EARLY LIFE OF KAMARAJ
EARLY LIFE OF K. KAMARAJ

Kamaraj was born on July 15, 1903 to Kumarasamy and Sivakami Ammal of Virudhupatti now known as Virudhunagar, a small town with a population of 16,837 in 1901. He belonged to the Nadar community which in those days was deemed to be an untouchable community. The Nadars were professionally toddy-tappers and economically poor. Though they were socially allowed to enter the Brahmin Aghraham, they were not admitted into the Hindu temples. It is the social background and social discrimination that imbued Kamaraj with a spirit of protest and revolt against such inequalities.

Nadars were the dominant group of people in Virudhupatti. There were many sub-sects among them, such as Pavalakkaran group, Nattanmai group, Melakkadaikarar group, Kilakkadaikarar group and Megavarna Vagairah group. One of these groups 'Megavarna Vagairah' group had matrimonial relations with 'Nattanmaikara group'. Chinnappa Nadar of Megavarna Vagairah


married Parvathi, sister of Sulochana Nadar belonging to the Nattanmaikara group. The couple had no children and they adopted Kumarasamy of Megavarna group.  

Later, Kumarasamy was married to Sivagami, daughter of Sulochana Nadar. To them was born a male child on July 15, 1903 and was given the name Kamatchi, after the family deity.

In the beginning, the child was known by the name 'Kamatchi' but later he came to be called 'Kamaraj' - adding the suffix 'Raja' to the name Kamatchi.  

This was how the name 'Kamaraj' was derived.

At the age of five, Kamaraj was admitted into a primary school, run by one Velayutham who was better known as 'Nondi-Vathiyar' (Lame Teacher).

But soon Kamaraj was shifted to another school run by one Murugan, known as 'Srijath Enadi Nayanar ¹Vidyasala', where he studied for one year and later got transferred to the Kshtriya Vidyasala.  

⁵ The 'Kshtriya Vidyasala' was the only High School

⁵Vidyasala means a school.
5 Ibid., p.83.
in Virudhupatti coaching upto the Matriculation class. It was a school run by the Nadar\textsuperscript{†} Mahimai and education was imparted since 1888 to all without collecting any fees.\textsuperscript{6} At a later date, when Kamaraj became the Chief Minister of Madras, he made school education free for all in Tamilnadu.

Kamaraj was not keen in studies. He was more interested in other activities than in academic pursuits.\textsuperscript{7} On various occasions Kamaraj displayed the qualities of a leader and a man of common sense. On one occasion the elephant of the temple of Virudhupatti ran amuck since the mahout had removed the chains binding the elephant and caused much damage. Kamaraj came on the way and found the elephant running helter-skelter. He acted swiftly and boldly, threw the chain on the elephant's trunk and thereby helped the mahout to control the elephant.\textsuperscript{8} This shows his bravery and presence of mind.

On another occasion Kamaraj was attending the Ganesh

\textsuperscript{†}Mahimai: A fixed rate of amount is collected from both sellers and purchasers and this collection is called 'Mahimai Fund' - Gazetteer of India, Tamilnadu, Ramanathapuram District (Madras, 1972), p.1004.


7 Personal Interview with Tmt.Nagammal, Sister of Kamaraj at Virudhunagar on 5th July 1990.

festival celebrated in the school. All the pupils of his age attended and paid an \(^\dagger\text{anna}\) as contribution. After the pooja was over, the Teacher in-charge of the festival, distributed \#\text{prasadam}\) and the students were rushing to collect it. Kamaraj kept quiet and was given very little quantity of prasadam in the end. On his return home, when his mother asked the cause for improper distribution, Kamaraj replied intelligently that the teacher was responsible for the improper distribution of prasadam. This only shows the reasoning capacity Kamaraj possessed at a very early age.\(^9\) There are many such incidents in his early life which marked him out as an unusual boy for his age.

Kamaraj had to leave school at the age of twelve while he was in the Sixth Standard. The untimely and unexpected death of his Grandfather Chinnappa Nadar, followed by that of his father Kumarasamy Nadar came as a setback to his studies.\(^10\) The burden of shouldering the family fell on his Grandmother Parvathi Ammal and mother Sivagami Ammal. Having lost the bread-winners of his family, Kamaraj was put into business by his maternal uncle Karuppliah Nadar.

\(^\dagger\text{anna}\) - a coin valued at one-sixteenth of a rupee.

\#\text{prasadam}\) - eatables offered to the deity and distributed after the prayer.

9 Ibid., p.54.

10 Personal Interview with Tmt. Nagammal, Sister of Kamaraj at Virudhunagar on 5th July 1990.
He worked in the clothshop of his uncle as a sales boy. At that time he began to evince keen interest in public activities. He took interest in the 'Bajans' sung in praise of Lord Muruga and became a member of the team organised by Kandasamy Pulavarn. As a young boy, he was also interested in physical exercises, and regularly practised Silambam and 'Boxing'.

Kamraj used to attend Panchayat meetings and listen to the arguments of the elders. He would never miss political meetings. P. Varadarajulu Naidu and advocate George Joseph of Madurai were great orators of those days. They propagated Home Rule Movement and vehemently attacked the British rule. Kamraj used to attend their meetings and even helped the successful conduct of such meetings in Virudhunagar.

Kamraj developed keen interest in understanding the prevailing political conditions and other happenings. He was a regular reader of the newspaper Swadesamitran a Tamil Daily.


†Silambam: Physical exercise displayed with long sticks in rural areas.

12 Ibid., pp.166 and 169.

13 Ibid., p.173; Interview with M. Bakthavatsalam at Madras on 20th March 1983.

14 Ibid., pp.293 and 295.
from one 'Bombay' Govindasamy Nadar — a business agent of Virudhunagar. 15 P. Varadarajulu Naidu exposed the misrule of the British and for this he was tried in the court of law. 16 C. Rajagopalachari later known as Rajaji pleaded for P. Varadarajulu Naidu in the court. This trial of P. Varadarajulu Naidu attracted popular attention like that of V.O. Chidambaram Pillai and Collector Ash murder cases. 17 All these happenings made Kamaraj take more interest in politics.

At the same time, Kamaraj was keenly watching the activities of the affluent Nadars of Virudhunagar who were staunch supporters of the Justice Party. 18 The activities of the Congress Party under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi such as the Khadar Movement, and prohibition also attracted Kamaraj's attention. 19 Influenced by the policies of the Congress, Kamaraj once argued in favour of one Kumaraiah, a young man from the Pallar caste, for his entry into the temple much against the wishes of his

15 Ibid., p.153.
16 Fortnightly Reports, 1st October 1918 (TNA, Madras), p.37.
18 Ibid., p.200.
19 Personal Interview with Tmt. Chellammal at Virudhunagar, on 6th July 1990.
The passing of the Rowlatt Act in 1918 and the subsequent enforcement of it created a great furore in the national politics. The Indian National Congress under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi planned a national 'hartal' on March 30, 1919 which was subsequently postponed to 6th April. The spontaneous and overwhelming support extended by the people of Delhi to the 'hartal' enraged the British Government in India. Hence they let loose a rule of terrorism in Punjab which ultimately led to the Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy on April 13, 1919 as noticed in the previous chapter. The great horror caused by the brutal massacre perpetrated by General O'Dyer was very strongly criticized by all sections of the people. Kamaraj came to know of this 'general massacre' of the ignorant civilians through the Swadesamitran. Kamaraj was deeply moved by the event. From that day onwards, Kamaraj became a volunteer of the Indian National Congress and decided to carry on with the propaganda of the Congress against the brutality of the English rule. Soon Kamaraj became a full-time worker of the Congress Party and began to arrange for the Party meetings.

The Nadars of Virudhunagar were mostly Justicites and so were not supporting the Congress. A powerful section of them, particularly affluent Nadars like M.B. Senthil Kumar Nadar and W.P.A. Soundara Pandian Nadar were loyal to the British and were anti-Congress.\(^{23}\) The wealthy Nadars of Virudhunagar by extending their support to the Justice Party made it a strong bastion for anti-Congress activities. As a matter of fact they tried to prevent the growth of the Congress and its influence in Virudhunagar and surrounding areas. They intimidated the gaslight owners not to hire them out for Congress meetings and also planned for disturbances at the Congress public meetings.\(^{24}\) When one such meeting was addressed by P. Varadarajulu Naidu, Kamaraj and his friends were vigilant and prevented any possible disturbance by the supporters of the Justicites.\(^{25}\)

After involving himself in the Congress activities Kamaraj began to organise meetings in the surrounding villages accompanied by his friends like Shanmugam, Abdul Rahim, Muthusamy Acheri, Gnanam Pillai, Subaraya Pantulu and Palani Kumar Pillai.\(^{26}\)

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was also interested in the trials in which George Joseph, the leading Nationalist advocate in Madurai pleaded. Many a time Kamaraj visited Madurai for this purpose.  

Kamaraj as a volunteer of the Congress Party was eager to meet Mahatma Gandhi. When Mahatma Gandhi visited Madurai, on September 21, 1921, Kamaraj left for Madurai with his senior colleagues like Gnanam Pillai and Subbaraya Pantulu. He attended the public meeting addressed by Mahatma Gandhi at Madurai. It was the first occasion when Kamaraj saw Mahatma Gandhi in person. The meeting of Mahatma Gandhi made an indelible impression in the mind of Kamaraj.

As a part of the Non-co-operation Movement, the Congress undertook the programme of boycotting the visit of the Prince of Wales in January 1922. Kamaraj and his friend Shanmugam came to Madras and watched the successful organisation of the programme of boycott.

In the meantime, Congress had planned for the local organi-

sations at District, Taluk and Town levels. At Virudhunagar, the Town Congress Committee was constituted in 1922. 'Bombay' Govindasamy Nadar was the first President of the Town Congress Committee. Kamaraj found place in it as a member of the Town Congress Committee.31

After meeting Mahatma Gandhi, Kamaraj became closely associated with the Congress policies such as Prohibition, Khadar Movement, and Removal of Untouchability. Kamaraj felt that it was his mission to take the message of Mahatma Gandhi to his town. For this task he raised money from the public by Hundi collection and had the speeches of Mahatma Gandhi printed in the press owned by Sachidanandam at Virudhunagar. It received wide publicity; particularly, the youngsters began to take more active part in the Congress.32

Kamaraj began to organise more number of meetings with the help of his friends and senior colleagues. Many of the meetings were addressed by his senior colleagues like Govindasamy Nadar and Subbaraya Pantulu. It was for the first time that Kamaraj addressed a gathering at a village called Eliyanaickkanpatti, to the west of Virudhunagar.33

31 Ibid., pp.343-344.
32 Ibid., p.359.
33 Ibid., p.357; Interview with Muruga Dhanushkodi at Madras, on 19th March 1983.
His style of addressing the gathering was very simple. He used the spoken language in his speeches and the audience was impressed. There was no inhibition in his talks and no stage fear could be noticed. He adopted the same style of addressing public meetings even at the All India Congress Committee meetings.

The active involvement of Kamaraj in the Congress Movement was viewed very seriously by his elders. His uncle Karuppaiah Nadar, Grandmother Parvathi and mother Sivakami Ammal got worried about his enthusiasm in public life. They made up their mind to check the activities of Kamaraj by planning to have Kamaraj married.\(^{34}\) They made efforts to find a suitable bride for Kamaraj. But Kamaraj decided the other way. He was very decisive and warned that any compulsion would lead to his running away from the house.\(^{35}\)

His stern refusal to marry and his increased involvement in political activities, drove the elders to take him away from Virudhunagar. He was taken to Trivandrum to work as an apprentice in his maternal uncle's timber shop.\(^{36}\) But it became a turning point in Kamaraj's life.

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In the small town of Vaikom near Trivandrum, casteism and untouchability reigned supreme. In pursuance of Mahatma Gandhi's Harijan Upliftment Movement, the local Congress decided to launch a struggle against the religious bigotry and fanaticism of the higher classes. E.V. Ramasami Naicker accepted the offer of leading the struggle.\textsuperscript{37} He started his agitation with a strong contingent of supporters in which Kamaraj enrolled himself as a volunteer.\textsuperscript{38}

The Vaikom Satyagraha made its mark and for Kamaraj, it was the first participation in a Satyagraha.\textsuperscript{39} It encouraged him to take full time and direct participation in the national movement. A bright chance for the emergence of Kamaraj as a State leader was in the offing. The volunteer from Virudhunagar rose to pre-eminent position in the Congress in the next two decades, by means of hard work and dedication.