



THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MILITANT NATIONALISM OR EXTREMISM IN INDIA. IMPACT OF THE TIRUNELVELI AND THOOTHUKUDI DISTRICT IN TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

In A.D.1885 after the formation of the All India National Congress, for twenty years the reins of the National Movement remained in the hands of the liberal leaders. These leaders were completely influenced by the English education and civilization. They also had full faith in the honesty and justice of the English Government. They did not want to uproot the English rule from India completely. On the other hand they wanted that some significant reforms be introduced in the present administrative system of India, so that the Indians could get some posts in the administration according to their ability. The liberals resorted to constitutional methods in order to achieve their goal but they failed to attain any success even after working for twenty years. On the other hand, the British Government changed its attitude towards the Congress: as a result of it a new group of leaders emerged who decided to actively oppose the policies of the English Government which went against the people of India.

This group of the leaders did not want to adopt the Non violent methods. In fact, this party had decided to oppose the English Government by Non-Co-Operation. This thinking came to be known as the Militant one. They condemned and criticized the policies of the liberals vehemently. The members of the Militant group also came to be known as angry young men. They desired that the aim of congress should be the attainment of Swaraj which should be attained by self – confidence and self – dependence. Gopalakrishna Gokhale's followers called Moderates and Bala Gangadhar Tilak followers called Extremist. Bala Gangadhar Tilak was the Father of the Extremist Movement in India.

The Tamil province of Madras Presidency emerged as a centre of extremist activities during the swadeshi Movement in India. The extremists of Bengal had a close association with the Swadeshi leaders of Tamil province. Many of these Nationalists of Bengal visited Madras in the beginning of 1908 to meet the Nationalists of Madras like G.Subramania Iyer, Dr.Nanjunda Rao, Subramania Bharathi, Surendhranath Arya and many others to bring the extremist ideology intact. Madras and Tuticorin became the strong hold centres of Swadeshi movement in Tamil province. V.O.Chidambaram pillai, the founder of Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company in 1906 at Tuticorin had visited frequently to Madras to get the financial support for his Swadeshi venture.

The Swadeshi Company was successfully competing with the British India Steam Navigation Company and in fact, diverted a major portion of its business to itself. According to Chidambaram Pillai "Swadeshim" means "The development of Indian Industries by Indians". The starting of the Swadeshi Company was a source of anxiety and caused much irritation to the authorities of the two concerns became very much strained. By that time Bipin Chandra Pal was touring and lecturing on Swadeshi, Boycott and National Education in Madras. His speeches were highly emotional and exciting. Seditious literature was widely printed and circulated.

The ill-treatment on V.O.C and Subramaniya Siva further added fuel to the Swadeshi fire. The youth of this district were gathered under the leadership of Nilakanda Bramachari, Arumugam, Madasamy Pillai and others. They planned to form a secret society to ventilate terrorism against the British officers. On 10th April 1910, the 'Bharath Matha Association' was formed by Nilakandan, Vanchi Iyer and other of Thenkasi and Senkottai. After forming this association, they executed a master plan and assassinated R.W.D.E Ashe on 17th June, 1911 at Maniyatchi Railway Station in Tinnevely District.

KEYWORDS: English education and civilization , political organizations.

INTRODUCTION:

In A.D.1885 after the establishment of All India National Congress, various small political organizations were established and these together contributed a lot to the National awakening in India.¹

In A.D.1885 after the formation of the All India National Congress, for twenty years the reins of the National Movement remained in the hands of the liberal leaders. These leaders were completely influenced by the English education and civilization. They also had full faith in the honesty and justice of the English Government. They did not want to uproot the English rule from India completely. On the other hand they wanted that some significant reforms be introduced in the present administrative system of India., so that the Indians could get some posts in the administration according to their ability. The liberals resorted to constitutional methods in order to achieve their goal but they failed to attain any success even after working for twenty years. On the other hand, the British Government changed its attitude towards the Congress: as a result of it a new group of leaders emerged who decided to actively oppose the policies of the English Government which went against the people of India.

This group of the leaders did not want to adopt the Non violent methods. In fact, this party had decided to oppose the English Government by Non-Co-Operation. This thinking came to be known as the Militant one. They condemned and criticized the policies of the liberals vehemently. The members of the Militant group also came to be known as angry young men. They desired that the aim of congress should be the attainment of Swaraj which should be attained by self – confidence and self – dependence.² Gopalakrishna Gokhale's followers called Moderates and Bala Gangadhar Tilak followers called Extremist. Bala Gangadhar Tilak was the Father of the Extremist Movement in India.

The Historians of the Indian National Congress classify the early congressmen into the Moderates and Extremists. The Moderate-Extremist conflict has engaged the attention of some of the specialists in the history of the early phase of the Congress movement. Both the Moderate and Extremists were the honest, earnest and dedicated Congressmen. They were all patriots. As the history of the British rule in India was "a continuous story of reaction and reform... the action, reaction and interaction among the early Congressmen towards Government measures gave rise to the Moderates and Extremists in Indian politics."³

The period between 1905 and 1919 may be described as the Era of the Extremists. The Extremists, like the Moderates, were also patriotic Congressmen. They constituted a radical faction of the Congress. They exercised little influence on the conduct of the Nationalist movement so long as the Moderates were monopolizing the affairs of the Congress ever since its inception in 1885. The Extremists were, therefore, disenchanted with the Moderates on the following three grounds, viz., 1) The Moderates failed to define India's political goal; 2) Their methods of agitation were ineffective; and 3) They failed to enlist mass support as a basis to negotiate with the British from a position of strength.⁴

The Extremists were those Congressmen who were disillusioned with the repressive policy of the Government and the failure of the Moderates. The younger elements, inspired by radicalism, demanded a change in the attitude and approach of the Congress. They were up against the continuation of the British rule in India. They feared that accepting meagre mercies would undermine the momentum of the rising Nationalism. Their declared goal was the attainment of Swaraj. For the extremists self government was the best government and the people fit to govern themselves. Then only the people would develop a spirit of self sacrifice, self reliance, and self determination. They, therefore, demanded absolute autonomy from

foreign control and their method to attain Swaraj was passive resistance. The Extremists were led by the trio Lala Lajpat Rai, Bala Gangadhar Tilak and Bipin Chandra Pal. Their program was clean different from that of the Moderates. They laid emphasis on Swadeshi, boycott of foreign goods and National education. In short, Extremists were not content with mere reform and were keen on reforming nation on their ideal of Swaraj. Tilak and Gokhale were the obverse and reverse of the same gold coin of Indian Nationalism.⁵

Causes of the Rise of Militant Nationalism

The following reasons contributed to the rise of Militant Nationalism:

Rise of Hinduism:

The early leaders of the Congress were greatly influenced by the western civilization. They considered the western education to be supreme, but in the last quarter of the 19th century some great persons emerged in India who re-established the lost glory and honour of Hinduism in the country. The preachings of Maharishi Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda etc. reminded the people of their Ancient culture and religious supremacy and leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Vipin Chandra Pal, Aurobindo Ghosh etc. Preached that "freedom is the aim of our life and it could only be achieved through Hinduism." They also emphasized the point that there could be no development in the country without attaining the political freedom. All this made the people realize that the policies so far pursued by the liberals were faulted and they decided to take to Militant Nationalism or Extremism in order to achieve their goal.

Natural Calamity:

In the last decade of the 19th century the people of Northern India had to face some Natural calamities. Famine and plague broke out in the country. The famine of A.D.1896-1897 and the plague in A.D.1899-1901 seriously hit the people but the government did not make any efforts to provide succour to the people who had fallen prey to famine and the epidemic. The famine of A.D.1907 was so severe that about 7 crore people were badly affected by it. In Southern India during the period of plague the Government burnt out various houses and the belongings of the people in order to check this serious calamity but provided no relief to the stricken people. Dr. Ram Gopal has also written about the activities of the government during the plague in southern India, that the army and police followed the Plague Commissioner Mr.Rand. The houses of the sick were demolished and the beddings and clothings of the sufferers were put to fire. It seemed as if some enemy was venting his wrath on a vanquished country.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak condemned the stern policies of the government through his newspaper 'Kesari', as a result of which he was awarded 18 months' rigorous imprisonment. Hence the Natural calamities and the stern policies of the British Government also helped in the rise of Militant Nationalism in the country.⁶

Bal, Pal and Lal's Leadership:

when the people of India were being subjected to the arbitrary and oppressive policies of the English and the liberal party was not getting any success in its moves against the government, the youth of India got the leadership of Bal, Pal and Lal. All the three were the most prominent leaders of the Militant National party. Bal Gandhar Tilak was a Great patriot and a staunch enemy of bureaucracy. Issuing warning to the English he once declared, "Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it."

Economic Discontentment:

During the British regime, the economic discontentment went on increasing among the people. All classes, the educated, labour, peasant and business were against the economic exploitation by the English. Some contemporary writers also fuelled the fires of this discontent through their writings and vehemently condemned the economic exploitation of Indians by the English. They made the people realise their deplorable conditions. They understood very well that the English Government wanted to cripple them by

economic exploitation. Hence, they swung towards the Militant Nationalism so that they could get rid of the tyrannical rule of the English.

Lord Curzon and His Reactionary Rule:

Lord Curzon came to India in A.D.1898. He was a reactionary Governor-General and a devotee of British Imperialism. During his Viceroyalty in India he took some such steps as made the English Government completely against the Indians. Actually, Lord-Curzon's administrative measures aggravated the situation and his anti-Indian activities made discontentment of the Indians reach its climax. Gopal Krishna Ghokhale has remarked in this connection, "Lord Curzon did the same act which Aurangzeb had done for the Mughal Empire." His oppressive policies helped a lot in the rise of the Militant Nationalism in the country.⁷

In A.D.1905 the Militant Nationalists started a public awakening movement against the English. In A.D.1907 in the Surat Conference the Militant Nationalists separated themselves from the Congress. Hence, it is quite evident that the rise of Militant Nationalism was not a sudden event but the twenty years of working of the liberals, negligence of the Britishers and their oppressive policies were such elements as contributed to the rise of Militant Nationalism.

The Tinnevely and Thoothukudi District, the South Eastern end of Tamilnadu has witnessed many a political events and was an anchor of extremist ideology during alien rule in India. Lord Curzon's policy created a lot of antagonism against the British. The National antipathy towards the British was accentuated at this time by the partition of Bengal which the whole of India resented by the British bureaucrats had its own reactions in making the Swadeshi movement stronger than before.

Militant Nationalism or Extremism in Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi District.

The Tamil province of Madras Presidency emerged as a centre of extremist activities during the swadeshi Movement in India. The extremists of Bengal had a close association with the Swadeshi leaders of Tamil province. Many of these Nationalists of Bengal visited Madras in the beginning of 1908 to meet the Nationalists of Madras like G.Subramania Iyer, Dr.Nanjunda Rao, Subramania Bharathi, Surendhranath Arya and many others to bring the extremist ideology intact. Madras and Tuticorin became the strong hold centres of Swadeshi movement in Tamil province. V.O.Chidambaram Pillai, the founder of Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company in 1906 at Tuticorin had visited frequently to Madras to get the financial support for his Swadeshi venture.⁸

Valliappan Olaganathan Chidambaram Pillai mentioned V.O.C and Robert William d'Escourt Ashe mentioned R.W.D.E.Ashe.

The period from 1900 to 1906 was, one of the critical juncture in the history of Modern India. This period witnessed the strenuous days of Lord Curzon's rule. His curtailment of the powers of the Calcutta Corporation, Official Secrets Act, officialisation of the Universities which made education costly. His tirade against the untruthfulness of Indians, budget of twelve Reforms, and his Tibetan Expedition euphemistically called the Tibetan Mission, and finally the heart beat event, partition of Bengal, broke the back of loyal India and roused a new spirit in the Nation.⁹

Madras was considered as a quiet province mostly dominated by Moderate politicians. It came in contact with the trends in Bengal, first through Vivekananda, who had a sort of royal reception in Madras after his return from Chicago. The next emissary of Bengal Politics in Madras was Bepin Chandrapal, Tarakanath Das, another man from Bengal who created a niche for himself in Madras. He was a regular member of the Yugantar party of Bengal and he came to Madras on behalf of that group. He found Madras a suitable place for organizing revolutionary propaganda and travelled extensively throughout the province. He could form a nucleus of revolutionary organization. Chidambaram Pillai, Subramania Siva, Subramania Bharathi, Dr.Nanjunda Rao, S.N.Arya, Nilakanta Brahmachari and others were the early recruits to the movement.¹⁰ They were men of outstanding merit and great organizing ability. They were men no agitators but were real leaders of men. V.O.Chidambaram Pillai was born at Ottapidaram, Tirunelveli District (Today Thoothukudi District) in 1873. He started his career as criminal pleader at Ottapidaram in 1896.

Subsequently, he moved to Tuticorin in 1900 and continued to practice. He gave up his practice to deliver lectures to his country men pointing out to them the benefit which would accrue by supporting Swadeshi enterprises. He was mainly instrumental in starting the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company in October 1906 and was also connected with the several Swadeshi concerns in Tuticorin. He was a staunch opponent of British India Steam Navigation Company (B.I.S.N.C) and certain other English companies in Tuticorin.¹¹

The Swadeshi Company was successfully competing with the British India Steam Navigation Company and in fact, diverted a major portion of its business to itself. According to Chidambaram Pillai "Swadeshism" means "the development of Indian Industries by Indians". The starting of the Swadeshi Company was a source of anxiety and caused much irritation to the authorities of the two concerns became very much strained. By that time Bipin Chandra Pal was touring and lecturing on Swadeshi, Boycott and National Education in Madras. His speeches were highly emotional and exciting. Seditious literature was widely printed and circulated.¹²

At Madras, the office of the *Swadesamitran* became a centre of Swadeshi movement. V.O.C. wrote a number of Swadeshi articles in this paper for collecting *Swadeshi nidhi* (Swadeshi Fund) for the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company. Thereafter, V.O.C. and Bharathi became very close friends. Bharathi wrote many articles in the *India* for their venture. The Swadeshi articles such as the "Swadeshi, Boycott and the National Education" became the day to day affairs of the Nationalists and Tamil press.

V.O.Chidambaram Pillai started a Tamil monthly called *Viveka Banu* in collaboration with Swami Vallinayagam. Nilakanta Brahmachari, a young man of good education, a Native of Erukkor, near shiyali in the Thanjavur District was engaged in journalistic work very largely of a seditious nature. He was the editor of the *Suryodayam* a vernacular paper published in Pondicherry. This paper was proscribed by the British Government in March 1910. In 1908, a Tamil paper *India* was published by Srinivasa Iyengar. The printer and publisher of the paper was sentenced to 5 years of transportation under section 124A, 153A and 505 I.P.C. for publishing seditious articles in India.¹³ Then the paper was removed to Pondicherry along with Bharathi, the editor of the paper which was somewhat a safe place for revolutionary workers in Madras.¹⁴

At Tuticorin Subramania Siva came under the influence of Chidambaram Pillai. Subramania Siva was educated in Travancore. He was tramping the country as an itinerant preacher lecturing on Swadeshi and boycott. Subramania Siva and Chidambaram Pillai delivered numerous lectures between February and March 1908. Both inspired people to refuse to buy the education by Government schools, to dispense with the courts both civil and criminal. The public opinion was chiefly mobilized by the speeches made by these Swadeshi enthusiasts.¹⁵

Simultaneously with the secret movement there was also an open agitation advancing Swadeshi Swaraj and boycott of British goods. Tuticorin and Tinnevely were the two important centers of this movement. Tuticorin was the place where several speeches were made which influenced the common people.¹⁶ The Joint Magistrate, R.W.D.E. Ashe in view of the disturbed state of popular feelings issued an order prohibiting such meetings under Section 144 Cr.P.C. In defiance of this, a meeting was called. It was attended by thousands of people. Under the influence of the speeches of Chidambaram Pillai on the 27th February 1908, the mill workers of Coral Mills Company, an European concern launched a strike.¹⁷ Meanwhile, a Swadeshi Bank was also started at Tuticorin by the exertions of Chidambaram Pillai. Furthermore, it strained the feelings between the proprietors of the Swadeshi concern and the authorities of the European concerns, mainly the local branch of the Madras Bank.¹⁸ A Swadeshi Spinning Mill was about to be brought into existence and would have started but for the institution of the proceedings under Section 107 & 108 Cr. P. C. against Chidambaram Pillai.¹⁹

When Subramaniya Siva and Chidambaram Pillai, who were the two important agitators, were arrested on 12th March, 1908 a riot took place on 13th March both in Tuticorin and Tinnevely. R.W.D.E. Ashe, the Joint Magistrate seeing the defiance to his order, went to the scene and ordered dispersment of the crowds. On their failure to do so, the police opened fire. Large numbers of persons were arrested and four people were killed. A boy aged 17 years was the first victim to the gun fire at Tinnevely.²⁰

Most of the Government buildings were attacked. The Government's property comprising; furniture and records of Government offices were in bonfire. The Town was in gloomy. The Municipality, the market, police stations were all set on fire. The excitement of the people was provident till 15th March. Finally, V.O.C. and Subramaniya Siva were charged under Section 124A and 153A I.P.C.²¹ They were sentenced to transportation for life but on appeal this sentence was reduced to 10 years and 6 years respectively.²²

On the Application to the High Court, Chidambaram Pillai was released on bail, on 25th March but was immediately rearrested on a charge under section 124A and 153A I.P.C. Two cases were instituted against him one for abetting Subramaniya Siva and the other for respect of his own speech on 9th March.²³ He was convicted and sentenced in both cases transportation for life. He was at once sent to the Coimbatore Jail. On appeal the High Court reduced the sentence to 6 years.²⁴

Meanwhile, the speeches at Tuticorin were delivered by prominent Nationalists on 11th and on the same day the municipal sweepers struck work. Many jutka drivers also refused to work even for "anti Swadeshi" natives. On 12th, all the private sweepers struck work. On 13th March 190, all shops were closed at the request of Gurunatha Iyer. A large crowd gathered and began to break lamps and threw stones.²⁵ Then they set on fire to the Municipal Office and the kerosene stores. Moreover, they attacked the Police Station, Post and Telegraph Office. A large mob continued to retire slowly in front of the District Magistrate and there were crowds in the nearby streets on either flank. The mob threw stones from all directions. The District Magistrate then gave the shooting order. In this encounter, one man was killed. Later, in the afternoon, the joint Magistrate issued an order prohibiting all meetings in the town. The Sub Divisional Magistrate marched to the troublesome place with a party of reserve constables on the contrary; it could not disperse the crowd. The Police resumed firing. In this connection, Gurunatha Iyer of Tuticorin was arrested on 14th March, 1908.²⁶

The Madras Government imposed punitive Police force on the places of riot. The Government also prosecuted. V.O.C, Subramaniya Siva and Padmanabha Iyengar under section 124A, 153A & 505 of I.P.C. The arrest of V.O.C, Subramaniya Siva and other regional Swadeshi leaders led a series of disturbances in the Tinnevely District. Wynch, the District Magistrate of Tinnevely District appreciated the services of R.W.D.E. Ashe, the Joint magistrate, who stationed at Tuticorin. V.O.C and Siva were ill treated in the prisons.²⁷

At this crucial juncture, V.O.C. and Subramania Siva were given maximum punishment for organizing the Coral Mill Strike and Swadeshi meetings at Tuticorin and Tinnevely between February and March 1908. V.O.C and Subramania Siva were ill treated in the jails. The news of ill treatment on these leaders gave a new extremist ideology. Neelakandan made an extensive tour to visit the Southern districts of Tamil Province to collect the youth for the new course of action. By this way, 'Bharatha Matha Association' was started in April 1910 at Tenkasi, Tuticorin, Tinnevely, Senkottai and Punalur. (Today Kerala State)

The Ill-treatment on V.O.C and Subramaniya Siva further added fuel to the Swadeshi fire. The youth of this district were gathered under the leadership of Nilakanda Bramachari, Arumugam, Madasamy Pillai and others. They planned to form a secret society to ventilate terrorism against the British officers. On 10th April 1910, the 'Bharath Matha Association' was formed by Nilakandan, Vanchi Iyer and other of Thenkasi and Senkottai. After forming this association, they executed a master plan and assassinated R.W.D.E Ashe on 17th June, 1911 at Maniyatchi Railway Station in Tinnevely District.²⁸

Decline of Extremist Movement

The Extremist Movement failed to strike roots in the Indian soil. The British Government suppressed the movement by a series of repressive measures. The Extremist leaders were arrested and deported. The Moderate Congress leaders were unsympathetic and intolerant towards extremist activities. The people in general, though sympathetic towards the programmes of the Extremists, were unwilling to openly associate themselves with such activities. It lacked leadership. The Extremists could not establish an organization of their own. Hence the Extremist Movement declined. Though declined, its impact on the Indian freedom struggle was enduring. It promoted aggressive Nationalism in India, provided a broad base by associating the mass with the movement and hastened the struggle for Indian Independence.²⁹

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