CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THAMIZHAGA VIVASAYIGAL SANGAM
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3.1. THE ORGANISATION

The Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam (Tamilnadu Agriculturists' Association), an organisation of peasantry came into prominence in Tamilnadu under the leadership of Late Narayanaswami Naidu during mid 60s and took up certain crucial issues of peasantry such as electricity, credit, prices, irrigation etc. The movement was confined to Coimbatore district initially and remained non-political till the year 1982. The membership base of Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam owing to its non-political stand was far and wide and claimed to have preserved homogeneity of interest with respect to issues pursued and vertical solidarity in view of that amongst peasantry who belonged to diverse socio-economic background prior to their enrolment in the organisation.

In order to realise the issues pursued, the Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam adopted certain passive and militant pressure courses of action as the strategy of its agitation which, in turn, led to confrontation with the political parties at the helm of affairs. Consequent to agitation launched by Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam the State Government announced either partial or complete acceptance of the demands of peasantry.
Since its inception in 1966, the Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam had attracted a lot of interest as it signalled of a new type of rural organisation of peasantry. Traditionally, organising the rural area has meant the mobilisation of the rural poor such as agricultural labourers against landlords on issues like wages or tenancy rights. But this organisation has claimed that it is based on an understanding that all rural families from agricultural labourers to rich farmers are 'Peasants' who have a basic unity of interest on several issues like price, electricity, loan, compensation, relief, employment opportunities through which it claims to represent the interest of all peasants.

3.2. THE BEGINNING OF THE MOVEMENT

The decade 60s saw the beginning of a new type of peasant movement organised under the banner of Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam which, as stated above, claims to stand for all sections of the peasantry. The beginning of the Sangam dates back to 1966 when the Coimbatore farmers organised and established Coimbatore Taluk Northern Region Farmers' Association in July 1966.

The beginning of Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam had its interface with certain developments took place in agriculture in the name of 'Package Programme' or 'Green Revolution'. Some of the packages given to farmers under this programme include Migh Yield
variety seeds, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, pumpsets etc., which has not only increased the aspirations of peasantry but also brought more area under cultivation. The technological transformation brought about by these new methods caused strains to peasantry as they had to invest more on farm and depend on external sources for its purchase which led to increased dependency of peasantry. Mechanisation of farm practices increased the dependency on electricity and water scarcity for irrigation has further aggravated the condition of peasantry who were subjected to heavy loss in the event of failure in any one of these. This condition of peasantry who were subjected to heavy loss in the event of failure in any one of these. This condition of peasantry pushed them to wall and precipitated the beginning of peasant organisation in Coimbatore to start with.

3.3. EARLY HISTORY

The early history of the peasant movement in Tamilnadu revolve around certain crucial issues of peasantry like electricity, agricultural income tax, debt relief, irrigation for which the peasants of Coimbatore North were organised in 1966. The organisation subsequently on initial success enlarged its organisational base to the entire district and state when all the districts were brought under the umbrella in the name of Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam (in 1973).
3.4. THE ELECTRICITY ISSUE

The mobilisation of peasants started in Coimbatore taluk when a meeting of farmers in the Panchayat Unions of Sarkar Samakkulam and Periyanaickanpalayam explored the possibility of forming a farmers' association. There were certain isolated incidents of peasant mobilisation and collective representation to Government for settlement of grievances in the past. In the year 1957, when the water dropped to very low levels in the Pykara Dam, the electricity supply to farmers was reduced to four hours from sixteen hours per day. A procession of farmers numbering over thousand met the District Collector and Electricity Minister. Consequently, the old system was restored. Again, in the year 1963, the Electricity Board ordered that electricity lines provided to farmers should not use more than one bulb per service. A delegation of farmers met the Minister for Electricity, Venkataraman and Chairman of Electricity Board and got a sanction of three bulbs at the maximum per service. As a result of these initial successes the leaders of peasantry organised to form an association to protect their interest as the farming operations are heavily dependent on external inputs. Subsequently, "The Northern Coimbatore Taluk Farmers' Association" was formed at a meeting held in Coimbatore on 2nd July 1966 in which Velappan and Narayanaswarni Naidu were selected as President and Secretary respectively. At the larger level in the political scene in the state in the 1967 general election the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was voted to power.
The Government in the state led by Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam passed an order and directed farmers not to use more than three bulbs in their pumpset/farm house and also imposed restrictions to use water only for agriculture purpose. The farmers of Palladam, Avinashi and Coimbatore taluks were mostly living on their farm houses and used water pumped from wells for domestic purposes and used electricity for light in the farm houses. Besides these, the farmers had economically operated jaggery (cane crusher) motors (5 H.P) on farm and operated jaggery motor during off season after cutting of sugarcane. The Electricity Board also levied Rs. 5,000/- as penalty on violators of this Government order. This order affected the interest of peasantry and warranted officials contact for its redressal.

Consequently, this issue was brought to the notice of the Superintending Engineer, Coimbatore and discussed. But nothing concrete emerged since the Superintending Engineering expressed his inability to do anything against the Government order and advised the farmers to meet the Minister at Madras. This had necessitated the farmers to contact local Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam Members of Legislative Assembly like Velusamy, Venkitachalam and Congress M.L.A., Karuthiruman. By way of collecting some amount from the affected pumpset owners to meet the transport and other incidental expenses to these M.L.As who were taken to Madras to meet the
Ministers concerned. The M.L.As sought an appointment with the Chief Minister Annadurai and met him. The Chief Minister subsequently directed the MLAs and farmers to meet Chief Engineer, Electricity Board and also contacted the Chief Engineer over phone and directed to meet the group to do the needful. Consequent to the Chief Engineer meeting the fine imposed on farmers was revoked and allowed the peasants to use water both for agriculture and domestic purposes. In the case of usage of electricity operated jaggery motor, it was decided that peasants use 'double through plug pin' to arrest the passage of electricity to regulator motor pump whenever jaggery motor was operated. This pin was installed on requisition by Electricity Board after paying a nominal amount of Rs.15/- Hence this issue taken up by peasantry was also a success.

All these incidents motivated the leaders to think on the need for an organisation for collective representation of their grievances to the officials concerned. Subsequently, the peasants of this district convened a meeting in President Hall, Coimbatore to discuss matters relating to their organisation. Consequently, the Coimbatore District Agriculturists' Association was established with Palanisamy Gounder as President, Mandradiyar as Vice-President, Narayanaswami Naidu as Secretary and Ramaswami Naidu as Treasurer on September 16, 1967.
3.5. THE AGRICULTURAL INCOME-TAX ISSUE

The Government introduced crop based Agricultural Income Tax in 1967. The Association convened a meeting with representatives from all over the district to discuss the problems created by the tax. This tax issue affected very much the growers of coconut and arecanut in this district. It was decided in the meeting to send a delegation to Madras to meet the Minister concerned. The delegation met the then Chief Minister Annadurai and the Government formed a committee to tour Tamilnadu to study the situation. Later, the crop based Agricultural Income Tax was withdrawn and it was replaced by a compound tax as suggested by the Association. The Association also managed to obtain in the next three years several concessions and favours to peasantry in this district.

3.6. THE ELECTRICITY TARIFF ISSUE

In the year 1970, the Government had hiked electricity rates from 8 paise to 10 paise per unit and also reverted to the Agricultural Income Tax based upon crop while Karunanidhi was the Chief Minister in the State. The Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam launched a districtwide agitation on this issue. The peasants numbering about 15,000 observed hunger strike at Tiruppur, Avinashi and Coimbatore and decided not to pay electricity dues at higher
rates and to resist power disconnections. The Association also asked for deferral of loan collections. The agitation continued for weeks resulting in the arrest of hundreds of peasants and their leaders. Subsequently, the leaders were released for talks with the Government, but it failed without yielding any results as demanded by peasantry. The agitation continued and on 9th May the Coimbatore city witnessed a massive rally of over 10,000 bullock carts and hundreds of tractors. In places like Mettupalayam, Electricity Board Personnel were gheraoed and disconnected power lines were reconnected by the peasants. The agitation of peasantry was repressed by using police force. As a result, three peasants were killed in police firing in Perumanallur. Consequently, the leaders were released on 24th July. In the negotiation held subsequently the Government agreed to reduce the electricity charges from 10 paise to 9 paise per unit and loan collections were deferred. The Agricultural Income Tax based on crop was abolished and the old standard acre system was once again adopted.

Meantime, before the negotiations and its results the farmers of Avinashi took the decision not to remit electricity tariff because their wells are the deepest ones in the district. In view of that they had to pay more to Electricity Board for the increased consumption of electricity for pumping water for irrigation. The peasants of Palladam taluk also joined them as they also faced similar
problem. The matter was referred to the District Association which in turn directed the peasants of these taluks not to remit dues till justice is rendered to them on par with other areas having less problem in irrigation.

In the process of agitation a committee under the Chairmanship of Dr. Sivasamy was nominated to oversee this electricity issue, particularly, to prevent peasants from paying electricity dues and also check Electricity Board officials executing disconnections. But the Electricity Board Personnel removed the fuse carrier nearby the roadside in Udumalpet. As a result, Dr. Sivasamy, a Union President and two others went to the Electricity Board Office around midnight and demanded for the restoration of service to the disconnected pumpsets. On refusal by the officials, these leaders squatted in front of the Electricity Board Office with determination to seek restoration of service.

The gherao in the Electricity Board Office by these leaders spread like a wild fire in the morning which brought thousands of peasants to the Electricity Board Office and they also joined in the gherao. Later, the peasants who were on gherao forcefully entered inside the office premises and physically lifted the wiremen responsible for disconnection outside and led them in a procession in the presence of police to the motor pumpsets and restored power
supply. This incident exposed the militancy of peasants in this district.

3.7. NO-TAX CAMPAIGN

In 1972, the peasants of this district due to debt burden and subsequent over due launched no-tax campaign with a view to seek certain concessions from the Government. The peasants resorted to picketing the Government offices and there were also large scale preventive arrests in this district. As a result about five thousand peasants were arrested and sentenced for over 2 months and lodged in Coimbatore Central Prison. Almost 75 per cent of the males in each village in this district were behind bars on this issue. Agricultural operations were paralysed due to their absence in the villages. This had necessitated the people in the villages of Coimbatore to organise a bullock cart rally to show their protest to the government. The peasants cleverly took all their bullock cart numbering 20,000 on the previous night of 7th June 1972 to Coimbatore and parked all the bullock carts in Coimbatore city and in front of Central Prison with a determination to seek the release of all arrested leaders and peasants and vowed to go out of Coimbatore only along with their leaders and other peasants.
The police personnel came to know this development in the city only on the next day morning i.e., 7th June 1972. They were unable to move their vans from one place to another in view of bullock cart blackade. The District Collector had to walk all the way to reach his office to inform the Chief Minister about this development. The Chief Minister (Karunanidhi by then) after the passage of 24 hours directed officials to release only the leaders for dialogue. The peasants who were determined to seek the release of all refused the offer of the Government. Subsequently, after two days all the peasants and leaders were released. This incident in Coimbatore had attracted All India attention and even the world. The internationally reputed daily 'Washington Post' described the incident as 'Batton Tanks of Coimbatore blocked Coimbatore city and paralysed life for two days'.

Meantime, in the process of no-tax campaign a peculiar method of peasant resistance i.e., throwing Kavin Kail (a small but strong stone) which had a range of 300 feet around to prevent police entry into their village was resorted to. As this novel method was very much rewarding the peasant army was built up in each and every village and training was imparted to all young people in village to prevent the entry of police. This strategy of peasant resistance was successfully carried out and ensured complete defence from police action. Later in Perumanallur on seeing police force coming to their
village, the peasants mistook the presence of police in van and approached them within 300 feet range with a view to check them. Taking advantage of the situation the police fired on the mob in which 3 peasants were killed. This was the very first firing incident in this district where a memorial was built up for the martyrs.

Later in 1972, as part of no-tax campaign preventive arrests were made. Dr. Sivasamy, Secretary of agitation committee, was arrested and sent to prison at a time when his mother was in death bed. While he was in prison, his mother died. His father-in-law wanted parole for him for performing the last rites since he was the lone son. The Government wanted him to execute an excuse letter stating he would not participate in any agitation henceforth. Dr. Sivasamy refused to handover any type of letter to the prison authorities for seeking his release to perform last rites to his mother. Consequently, peasants numbering about 10,000 participated in the funeral and performed last rites.

The struggles launched by the District Association of peasantry were a grand success which had not only established itself as a major force but also established credibility with political parties. Consequently, the agitation had also spread to several districts outside Coimbatore. Narayanaswami Naidu, the Secretary of the Association, had emerged as a strong figure owing to his leadership qualities as the Chairman of the agitation committee.
3.8. DEBT RELIEF CONFERENCE

In 1973, a State level Debt Relief Conference was held at Coimbatore to focus the debt burden of the peasantry in which peasants all over the State had participated. The debt relief conference was the initial step towards escalation of the District level Association to the state as a whole in the name of Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam. This conference had also released a souvenir and collected about fifty thousand rupees through advertisements, which was utilised for the organisational activities. After the conference, the State Government was pressurised to look into the farmers debt issue which was mounting over years and even crossed the principal amount once they drew from the co-operative credit societies.

3.9. FORMATION OF STATE LEVEL ORGANISATION

After the deliberations in the state level debt relief conference at Coimbatore the leaders took intensive tour in the districts and generated awareness amongst peasantry on the need for a state level organisation to fight for their issues and safeguard their interests. Consequently, a state level conference was held in Tiruchirappalli on 13th November 1973 in which representatives of peasant organisations from Coimbatore, Madurai, Salem, Tirunelveli, Dharmapuri, Ramanathapuram etc., were present. The Thamizhaga
Vivasayigal Sangam (Tamilnadu Agriculturists' Association) was formed at this meeting. The meeting elected Narayanaswami Naidu as President, Balasubramaniam as Secretary, and Mayilsamy as Treasurer, and convenors were also nominated for all the districts.

3.10. THE ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

The Coimbatore Northern Taluk Vivasayigal Sangam established in 1966 was only an informal organisation of peasantry living mostly in Coimbatore and Periyanaiickanpalayam Panchayat Unions in the district. But the Coimbatore district Vivasayigal Sangam of 1967 was systematically organised and registered under the Societies Registration Act. The by-laws of the District Vivasayigal Sangam were published as "Rules and Regulations" (Appendix I). In 1973 when the state level Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam (Tamilnadu Agriculturists' Association) was formed it was not registered but it continued with the same rules and regulations.

The constitution of the State level organisation of Vivasayigal Sangam spells out a four tier structure with units at Village, Block, District and State levels. In its actual functioning the organisation bears a loose and informal structure. Elections as per provisions never held for top positions. It was carried out informally through consensus. Dr. Velappan was the President of the Coimbatore
Northern Taluk Vivasayigal Sangam. When the District level Association was formed, Palanisamy Gounder was chosen as its President, Narayanaswami Naidu was the Secretary of these two organisations. Narayanaswami Naidu emerged as the powerful figure in the 1972 agitation, subsequently he was made as the Chairman of Agitation Committee. Later, when the state level organisation, the Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam was formed he was chosen as the President, a post which he occupied till his death.

The organisation that makes major policy decisions is the central executive council which in addition to the President and the Secretary consists of representatives from all districts. The Agitation Committee also plays a significant role in the Vivasayigal Sangam organisational activities. Since 1972 agitation, Narayanaswami Naidu as Chairman of agitation committee attracted the attention and came into the limelight who later became the President of Vivasayigal Sangam in 1973. Dr.Sivasamy since then was made Chairman of Agitation Committee, who also became the President of the Sangam later after the death of Narayanaswami Naidu in 1984.

3.11. DEMANDS AND STRATEGY OF AGITATION

One of the earliest general statement of demands that the Vivasayigal Sangam came up with its 12 point charter of demands that was drafted in 1972 and the 20 point policy statement in 1974
Prior to 1970 the Vivasayigal Sangam had confined itself to petition and lobbying. The major demands were: decrease of electricity tariff and a deferral of loan collections. The Vivasayigal Sangam resorted to such pressure strategies as hunger strikes, picketing and processions. They were also successful in gheraos of electricity board personnel through which they had realised the demand of restoration of power supply to the disconnected pumpsets.

A turning point in the strategy of agitation of Vivasayigal Sangam took place in 1972. Apart from reduction in power tariff rates the Vivasayigal Sangam started demanding debt relief, as against a mere deferral of loan collection; with a view to realise these demands apart from regular forms of protests the Vivasayigal Sangam brought in two other new methods of agitation namely, bullock cart blockade and stoppage of milk, butter milk and vegetables to cities which were supposed to be highly successful and attracted the attention of national and even international press.

The Vivasayigal Sangam describes itself as 'Gandhian' and proclaims its belief in non-violence. The agitations of the Vivasayigal Sangam many a time were dealt with great repression by the Government. There were incidents of police firings and many activists of the Sangam were killed. The Vivasayigal Sangam also at times took violent turns involving destruction to life, property etc. On one
occasion a Sub-Inspector of police was also killed in mob attack. At the same time the Vivasayigal Sangam had also willingly co-operated with Government through its participation for negotiated settlement. The Vivasayigal Sangam had also made use of all constitutional means including legal proceedings against Government measures, petitions, participation in committees constituted by the Government including that of Minimum wages committee, High power committee etc., to represent their grievances and negotiated settlements.

3.12. AGRICULTURAL GRIEVANCE DAY MEETING

Since formation of Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam, agitations continued with renewed vigour and Government also counteracted with its police force throughout 1973 and 1974. In the year 1974, the peasants wrested an important concession from the Government. It was agreed that one day in each month (i.e., third Saturday) would serve as 'Agricultural Grievance Day'. On this day, representatives from the Departments of Electricity, Revenue, Irrigation and co-operative would be present at the District Collectorate. The understanding was that all grievances brought to notice here would be redressed before the next grievance day meet. The Agricultural Grievance Day meeting went on well till imposition of MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act) in 1976.
3.13. DEVELOPMENTS DURING EMERGENCY PERIOD (1975-1977)

The Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam could not decide its operational strategy during the emergency period as there was lot of uncertainty particularly during the year 1975-76. The organisational and pressure courses of action of the Association during this period was very much affected. Utilising this opportunity, the Government led by DMK once again increased the power tariff from 9 paise to 16 paise per unit. The peasants had to suffer like anything and were constrained to initiate any militant activity to show their protest to this action of the Government.

In 1976, when the DMK Government led by Karunanidhi was dismissed under Governor's rule, confiscations were resumed. Later, the Association convened a conference in December 1976 exclusively to discuss matters concerning irrigation and resolved to stop payment of dues, if electricity rates were not reduced.

After the period of emergency, general election to Tamilnadu State Assembly was held in 1977. It is worthy of mention here to state certain developments took place in DMK party during the preceding period of emergency. M.G. Ramachandran was dismissed from the DMK party and founded a party namely Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK). Subsequently, the ADMK party contested the
Dindigul by-election to Parliament held in 1972 and captured the seat.

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) Government led by Karunanidhi suffered a series of setbacks since split in the party and defeat in the Dindigul by election to Parliament. Utilising this situation and anti-DMK feelings of peasantry, the ADMK grew up in a spectacular manner. In 1977, general election to assembly ADMK party captured power in the state and its leader M.G. Ramachandran became the Chief Minister. The new Government in the State led by M.G. Ramachandran also, by and large, followed the same policies of the erstwhile Government led by Karunanidhi as far as agriculture was concerned whatever the concessions provided during this period was only marginal.


The peasants had to initiate once again the pressure courses of action since 1977 to draw the attention of the Government towards their sufferings. In the series, there came picketings, Gherao, bandh, no-tax etc. The Vivasayigal Sangam passed a resolution asking the peasants not to remit electricity tariff, co-operative credit, land
tax, etc., and announced the 9 point charter of demands (Appendix 3). As the Government's response towards the demands of peasants was poor, the peasants resorted to their strategy of pressure activities. This had further aggravated to deteriorating relationship between the organisation and the Government and precipitated militancy of peasantry. In the state level bandh held in 1978 there took place police firing at several places which include Vedasendur, Nochiodaipatti, Udumalpet, Vagaikulam etc.

The police firing and other excesses committed by police had decreased the morale of the Government led by M.G. Ramachandran among the public in the state. Further, the incident at Vagaikulam, where a plan to take water from the tank to distant places for drinking purposes rendered peasants into hardships as they lacked water for irrigation in view of that. The peasants of this area gathered and foiled the attempt of the Government. In the process three peasants fell to the bullets of police. After this incident, the Government abandoned the plan of drawing water from the Vagaikulam tank for drinking purposes. Later, the martyrs memorial columns were built up at places like Perumanallur, Vedasendur, Nochiodaipatti to perpetuate the memory of the supreme sacrifices made by these peasants.
The State Government also responded to the sufferings of peasantry in the form of constitution of a High Power Committee with the Chief of State Planning Commission as its Chairman which consisted of two representatives of the Vivasayigal Sangam namely Narayanaswami Naidu and Balasubramaniam. The Vivasayigal Sangam agreed to remit land tax and wanted the Government to reciprocate in the form of withdrawal of all distraint proceedings against peasantry. In March 1978, the Vivasayigal Sangam representatives walked out of the High Power Committee and continued agitation since the Government continued distraint measures.

Since then, there were series of agitations and brutal repressions by police. In 1978 alone eight peasants were killed in police firing. In the talk held subsequently the Government agreed to reduce the power tariff from 16 paise to 14 paise to big farmers and 12 paise for small farmers. The Vivasayigal Sangam continued its agitation since several other demands were not conceded to. A Statewide bandh was called to condemn the brutal repression of police and firing during which a Sub-Inspector was killed at Tirunelveli. This incident led to the arrest of Narayanaswami Naidu, who was charged with inciting violence. He was later released when there was a statewide agitation.

In the 1980 Parliament election, the AIADMK (ADMK now changed the name into All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) lost
and captured only 2 seats out of 39. Subsequently, the Government led by M.G. Ramachandran was dissolved and the state was brought under President's rule. Meantime, M.G. Ramachandran who was now out of power mobilised sympathy from public particularly from the weaker sections.

The 1980 Parliament election clearly demonstrated that no political party could capture power in the state without the support of Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam. Learning lessons from the past performance, M.G. Ramachandran went to meet Vaiyampalayam and Mathampalayam to meet Narayanaswami Naidu and Dr. Sivasami and sought their support in the ensuing election to AIADMK party. The Vivasayigal Sangam reciprocated to the demand in the form of adopting a resolution of 'neutral stand' in the election which amounted to a defacto support for the AIADMK party. The AIADMK on its part incorporated among other things the 9 point charter of demands of Vivasayigal Sangam in its election manifesto (Appendix 4). No other political party including DMK had not said anything explicitly to the demands of Vivasayigal Sangam.

3.15. DEVELOPMENTS DURING AIADMK RULE SINCE 1980

Following the Assembly election, the AIADMK returned to power and its leader M.G. Ramachandran became the Chief Minister in
the state in 1980. As against the election eve assurances and expectations of peasants, M.G. Ramachandran had rejected the demands (which he himself accepted and incorporated in AIADMK election manifesto) and adopted the policy of divide and rule as far as issues of peasantry were concerned. The first division came in the form of electricity tariff, i.e., 14 paise per unit for small farmers and 16 paise per unit for big farmers, cancellation of taccavi loan and penal interest, interest on principal amount to small farmers and extension of time for repayment of loan in the form of conversion of term loans etc., were given. These measures helped more for small farmers and satisfied with the concessions given to them and extended support to M.G. Ramachandran. The demand for housing scheme for landless labour was concerned the Government had formed TAHDICO (Tamilnadu Adi Dravidar Housing and Development Corporation) to construct houses for the people of Adi-Dravida (Harijan) communities. Later, India Avaz Yojana was introduced with financial support from the Union Government. Owing to these concessions the landless labour also shown disinterest in the activities of Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam. All these measures of the Government inflicted a division among peasantry and thereby caused weakness in the support base of the Vivasayigal Sangam.

Later, in the same year, the Koothappar issue was taken up by Vivasayigal Sangam where the Government assigned the irrigation
tank site to the Harijans for house construction. This action of Government was vehemently opposed by the peasants of the surrounding area who held that the percolation effect of the tank would be lost if houses were constructed on the tank site. But the Government under instructions from the then Housing Minister Nalluswami went ahead with its programme of site assignment and subsequent construction of houses. This had sparked the fury of peasants and ultimately Vivasayigal Sangam gave a call for a rally at Trichy and directed peasants of the state to participate in it to focus this issue. The Government subsequently banned the rally and whoever came to Trichy through whichever mode of transport from various directions were subjected to repressions by police. Due to this abrupt development, the Vivasayigal Sangam had abandoned the rally at Trichy. This incident had further decreased the morale of the participating members and weakened the organisational strength of Vivasayigal Sangam.

In order to collect the co-operative credit overdues, the Government unleashed its "Operation loan Collection" in 1980 and this continued till 1981 and later, thousands were arrested. The 'Operation' was carried out in areas where the Vivasayigal Sangam was strong so that other areas follow suit. The Vivasayigal Sangam could not face such repression and the 'no-tax' campaign started to fail. Finally, at a meeting of representatives from all districts held in January the Sangam leaders from Coimbatore, Periyar, Madurai and
other districts pleaded that since a majority of peasants had already paid their dues by availing government concessions it was meaningless to direct the remaining not to pay. This could be considered a turning point in the movement marking the end of the 'Agitational Phase' of Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam.

Subsequent to the success of 'Operation Loan Collection' through distraint proceedings the Government now initiated yet another measure to realise the electricity bill outstanding from the peasants in the name of "Operation Power Disconnection" at a time when the standing crops were about to attain flowering and harvested. This operation was carried out through removal of transformers from villages with police escort. The peasants who were already sore over the repressions now unable to resist the move of the Government. Consequently, this issue necessitated the peasantry to dispose off whatever the property they possessed to safeguard not only the standing crop but also their social honour by remitting the electricity dues.

All these incidents in the life of peasants in the state had very badly affected economic condition and shown lack of interest in the organisational activities of Vivasayigal Sangam. The Government's divide and rule policy on agricultural front checked vertical solidarity of peasants of different strata. The operation loan
collection and power disconnection resorted to by the co-operative credit societies and Electricity Board respectively caused several strains and rendered peasantry in lot of misery. Therefore, in view of these developments the support base of Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam started showing gradual liquidation.

Moreover, the Government raised the electricity rates once again from 16 paise to 24 paise per unit. The Vivasayigal Sangam to counteract this announced that it would contest atleast 50 per cent of the seats in the forthcoming Panchayat elections to defeat the AIADMK party. But, the elections were deferred. The 'operation power disconnections' continued throughout 1982. When the vivasayigal Sangam again announced agitations, the Government reacted by arresting thousands of Vivasayigal Sangam members, leaders at various levels. Consequent to this action by Government, the Vivasayigal Sangam called off the proposed agitations against Government.

On seeing the deteriorating support base and sorrowful state of affairs identified in the Vivasayigal Sangam organisation, the leaders in order to avoid further deterioration convened a meeting at Gudalur in Nilgiris in which all state and District executives participated. The meeting lasted for three days from May 20-22, 1982. It was decided in the meeting after careful consideration to convert the non-political stand of Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam into a
political party in the name of Indian Farmers and Toilers Party (IFTP). This decision was officially announced on the occasion of farmers' day rally held in Madras on 5th July 1982.

3.16. SPLITS IN THAMIZHAGA VIVASAYIGAL SANGAM

Since its inception in 1966, there have been several splits and some of these have been 'caste based'. In 1971, Krishnaswami Gounder split the organisation and formed his group in the name of Thamilnadu Manila Vivasayigal Sangam (Tatnilnadu State Agriculturists' Association) on the question of Narayanaswami Naidu's misuse of funds and refusal to talk with the Government. He was elected as President and Muthuswami Gounder another strong man in Vivasayigal Sangam in Coimbatore district as General Secretary. Initially, Krishnaswami Gounder was able to mobilise some support since large number of peasants in Coimbatore district belong to the Gounder caste.

The Coimbatore District Agriculturists' Association till 1973 had in its rolls MLAs and several Panchayat Union Chairmen. After the formation of state level Association many of them resigned and continued their membership only in their parent political parties. In 1978, when many leaders were arrested after the firing incident at Vedasendur and many other places the Vivasayigal Sangam's Secretary Balasubramaniam started talks with the Government. He was charged
with dictatorial attitude, anti-Sangam stand and dismissed from the position. As a result, he left along with some sections of Vivasayigal Sangam and formed an organisation with the same name and banner. Similarly, in 1980, Chinnaswami Gounder was ousted when he started negotiation with Government when the leaders were arrested during "Operation Disconnection". He also left along with some sections of members and formed his own organisation with similar name.

3.17. THE FORMATION OF POLITICAL PARTY

It was felt by many leaders and activists of Vivasayigal Sangam that it was forced to go in for a political party structure since the non-political structure of Vivasayigal Sangam miserably failed to realise all the needs of peasantry through constitutional means i.e., legal and agitational. The pressure courses of actions of Vivasayigal Sangam since 80 met with repression at the hands of police. A massive state level rally planned in Trichy in 1981 had to be abandoned since the police unleashed attack on the members on the previous day. Many of the participants who were travelling by bus, train were waylaid and attacked. The 'Green Towel\(^1\) of members served as the identity symbol for police repression. The members who underwent this nightmarish experience termed it as another \(^\text{11}^\text{Jalianwalabagh}\.\)
The building constructed by Vivasayigal Sangam at Oddanchathram in Anna district on Puramboke (public) land which was subsequently demolished reflected the mood of the Government towards the issues of peasantry. Moreover, "The Operation Loan Collection" and 'Operation Power Disconnection' undertaken by Cooperative Credit Societies and Electricity Board respectively terrorised the members of Vivasayigal Sangam in the village.

The party formation could be said the end of the 'agitational phase' of the Vivasayigal Sangam. Narayanaswami Naidu stated in 1983, "The Karnataka Tobacco Growers' agitation, milk producers' and vegetable growers' agitation in Maharashtra had been a failure. The Government can easily crush agitation with its police force. We cannot do too much with stones. I abandoned these methods only after trying these to the limit. Is it our fate to always to agitate after electing someone to power" he asked. He had also stated that electoral politics is the plan for the future.

The political party now formed in the name of Indian Farmers and Toilers Party put up a candidate for the Periyakulam Parliamentary by-election in September 1982. The candidate, who was considered as a strong man in the organisation and President of Madurai District fared very badly by losing his deposit.
The 10 point charter released by the party at the time of its formation generally formed its policies of electoral politics (Appendix 5). A comprehensive statement since release of this 10 point charter, was made by Narayanaswami Naidu in the form of articles further reflected the party's ideologies. In essence it proclaims and upholds the 'Gandhian Approach to Development' through its engagement in 'constructive programmes'.

The Indian Farmers and Toilers Party (IFTP) had decided to work jointly with 14 party alliance of opposition parties. The Central executive committee of the party in August 1984 had decided to mobilise funds to meet the expenses in the forthcoming elections. The party participated for the first time in the general election to the State Legislative Assembly in 10 constituencies in the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam led 14 party alliance. But due to sympathy wave in favour of M.G. Ramachandran, the then Chief Minister, who was hospitalised in the United States of America, by. then and. the assassination of Indira Gandhi favoured AIADMK and Congress(I) respectively. Therefore, the alliance combine of AIADMK and Congress(I) swept in the poll. The IFTP drew a blank in the election and most of the candidates even forefeited their deposits. Moreover, during electioneering Narayanaswami Naidu died while he was staying in Travellers Bungalow at Kovilpatti. The leader's death was considered as an irrepairable loss to the party and to the organisational efforts.
The party also contested in the 1989 general election to the state assembly, this time independently, in about 32 constituencies and drew a blank. The poor political performance of IFTP in all these elections developed schisms in the party amongst some influential leaders and caused split in the party.

3.18. FORMATION OF SPLINTER GROUPS

Later in 1986, due to discontentment and vested interests of caste based factional politics, the party suffered a setback in the form of a split. Chellamuthu, the state level secretary in the party who had considerable backing of the members of Gounder caste in the party formed a parallel party in the name of Indian Farmers and Toilers Party (Chellamuthu). It was stated that this group had strong influence in the Gounder dominated areas in Madurai, Dindigul, Coimbatore, Periyar and Salem districts.

Before split in the party, in the Panchayat elections candidates belonging to IFTP won in two Panchayat Unions namely Karamadai in Coimbatore and Vembakottai in Kamarajar district. These two chairmen of Panchayat Union after the split in the party joined in the Chellamuthu group. Later, this splinter group had organised a rally in Dindigul on 5th July 1986 in an attempt to show its strength.
While the parent political party, IFTP, contested independently in the 1989 general election to the state legislative assembly and drew a blank, the splinter group led by Chellamuthu contested the election in alliance with AIADMK and Congress(I) in two constituencies and successful in one constituency in Salem district. Consequently, the state assembly had a representative of peasant and, to that extent the splinter group has sown the seed towards development of lobby for the peasantry in the state.