



## V.O.CHIDAMBARAM AND SWADESHI NATIONALAISM IN TAMIL REGION

**K. Vijayarangam**

Part-Time Ph.D. Research Scholar in History, Department of History,  
Presidency College (Affiliated to the University of Madras) Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

### ABSTRACT :

*The growth of nationalism in the first half of the Twentieth Century India was closely connected to the anti-colonial movement. The ideology of nationalism united the various linguistic and cultural groups of India. Further the spirit of nationalism served an effective weapon for the Indians to fight against the oppressive colonial rule. In Tamil Nadu, as in other parts of India, V.O. Chidambaram Pillai and other swadeshi extremist leaders ventilated anti-colonial feelings against British colonial rule aiming at the revival of the glorious sea faring traditions of the Tamils and free India from the unwanted intervention of the British. Swadeshi and boycott were the twin weapons of the Swadeshi Nationalists .V.O. C and other Swadeshi leaders wanted to follow the footsteps of Tilak V.O.C. pursued the swadeshi ideals through his new enterprise.*



**KEYWORDS :** Swadeshi, Moderates, Extremists, Swadeshi Movement, V.O.Chidambaram, Siva, Tilak, B.C.Pal, Tirunelveli.

### INTRODUCTION :

The swadeshi movement in Tamil region from 1906 to 1916 represents a significant aspect in the history of freedom struggle in Tamil Nadu This period witnessed a keen ideological tussle between the Moderates and swadeshi Extremists. The Moderate leadership trained in strict constitutionalism aspired reforms in politics but did not work to replace the British Government. The Swadeshi extremists, who regarded the conventional methods of prayer, petition and persuasion adopted by the Moderates as meaningless, offered radical alternative in the form of swadeshi, boycott and national education. Though the extremist politics had been in existence in Tamil region, an organized form of expressing the same came into being only by 1906.

There were two schools of extremist thought in Tamil region . The first school which had its sway till 1908 consisted of prominent leaders like V. O. Chidambaram Pillai. Subramania Siva and Ethiraj Surendranath Siva. The second school which made its presence felt in 1908 included in its fold V.V.S. Ayyar, Neelakanta Brahmachari and V.V.S. Iyer . The two schools cherished the same aspiration, that is, the emancipation of the nation but differed in their *modus operandi*, for the first school advocated.. violence without practising it, while the second school not only preached violence but also practiced it.

V.O. Chidambaram Pillai. Subramania Siva and other leaders of the first school were very much influenced by the views of Tilak, B.C. Pal. Aurobindo Ghose and Lajpat Rai. Following their

example, the leaders of the first school gave a philosophical base to the freedom movement. The swadeshi nationalists of the first school wanted to lay the foundations of independent economic growth and also the attainment of swaraj. To achieve this, they adopted the weapons of swadeshi, boycott and national education. While placing these alternatives before the public, V. O. Chidambaram, Siva and other leaders of the first school exhorted them to be self-reliant. For this, they wanted the public to discard foreign goods and stop sending their children to the Government schools. The nationalists pointed out that the laws passed by the British were intended to safeguard the privileged status of the rulers. They advised the native population to settle their disputes amicably among themselves without allowing the intervention of the officials. The second school did not confine themselves to mere ideological conceptions. They concentrated more on the establishment of an organizational structure. They formed secret societies and through which they operated their programme of activities. The Bharatha Matha Association was a secret society which served the needs of the second school of the swadeshi nationalists.<sup>1</sup>

The partition of Bengal in 1905 strengthened the hands of the extremists in Congress and soon they started a new movement everywhere in British India. In this movement young men actively involved and pursued swadeshi ideology in opposition to the British endeavours. In Tamil Nadu, V.O. Chidambaram along with C. Subramania Bharathi, Subramaniya Siva, V.Chakkarai Chetti, Ethira Surendranath Arya, S. Srinivasachari, S. N Thirumalachari, M.P. Tirumalachari and others formed the core group of the new Movement.<sup>2</sup> Salem C.Vijayaragavachariar, a freedom fighter, a very able advocate and one of the legal advisers of Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company inspired V.O.C. in all the ways. The Salem riot case of 1882 was highly published in the Indian press. The nationalist newspapers praised him as a great champion of civil liberties.<sup>3</sup> He was also called as the 'Lion of South India'.<sup>4</sup> In 1899 he became a member of the Indian Congress propaganda committee and carried the message of the Congress to the people. His speeches and valiant activities much influenced V.O.Chidambaram who began to involve in anti-British activities in the Tirunelveli District.

V.O.Chidambaram aspired for the liberation of the country from the yoke of the British rule. Chidambaram Pillai came under the magnetic spell of Salem Vijayaragavachariar whose ideology created much impact in the minds of the former. It was their identification with the ideals of Balgangadhar Tilak which brought them very near in the political sphere.<sup>5</sup> Pondithurai Thevar, a patriot, an orator, a poet and the President of Madurai Tamil Sangam also inspired Chidambaram. Pandithevar supported the commercial enterprise of V.C.Chidambaram<sup>6</sup> and he was elected as the president of the Board of Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company. He donated rupees one lakh to V.O. Chidambaram to start a Shipping Company. His remarkable service to Tamil literature and Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company was remarkable.

During one of his visits to Madras in 1906, V.O.Chidambaram met Swami Ramakrishnananda, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda in the Ramakrishna Mutt. An ardent exponent of Swadeshi, Ramakrishnananda asked Chidambaram Pillai what efforts he had undertaken to promote Swadeshi. To his question, V.O.Chidambaram made a philosophic response by stating that any effort was in vain in a life of illusion. Realising that Chidambaram was in a state of disillusionment, Ramakrishnananda told him that Swadeshi was the only panacea to all the ills. Thus, the seed of Swadeshi ideology was cultivated in the minds of V.O. Chidambaram. Later on, he also met Swami Abedananda and Bal Paramananda of the Ramakrishna Mutt. Constant contact with the spiritual heads nourished the spirit of Swadeshi in his heart V.O. Chidambaram. Hence V.O. Chidambaram stood up to colonial despotism and oppressive rule in his unique way of starting navigation company.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of 1905, V.O.Chidambaram, inspired by the patriotic sentiments of 'Mandayam' family, approached Thirumalaichari. The meeting of V.O.Chidambaram with Thirumalaichari made him to visit the office of the *India*. There he exchanged his sentiments and views with Thirumalaichari and Bharathi. He invested his entire earnings to the Indian owned Swadeshi Navigation Company with V.O.Chidambaram Pillai and lost it all when the Company officially ceased on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1911.<sup>8</sup> In 1906, S.N Thirumalachari also opened a press and published a paper *India*, edited by Bharathi. He also

started a journal called, *Baja Bharat* which was also edited by Bharathi. In the beginning Sister Nivedita wrote articles to '*Bala Bharat* to awaken the people of the Tamil region.

In 1906 V.O.Chidambaram Pillai visited the residence of Thirumalaichari in Madras, the publisher of the *India* and expressed his desire to meet Subramariaa Bharathi He was introduced to Bharathi. Like Chidambaram Pillai, Barathi was also a native of Tirunelveli District and by nature became very closer to each other. Chidambaram Pillai accompanied Bharathi to the Marina Beach where they sat hours together and shared their thoughts about the subjugation of India and her low position under the British rule.<sup>9</sup> Very often Chidambaram Pillai to visit the office of the *India*, and shared his emotional feelings Tirumalachari and Bharathi. It was customary to them to visit the Marina Beach where they discussed about the ways to end the autocratic rule of the British.. They discussed about the French Revolution and the Unification of Italy and Germany Fr the sake of V.O.Chidambaram Bharathi translated into Tamil the oath taken by Mazzini on the occasion of Mazzini's attempt to organise 'Young Italy'. Chidambaram Pillai's contact with Bharathi moulded him to become a swadeshi extremist.<sup>10</sup>

The Partition of Bengal in July 1905 strengthened feelings of extreme nationalists in India. The Indian National Congress and nationalists vehemently opposed. the partition. Bala Cangaahar Tilak played a notable role in spreading the message of Swadeshi, use of Indian goods and boycott of alien goods. The spread of Swadeshi ideals in Tamil Nadu paved the way for the rise of a new ideological group of swadeshi extremists. This group decided to convene a Swadeshi conference at Palayamcottai where they took oath to pursue their goal of Swadeshim.<sup>11</sup> V.O.C attended the conference both at Tirunelveli and Palayamcottai and later he delivered lectures on Swadeshi in the public meetings at Madurai and Tirunelveli. Due to the call from B.C. Pal and Kaparde to strengthen the extremist activities, the swadeshi extremists of Tamil Nadu region went to Calcutta to attend the annual session of the Indian National Congress in December 1906. There they declared support to the boycott resolutions.<sup>12</sup> V.O.Chidambaram overtly declared to boycott foreign goods and everything of foreign nature. By doing so only, India could attain Swaraj, expressed by V.O. Chidambaram.<sup>13</sup>

During the months of April - May 1907, Bipin Chandra Pal undertook a tour of South India with the aim to spread the message of Swadeshi . He arrived on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1907 at Madras.. Between 1<sup>st</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> May 1907, B.C. Pal accompanied by Subramania Bharathi delivered lectures about the concept of Swadeshi, boycott of foreign goods and Swaraj to the people gathered on 'the Marina Beach. V.O.Chidambaram Pillai's energetic speech and eloquent use of the Tamil language in translating the speeches of B.C Pal had thrilling effect' all over the Tamil region.

Subsequently, the swadeshi extremists like V.O.Chidambaram and Bharathi recommended the name of Lalalajpat Rai to the post of the President of Indian National Congress session at Surat on 26<sup>th</sup> December 1907. According to Chidambaram, Tilak stood like the powerful but calm lion before a hundred frenzied elephants. After their return from Surat, Bharathi and V.O.Chidambaram were involved in active propaganda regarding the split in the Congress and the establishment of the Nationalist Conference and its action swadeshi programme. After his return to Tuticorin, Chdambaram Pillai continued his political activities with a renewed strength and worked for the establishment of the Swadeshi enterprise. He served the secretary of the board of the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company . He adhered him much to the ideals of Swadeshi and boycott of foreign goods.<sup>14</sup> His Swedeshi Steam Navigation Company posed a direct challenge to an established British enterprise in 1906. The activities of the Company exposed the larger political involvement of the V.O.Chidambaram and other swadeshi nationalists in Tamil region During the period of 1906-1908, Tirunelveli and Tuticorin emerged as the centers of the swadeshi nationalists and heralded hectic political activities.

To conclude, V.O.C recognised the importance of the working class to India's National Movement .The increasing of colonial oppression and the rise of swadeshi nationalism paved the way for the emergence of the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company . The Swadeshi movement in Tirunelveli was much characterized with anti- colonial spirit . The legacy of the struggle and national assertiveness initiated by V.O.C and his praiseworthy companions inspire the people of Tamil region in the struggle against the British rule in the Gandhian Era. In this way, V.O.C became a symbol for patriotism, and he

inspired many patriots who continued the struggle against the British rule. At the same time V.O. C and other swadeshi nationalists had lost their valuable property and dedicated their valuable lives for the sake of the liberation of the nation from the yoke of the British rule.

### END NOTES

1. Gopalakrishnan, P.B., 'Freedom Movement in Tamil Nadu with Special Reference to Extremism' in *Souvenir on National Integration*, School of Historical Studies, Madurai : Madurai Kamaraj University, 1991, pp.25-26.
2. The Hindu, Madras, 5 March 1908.
3. Sundarajan, Saroja, *Madras Presidency in Pre-Gandhian Era, A Historical Perspective, 1884-1915*, Pondicherry: Lalitha Publications, 1997, pp.162-166.
4. *News Today*, 6 May 2009.
5. Sen, S.P., *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. III, Calcutta: 1974, p.381.
6. Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company, Tuticorin, Rle' Public Miscellaneous, Bundle No. 35, pp. 7-8, Tamil Nadu State Archives. (TNA)
7. Chidambaram Pillai, V.O., *Suyasarithai*, (Tamil), Tirunelveli: 1990, p.41-43.
8. Rajendran, N., *The National Movement in Tamil Nadu. 1905-14*, Madras: 1994, pp.85- 102.
9. Subramanian, V.O.C., *VOC Kanda Bharati*, (Tamil), Madras, 1946, p.7.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.10-11.
11. *India*, 30 June 1906.
12. *Ibid.*, 22 December 1906.
13. Rajendran, N., *op.cit.*, pp. 36-38.
14. Madras Secret Police Abstracts of Intelligence, 1908, Para 528, pp.311-314.(TNA)



**K. Vijayarangam**

Part-Time Ph.D. Research Scholar in History , Department of History ,  
Presidency College (Affiliated to the University of Madras) Chennai, Tamil Nadu.