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## SPREAD OF SWADESHI MOVEMENT IN TIRUNELVELI

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### Abstract:

*Swadeshi' means self-help and self-reliance. The spirit of Swadeshi expected people to educate themselves on national lines. It was used as an economic, political and spiritual weapon. The Swadeshi Movement enabled the Tamils to become self-respecting, self-reliant, self-supporting people. The Swadeshi Movement taught the people how to organise capital resources, labour, energies and talents, to 'the greatest good of greatest number' of Indian citizens. The object of the Swadeshi Movement was to popularize the use of indigenous articles. The partition of Bengal caused the spread of Swadeshi spirit throughout India. V.O. Chidambaram, Subramania Siva, Subramania Bharathi and Padmanabha Iyengar were the important Swadeshi leaders in Tamil Nadu. The Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company was founded by V.O. Chidambaram at Tuticorin and the lectures given by Swadeshi leaders about Swadeshi and boycott of foreign goods inspired the people of Tamil Nadu.*

### KEYWORDS:

Swadeshi, Swadeshism Zamindars, Sangam.

### INTRODUCTION

The people patronised Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company and boycotted the British India Steam Navigation Company. They boycotted foreign goods, foreign education and foreign government. The European officials hated the Swadeshi ideas of Tamil Nadu. They suppressed the Swadeshi nationalist leaders and their followers. The repression of the British government did not control the Swadeshi Movement but it made the Swadeshi spirit to spread like wild fire throughout Tamil Nadu.

### ORIGIN OF THE MOVEMENT

Swadeshi Movement originated in the extreme South of India. This movement was a concrete manifestation of protest against the partition of Bengal in this particular part of the country, which led to the spread of Swadeshi ideals throughout India.<sup>1</sup> During 1900-1916, Madras was called despitefully the 'benighted conservative' and 'Model' Presidency.<sup>2</sup> The rise of extremism completely changed the nature of political agitation in Madras. The emergence of new leadership on the national political horizon created political ferment. The extremist movement owed its ascendancy principally to Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bepin Chandra Pal(B.C.Pal) and Aurobindo Ghosh.<sup>3</sup> The Madras Government could hardly identify any such extremist element in the political arena until the stormy tour of Madras by B.C.Pal. The latter's tour radically altered the political climate of Madras.

As a result, the people of Madras became more militant, vocal and active than before. In fact, B.C.Pal awakened the Tamils from deep slumber.<sup>4</sup> In a short time, Madras was converted into an extremist

stronghold. The extremist leadership in Madras was centred around the extremist family of Subramania Bharathi, V.O. Chidambaram, Ethiraj Surendranath Arya, Chakkarai Chetty and Krishnaswamy Sharma. Since 1907, two separate organisations, the Madras Mahajana Sabha, identified with moderates and the Chennai Jana Sangam, associated with extremists, functioned in Madras. The latter established its branches in Kancheepuram, Thanjavur and Tirunelveli.<sup>5</sup> In the Madras Presidency, the prominent political leaders, especially militants like the renowned poet, Bharathi, were taking interest in the Swadeshi Movement. Besides, a large number of journals and periodicals were propagating the extremist cause through their impressive and powerful writings.<sup>6</sup>

On the eve of partition of Bengal, a series of political meetings were organised in Madras city as well as in the districts, condemning the proposed partition and the repressive measures of Lord Curzon.<sup>7</sup> Such strong political feelings emerging from “that sedate, sober province of Madras” appeared rather odd to the colonial observers. One such observer commented that South India had always enjoyed a reputation for level headedness, which the north might envy, but even here, feelings were intense.<sup>8</sup> On September 10, 1905, a Swadeshi meeting was held in Madras, which was attended by about thousand students from various colleges.<sup>9</sup>

The Indian press supported the Swadeshi Movement. The newspapers propagated the spirit of nationalism to the people. The Swadesamitran stated that a public meeting would be held on 23rd instant, in front of the Pachaiyappa's College, for propagating the Swadeshi Movement and all citizens of Madras were requested to attend this meeting without fail.<sup>10</sup> The merchants and the zamindars of Madras did not evince any patriotism. They kept themselves aloof from all public movements and tried to please the Anglo-Indian officials. But the Swadesamitran inspired the Madras people through the example of Bengal - minded zamindars and merchants.<sup>11</sup> The new awakening had spread throughout India, including Madras where district conferences in both Tamil and Telugu areas greatly stimulated political interest. But it was the tour of the Bengali political agitator, B.C. Pal, through the Madras Presidency in 1907 that had enlivened the quality and expression of south Indian politics in the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> At this time, Swadesamitran observed that Sir Arthur Lawley was appointed as Governor, of Madras (1906-1911), who succeeded the former Governor Lord Ampthil.<sup>13</sup> The whole period of his governorship was marked by manifestation of unrest, exhibiting itself in campaigns of seditious oratory, resulting in riots of a more or less serious character.<sup>14</sup>

#### REACTION IN TIRUNELVELI

Public advocacy of 'nationalist' views was evident in Tirunelveli in the latter half of 1906 and the early part of 1907. The campaign did not assume serious proportion until the arrival of B.C. Pal from Bengal in April of the same year. He gave fresh impetus and direction to the nationalist party in Madras.<sup>15</sup> The Mysore Star reported that B.C. Pal had lectured in Madras on swadeshim, boycott and swaraj.<sup>16</sup> B.C. Pal particularly targeted college students and educated people in urban centres and he was remarkably effective. His speeches evoked opposition from educational authorities and the government as it stirred up disaffection among college students and threatened the general peace and tranquillity.<sup>17</sup> The younger generation were ready to listen to the doctrines of advanced nationalism. Inflammable materials fueled the riots which occurred in Tirunelveli and Tuticorin.<sup>18</sup>

An official report in December 1906 singled out Tirunelveli as the only district in Madras from where significant anti-British feelings were being reported.<sup>19</sup> The Swadeshi and terrorist movements tended to unite educated elements in Madras Presidency against the government, following the examples of nationalist leaders in Bengal and Bombay and a group in Madras.<sup>20</sup> B.C. Pal found in Madras a suitable place for organising revolutionary groups and travelled extensively throughout the province.<sup>21</sup> V.O. Chidambaram, a lawyer of Tuticorin, developed into a major extremist leader and in 1906, a Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company was started at Tuticorin. This Swadeshi venture was resented by the British India Steam Navigation Company and this bitter hostility sharpened anti-foreign feelings in Tuticorin.<sup>22</sup> V.O. Chidambaram started the Tuticorin Industrial Welfare Association and the Dharma Sangam for fostering Swadeshi industry and commerce. The national emporium, a shop selling Swadeshi goods and a spinning and weaving centre, were also established.<sup>23</sup>

#### SWADESHI STEAM NAVIGATION COMPANY

In 1900, V.O. Chidambaram moved to Tuticorin to set up legal practice. He delivered lectures to the people pointing out to them the benefit which would accrue by supporting Swadeshi enterprises. According to V.O. Chidambaram, Swadeshi means “the development of Indian Industries by Indians”.<sup>24</sup>

There was a fine harbour for boats, a short public jetty and many private jetties. When V.O. Chidambaram moved into the harbour, the port's main traffic was with Colombo. The British India Steam Navigation Company was operating a daily service to Colombo.<sup>25</sup> He made many friends both in the shipping profession as well as outside it. He visited Madras and came to know Swami Ramakrishnanandha, the Founder of Sri Ramakrishna Mutt and Mission in Madras.<sup>26</sup> Chidambaram met him at the time of the partition of Bengal. He was advised by Ramakrishnananda to take Swadeshi work in right earnest. V.O. Chidambaram took the advice to heart and soon made Tuticorin the envy of even Madras.<sup>27</sup>

Three organisations were established at Madras for the promotion of swadeshim. The Industrial Association raised small contributions and established warehouses exclusively for storing and selling swadeshi goods.<sup>28</sup> The Swadeshi League undertook the hawking of swadeshi goods and preaching swadeshim to the masses. The Balabharata Association was an organization to give political lecturers on boycott and swadeshim and to issue small pamphlets in languages vernacular.<sup>29</sup> Tuticorin merchants consulted V.O. Chidambaram. He placed before them a wider plan, combining patriotism and business, swadeshim and shipping.<sup>30</sup> They wanted V.O. Chidambaram to do something to break the strangling monopoly of the British shipping concern in the coastal trade with Ceylon.<sup>31</sup>

Cattle were shipped in large numbers to Colombo and the trade in cattle was an important part of shipping activity. V.O. Chidambaram suggested the idea of floating their own Steamship Company which would operate on the principle of swadeshi.<sup>32</sup> V.O. Chidambaram founded the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company at Tuticorin, on the East Coast of Madras Province.<sup>33</sup> The Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company Limited was with register on October 16, 1906 under the Indian Companies Act of 1882, registered No.13 of 1906. Its registered office was in No.85, Great Cotton Road, Tuticorin.<sup>34</sup> This Company came into being as a joint-stock company on November 12, 1906. The Company was formed with a capital of Rs.10 lakhs, divided into 40,000 shares of Rupees twenty-five each.<sup>35</sup>

Two ships were bought and many ships were rented. Indian merchants began to send their cargo in those ships only.<sup>36</sup> The name of the ships were Gallia and Lawoe.<sup>37</sup> P.Pandithurai Thevar was President and Secretary of the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company. This Company had thirteen leading men who acted as the initial Board of Directors. They were S.V.Nallaperumal Pillai, A.M.H. Arunachalam Pillai, S.S.V. Krishna Pillai, B. Venkata Ramanujam Naidu and others. An assistant secretary managed the day to-day affairs of the Company and V.O. Chidambaram was prevailed upon to undertake its responsibility.<sup>38</sup> The objective of the Company was to organise a cheap and reliable steam service between Tuticorin and Colombo which was to be extended to other places later on. The encouragement of navigation and imparting of practical training in ship-building and the establishment of schools for instruction in the repair and maintenance of ships were among the other objectives of the Company.<sup>39</sup>

The Shah Lines of Bombay, an Indian concern, was encouraged to start a competitive service in Tuticorin. The Swadeshi Company was able to provide shipping space at this time to Indian traders, and its facilities for passengers and cargo were superior to those offered by the British Company.<sup>40</sup> V.O. Chidambaram's native shipping Company project supported the Swadeshi Movement against the economic exploitation of the aliens.<sup>41</sup> The people boycotted the British India Steam Navigation Company (B.I.S.N.Co.) and patronised the local Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company (S.S.N.Co.).

The figures for the year 1907-1908 indicated the dramatic increase in passenger traffic. It was in proportion to the rapid growth of political agitation in Tirunelveli. The very next year the passenger traffic took a downward plunge which conclusively proved the damage S.S.N.Co. incurred on account of repression.<sup>42</sup> For sometime, the British Company lost heavily in traffic. It was keen to regain its position somehow. When the British monopoly was destroyed, their income too dwindled. Therefore, they tried to bribe Pillai and stop his nationalistic activities.<sup>43</sup> The foreigners wanted to crush it but the Company was firmly established. They took some efforts to crush the Company. The Jananukulam reported that Waller, Assistant Collector of Tuticorin, being envious of the Swadeshi Movement, had imposed restrictions on the movement of steamer service.<sup>44</sup>

The Swadesamitran published some of the doings of Waller against the Swadeshi movement. He transferred the officers who were interested in the native steamer service.<sup>45</sup> The Company fell into evil days. It also lacked technical skill and operational facilities. The Hindu urged upon the people to extend their wholehearted support to the new company but the British forbade the sale of tickets in the bazaars.<sup>46</sup> The lack of co-operation was another reason for the failure of Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company.<sup>47</sup> As a consequence, the Company was closed down in ten years and sold to the British. This came as a big disappointment to the nationalists.<sup>48</sup> Under these circumstances, the Swadeshi Movement moved to the next stage.

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