CHAPTER I

EARLY LIFE

Vedaratnam Pillai was born on 25th February 1897 at Vedaranyam of Tanjore District. Vedaranyam is at present situated in the present Nagapattinam District in Tamil Nadu. It is classified as selection Grade Panchayat. Its position is 10.22° N and 79.50°E. It lies on the railway line between Thiruvarur.

1 Interview with S. Ramaiyan, Statistical Inspector, Vedaranyam, 22nd January 1993.

and Karaikudi. It is a Taluk Headquarters in the Mannargudi Division. There are frequent bus services to Vedaranyam from Thiruthuraipoondi, Nagapattinam and Pattukkottai. It is a coastal town. Its elevation is about 2.2 meters above mean sea level. The great majority of the people are engaged in agriculture. Besides, agriculture salt industry and tobacco factories are common in this area. The popular salt swamp area lies a few kilometers west of the town. During National Movement, Vedaranyam became politically active place where the Salt Satyagraha under the leadership of C. Rajagopalachari with the help of Vedaratnam Pillai took place.

It is also a religious centre. There is a temple known as Vedarayesvarar temple. The other celebrated place is kodiakadu with its temple Amirthakadeswar. According to legend the hero of Ramayana, Rama, tried to

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3 Data Register, Office of the Block Statistical Officer, Vedaranyam.

cross the sea to Srilanka from this place. Vedaratnam Pillai had spent early part of his life in these surroundings. His ancestors seems to have migrated from Tirunelveli District six generations ago. This migration had taken place on the pursuasion of the royal kings to perform spiritual pujas (ceremonies) to the deity (Vedaranyesvar). His arents were Appakutti Pillai and Srimathi Thangammal who belonged to the ardent Saivite Vellala family. He was the third son to his parents. His eldor brother was Somasundaram. His father worked as a Head clerk in the Vedaranyesvarar Temple at Vedaranyam. It was he who had published the Sthalapuranam of this temple [History of the temple] in the year 1898. It is said that Vedaratnam Pillai's

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5 Interview with V.Appakutti Pillai, son of Vedaratnam Pillai, Vedaranyam, 20 November, 1992.


ancestors came in the lineage of Saint Thayumanavar. Hence, the parents and his own family happened to be ardent saivites and God fearing, Vedaratnam Pillai imbibed piety and good manners from them. There is also little wonder that Vedaratnam Pillai from his childhood was pious and religious.

There is a practice in the Vedaranyam temple that "Almanac" (Panchangam) is read on the Tamil New Year Day. When the Tamil Almanac was read in the Tamil New Year Day it was read by a member of Appakutti Pillai because of being descendant of Saint Thayumanavar. Vedaratnam Pillai in his early days enjoyed the privilege of reading Almanac in the temple in the New Year Day and also of the privilege of helping the idol of Saint Thayumanvar mount the chariot during festival.

9 Interview with Chief Priest Thiagaraja Kurukkal, 22, November 1993.
10 Interview with M. Rajaram, Executive Officer, Vedaranyesvarar Temple, Vedaranyam, 15, December 1993.
He had his elementary education in Vedaranyam between, 1903 and 1910 and completed fifth standard there. From up to eighth standard he had his education at Nagapattinam. He used to go to Nagapattonam in a boat through uppodai and attended the school. His education stopped with eighth standard. His disinterest in formal education and his family's business made him to discontinue studies and evidenced interest in the study of Tamil literary works and other languages and thus he did not pursue his education further. His education was not confined to the four walls of the class room. Beyond his mother tongue Tamil, he learnt other languages such as English, Hindi, Sanskrit, Malayalam. He was also a voracious reader and read sacred books like Gita, Thirukkural and Thayumanavar songs. By the age of 20, he was able

11 Tamil Encyclopaedia, p.519.


to read Gandhiji's work. He was drawn towards Gandhi's ideals and interested in Tolstoy's works. Later in his life it was these studies that shaped Vedaratnam Pillai's political and social views. He also maintained a library where he collected books on various subjects on various languages.

After his school education, he helped his parents in agriculture and salt producing industry. In the year 1912, at the age of 15, he married his maternal uncle's daughter by name Kamalambal. In order to get training in salt business, his parents made him to join his cousin Deivanayagam Pillai's salt factory. Deivanayagam Pillai was the son of his mother's sister, due to difference of opinion in business Vedaratnam Pillai went to Madras without informing his family. There he was employed in small shops. His mind was not at rest.

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14 Ibid., p.360.
15 Bahirathan, Maraikkattil Oru Manikkam, p.20.
17 Ibid., p.20.
He was in a vacillating mind. Hence, he left Madras shortly\(^\text{18}\). He moved from place to place. He went to North India and visited Benares. There he had a dip in the Ganges and worshipped lord Sri Kasi Viswanath. He had a desire to visit Badrinath. But he could not visit Badrinath, as it was winter season and, the temple at Badrinath normally closed during winter.

So, in the year 1920 he went to Bombay and met a number of nationalist leaders who had involved themselves in national movement under the leadership of Gandhiji. Since Vedaratnam Pillai had already read the works of Gandhiji which had helped him to understand and appreciate Mahatma Gandhiji's involvement in the national politics.

All these and his contact with freedom fighters at Bombay had a profound impact on young Vedaratnam Pillai. At Bombay it was usual for him to witness daily in the streets a number of processions carrying the

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posters of Gandhiji and other National leaders singing the song "Vande Matharam". All these brought a sea-change in Vedaratnam Pillai\textsuperscript{19}.

His visit to Bombay and acquaintance with national leaders had influenced Vedaratnam later to join the national movement and strengthen Gandhi's cause. Similarly, later in his life attracted by Gandhiji's ideal of Swadeshi he did not like to wear foreign cloths. Like Gandhiji he dressed in khadar. He discarded clothes made of cotton and silkyarn and instead put on clothes made of hand spun yarn. The change of place, with poor amenities had shattered his health\textsuperscript{20}. Soon he was short of money and finding no other help in the city of Bombay, he sent a wire to his father asking for rupees two hundred. His father was much pleased to know that his son wanted to return home and sent him the money he wanted. As soon as the money

\textsuperscript{19} Bahirathan, \textit{Maraikkattil Oru Manikkam}, p.33.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.}, pp.31-32.
reached Vedaratnam Pillai he returned to Vedaranyam. It was a welcome union with his family. But his fragile health caused anxiety to his parents.

Dr. Pandurangam, his family doctor attended on him and warned that Vedaratnam Pillai should on no account stir out of town for six months. The medical attention and the response of Vedaratnam Pillai to the treatment resulted in restoration of his original health.

After Vedaratnam Pillai recovered from his health, his father wanted to involve him in the business of salt along with his brother Somasundaram pillai. Accordingly, Vedaratnam Pillai joined with his brother Somasundram Pillai in business Activities. In addition to salt business, they both also started a cloth store at Vedaranyam. Yet Vedaratnam Pillai's involvement in

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21 Ibid., see also interview with v.Appakudi Pillai, Vedaranyam, Nov. 24, 1992.

22 Ibid., pp.33-34.
business activities lasted only for four years. He had a burning desire to dedicate to join national movement\textsuperscript{23}. The result was that in the year 1920, he gave up his business activities and joined the Indin National Congress.

The period when he joined the Indian National Congress was an important period in the history of National movement. It was a period of Gandhian era. The Montagu Chelmsford report was published in 1918. The report did not meet many important demands of the Congress such as the principle of self-determination instead it recommended only "dyarchy" in the provincial governments\textsuperscript{24}. In the year 1919, the Government of India brought Rowlatt Act giving powers to imprison persons without trial\textsuperscript{25}. Gandhiji wanted to launch an all India

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\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Ibid.}, p.343.
Movement in the form of Satyagraha against Rowlatt Act. In all the programmes of Gandhiji, although leaders irrespective high respect for Gandhi, some of his close followers were not in favour of direct action. They were not also for any agitational programmes. Yet Gandhiji was firm in conducting programmes of Satyagraha at any cost. Accordingly Rowlatt Satyagraha was conducted on April 6, 1919 on all India basis. As a precurs to Non-Co-operation Movement, on April 13, 1919, the tragedy of Jallian Wallabagh took place at Amristar. In a firing by the troops under the order of General Dyer at the unarmed people who had gathered on the Baisaki day in Jalianwallabagh, about 400 people were killed and 1200 wounded. Under the pressure of public demand, the Hunter Commission was appointed by the government. It published its report in March 1920. It declared Dyer's action as only "a grave error of judgement". It did not satisfy the people who had demanded the punishment of General Dyer as well as other officials. The action of British Government further aggravated the situation in India on

There was only one exit which the troops occupied, quoted in Percival Spear, The Oxford History of Modern India, 1740-1975, p.341.
account of the abolition of the caliphate photo of Turkey. The Sultan of Turkey was revered by the Indian Muslims. The action of Britain on Turkey perturbed the Indian Muslims. Hence, the Khilafat movement was launched this needed Hindu cooperation. Hindu-Muslim unity was an essential element in Gandhiji's nationalism. By allying the Hindu - Muslim leaders, he could bind the two religious communities against the British Government. Taking all these into account, Gandhiji proposed the programme of Non-cooperation Movement. He evolved a programme of struggle which would mobilise masses into national movement.

In launching any direct action against the government in the form of Satyagraha, there was no difficulty for Gandhiji as far as North India was concerned. For in North India he became popular by conducting Satyagrahas at Champran, Kaira and Ahamadabad during 1917-18. These struggles earned for him a great

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Percival spear, The Oxford History of Modern India, 1740-1975, p.349. See also Sumit Sarkar, Modern India, p.214.
majority of political followers in North\textsuperscript{28}. But in South it was not an easy task for Gandhiji. For it was at this time, there were groups within Tamil Nadu Congress party. This became a dilemma for Gandhiji to ally himself with any one of the groups. Our concern here is to find out under which group Vedaratnam Pillai identified himself in the National Movement of Tamil Nadu\textsuperscript{29}.

Vedaratnam Pillai was also a beginner in politics. Although he had a high regard for Gandhiji and other national leaders, he had not also fully engaged himself in politics. But he was aware of all the events that had happened both on the national level and on the regional level of Tamil Nadu politics.

It was at this time he was under the influence of Santhanam a law student who had fully engaged himself


\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Ibid.}, p.21.
in Tamil Nadu politics following Gandhian ideals. Santhanam later became a Deputy Railway Minister under the Premiersship of Jawaharlal Nehru after independence. To have a clear idea of the group politics in Tamil Nadu it is relevent to know about Gandhiji's relationship with different groups in Tamil Nadu.

Gandhiji's attempt of getting support for his programmes from the various groups in Tamil Nadu was not also encouraging. It is true that all the groups in Tamil Nadu respected Gandhiji. This was evident at the time when he was launching earlier satyagraha movement on all India basis against Rowlatt Act. First he made contacts with Congressmen like G.A. Natesan and V.S.Srinivasa Sastri, Moderates through leaders like Gopalakrishna Gokhale. But after the death of Gokhale, they joined the organisation of Servants of Indian Society³⁰. They had a deep respect for constitutionalism.

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³⁰ Ibid.,
It took the rash step of interning her and two of her associates, George Arundale and B.P. Wadia in June 1917. The internment of Besant really increased her popularity. This made the government to release her on December 1917. In order to get the support of Besant and her Home Rule leaguers Gandhiji contacted through one Dwaraka Doss, a Gujarathi. But her experience of internment discouraged her from moving on to more intensive agitation. On the question of Rowlatt Act she took a middle course\(^\text{32}\). Hence, Gandhiji's idea of getting support from Annie Besant ended in vain.

Without the moderator Besant as ally, Gandhiji had no alternative but to turn to others seeking support for his Rowlatt Satyagraha in Tamil Nadu. Finding no other way, Gandhiji sought the support of political leaders like Kasthuri Renga Ayyangar and Salem G.Vijarangavachariar, who had earlier participated in the Rowlatt Satyagraha movement in Tamil Nadu. They

\(\text{32 New India, 24, January 1919.}\)
could not continue the struggle further. Though they were basically different from Gandhiji's views they did support Satyagraha Movement, mainly because of their respect for Gandhiji.

It was in this atmosphere, Tamil Nadu Congress Committee met at Madras under the presidency of Kasturi Renga Ayyangar. They were not in favour of Gandhiji's agitation programmes. Hence, Gandhiji could not get support from this group. It was at this time, there came the support of Rajagopalachariar [also known as Rajaji]. Gandhiji also felt it better to rely on Rajaji and his followers for all his programmes in Tamil Nadu and sought their help.

Rajaji in order to give support to Gandhiji contacted T.S.S.Rajan of Tiruchirappalli, P.Vaidhyanatha


34 Ibid., p.217-218.

35 Ibid.,
Ayyar of Madurai, S. Ramanathan and K. Santhanam, Mannargudi. They all gave support to Rajaji and followed the principles of Gandhiji in politics through out their political careers. Thus, a new set of Gandhians emerged in the Tamil Nadu politics under the leadership of Rajaji. The Indian National Congress annual session was held at Calcutta on 6th September 1920, Rajaji gathered about 306 Gandhians from Madras Presidency and made them to attend this Congress session. It was in this Congress, Gandhiji's programme of Non-Cooperation launched in stages. First, there would be renunciation of government titles and honorary posts followed by the boycott of government sponsored schools, colleges and law-courts.

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38 Ibid.
In the district of Tanjore, it was Santhanam who had been trying his best to draw Vedaratnam Pillai to come into the group of Gandhians. Yet this could not materialise at once. For during this time, Santhanam had devoted his services fully towards the programme of Non-cooperation and then he went to Kallidaikurichi to serve for Khadhi Industry. Only in the year 1922, after his release from jail he was thinking of organising the Congress Party in Tanjore district on Gandhian lines and entrusting the same to followers of Gandhi. In this endeavour, he found Vedaratnam Pillai as a suitable person and draw him into national politics. This made Vedaratnam Pillai to become a follower of Gandhiji. We have already seen that Vedaratnam Pillai even in his boyhood had a high regard for Gandhiji and considered him as his mentor. He also gave up wearing a shirt in keeping with the habit of his mentor Mahatma Gandhi. He wore a loin cloth, a khadi dhoti and a khadi towel.

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It was to this sincere Gandhian, Santhanam entrusted the job of organising the Congress movement in Tanjore district. Thus, from 1922 onwards Vedaratnam Pillai fully engaged himself in the task of organising the Congress movement in Tanjore district and he became the Secretary of the Tanjore District Congress Committee. In organising the Congress movement in his district, he took much efforts in installing the Gandhian ideals to the people. True to the principles of Gandhiji, Vedaratnam Pillai propagated Gandhiji's constructive programmes of uplifting the Harijans and khadi programmes. Thus, with his sincerity he made the Congress party popular among the villagers.

In the year 1924, at Belgaum, the all India Congress Conference met under the Presidentship of Mahatma Gandhi. Vedaratnam Pillai was one of the Congressmen who attended the Belgaum session. After

40 Ibid.,
42 Ibid., p.360.
his return from Belgaum, Vedaratnam Pillai planned to make Tanjore District into a strong hold of the Congress Party. In the very same year, he organised a conference at Mannargudi to propagate khadi movement among the people. This conference was presided over by Rajaji. Satyamurthi attended this conference as a special invitee.

Next, in the year 1927, he convened the conference of Tanjore District Congress at Vedaranyam. V.S.Srinivasa Sastri, the then president of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee, Srinivasa Ayyangar, Rengasamy Ayyangar, the editor of The Hindu (English Daily) took part in the conference. Vedaratnam Pillai was the president of the reception committee. He made this conference appear like the Provincial Congress Conference.

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It was resolved in this conference, to spread the Congress ideals in and around Vedaranyam and to boycott foreign goods and encourage swadhesi cloth.\textsuperscript{45}

In organising the Congress Party in Tanjore District at this time was not an easy job. For this district was then the stronghold of Justice Party. Pattukkottai Alagiri, V.N.Nadimuthu Pillai, K.R.G.Balu, V.P.N. Babu Chettiar and Nidamangalam Arumugam were the prominent members of the Justice Party. Ideologically they gave stiff resistance to the Congress Party. But Vedaratnam Pillai through selfless service, unflinching loyalty to the progress of Congress Party and dynamic disposition made Congress strong in the district.

In some places like Tiruvarur, because of some of the important personalities like A.T. Panneerselvam the influence of Justice Party was strong. A.T.Panneerselvam was not only Bar-at-law but a dynamic personality in this area. He was also a native of Perumpanaiyur near

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Tamil Encyclopaedia}, p.519.
Thiruvarur. He also served for the cause of the people. Although ideologically A.T. Panneerselvam differed from the policies of the Congress Party, the people in the Madras Presidency had a high regard for him. Hence, it was very difficult to spread the ideals of Congress Party in the area of Tiruvarur where A.T. Panneerselvam had established his influence. Yet, Vedaratnam Pillai was not discouraged in propagating the ideals of Congress movement in Thiruvarur.

Gradually, Vedaratnam Pillai succeeded in infusing the ideals of Gandhiji's Congress among the people of Thiruvarur. His sincere services to the downtrodden and the uplift of the Harijan really drew a large number of followers even in Thiruvarur. Finally, he succeeded in making Thiruvarur as a strong hold of the Congress Party.

In the history of National movement, the year 1927 was an important period. Although discontentment against the British Government gathered from the beginning of 1920's, the economic measures of the government such as the introduction of preferential rates for British steel in 1927 and others created a strong feeling of
resentment among the bourgeoise and other sections of the people. This resulted in strong opposition to the British from all sections of the people as well as from all political parties or groups. This resentment against the British rule was high in the year 1927 because of the appointment of the Simon Commission on February 1927. As there was no Indian in the Commission, the discontentment among all sections, political parties and groups against the British further grew creating a tense situation in the Indian politics. It was also called as "Whiteman's Commission".

There was a lot of hue and cry against the Commission all over India. It was boycotted almost by a majority of the people. Hartals were held all over the country. The members of the Simon Commission were asked to go back. In Madras, the boycott of Simon Commission was opposed by the people under the

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46 A.R.Desai, Social Background of Indian Nationalism, p.357.

leadership of Satyamurthi\textsuperscript{48}. In the district of Tanjore, it was Vedaratnam Pillai who organised the boycotting of Simon Commission Movement. Due to the efforts and organisational measures taken by Vedaratnam Pillai, strong opposition to the Commission was shown in Tanjore, Thiruvaiyar, Mannargudi, Nidamangalam and Vedaranyam the birth place of Vedaratnam Pillai\textsuperscript{49}.

Subsequently, Vedaratnam Pillai wanted to increase the popularity of the Congress party in Tanjore district by arranging a Provincial Congress Conference at Vedaranyam in the year 1929. In arranging this conference he had some obstacles too. He was thinking of bringing a national leader to preside over the conference. In politics, he had some people who disliked his popularity. Hence, they sent wires to the national leaders not to turn up. Even those leaders who had earlier promised to help him in arranging the


\textsuperscript{49} The Civil Disobedience Movement, (Confidential File, Tamil Nadu State Archives).
conference were also intimidated and they withdrew. Vedaratnam Pillai was not disheartened. He made all arrangements in his own way for the conference.

To manage the situation, Vedaratnam Pillai made another plan. He directly went to Calcutta and waited upon Gandhiji with a request to depute Sardar Vallabhabhai Patel to the conference. As Gandhiji thought that a trip to Vedaranyam would consume a lot of time hence, he did no oblige Vedaratnam Pillai's request. Thereupon, Vedaratnam Pillai told Gandhiji that he would leave the place only if he consented to send Vallababhai Patel to the conference at Vedaranyam. Gandhiji was moved by Vedaratnam Pillai's sincerity of purpose and conceded his request.

It was at this time, there were differences among the leaders of the all India Congress Party. Within the Congress a left wing had grown which was


not satisfied with the goal of dominion status and desired to substitute complete independence for it. It also insisted on a programme of struggle.

It was in this tense situation, Vedaratnam Pillai had to conduct the conference of Provincial Congress at Vedaranyam. The conference took place on 31st July and 1st August, 1929. To the conference Gandhiji sent Mahadev Desai as his representative. Sardar Vallabhabhai Patel presided over the conference. Satyamurthi and S. Srinivasa Iyyengar also participated in the conference. In the Provincial Conference leaders of Congress Party belonging to different groups expressed their varied opinions on the question of national movement. There was also confusion and tense situation. Some cried for the demand of complete independence and others for dominion status. Finally,

52 Ibid., p.89. See also The Civil Disobedience Movemnet Confidential File.


54 Ibid.
Vallabai Patel expressed his opinion and supported the demand of dominion status for India. This was welcomed by many of the Congressmen who attended this Conference.

It was in this Conference Rajaji found the talents of Vedaratnam Pillai and wanted to utilise him for all the future course of the programmes of national movement in Tamil Nadu\(^5\). The association between Rajaji and Vedaratnam Pillai grew further. In fact, he became the righthand of Rajaji after this Conference. It was this acquaintance that made Rajaji to utilise Vedaratnam Pillai to organise the programme of salt satyagraha. To utilise Vedaratnam Pillai fully for the salt satyagraha, Rajaji chose Vedaranyam as its centre.

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