



## **Kulasekarapatnam Incident – A Violent Nationalism in Quit India Movement**

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The Quit India Movement spread in a hurricane speed to all the provinces of India. The states saw an unprecedented revolution in the history of Freedom struggle. Provinces like Madras presidency, Maharashtra, Bengal, Punjab, Rajasthan, Bihar and the like played a leading role in the August Revolution. Among the various states of India, the Madras presidency occupied a unique place in the Quit India Movement. The congress leaders of this presidency imbibed anti-British feelings in the heart and soul of the people. They conducted many meetings on the eve of the Quit India Movement and educated them to participate and make it a fruitful one. Different districts of Madras presidency took a leading part in the Quit India Movement. The gospel of the August Revolution was spread by the congress volunteers in every nook and corner of the Madras presidency. It had great effect on the masses. It prepared all the people to take part in the Quit India Movement. Madurai, Ramnad, Trichy, Salem, Madras, Tanjore, Coimbatore and Tinnevely districts of Madras presidency vigorously launched the Quit India Movement. Tinnevely district of Madras presidency was the first and most important district which played a crucial role in the Quit India Movement. This was a model district for the extremist movement and nerve centre of extremism. When the Quit India Movement was launched, Tinnevely district became the nucleus of picketing, bomb throwing, hartals, arson and other such violent activities. The present



study focuses the violent activities which happened at Kulasekarapatnam in Tiruchendur taluk of Tinnevelly district.

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The Quit India Movement which was started with the slogan do or die soon became violent in Tinnevelly district. Kulasekarapatnam situated in the Tiruchendur taluq of Tinnevelly district witnessed the association of an English officer. In Kulasekarapatnam there was a big British owned salt factory. It was



under the control of Asst. Salt Inspector W.E. Loane. He was very hard working and sincere in his works. Due to his devoted work, the daily collection of the salt factory was raised from 10,000 to Rs. 75,000. He was a faithful servant of the British government. In Kulasekarapatnam there was a small port. From there salt was exported to various parts of the world via Tuticorin main port.

The extremists of Tiruchendur taluq under the leadership of Rajagopalan decided to loot the salt factory at Kulasekarapatnam. At the same time they had no idea about the structure of the salt factory and the existence of the amount of arms and ammunitions in the factory. Moreover they had no idea about the number of police personnel stationed inside the factory for security purpose.<sup>1</sup> It was humanly impossible to loot the factory without knowing the above facts. In order to know the above details they selected Sivanthakani, a clever and shrewd underground activities. He was secretly sent to the salt factory for collecting informations regarding the number of rifles available in the salt factory, the way to enter into the salt factory very easily and the number of policemen stationed inside the factory for security purposes. He entered the salt factory stealthily and returned with all necessary details. Immediately Rajagopalan and party arranged a meeting at 'Pipe Line' on the night of 19 September 1942.<sup>2</sup> It was attended by sixty seven persons.

In the meeting they discussed the way in which the factory was to be looted. Rajagopalan streamlined the ways and means for looting the factory." The meeting of 19th September ended with the adoption of a plan for looting the salt factory. As per their plan, the sixty seven members were divided into two groups. One group consisted of fifteen and the other group had fifty two. The first group was to be headed by Mantiram and the second group under the leadership of Rajagopalan. The former was entrusted with the work of breaking the main gate. The latter was given the work of entering into the saltpan, then



four persons should get hold of the policeman of duty and one person to tie him. Thereafter all the rifles should be taken away from the salt factory.

The agitators started their work exactly at 3 'o clock in the night. The petty officer Vedamani after ringing the bell thrice went to bed. When the group of Rajagopalan was about to reach the main gate, the Mantiram group broke the main gate and gave way to the Rajagopalan party to enter into the saltpan. When the main gate was broken, the volunteers increased their speed in their activities. As per their plan, two persons caught hold of the police constable on duty and tied him. Then the volunteers took nine rifles and considerable amount of ammunicions from there.<sup>4</sup>

In the salt factory there was a shed. The volunteers set fire to the shed. Meanwhile two guards escaped from the eyes of the volunteers and began to attack them. When the situation went beyond normalcy Vel Konar, a member from the agitators put a cut on the right hand of the police by the aruval in his hand. The exchange of blows between the guards and the agitators created uproar in the factory. It was heard by the Assistant Salt Inspector Loane. He also saw the flames coming from the shed. On seeing this he came out of his house with a carbine but some slipped from his hand. At that time E.P. Thangavel and Kasirajan and other members of the volunteers group hide behind the pillar of the factory. Mantiram and Rajagopalan stood at the centre of the gate.<sup>5</sup> Loane saw them and hurriedly fired on them. Soon the bullets were exhausted because some of the cartridges already slipped from his hand. Rajagopalan also gave a warning shot to threaten the salt inspector. As Loane was just opening the factory gate, Rajagopalan thought that Loane was coming for a peaceful settlement with them. But, on the contrary to the expectations of Rajagopalan, Loane rushed to the guards shed and tried to frighten away the crowd with the bayonet fixed on the carbine. Meanwhile Loane made another attempt to hit. Rajagopalan with his



bayonet escaped from this attack by finding on the factory wall where the factory clock was hanging.

Thus the attempt on Rajagopalan ended in vain. Thereafter Loane turned his eyes towards Mantiram. Loane also attacked Mantiram with the bayonet in his hand. Mantiram boldly resisted it with the weapon in his hand. However, the bayonet entered into the body of Mantiram half an inch deep on his bosom. But the wound was not so severe. Loane also secured some minor injuries in the exchange of attacks. When Mantiram turned to the other side, Loane attacked him from the backside with the bayonet. Mantiram fell down in the middle of the salt pan. Then Loane kicked Mantiram with his foot. When Loane was prepared to put another hit on Mantiram with the bayonet Kasirajan, another member cut the hand of Loane with Kandakodari.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile E.P. Thangavel attacked Loane with the spears on the right chest. The vel stick stayed on the body of Loane. After that all the members of the mob attacked the official with the country weapons in their hands. Loane received more than sixty nine bodily injuries and fell down on the ground by shouting 'Oh God' and died. This was the first instance of a deliberate murder of a government servant in the Madras province during the Quit India Movement.

The Hindu reported the attack of Kulasekarapatnam salt factory as follows<sup>7</sup>

“A mob of 100 members armed with knives and guns attacked the Salt Factory at Kulasekarapatnam in Tinnevely district on the night of September 19, 1942 at about 3 a.m. They burnt down a shed and killed the Assistant Salt Inspector of Salt Factory, W.E.Loane, who attempted to drive off the crowd. The terrorists were able to succeed in their plan of looting money and arms from the Salt Factory of Kulasekarapatnam”.



The death of Asst. Salt Inspector Loane marked the end of the looting. That night the mob looted the salt factory thoroughly. They got immense arms and ammunitions from there. They also took three carbines and ten rounds in all. The looted weapons were placed under the custody of Chithuvilai Perianadar and then dispersed. They planned to meet after a week again. The next target of the mob was to destroy the Taluk office of Tiruchendur. Before attacking the Tiruchendur taluk office most of the members of the mob were arrested.

The murder of the Assistant Salt Inspector gave a rude shock to all. The police force became more active in arresting the concerned culprits. They began their hunt for the accused in every nook and corner of the district. At last on 22 September 1942 Rajagopalan along with his party was arrested in the forests of Sathankulam,<sup>8</sup> a place located in between Vallioor and Tiruchendur. Shortly 115 men were arrested in this connection. Police could not enter into Udangudi for eight days after this, thinking that the ferocious culprits with deadly weapons are staying there. Only after seizing the looted articles from Chithuvilai Peria nadar, and also confiscating the country weapons used by the agitators, the police entered into Udankudi. The police officers like Appathurai Pillai, Ramalingam and Malabar Special Police started to attack Udangudi. The Kalankudiyiruppu village munsif also joined with the police officers.<sup>9</sup> The police force under the leadership of Deputy Appathurai Pillai plundered Udangudi as an act of police repression. The Malarbar Special Police force raped the ladies of the village.<sup>10</sup> The atrocities by the police were perpetrated around ten miles radius of Udangudi village. The places affected by such police raids of revenge were Sirunadarkudiyiruppu, Mathavankurichi, Padukappathu Kottankadu, Paramankurichi, Thandupathu, Seerkachi and Sathukudiyiruppu. The Malabar special Police demolished the houses of Mantiram and Meganathan.<sup>11</sup> In the meantime Mantiram escaped to Kerala state. But the police wandered here and there for arresting Mantiram. After spending some days in Kerala state,



Mantiram again came to Tamil Nadu through Nagercoil, Cheranmadevi, Palayamkottai, Srivaikuntam, Avaniapuram, Poovani and Maniachi and lastly reached Kovilpatti.<sup>12</sup> He stayed at door number 1 of Chekkadi Street, Kovilpatti. One day at about 12 o' Clock in the mid-night the house where Mantiram stayed at Kovilpatti was besieged by twelve constables. Mantiram was arrested by them. He was handed over to the Sub-Inspector. The latter ordered for putting him in the Palayamkottai jail. Later on he was shifted to Tiruchendur sub-jail. After passing some days Mantiram was transferred to the Kokkirakulam sub-jail.

Eventhough the government arrested 115 persons in connection with the Loane murder case they filed a criminal case, only against twenty six persons. In the first Information Report the accused were charged for assaulting W.E. Loane and for causing injuries to six servants of the Salt Factory and setting the factory on fire.<sup>13</sup> Related to this incident Kasirajan and Rajagopalan the two accused were given death sentence.

Venkatakrishnan an active freedom fighter from Tuticorin rendered valuable help in reducing the death sentence of Kasi and Rajagopalan. On the eve of the Quit India Movement Venkatakrishnan was arrested under Defence of India Rules and sent to Tanjore jail.<sup>14</sup> When he was released, he did not come back to Tuticorin. He went over to Madras to have a discussion with his fellow prisoners at Madras. There he received a telegram from M.C. Veerabahu of Tuticorin. The text of the telegram was that, 'One of our friend come to Madras, do him the needful, soon father of Rajagopalan proceeded to Madras along with a letter. They conducted the case so far in the Sessions Court at Tinnevely by collecting money from the local people. The appeal case was conducted in the State High Court. Both the courts confirmed the death sentence to Rajagopalan and Kasirajan. This case could be appealed only in the Privy Council after this stage. For appealing this case to the Privy Council, it required at least Rs. 20,000. M.C. Veerabahu said in that letter that it was not possible for him to collect this



huge amount. This amount could be collected only by Venkatakrishnan. Hence the work of collecting funds for appealing the case was entrusted to Venkatakrishnan.

In the meantime Mahatma Gandhiji worked for a similar case in the North. On 16 August of 1942 a mob of 3,000 persons attacked the Ashti Station house. As a result of it police opened fire. In the firing seven people lost their lives. The infuriated mob in the next turn overpowered the police force. In the following attack one Sub-Inspector, one head Constable and three constables were murdered. Subsequently police arrested some Congress youths in this connection. At the end of the case some Congress volunteers were given death sentence.<sup>15</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi took efforts for the change of the death sentence into life imprisonment. He submitted Mercy petitions before the viceroy at Delhi for the case. So the nature of the Ashti case in the north and Kasi-Rajagopalan case in the south were similar. Both the incidents took place in an identical circumstance. The "Do or Die" slogan of Gandhiji instigated the volunteers of the South and the North to embark on the programme of violence.

Venkatakrishnan collected all the details connected with the Ashti case in the North. Thereafter he decided to seek the help of Gandhiji. In his letter to Gandhiji, he elaborately explained the Kulasekarapatnam murder case and requested Gandhiji to help the affected parties of the case.<sup>16</sup> In the meantime Venkatakrishnan approached Rajaji also for helping him in this matter. During the Quit India Movement there was a vast gap between the ideologies of Gandhiji and Rajaji. Hence the latter hesitated to interfere in this matter. Meanwhile Rajaji received a letter from Mahatma Gandhiji regarding the murder case of Assistant Salt Inspector Mr. Loane. Venkatakrishnan too received a letter from Gandhiji. In it Venkatakrishnan was asked to meet Rajaji?<sup>17</sup> Despite the



differences of opinion between Gandhiji and Rajaji, Venkatakrishnan succeeded to seek the help of both Gandhiji and Rajaji.

As per the direction given by Gandhiji, Venkatakrishnan went to meet Rajaji in the next day of the receipt of the letter. Rajaji asked Venkatakrishnan a direct question. "What I will do for the Kulasekarapatnam murder case". In his reply Venkatakrishnan begged Rajaji to make arrangements for appealing the case in the Privy Council. Rajaji directed Venkatakrishnan to prepare an appeal to

the Privy Council. Hence Venkatakrishnan approached Shri R. Venkataraman to prepare the appeal.

Shri. Venkataraman prepared the appeal in an excellent manner. Rajaji made an appeal to the people through the newspapers for the collection of funds. People contributed magnanimously for the appeal of the case to the Privy Council. Venkatakrishnan met Rajaji with the appeal copy. Rajaji got it and drew a letter of credit for 12,000 rupees and sent the same to an able lawyer of London. This lawyer was very sympathetic towards the Indians. The appeal was accepted by the Privy Council and the date was fixed for further argument. Thus the death sentence of Kasirajan and Rajagopalan were temporarily stopped.

The acceptance of the appeal by the Privy council marked the end of the first stage of the Kulasekarapatnam murder case. After a few months Rajaji invited Venkatakrishnan to make a discussion over the case. Rajaji asked Venkatakrishnan as to who was consulted to take decision to run this case further on. Venkatakrishnan replied that the decision of the father of Rajagopalan was the final one in this case. This discussion of Rajaji with Venkatakrishnan was a turning point in the case. Rajaji thought that if the privy council confirmed the punishment of the lower courts, then what will we do? Therefore Rajaji preferred to submit a mercy petition to the Viceroy. If the mercy petition was accepted by the Viceroy, the death sentence should definitely be converted into life



imprisonment and they would be released immediately after the freedom of our country.<sup>18</sup> After a prolonged cogitation Rajaji decided to withdraw the appeal from the Privy Council and planned to submit a mercy petition to the Viceroy. He did so because the Privy Council generally followed the decisions of the Sessions and the High Courts, then there could be no chance for saving the life of Kasirajan and Rajagopalan. This idea was floated to Venkatakrisnan and the father of Rajagopalan. Both of them accepted the plan of Rajaji. At last the appeal case from the Privy Council was withdrawn. Then Rajaji prepared the mercy petition and sent the same to the viceroy. The persistent efforts of Rajaji made the Viceroy to accept the mercy petition. The mercy petition was taken up for trial one month later Rajaji was summoned by the Home Ministry member Sir Basil Plaket. The latter was the dreadful enemy of Indian independence and Quit India Movement of 1942.<sup>19</sup>

Rajaji did not stop his activities towards Kasi-Rajagopalan case even after the end of the case. As per the appeal of Rajaji, money was forth coming from different directions. After getting the death sentence changed to life imprisonment from the Viceroy, Rajaji appealed to masses not to send money for the case. There was a balance of money from the first term collection. With the money Rajaji negotiated with an insurance company. By remitting the money in the insurance company Rajaji and Venkatakrisnan made arrangements to dole out an amount of rupees fifty every month to the mothers of Kasirajan and Rajagopalan till their death. Thus not only the activities, but also their dependents too were taken care of in the wake of Quit India Movement in Tinnevelly District.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the Quit India Movement in Tamilagam, the Kulasekarapatnam case was the only murder case filed in the court of law. And this took place in Tinnevelly District in the grip of political militancy. It showed that Tinnevelly was not far behind extremism during the August Revolution.



This case gave a serious blow to the domination of the British in the South of Madras Presidency.

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