



MERGER MOVEMENT: TAMILS' STRUGGLE FOR SHENCOTTAI

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ABSTRACT:

Merger Movement was started vigorously in the independent India on the linguistic lines. The dawn of Andhra precipitated this movement in south India especially in the Madras Province. The Madras Province was a vast one since the formation of the Madras Presidency in 1801. This Province had the Oriya, Telugu, Malayalam, Tamil and Kannada speaking people. Madras, the headquarters of the Madras Province was in dispute between Telugu and Tamil speaking people. In the Tamil speaking area, especially in the southern border and northern border the Tamils agitated demanding the annexation of the Tamil areas with Madras State which was a predominantly Tamil Province. For a period, the Tamil speaking Shencottai Taluk was under the jurisdiction of the Princely State of Travancore. Hence the people and the representative of Shencottai Constituency agitated for the merger of Shencottai with Tamil Province. The agitation was well backed by the Travancore Tamil National Congress and the leaders of the Madras State.



KEY WORDS: Shencottai, Travancore, Tamil Malayalee, Tirunelveli, Madras State, Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress (T.T.N.C.), Andhra.

INTRODUCTION:

Encompassing an area of 128,559 square miles, the Shencottai Taluk had a population of 65,4177 in 1951. Divided into 10 *pakuthies*, it consisted of two unrelated parts, the largest is mostly covered by forest in the west side of the ghats and the smaller part is on the east side of the ghats and shares the topographical and demographic characteristics of the then adjacent Tirunelveli District. It was a relic of the past when the dominion of the rulers of Travancore extended over parts of this District. On the slopes of the hills there were rubber plantations, tea plantations and some coffee plantations. In the trans-ghatian area, the soil was quite rich and there were a series of small cisterns and irrigation canals, rice fields were the main crop. ¹

Shencottai, seat of the taluk, is located at the foot of the ghat on the east side, on the main road from Tirunelveli to Kollam. Other important villages are Achanputhur, Ayikudi, Elathoor, Karkudi, Puliয়ারai and Sambavarvadakarai. Courtallam is a sanatorium full of visitors during monsoons, when the falls are full and a swim under them is very refreshing. ²

The Shencottai area of the Princely State of Travancore was part of the homeland of the Tamils. Tamils in this region faced discrimination as workers and tenants on Malayalee landowners' lands. Socially they were treated like untouchables and denied their legal rights. The memory of past glory coupled with a subsequent sense of insecurity in linguistic areas, improperly grouped into

administrative units, led to the movement for linguistic unity and the formation of linguistic states. Development of regional languages and the spread of nationalism created an awakening among the people.³ Languages, which are rich and powerful expressive vehicles, created a sense of unity among people. However, with the British system of administration, they found themselves divided and dispersed in different provinces.⁴ In fact, drawing inspiration from the language that was generally spoken in a well-defined way area with the same historical states had gained momentum.

DIFFICULTIES OF THE TAMILS

The southern tip of the Princely State of Travancore-Cochin formed an integral part of the homeland of the Tamil people. The Travancore Tamils were not given equality and justice. The subsequent Travancore governments ignored Tamil and encouraged Malayalam.⁵ Educated Tamils could not guarantee equal opportunities in the administration. In addition, Tamils were subjected to social handicaps, which included denying the right to walk the streets, enter temples, and even draw water from the well.⁶ Furthermore, women were also not allowed to wear upper garments or chappals and use umbrellas. They were treated as untouchables. The upper castes slowly confiscated their assets and subjected them to heavy taxes.⁷

To begin with, the struggle of the Travancore Tamils was directed against forced labor and the restriction of upper cloths. Later, it became a temple entry movement and eventually merged with the Tamil Integration and Self Respect Movement. When the question of the linguistic reorganization of the states arose, the Tamils of Travancore, already restless under the repressive regime of Malayalee Princes joined with their fellow Tamils of Madras State and attempted to form a common Tamil identity.

The call for a separate Tamil Province was first expressed since Tamil Nadu Congress Committee held its meeting in Tirunelveli in July 1938.⁸ This appeal was reiterated at the meeting held in Madras in October 1938.⁹ While M.A. Jinnah demanded Pakistan, Periyar E.V. Ramaswami, the founder of the Self Respect Movement raised the voice for a separate Dravidistan. Jinnah considered Dravidistan as a third nation and secured Muslim support for it. The Dravidanadu of E.V. Ramaswami was not a province like Andhra, but a separate autonomous unit based on self-determination.¹⁰ The demands of some Tamil leaders such as S.P. Aditanar foresaw the formation of an independent Tamil sovereign state, comprising Tamil-speaking areas in southern India, north of Sri Lanka and south of Travancore. However, for members of the Congress of Tamil Nadu, the Tamil Province meant a province like any other linguistic province under the Indian Union.¹¹ The compact status for the Tamils required the integration of the Tamil-speaking areas at Travancore in the south and the boundaries of the area in Andhra in the North. A major upheaval in Travancore and smaller ones in the border areas of Andhra marked the growth of the Tamil Integration Movement.

The formation of the Travancore Tamil Nadu (hereinafter T.T.N.C.) in December 1945 is a milestone in the history of Travancore Tamils.¹² Meanwhile the formation of linguistic provinces had acquired greater importance in the context of Post-independence India. Faced with this situation, the Kerala Provincial Congress insisted on a united Kerala on linguistic reasons.¹³ The Congress leaders of Malabar Pradesh, the Cochin Congress and the Travancore State Congress decided to form a United Kerala which extends from Kasargode to Kanyakumari.¹⁴ At the same time, the Tamils of Travancore wanted to have a separate Tamil area, an idea that the Travancore Malayalee leaders refused to accept. In July 1947, the Tamil Movement for integration with Tamil Nadu gained momentum. The Government had ordered the holding of elections for Representative Body in January 1947.¹⁵ As a preliminary step in garnering electoral support, the T.T.N.C. sought the cooperation of prominent leaders from different locations. The entry of A. Nesamony in T.T.N.C. was a turning point,¹⁶ when he led the movement with his consummate organizational skills.

In the meanwhile, with the efforts of A. Nesamony, T.T.N.C. expanded its activities to the other Tamil areas of Travancore. The party then turned its attention to Shencottai and began its activities under the leadership of Krishnaswamy Karayalar, Sabari Perumal Pillai and A.R. Karayalar.¹⁷ When the State Reorganization Commission was appointed in 1953 by the Government, the T.T.N.C. demanded the merger of the Tamil areas of Travancore with Tamil Nadu.¹⁸ When the Commission visited

Trivandrum on 25th May 1954, K. Kamaraj, the Chief Minister of Madras suggested that the nine taluks in Travancore-Cochin, namely Thovalai, Agasteeswaram, Kalkulam, Vilavancode, Neyyatinkara, Shencottai, Devikulam, Peermedu and Chittoor, should be merged with Tamil Nadu.¹⁹ The representative of Shencottai, SattanathaKarayalar, presented a memorandum to the S.R.C. insisting the merger of these nine taluks with Tamil Nadu.²⁰

Since the Government did not pay attention to their representation, the T.T.N.C. observed 30th June 1954 as 'Liberation Day' in all Tamil areas. Observed peacefully by holding public meetings and passing resolutions the Travancore Tamils expressed their apathy. A public meeting was organised at Munnar, A. Nesamony, Abdul Razaak and A Chidambaranatha Nadar arrived there on 3rd July 1954.²¹ But the police forbade them to enter meeting place at Munnar.²¹ When the leaders defied the order ban, they were arrested and sentenced to six weeks imprisonment.²² To protest against the arrest of Tamil leaders, the hartals were organised in all Tamil areas of Travancore.²³

T.T.N.C. MOVEMENT IN SHENCOTTAI

Disappointed by the government's indifference to the demand of the Tamils, the Shencottai's T.T.N.C. unit began its agitation movement on 4th August 1954. K. SattanathaKarayalar, M.L.A. and A.R. Karayalar, a former M.L.A., with over a thousand volunteers, staked out Taluk's office.²⁴ They were charged by police before Taluk Shencottah Class I Magistrate for offenses under Sections 447 and 290 of the Indian Penal Code and Sections 51 and 52 of the Police Act and sentenced to six weeks imprisonment and fined Rs. 50 per person, otherwise they would have been imprisoned for an additional period of one week. They were taken to the central prison, Trivandrum, to serve their sentence.²⁵ On 5th August 1954, the second day of the movement, two people were sentenced under sections 51 and 52 of the Police Act and sentenced to one week imprisonment. They were held at the Shencottai Police Station.²⁶

According to a police report, on the first day of the agitation there was a crowd of around a thousand people. The crowd was a little smaller the next day, but the shouting and demonstrations were louder. The police awaited the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam a party organized by C.N. Annadurai on Tamil nationalism, sending batches of two to stake out public offices at hourly intervals, from 6th August 1954 onwards. While observing the situation, a police inspector from the Circle with an Armed Reserve party was stationed in Shencottai to avoid adverse incidents.²⁷ The Taluk Magistrate sent a telegram to the Chief Secretary that nearly thirty one volunteers of the D.M.K. picketed the public offices on 6th August 1954 were evicted by the police. Three of them were indicted before the magistrate and sentenced to short term imprisonment.

Once again, the Quilon District Collector informed the Government that the situation was under control and that peace was restored. He was in constant contact with the Taluk Magistrate and the District S.P. of Quilon. To investigate the situation, the District Collector visited Shencottah on 12th August 1954.²⁹

On the third day, 6th August 1954, the T.T.N.C. held a public meeting at Town Hall of Shencottai. V. Champakam Karayalar chaired and Swaminathan, Subramanyam and Perumal of Shencottai spoke in support of the integration of Tamils with the motherland, Tamil Nadu.³⁰ Approximately 5,000 volunteers of T.T.N.C. attended the meeting. According to the decision made during the meeting, Velayudhan Pillai and Shanmugham Asari of Elathur organized a procession attended by 300 people on 7th August 1954. They shouted slogans for the merger. At this time, two people wanted to enter the courtyard. But they were taken into police custody and later imprisoned for four days and also fined Rs. 10 each, otherwise they would have been imprisoned for another three days. The defendant refused to pay the fine.³¹ On 9th August 1954, the fifth day of the movement, two T.T.N.C. volunteers were arrested for picketing in Taluk's office and charged with offenses under sections 51 and 52 of the Police Act. They were found guilty and sentenced to three days' imprisonment and fined Rs. 5 and, in case of non-compliance, they would have to suffer imprisonment for an additional period of two days. The district administration had carefully observed the situation.³²

A complete hartal was observed at Shencottai on 11th August 1954, the sixth day of the movement, and even the students refrained from attending classes. A large crowd, mostly younger people gathered in front of the gate of the public office and the staged demonstration. A coffee hotel café near the gate where local government officials brought their meals, was attacked by part of the crowd for the offense handled by the hotel to supply some customers with food. The police forcibly dispersed the crowd. The angry crowd threw stones and injured five officers. A lot of the volunteers in the crowd were laden with lathi. Despite the provocation, the police had in exemplary moderation and therefore nothing unpleasant happened. The crowd dispersed the day after the arrest of the two demonstrators.

Two T.T.N.C. volunteers were arrested for picketing in the Taluk office complex produced in court on a charge under sections 51 and 52 of the Police Act. Proven guilty, they were sentenced to a prison term of one week and further to pay a fine of Rs 50 and, in case of non-compliance, they had to be imprisoned for a period of three weeks. The accused refused to pay the fine. The district administration had closely followed the events in Shencottai.

The Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress observed 11th August 1954 as 'Liberation Day' of Tamils in all Tamil areas of Travancore. In an attempt to effectively counteract the agitation by force and spread terror among the locals the government had deployed military and police forces in Tamil areas. This had led to more violent incidents. Five were killed and many were injured in the police shooting at Martandam, while six were killed and many others seriously injured at Puthukkada. ³³ The suppression of peaceful satyagraha and police atrocities had become a problem of harsh criticism. Protesting the police shooting, Ram Manohar Lohia resigned from the Praja Socialist Party on 21st August 1954 insisting the resignation of Government of Pattom A. Thanupillai. ³⁴ The no-confidence motion on Pattam A Thanupillai Ministry was succeeded the State Assembly in February 1955, The National Congress, the Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress and the Praja Socialist party member, TS Ramaswamy Pillai and Shencottai Chattanatha Karayalar jointly concluded the government of Pattom A. Thanupillai. ³⁵ These developments facilitated Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress to attract the attention of the States Reorganization Commission (S.R.C.).

In accordance with the recommendations of the S.R.C., Shencottai Taluk of Quilon District was partly an exclave in the Tirunelveli District in the Madras State. The percentage of Tamil-speaking people in this taluk was around 93%. Physically and geographically it belonged to the Tirunelveli District. ³⁶ Therefore, the S.R.C. recommended its merger with Tamil Nadu. As a result, on 1st November 1956, Shencottai Taluk merged with Tirunelveli District.

To conclude, the merger movement in Tamil Nadu was purely a political movement aimed at the liberation of the Tamils from the Malayalee dominated Travancore Government which demonstrated an oppressive rule against the Travancore Tamils. In this endeavour, the Travancore Tamils got the full support of their fellow Tamils of the Madras State. Shencottai, a mostly Tamil speaking region nearby Tamil Nadu attracted Travancore Tamils agitators, As a consequence, agitations held at Shencottai and as per the SRC recommendations, it ultimately merged with the Tirunelveli District of the Tamil Nadu.

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