Chapter - XIV

Freedom Struggle
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FREEDOM STRUGGLE

This Chapter summarises the movements of the freedom struggle. The year 1905 constitutes a significant landmark in the national as well as the provincial politics of India. The day of the enactment of the partition of Bengal on 16th October 1905 was a day of great gloom. It was observed as a day of fasting and prayers in many parts of India.

THE SWADESHI MOVEMENT:

The two years from 1905 to 1907 were a period of only passive resistance, the nationalists carrying on a vigorous anti-British propaganda and indulging in the free use of tongue and pen. They did so at a great sacrifice and their protest found full expression in the celebrated Swadeshi movement. Swadeshi was aimed at using goods produced at India and the boycott of British goods. The year 1906 was declared the Swadeshi year.

The response of the Madras Presidency to the Swadeshi movement was tremendous. The champion of this movement in the Presidency was V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, a lawyer of repute from Tuticorin who had been extolled as the Tilak of South India. He started the Tuticorin Industrial welfare Association and the Dharma Sangam for fostering Swadeshi industry and Commerce. The National Emporium, a shop selling swadeshi goods, and a spinning and Weaving Centre were also established.

Due to his efforts the swadeshi steam navigation company Ltd. came into being in Tuticorin. It was registered on October 16th, 1906 with a nominal capital of ten lakhs of rupees under the Indian Companies Act of 1882, as Registered No 13 of 1906. Its Registered Office was in No. 85, Great Cotton Road, Tuticorin. The Swadeshi Steamer Sha Allum was to run between
Tuticorin and Colombo. The majority of the Indian merchants shipped their cargo in the Swadeshi Steamer.7

The Period from 1906 to 1911 was marked by manifestations of unrest, exhibiting itself first in campaigns of seditious oratory, resulting, in some places, in riots of a more or less serious character. The arrival from Bengal of Bepin Chandra Pal, in April 1907 gave a new impulse and direction to the nationalist party in Madras. In Madras Province the people were excited by the eloquent speeches of Bepin Chandra Pal.8 In his lectures delivered in Madras City, G. Subramanya Aiyar and other agitators took an active part.9

Pal’s forceful oratory appealed most to the younger generation who readily responded to his call. Sathyamurthy who was then doing his Bachelor’s degree at the Madras Christian college, overwhelmed by Pal’s lectures on Swadeshi and boycott, made a bonfire of foreign cloth.10 To Sathyamurthy and men of his group, Pal was a well loved apostle.11

The Madras Government, afraid of the total impact, imposed certain conditions and Pal cancelled the last two of his addresses and left the City. In the Godavari district Bepin Babu was received with much enthusiasm, especially by the students of the Rajahmundry college. To the students, who’s patriotic sentiments were crushed in their own land, the arrival of Paul in Rajahmundry on 19th April 1907 was godsend.12

His emotional speeches set the students of the Rajamundry college aflame with the spirit of nationalism. They flocked to his meetings and on the day of his departure broke into open revolt against the college authorities and seceded from the institution to the number of nearly two hundred.13

About the same time several instances occurred in the Godavari district of Europeans being jeered at and even assaulted. In Cocanada, the head-
quarters of the district, the District Magistrate was greeted with shouts of “Bande Mataram” when he rode through the streets. These outbursts culminated on the 31st May 1907 in an attack on the European club at Cocanada by a large mob, which caused considerable damage to property. The cause of the outbreak was an assault committed a few hours before by the District Medical officer on a boy who had shouted “Bande Mataram”. Fifty persons were prosecuted for participation in the riot, of whom thirteen were convicted finally. An additional police force consisting of eighty three men of all ranks was quartered in the town for six months.

In Madras city the visit of Babu Bepin Chandra Pal was followed by daily meetings convoked on the South Sea Beach and the Moore Market to spread his doctrines. At first the number of those attending these meetings was insignificant, but the attendance rapidly increased to several hundreds of people, frequently ending in a procession to some public place in the course of which Europeans met with on the road were openly hooted at and hustled.

In 1908, V.O.Chidambarampillai was joined by B.Subramanya Aiyar better known as Subramanya Siva, a native of the Madura district, and the two began a systematic course of public speaking, the avowed object of which was the attainment of “Swaraj” by means of “Swadeshi” enterprise and “Swadeshi” volunteers. From February 3rd till March 9th. 1908 Sivam and Pillai addressed meetings daily at the beach in Tuticorin, except for a few days when they did so elsewhere. People gathered in thousands - a ten-thousand crowd was a normal attendance - to hear them.

The main theme of these speeches was fearlessness, support for Swadeshi, boycott of foreign items and united effort to win freedom for the country. As a direct result of these speeches strikes broke out among the mill operatives in Tuticorin.
MOVEMENTS IN TUTICORIN

The people of Tuticorin became enthusiastically pro-Swadeshi as a result of the speeches of Sivam and Pillai. The workers of the Coral Mills, a British-owned textile unit in Tuticorin, struck work on the 27th February, 1908 demanding higher wages. The mill was making huge profits and declaring a dividend of 60 percent to its British share-holders, while the workers were getting only subsistence wages. Chidambaram Pillai and Subramania Sivam espoused the workers’ cause.

Andrew Harvey, the chief of the mill deputed his agents to the houses of the workers to ascertain their grievances and to persuade them to resume work. The determination of the workers to continue with the strike compelled the agents of the mill to resort to force. They seized six supervisors of the mill and confined them in a cellar.

An enquiry committee consisting of K.J.R.Venkatarama Iyer, Balaji Rao and Padmanabha Iyengar met on 1st March 1908 and after studying the problems, unanimously agreed that the workers had genuine grievances which the management failed to redress. V.O.Chidambarampillai intervened on behalf of the workers and the authorities agreed for a settlement. This agreement resulted in the upward revision of the wage structure.

Through the Coral mill strike the Swadeshis proved that they were capable of effective organization and no doubt, it owed its success to the nationalist leaders. Afraid of similar strikes, the authorities of local municipality, the Railways and other firms run by the foreigners raised the wages of their staff by 50%. The workers got better deal from their employers.
These developments not only helped the spread of the movement but also contributed to a change in the attitude of the people towards the British. The public felt that the Europeans were the cause for their misery. This practice of labourers striking work to wrest a concession from their employers which was hitherto peculiar to North India now spread to south India. The strike was amicably settled, adding to the popularity of the Swadeshi leaders Chidambaram Pillai and Subramania Sivam.

Lawley employed all the machinery of repression at his command to throttle to death the Swadeshi movement in its infancy. He interpreted a Swadeshi as a seditionist and instituted proceedings under the security sections of the Code of Criminal procedure against the principal leaders of the seditious movement, Chidambarampillai and Subramaniya siva, and this led to serious disturbances of the public peace at Tuticorin and Tinnevelly.

In Tinnevelly the mob invaded the C.M.S. College and the Munsi’s Court, burnt the Municipal office, a police station and part of the post office and destroyed some furniture in the hospital. The attitude of the mob was so threatening that the police were twice compelled to fire, killing four persons.

At Tuticorin the Divisional Officer and the police were assaulted by the mob who did not disperse until fire was opened and several persons were wounded. The leading agitators Chidambaram Pillai and Subramanya Siva were prosecuted for offences under sections 124-A, 153-A and 505 of the Indian Penal Code and convicted and sentenced to imprisonment. A force of punitive police was quartered in the principal centers of agitation for six months.

Arthur Lawley’s Government in 1908 undertook a number of prosecutions for inflammatory writing and speaking. Proceedings were taken against the following nine persons:
1. Ethiraj Surendranath Arya, a member of the managing Committee of the “Chennai Jana Sangam, an organization of the extremist party in Madras.
2. G.Subramanya Aiyar, editor of the Swadesa Mitran.
4. B.Narayana Rao, editor of the Swaraj newspaper, Bezwada.
5. P.Lakshminarayana, treasurer of the Swaraj newspaper.
6. M.Srinivasa Aiyanagri, editor of India.
7. A.Krishnaswami Sarma, a “Swadeshi” Lecturer.
8. L.Basavayya, Manager of the “Swadeshi” Stores, Bapatla, Kistna district.
9. M.P.Tirumala Chari, proprietor of India.

The Press Act came in to force on February 9, 1910. Offences against the Act made the person concerned liable to forfeiture of security. The measures adopted by the Government of Sir Arthur Lawley for the suppression of the sedition drove a small band of extremists to take refuge in Pondicherry when they attempted to disseminate seditious literature throughout the Presidency. The newspapers viz., The India, The Suryodayam and The Vijaya and the two pamphlets “Kanavu” and “Arilorupangu” by Subramania Bharathi, which were issued from Pondicherry were proscribed under the Press Act.

TINNEVELLY RIOT

Political agitation spread through the entire country resulting in some places in riots. One such riot was the unhappy outrage in Tinnevelly.

V.O.Chidambaram who spearheaded the Swadeshi movement in Tamil Nadu organized a public meeting at Tirunelveli on 9th March 1908 to celebrate the release of Bipin Chandra Pal for which permission was denied.
The violation of the prohibitory order led to the arrest of V.O. Chidambaram Pillai and his strong deputy Subramania Siva on 12th March 1908.37

Startling developments took place the next day, March 13th. Angered by the arrest of their leaders, the people of Tirunelveli spontaneously expressed their resentment in many ways. Shops were closed down and all businesses came to a stop, students marched out of colleges and schools and swelled the streets. Huge crowds gathered in the main thoroughfares and started moving in the direction of the municipal office. Mass anger found a vent at the municipal office. The crowd rushed into the building, took out all official records and made a bonfire. With a bounteous flow of kerosene oil, the whole building was set on fire.38

The policestation was the next target. Two constables who were in charge were courteously asked to go out, and all things there were burnt, and finally the building itself. The Additional District Munsiff’s Court came in for attack next, and was partially burnt. A bag of money containing Rs. 500 found there was distributed among the crowd. The kerosene oil tank in the Pennington market was then set on fire, and it burned for two days. Its fumes darkened the skies in huge clouds and hung over the town.39

At noon, the Collector and District Magistrate, Wynch, at one place, seeing some decorations, asked the persons there what they were for. When one of them innocently replied it was in celebration of Bepin Pal’s release, out lashed Wynch’s whip giving the man a bloody cut in the face. This infuriated the crowd, which had all along done only damage to property. But now stones were pelted at the police. The police opened fire without a warning and the officers used their revolvers. The day’s toll was four dead, one man of them an innocent youngster returning from a temple.40

Rioting continued for three days, and spread to Tuticorin and Tachanallur also. In Tuticorin, ignoring the ban on meetings a public meeting was arranged in an open-air cart stand. Educated and labouring classes
attended the meeting, which was quite orderly. After the meeting started, however, mounted police suddenly charged into the crowd without any warning. Sub-Collector Ashe took a prominent role in this action and made himself the cynosure of public antipathy. Tension ran so high that many European residents of Tuticorin spent the nights in a ship anchored off Tuticorin. Indian workmen like barbers, washermen and butlers refused to serve European masters and also pro-British Indians.

The Tirunelveli outbreak made the Government to adopt tight security measures. The police were ordered to arrest any suspect. Further, all arms licence in the District were cancelled. The issue was raised in the Madras Legislative Council by B.Narasimheswara Sarma who criticized the action of the officials. But the Government justified the action of the District Magistrate and narrated the chain of events that led L.M.Wynch to order firing. Finding the gravity of the situation, the Madras Mahajana Sabha appointed a sub-committee to consider the advisability of a non-official commission to enquire into the disturbances in Tirunelveli. The impact of the arrests of the Swadeshis could be felt as far as Kakinada, where the people set fire to the Government offices to condemn the action. Rees, a member of the British Parliament also raised the issue on 17th March 1908 in the House of Commons.

The press in Madras reacted sharply to the arrests of the leaders and attributed the riots to the mistakes committed by the local authorities. The strike of the operatives of the Coral Mills at Tuticorin was amicably settled by Chidambaram Pillai and his friends. A subsequent disturbance at Tuticorin was caused by the thoughtless action of the police in preventing a public meeting and B.C.Pal’s celebration being held. If the magistrate and the police had not meddled in the matter, everything would have gone on quietly as was the case in numerous other places in the country.
Papers like “Bhavani”, Telugu weekly of Nellore, “Veerakesari”, kannada fortnightly of Madras, “Nadegnnadi”, Kannada weekly of Bangalore. “The West Coast Spectator” of Calicut, “Jananukulan”. Tamil weekly of Thanjavur and “Hindu Nesan”, of Madras had strongly critical observations on the authorities. They asserted that repression, would not solve the problem. In short, the press viewed the incident from a different angle. Despite the hue and cry in the press, official excesses continued under the policy of the mailed fist by Governor Lawley.\(^45\)

The year 1909 was marked by the appearance for the first time in this Presidency of the anarchist’s bomb. About a mile from Tenali in the Guntur district, an infernal machine buried in the public path exploded and killed an unfortunate coolly who trod upon it. In connection with this outrage three persons were arrested and tried on charges of murder and offences under the Explosive Substances Act. Two of them were acquitted but the third was convicted and sentenced to transportation for ten years for the less serious offence, the High Court setting aside the conviction on the count of murder.\(^46\)

**ASHE MURDER**

In 1911, the persecution of Chidambaram pillai in the jail had an unexpected repercussion outside. Sub-Collector Ashe came back to Tirunelveli on promotion as the Collector of the district,\(^47\) and it was suspected all round that he was one of those primarily instrumental in making Government follow the repressive line, including the harassment of political prisoners in jail and also the sad end of the swadeshi steam Navigation Company, started by V.O. Chidambaram Pillai.

On the fateful morning of 17\(^{th}\) June 1911,\(^48\) Ashe accompanied by his wife boarded the train Tuticorin-Madras mail at Tinnevelly Bridge to go to Kodaikkanal where his four children were living. He was killed in the railway
coach at Maniachi, a station on the main line of South Indian Railway by a pistol shot fired at him by Vanchinathan a member of terrorist group of nationalists on the same day. Vanchi Iyer of Shenkottah in Travancore, the assassin of Ashe killed himself after accomplishing his object. He had shot himself in mouth and lay dead in the latrine, with the pistol in his right hand to escape from harassment of the Britishers Vanchi Aiyar committed suicide by shooting himself.  Sankara Krishna Iyer who stood close by when the shot was fired, was seen looking into the compartment after the incident and then running away. Sankara Krishna Iyer was identified on 26th June and was arrested. The repressive measures of the Government drove some of the extremists underground and some other into exile to Pondicherry.

In this Ashe Murder Case fourteen persons were committed for trial to the High Court of Madras. They were charged with having entered into a conspiracy to wage war against the British and in pursuance of that, aided and abetted the murder of Ashe by Vanchi Iyer on 17th June 1911. All these men with the exception of Muthukumaraswamy Pillai and Subbaiah Pillai were in their twenties, the youngest being the first accused, namely Nilakanta Brahmachari, who was just 21. All were charged under Sections 121-A, 302, 109 and 111 of the IPC.

The key figure in this conspiracy was Nilakanta Brahmachari who was a political preacher and anarchist engaged in “Seditious” Journalism at Pondicherry as editor of the Vernacular paper suryodayam. Vanchi Iyer was an active associate of Nilakanta Brahmachari. The unfortunate murder of Ashe, however, was an isolated event of terrorism in Madras Presidency which did not find acceptance as a popular ideal even with extremists. With the annulment of the partition of Bengal in 1911 terrorism almost disappeared from the political scene of India.
RISE OF ANNIE BESANT

The Home Rule Movement, started by Annie Besant, an Irish theosophist lasted for a short span of time. Though she emerged as an all-India figure, she was of particular importance to south India, especially to Madras presidency.

In 1913, Dr. Beasant gave a series of eight lectures in Madras. To fight a battle for Home Rule, she started an English weekly, commonweal in January 1914. Afterwards, she purchased the Madras Standard, an English daily and renamed it as New India the first issue of which appeared on 14th July of the same year. Her New India was a great force in the battle for India’s independence and it was perhaps the most popular paper in South India.

Dr. Besant started the Home Rule League at Gokhale Hall in Madras on the 1st of September 1916. It made swift and spectacular progress captivating young nationalist minds. Since then Besant acted as a tornado by bringing forth Madras into the forefront of All-India politics.

Her Home Rule League which was more effective in Madras than elsewhere spread like a fire. By September 1917, it had nearly 130 branches all over the Presidency. The Government of Madras tried to dissuade her from the path of agitation. Restrictions imposed on her made her more determined to carry on with the work of Home Rule League. She also converted her Theosophical Society into a political organization and carried on vigorous political propaganda.

The press played an important role in its growth. In her weekly ‘Commonweal’ and especially in the daily ‘New India’ Besant wrote column after column upholding India’s claim to swaraj. New India had the largest
circulation of any other south Indian newspaper by 1916.\textsuperscript{61} It increased its attack on the British bureaucracy. This activity alarmed the Government. The New India press was repeatedly called upon to furnish security under the Press Act which came into force on February 9\textsuperscript{th}, 1910.\textsuperscript{62} Such securities were repeatedly forfeited. Besant remained stubborn and unyielding. She approached the High court and this trial gave her organization great publicity.

Lord Pentland, the Governor of Madras adopted a series of repressive measures to put down the Home Rule League. He did not stop with the forfeiture of the deposit amount of Besant but also externed her from Bombay and then from the Central Province and Bihar. But Besant remained stubborn. In the middle of June 1917, Pentland came down to Madras from Ootacamund to meet Besant in order to persuade her to abandon the Home Rule campaign. Her final refusal to abandon the Home Rule League led to her internment. On 16\textsuperscript{th} June 1917, the very next day of her historic meeting with Pentland, Annie Besant and her two Lieutenants G.S. Arundale and B.P. Wadia were served by Pentland, with the order of internment. There was angry uproar against the order. The resentment was universal.\textsuperscript{63}

Jinnah as President of the Bombay branch of the Home Rule League strongly protested against the internment of Mrs. Besant.\textsuperscript{64} Gandhiji in a letter to Chelmsford the Viceroy, on 10\textsuperscript{th} July 1917 wrote “in my humble opinion the internments are a big blunder. Madras was absolutely calm before then, now it is badly disturbed”.\textsuperscript{65} Protest meetings were organized at several places in Madras.

When on 20\textsuperscript{th} August 1917 Montague made his declaration in Parliament, the internment lost all its meaning. Mrs. Besant was released on September 17\textsuperscript{th} 1917.\textsuperscript{66} By the time she was released her popularity rose to the highest pitch. She was elected unanimously as the President of the next Congress convened at Calcutta.\textsuperscript{67} Her mission acquired wider acceptance
among the masses. Her propaganda-machinery through the efforts of S.Kasthuri Ranga Iyengar, founder-editor of the newspaper Hindu and P.VaradarajuluNaidu became more effective. Despite its short life, Dr.Besant’s movement was exceedingly popular with the masses of Tamil Nadu.

Home Rule Movement soon merged itself into the non-cooperation and khilafat movements. In 1920 Gandhiji came down to the South in order to enthuse people to rally round the congress and to make the civil disobedience movement a success. The leaders of this movement in the Madras Presidency wereKasturiRangaAiyangar,SrinivasaAiyangar,C.Vijayaraghavachariar,Satyamurthi,VOChidambaramPillai,KalyanaSundaramudialar,Singaraveluchetty E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, Dr. P.Varadarajulu Naidu, Yakub Hasan and C.Rajagopalachari.

Thus the Presidency of Madras was never berefit of political leaders of stature and eminence. Right from the beginning of the British rule, there were leaders who raised their voice demanding justice; and who questioned the discrimination practiced in India by the British officials.

During the period of study martyrs like Voc,Siva, Subramanya Bharati and others underwent untold mental and physical tortures in a bid to free their motherland. Besant’s arrival on the Indian political scene was a Godsend. She played an important role at a crucial hour in the movement to liberate India. until the advent of Mahatma Gandhi. They looked upon public duties as the highest sacrifice. They performed this noble work most unostentatiously. They were selfless men with no axes to grind and whatever they did was inspired by the noblest nationalist sentiments.
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