CONCLUSION

Tamil Nadu did not lag between other parts of the country in the struggle for freedom and its history of participation goes back to the last decades of the 18th century when the Poligar of Panchalankurichi Virapandiya Kattabomman raised the standard of revolt against the British hegemony and their claim for tribute from him. But the real war against the British gained momentum only after the entry of Mahatma Gandhi into it in 1917. The freedom fighters of Tamil Nadu included Rajaji, an astute statesman, Satyamurti, the orator, Kamaraj, the champion of the poor, V.O.Chidambram, the lawyer and patriot, who setup a steamship company against the British monopoly in steamer service, Subramania Bharati, the revolutionary poet, Subramania Siva a great writer and a nationalist, V.V.S.Iyer, an extremist, Vedaratnam Pillai, a Gandhian, E.V.Ramasamy Naicker, a rationalist, N.M.R.Subraman, founder of Gandhi Museum at Madurai and an ardent Congressman and others like O.P.Ramasamy Reddiar, N. Subramanian, T.S. Avinasilingam Chettiar, C.Vijaya Ragavachariar among the freedom fighters, there were extremists and moderates, the leading
extremists being V.V.S.Iyer, Subramania Bharati, Subramania Siva and V.O.Chidambaram Pillai. The extremists were the impassioned champions of political freedom and socio-economic justice through violent means whereas the moderates like Rajaji, Vedaratnam Pillai, T.S.Avinasilingam and others adhered to the Gandhian philosophy of "Non-violence" as a means to achieve political freedom.

Born in 1897 at Vedaranyam in an orthodox saivite family which traces its lineage to saint Thayumanava Swamigal of 15th Century who composed the famous political lines

Oh! God! I don't want

anything but the happiness

and joy of every one and all.¹

¹ Thayumanavar song, No. N.0.221, Bara Bara Kannee, Quoted in Pollachi, N. Mahalingam Mrs. Mariyammal Manivizha Malar Thiruvadai Marudhur, Vedaranyam : Kasturba Gandhi Kanya Gurukulam, 1983, p.87.
Vedaratnam Pillai was a multifacted personality: a freedom fighter, a social reformer, a legislator without a peer, a humanitarian, a champion of the poor and the needy all rolled into one in him. He carved out a niche for himself in the history of the freedom struggle in his native region in his own right. Nothing in the world was so important and significant to him as India's political freedom and the fulfilment of Gandhian ideals, especially his 18 point constructive programme for the uplift of the oppressed sections of society living in squalor and privation. Vedaratnam Pillai was a cosmopolitan in outlook.

Vedaratnam Pillai was a polyglot. He was well versed in Tamil, English, Hindi, Telugu and Sanskrit and had a smattering knowledge of Urdu and Bengali. He had a reputation for powerful oratory in Tamil and used to speak in it fluently and for hours together in simple style. He never failed to quote Tirukural couplets in his speeches. In 1949, he conducted the second Tamil festival successfully at Tiruvarur. It is

---

to be noted that as an ardent admirer of Bharatiyar, Vedaratnam Pillai set up at Vedaranyam in 1947 a committee known as 'Bharatiyar Committee' just to make Bharatiyar and his songs known to everyone while Bharati was alive.

As a true Gandhian, Vedaratnam Pillai set about implementing the 18 Point Constructive Programme of Mahatma Gandhi. The 18-points Programme enunciated by Gandhi were oriented towards bettering the standards of the poor and the weaker sections of society. Vedaratnam Pillai engaged himself in fulfilling Gandhiji's vision of a New India along with other freedom fighters with great interest. Gandhiji's vision of New India is, "I shall work for an India in which the poorest shall feel that it is their country, in whose making they have an effective voice, an India in which there shall be no high class or low class of people, an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony".

------

Gandhiji's concept of 'Swaraj' would be a meaningless term without the removal of social evil of untouchability which chained thousands with shackles of human bondage. The 18-point charter of his constructive programme provided hope for those who dreamt of free India. It included in its ambit upliftment of downtrodden, prohibition, promotion of khadi and the like. It is a known fact that Gandhiji's first priority was the emancipation of the individual. Gandhiji wanted every Indian to understand what it was to live with self-respect and dignity. According to Gandhiji, 'untouchability' in the manner it was practised was a serious 'crime' against society and a 'a blot on Hinduism'.

Vedaratnam Pillai even from his boyhood days hated untouchability. Gandhiji's call to fight this social evil of 'untouchability', 'Touch-me-notism' with all the strength one could command, made Vedaratnam Pillai throw himself heart and soul into the campaign for eradication of that social handicap. Vedaratnam Pillai worked for it in six ways. They were 1. the temple-entry of the Harijans, 2. periodical visits by caste Hindus to Harijan colonies and doing cleaning
operations there, 3. participation of people irrespective of caste in communal feasts, 4. distribution of house sites to them and 5. rendering service to them during elections and 6. arranging for their education. As part of his crusade against untouchability, Vedaratnam Pillai launched the campaign for temple entry of Harijans. In this, he was ably helped by two acts passed in 1938 and 1939 in the Madras Legislative Council when Rajaji was the Prime Minister of Madras Presidency for the temple entry of Harijans. They were the Removal of Civil Disabilities Act (Madras Act XI of 1938) and the Temple Entry Authorisation and indemnity Act (Madras Act XII of 1939). The first one removed the social disabilities of Harijans allowing them to have access to public streams, rivers, wells, pathways, sanitary facilities and transport. The second Act protected and indemnified the officers of the government, temple authorities of seven temples such as the Minakshi Temple at Madurai, Renganathaswamy Temple at Srirangam and the like from legal action for having permitted the untouchables to offer worship and also permit the trustees of other temples to throw open the doors of temples to the untouchables to offer worship and also permit the trustees of other temples
to throw open the doors of temples to the untouchables for worship.

Vedaratnam Pillai did not stop with the entry of Harijans into temples. He conducted several community feasts in villages in which the caste Hindus and the Harijans took part. The Kasturba Gandhi Kanya Gurukulam in 1946 had as one of its aims the uplift of Harijan women and girls. In the matter of admission to it, preference was shown to Harijan girls. A president of the Thanjavur District Harijan Seva Sangh Vedaratnam Pillai earned for the State of Tamil Nadu the pride of place as one having been in the forefront for Harijan uplift in Tamil Nadu. The government of Tamil Nadu on its part honoured Vedaratnam Pillai with a gold medal in recognition of his yeoman service to Harijan upliftment. Vedaratnam Pillai did not hesitate to move away from his elder brother Somasundaram and take up a separate residence with his family when the latter objected to his close movements with the Harijans.

-----

Another important Gandhian ideal, the fulfillment of which he vigorously worked was the introduction of Prohibition. Toddy Gandhiji felt was the mother of all evils in society and so its consumption in his opinion would keep the poor especially the Harijan always in want. Vedaratnam Pillai at the call of the Mahatma strived hard to put an end to toddy consumption. He moved from village to village propagating the evils of toddy consumption. He distributed pamphlets describing toddy as “poisonous drink” and "Toddy is the God of death" among the villages. The era of picketing toddy shops commenced with Vedaratnam Pillai leading the picketing of them with a band of youth imbued with Gandhian ideals at Tiruturaipoondi in 1920 for days together. They did it non-violently and pocketed the insults hurled upon them by the toddy shop owners and toddy consumers as well. He never let slip an opportunity to emphasize the need for temperance in one’s life. Even during the Salt Satyagraha Movement of 1930, he did not fail to impress upon the people of the roadside village enroute Vedaranyam from Trichy the need for eradicating untouchability and observation of total abstinence from alcoholic drinks. Vedaratnam Pillai,
had the support of Rajaji\textsuperscript{5}, an ardent champion of prohibition in Tamil Nadu in all his campaigns against toddy consumption.

Promotion of Khadi was another constructive programme of Mahatma Gandhi. He considered khadi as 'fundamental to India's economy'. It was his firm conviction that if people decided to wear khadi clothes, it could be said with certainty that India had attained both political and economic independence. He wanted every Congressman to wear khadi cloth and live a life of simplicity. Gandhiji's visit to Madurai in 1921 saw him discard his shirt and wear a four cubit long piece of cloth about his waist permanently as a sign of his empathy with the farmers of Tamil Nadu who worked in their fields with only a linen cloth around them to hide their shame. This proved an inspiration to ardent followers of Gandhiji like Vedaratnam Pillai to emulate him.

\textsuperscript{5} Interview with V. Appakutti Pillai, 25, November 1992.
Every decision of Ghandhiji in his personal life had an infectious effect on Vedaratnam Pillai. When Gandhiji began to lead a life of self alienation (brahmacharya), Vedaratnam Pillai also began to practice it when he and his wife were 25 and 20 years of age respectively. After sometime, Vedaratnam Pillai used to wear khadi clothes made of yarn spun by himself on his spinning wheel (charka). He made everyone in his household to wear khadi garments and it is no wonder that he presented a khadi sari to his daughter-in-law on the occasion of her marriage to his son. His propagation of khadi was based on its intrinsic value to the wearers and its makers, the wearers feeling proud to have a dress indigenously made and those engaged in its making having some income from the sale of it. To him khadi represented socialism and symbolised patriotism, national prosperity, and progress.

For the purpose of propagating the efficacy of wearing khadi dress in the neighbouring villages such as Agastiyampalli, Kodyakkadu, Thopputhurai and the like, he started a khadi vastralaya (shop) and a charka association at Vedaranyam. Through persuasion he made
the inmates of his Gurukulam and the staff wear khadi dress. He was a man who practised what he preached. He closed his family textile shop with a large stock of mill-made Textile goods and allowed the entire stock go waste in 1922. Such was his adherence to 'swadeshi' policy. He helped a toddy dealer at Vedaranyam in the same year to start khadi shop when he voluntarily stopped dealing in toddy. Whenever he found leisure he would spun yarn on his charka. His love for khadi was such that he spun yarn on his charka while sitting along with other leaders on the dais during the Avadi Congress Session.

The Kasturba Gandhi Kanya Gurukulam founded in February 1946 stands as a monument proclaiming to the world that there was true Gandhian in Vedaratnam Pillai. The Gurukulam has, step by step, grown into a big institution providing education both academic and vocational to more than one thousand girls. It provides education, food and medical care to all the girls of the Gurukulam free of cost to this day. The education that was imparted in the earlier stages of the Gurukulam was based on "Basic Education", one of the 18-points of
charter of Gandhiji's Constructive Programme, is run or Sarvodaya lines and has been producing its basic needs such as uniform dress for students, hand-pound rice, toilets, vegetables, edible oils, milk from the gosala (cow farm) inside the campus and the like. Besides, it is a centre where the inmates learn moral ethos like 'live and let live' and a spirit of accommodation, a sine qua non for social harmony.

Vedaratnam Pillai was a good organizer of satyagrahas in non-violent ways. It is no gain saying that Vedaratnam Pillai shot into fame as a result of his successful conduct of the salt satyagraha march which lasted from 13 April 1930 to 30 April 1930. Vedaratnam Pillai did not lose his fortitude even when all his properties were confiscated by the colonial government on account of his active participatin in the salt satyagraha. This event of 1930 was a mile stone in the life of Vedaratnam Pillai and in recognition of his successful conduct of it he was honoured with the title 'Sardar' meaning commander by the participants of the Farm Labour Conference held in 1931 at Tirunelvelly.
Vedaratnam Pillai was a dutiful legislator. He acquainted himself well in the Assembly. He was elected to the Madras Legislative Assembly three times, i.e. in 1937, 1946 and 1957. In 1937, he was elected from the Mannargudi Double Member Constituency and in 1946 and 1957 from Tiruthuraipoondi Assembly Constituency. He used to speak in the Assembly on matters concerning not only his constituency but the whole of the state. He attended the Assembly sittings regularly and never a day's sitting passed without a question from him.

Though Vedaratnam Pillai was not a socialist he stood for narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor through land reforms and legislation. The communists in the region around Tiruthuraipoondi found Vedaratnam Pillai a stumbling block in their revolutionary activities and once they made an attempt on his life. But Vedaratnam Pillai talked to


V.S. Thiyagaraja Mudaliar, a mirasudar in the region over the phone and got an extent of 178.21 acres of land donated to the Bhoodhan Movement. The lands thus got were distributed to the landless at a Bhoodhan meeting held at Tiruthuraipoondi under the presidentship of Rajai. For the welfare of Adivasis living in the Kodiyyakadu forest, he got with great difficulty for them certain rights and privileges in the forest land. Similarly, the harmful effects of tobacco consumption on the health of the people drew his attention. Tobacco is a cash crop and a money spinner. It was grown on a large scale in Vedaranyam area. It was also grown in Vedaratnam Pillai's lands. In 1922, he destroyed the entire lush green tobacco crop in his lands just as Periyar E.V. Ramasamy Naicker had felled down all the coconut trees in garden to prevent their use for toddy tapping. This act of Vedaratnam Pillai demonstrated beyond doubt his concern for the health of the general public.

Vedaratnam Pillai, respected his political opponents and others who differed from him on several matters. Whenever he visited the Vedaranyesvar temple at Vedaranyam, he did not fail to call the Varani
Adheenam Mutt head who was also the hereditary trustee of the temple and pay his respects to him though the two had held opposite views on the management of that temple. He was very much distressed when he heard about the communists' attack in 1940 on the house of one Nedumbalam Samiyappa Mudaliyar near (Tiruthuraipoondi) a former Justice Party activist and requested the ministers through telegrams and letters to take stringent action in the matter.

In all his social and political activities he had the support of three other equally famous personalities, namely, O.P.Ramasamy Reddiar, N.M.R.Subbaraman of Madurai and T.S.Avinasilingam of Coimbatore, who were Gandhians and stood for political freedom, social harmony. They were known among the people as "Annachis" (elder brothers). Vedaratnam

-----


Pillai through his social reformers made it to some extent a reality the dreams of Dr. B.R.Ambetkar, who said “The freedom of the nation if it is to be a reality must vouchsafe the freedom of the depressed classes”\textsuperscript{10}.

The role of Sardar Vedatnam Pillai in the Reconstruction programme of India in pre and post Independence periods in the socio-economic and political arena will ever be remembered by posterity.

\textsuperscript{10} Dhananjay Keer, \textit{Dr. B.R. Ambedkar life and his mission}, p.304.