CHAPTER - I

EARLY LIFE, POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

M.Bhaktavatsalam was born on October 9, 1897 at Nazarethpet, a small village three kilometers west of Poonamalle, in Sriperumbudur taluk.\(^1\) Sriperumbudur comes under Chengalput district. The initial ‘M’ stands for Minjur, the native village of his paternal lines. His parents were Kanagasabapathy and Mallika.

A part of the ancient Thondaimandalam or Thondainadu is now known as Chengalput. Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas and Vijayanagar kings ruled this place and later it came under the rule of Nawab of Arcot. The British helped the Nawab of Arcot by providing financial and military support to fight against the Palayakaras and native rulers of South Tamilnadu. In return for the support received from the British, the Nawab of Arcot handed over his territory to the East India Company in 1760.\(^2\) This area was known as Jahir and later the British reorganised the territories and named it as Chengalput. Literally Chengalput means – ‘the lily pond


Gazetteers of India, Tamilnadu State, (Kancheepuram and Thiruvalur Districts – (Erstwhile Chengalput District) Volume 1, Government of Tamilnadu, Chennai, 2000, p.139.
village’. It was called ‘Kuvalayapura’ in Sanskrit - meaning Water Lilly town. In Tamil it was called ‘Chengazhuneerpattu’.

Chengalput district took an active part in the country's freedom movement and the people there resisted the British much earlier though not under the banner of freedom struggle. The rural society consisted of landlords and labourers. When the Jahir changed from the Nawab to the East India Company, the British began to assess and collect land revenue. The landlords and labourers together opposed the British. Perhaps, this was the first local opposition to the British administration. The labourers refused to work in the lands owned by the Company so that the British could derive no revenue.³ Thereafter many eminent personalities emerged from this district and stood in the forefront of the freedom struggle.

P.Ananthacharlu who belonged to this district organised the Madras Provincial Congress.⁴ He was also the founder of Madras Mahajanasaaba in 1884. In 1878 six young graduates started an English daily named ‘The Hindu’. One among them is M.Veeraraghavachariar who belonged to Attur in Chengalput district.⁵

T.V.Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, later known as ‘Thiru.vi.ka’ an illustrious son of Chengalput and a great scholar of Tamil, presided over the Annual Provincial Congress conference at Kancheepuram in 1925. Thus, his native district replete with such patriots provided an inspiration to young Bhaktavatsalam to join politics later on.

Bhaktavatsalam was deeply religious in his disposition. The religious atmosphere that prevailed in this district was one of the reasons for his religious and pious nature. During the Sangam Age there was harmony among different religions in this area. But as a result of Kalabira invasion Buddhism and Jainism spread and so the worshippers of Siva and Vishnu felt the need to bring a Hindu renaissance. This was done by the Nayanamars and Alwars. Among the sixty three Nayanmars, Thirunavukkarasar was closely associated with Chengalput district. Siruthondar, a staunch Saiva devotee belonged to Kunrathur. Poosalar belonged to Thiruninravur. Poigai Alwar, Boodath Alwar and Thirumizhisai Alwar all hailed from this district. Sankara Mutt in Kancheepuram further added religious importance to this place. Ramanujar and Vedanta Desikar also had contributed their mite for the religious revival and brought prominence to this district.

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Sekkizhar, the author of ‘Periya Puranam’, a monumental work on Saiva Saints, also belonged to this region.

In addition to the rich political and religious background prevailed in his native place, the atmosphere at his house also shaped the character and attitudes of Bhaktavatsalam to a great extent. As his father expired when Bhaktavatsalam was five years old, his maternal uncles and his grandmother brought him up. Muthuranga Mudaliar and Evalappa Mudaliar were his uncles. They belonged to a rich Hindu Vellala family at Nazarethpet. They were known as 'Pettai Mudaliars'. Muthuranga Mudaliar was a pious patriot whose heart was engrossed in the hymns of Alwar saints and his words and deeds were with those of Mahatma Gandhi. For the services rendered by their ancestors, Nazarethpet Village was gifted to them by the East India Company. They inherited more than 1000 acres of land.

His uncles had 5 sisters. Among them Mallika (Bhaktavatsalam's mother) alone had 2 children. So, Bhaktavatsalam was brought up in an atmosphere of extreme care and protection. Bhaktavatsalam's early education was imparted at his home only.

M.Bhaktavatsalam, Enathu Ninaivugal, Jananayaka Sevasangam, Madras, 1971, p.4.
After completing formal education at home, he was brought to Chennai and admitted at Lutheran Mission School at Purasaiwalkam in the VI standard. Then he joined IX standard at Pennathur Subramaniam High School, Mylapore.\textsuperscript{11} His maternal grandmother's sister was with him at Mylapore. They were staying at 13, Sannadhi Street Mylapore.\textsuperscript{12} Many political leaders had visited and discussed important political matters at this house.\textsuperscript{13}

He completed his school education in 1915. He joined the Presidency College Madras in the year 1916 and graduated in B.A. Economics. The Presidency College prohibited students from taking part in politics. The government also ordered that students should not go to political meetings. This was called G.O.559.\textsuperscript{14} But, Bhaktavatsalam hailing from a family of patriots was attracted to politics. Even when he was a student, he participated as an observer in the Chengalput District Convention of 1918.\textsuperscript{15} In 1919 he took part in the hunger strike protesting against the Jalianwalabagh massacre.

At that time Annie Besant was playing a remarkable role in Indian politics. She preached about 'home rule', boycott of foreign goods and

\textsuperscript{11} M.Bhaktavatsalam, \textit{op.cit.}, p.6.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{ibid.}, p.7
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{ibid.}, p.7
\textsuperscript{15} S.Amarnath, \textit{op.cit.}, p.13
demanded responsible government to Indians through a series of articles published in *New India*. She also arranged many meetings on constitutional topics. Bhaktavatsalam who was then a student at that time used to attend her meetings and was influenced by her speeches and articles. He also wrote articles in *New India* and *Common Weal*. Annie Besant wrote a book called *India is a Nation*. Though this book was prohibited, every student in Madras presidency then had a copy of that book in hand.\(^{16}\) After completing B.A. Degree, he joined Law College for further studies. He got his law degree in the year 1920.

Immediately, after his graduation in law in 1920, he married Gnanasundari daughter of T.V. Gopalaswamy Mudaliar, a freedom fighter. He had held many responsible positions in the Madras Mahajana Sabha and was the secretary of Madras Provincial Congress Committee.\(^{17}\) He was also a close associate of Rajaji, Srinivasa Iyengar, Satyamurthy and Rangaswamy Iyengar.

Bhaktavatsalam's mother expired in 1920. He joined as junior with Alladi Krishnaswamy Iyer. But he did not practice long as lawyer. He took up Insurance business for some time at Madras Tropical Insurance started by Motilal Nehru, Subash Chandra Bose and other Congress leaders.\(^{18}\)

\(^{16}\) M.Bhakatavatsalam, *Naan Kalandukonda Sudantira Porattam*, op.cit.,p.1  
\(^{17}\) M.Bhakatavatsalam, *Enathu Ninaivugal*, op.cit., p.8  
\(^{18}\) Personal Interview with *Sarojini Varadappan*, Daughter of M.Bhaktavatsalam, on 10.09.2000 at Chennai.
Though he had bright prospects as an advocate, the call of Mahatma Gandhi to participate in the freedom struggle attracted him much and hence he left the legal profession. Knowing fully well that, there was no silver lining on the horizon, but only dark clouds and obstacles, he joined the National Movement. Sheer love of the country, people, language and culture alone prompted him to throw his lot with the freedom struggle. Thereafter he dedicated his whole life in serving the nation. Jails became a second home to this young man and he sacrificed many pleasures of life. He was imprisoned thrice - first time in 1932, for celebrating 26th January as Independence Day, second time during Individual Satyagraha in 1940 and third time in 1942 during the Quit India movement. He had to travel widely into the interiors of the country to educate the masses on political issues.

His uncle Muthuranga Mudaliar shaped Bhaktavatsalam's political ideas. He was a pioneer statesman in South India belonging to a Non-Brahmin community. The Britishers in pursuance of their policy of "divide and rule" were successful in dividing Hindus and Muslims in North India; Harijans and Caste Hindus in West India and introduced differences between Brahmins and Non-Brahmins in South India. But, Muthuranga Mudaliar did not succumb to this communal virus and he rose above caste politics. P.Thyagaraja Chetty and T. Madhavan Nair started the South Indian Liberal Federation, popularly known as the 'Justice party' in 1916 to
fight the dominance of Brahmins and they agreed to support the British.\footnote{Eugene F. Irschik, \textit{Political and Social Conflicts in South India The non Brahmin Movement and Tamil separatism 1916 –1929}, Oxford university Press, Madras, 1969, p.47.} To counter the activities of Justice Party and to uphold the legitimate rights of the Non Brahmins in the Congress party, Muthuranga Mudaliar and Kesava Pillai started the Madras Presidency Association.\footnote{Ibid., p.61} Bhaktavatsalam followed the path of his uncle, Muthuranga Mudaliar. Muthuranga Mudaliar, had he wanted, he could have joined hands with the British and become powerful. But this ardent patriot resisted the communal feelings and fought against this virus and shaped the political leanings of his nephew.

Once the political freedom was secured, it became necessary to bring the country out of economic distress. Administration and nation building were the tasks now ahead of them. Bhaktavatsalam took up any position that was assigned to him. From 1946 to 1967 he held various positions in the government. Starting his career as Parliamentary Secretary to Gopala Reddy, Minister for Local Administration, in the year 1937, he deservedly rose to the position of Chief Minister of Tamilnadu in 1963. Except for a brief spell of 10 months during 1952-1953, he was in the State Ministry for nearly 21 years. But neither success elated him nor failures depressed him. He performed his duties as a loyal and disciplined soldier of the party.