it was confined to Bhadralok class and the peasant masses in general and the Muslims in particular did not take part in it. Secondly, it was essentially religious in character in the sense that it was based on Hindu religion and the tradition of Hindu society. The introduction of religious obscurantism and mysticism in politics not only weakened the secular character of the Nationalist movement but also estranged Muslims. It “inevitably retarded and weakened the real advance of the National movement and of political consciousness”. Thirdly, like the Muslims, the mass of the common people and the workers were still outside the mainstream of National politics. Fourthly, the Extremists demand for Swadeshi and Swaraj was premature and their agitational method was unrealistic because the people were not



prepared and trained for them. Besides, the leaders divided among themselves. Fifthly, the method of Passive resistance was impracticable. In fact, boycott of goods was a failure. It meant sudden stoppage of commercial transactions. It was a sort of commercial war which India could not afford. Despite boycott programme large quantity of cotton goods and sugar were imported to Bengal, the birth place of the Swadeshi Movement. Sixthly, it was folly to give up Government posts and keeping away from Colleges, Courts and Councils, it retarded the Country's progress. In short, the cause of the country was spoiled by unworkable and disagreeable plans of action.

In spite of criticism, the Swadeshi Movement, though suppressed for the time being, ultimately resulted in the cancellation of the Partition of Bengal. The Partition as "a preemptive blow at the National patriotic forces" failed. Curzon's attempt to crush the nascent National struggle proved to be counterproductive. The Swadeshi Movement contained the seeds of Swaraj. Presiding over the 22nd Session of the Congress at Calcutta in 1906, Dadabhai Naoroji gave the slogan of Swaraj. "Which at that time caught the people and the country in a frenzy of effort for the attainment of that ideal".³⁷

Estimate

The anti-partition agitation flowered into Swadeshi Movement. Though the Congress readily responded to the Swadeshi Call, it was hijacked by the Extremists. The movement was a combination of several small struggles like boycotting of foreign cloth, picketing of shops, public meetings, processions and so on. Many methods of mass mobilization were adopted. The movement was multi-faceted. It involved several sections of society. It soon spread to other parts of India. True, the movement could not be continued for several reasons. But it must be recognized that the movement was the forerunner of mass struggle. It was the fountain-head of subsequent National agitations. The legacy of the Swadeshi movement lasted long.³⁸

End Notes

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