



ISSN: 2231-5063

IMPACT FACTOR : 4.6052 (UIF)

VOLUME - 6 | ISSUE - 9 | MARCH - 2017

## SWADESHI EFFORTS AND ACTIVITIES OF SWADESHI LEADERS IN TAMIL NADU

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### ABSTRACT

Swadeshi means self-help and self-reliance. The spirit of Swadeshi wanted the people to educate themselves on national lines. It was used as an economic, political and spiritual weapon. The Swadeshi Movement made the Tamils 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 all 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, founded by V.O. Chidambaram at Tuticorin and the lectures given by

the Swadeshi leaders about Swadeshi and Boycott inspired the people of Tamil Nadu.

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

**KEY WORDS :** Swadeshi, Boycott, V.O.Chidambaram, Steam Navigation Company, Tinnevely, Tuticorin.

### DAWN OF THE SWADESHI MOVEMENT

Swadeshi Movement originated in the extreme south of India. The Partition of Bengal was a concrete manifestation of the Swadeshi Movement in this particular part of the country, which led to the spread of Swadeshi throughout India.<sup>1</sup> During 1900-1916, Madras was derisively called the 'benighted', 'conservative' and 'model' Presidency.<sup>2</sup> The rise of extremism completely changed the complex of political agitation in Madras. The emergence of new leadership on the national political horizon created political crisis. 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 elements in the political arena until the stormy tour of B.C.Pal to Madras. The latter's tour, however , radically altered the political character of Madras .



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As a consequence, 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 centred around the Mandayam family of Subramania Bharathi, V.O. Chidambaram, Ethiraj, Surendranath Arya, Chakkarai Chetty and Krishnaswamy Sarma. Since 1907, two separate organisations, the Madras Mahajana Sabha, identified with the Moderates and the Chennai Jana Sangam, under the extremists, functioned in Madras. The latter established its branches in Kancheepuram, Tanjore and Tinnevely.<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 cause through their impressive and powerful writings.<sup>6</sup>

Before the incident of the Partition of Bengal a series of political meetings were organised in the Cities 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 Madras" appeared rather odd to the colonial observers. One such observer commented, "South India had always enjoyed a reputation for level headness which the north might envy, but even here feelings were intense".<sup>8</sup> On 10<sup>th</sup> September 1905, a Swadeshi meeting was held in Madras, attended by about a thousand students from various colleges.<sup>9</sup>

Swadeshi Movement was strongly backed by the Indian Press. The newspapers infected the people with the spirit of nationalism. The *Swadesamitran* stated that a public meeting would be held on 23<sup>rd</sup> instant, in front of the Patchaiyappa's College for propagating Swadeshi Movement and all citizens of Madras were requested to attend this meeting without fail.<sup>10</sup> But 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 nationalist zamindars and merchants of Bengal.<sup>11</sup> The new Congress 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, Bepin Chandra Pal, through Madras Presidency in 1907 that had enlivened the quality and expression of south Indian politics in the early Twentieth Century.<sup>12</sup> *Swadesamitran* observed that Sir.Arthur Lawley was appointed as Governor of Madras (1906-1911) who succeeded the former governor Lord Amphil.<sup>13</sup> The entire period of his governorship was marked by manifestation of unrest, exhibiting itself in campaigns of seditious oratory, resulting in some places in riots of a more or less serious character.<sup>14</sup>

### Rise of Swadeshi Leaders in Tinnevely

There was some public advocacy of 'nationalist' views in Tinnevely in the later half of 1906 and the early part of 1907. The campaign did not assume serious proportion until the arrival from Bengal of B.C. Pal in April of the same year. He gave a new 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 targeted particularly the college students and educated people in urban centres and he was remarkably effective. His speeches evoked opposition from educational authorities and the Government because it stirred up disaffection among college students towards the Government and threatened the general peace and tranquility.<sup>17</sup> The younger generation were ready to listen to the doctrines of advanced nationalism and the existence of inflammable materials triggered riots which occurred at Tinnevely and Tuticorin.<sup>18</sup>

An official report in December 1906, singled out Tinnevely as the only District in Madras from where significant anti-British feelings were being reported.<sup>19</sup> 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, emerged as a major extremist leader and in 1906, a Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company, was started at Tuticorin. The bitter hostility against this

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Swadeshi venture, shown by the British India Steam Navigation Company 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- An Adventure of V.O.Chidambaram**

In 1900, V.O. Chidambaram moved to Tuticorin to set up legal practice. He delivered lectures to the people, pointing out to them the benefits 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 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 profession and outside it. He visited Madras and came to know Swami Ramakrishnanandha, the founder of the Sri Ramakrishna Math 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 Swadeshism. 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 swadeshism to the masses. The Balabharata Association was an organization to give political lectures on boycott and swadeshism and to issue small pamphlets in the various vernaculars.<sup>29</sup> Tuticorin merchants consulted V.O Chidambaram. He placed before them a wider plan, combining patriotism and business, swadeshism and shipping.<sup>30</sup> They wanted V.O. Chidambaram to break the strangling monopoly of the British shipping concern on 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 its own.<sup>32</sup> V.O. Chidambaram founded the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company at Tuticorin, on the East Coast of the Madras Province.<sup>33</sup> The Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company Limited was registered on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1906, under the Indian Companies Act of 1882, registered at 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 12<sup>th</sup> November 1906. The Company was formed with a capital of Rs.10 lakhs, divided into 40,000 shares of Rs.25/ 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 ships were *Gallia* and *Lawoe*.<sup>37</sup> P.Pandithurai Thevar was the President and Secretary of the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company. This Company had thirteen leading men who constituted as the initial Board of Directors. They were S.V.Nallaperumal Pillai, A.M.H. Arunachalam Pillai, S.S.V. Krishna Pillal, B. Vengata 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 object of the Company was to organize a cheap and reliable steamer 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 objects of the Company.<sup>39</sup>

The Shah Line 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 project supported the Swadeshi Movement against the economic exploitation by 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 proportionate to the rapid growth of political agitation in Tinnevely. The very next year, the passenger traffic took a downward plunge which conclusively proved that S.B.N.Co. incurred losses on account of repression.<sup>32</sup> For sometimes, the British Company lost heavily in traffic. It was keen to regain its position some how. 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 Mr.Waller, Head, Assistant Collector of Tuticorin, being envious of the Swadeshi Movement, had imposed restrictions on the movement of the steamer service.<sup>44</sup>

The *Swadesimitran* published some of the doings of Mr.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. Also it 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 passed to the next stage.

To conclude, every phase had its impact in the history of freedom struggle in Tamil Nadu. The role of Swadeshi nationalists of Tamil Nadu in the freedom struggle has been the landmark in the history of freedom struggle in India. Their adventures, ideas, efforts, dedications, speeches, writings are worth to note and those are making great impact in the course of the national movement. Especially, the trinity leaders of Tinnevely, V.O.Chidambaram, Subramania Bharathi, and Subramania Siva had created an indelible imprints in Indian National Movement. The Swadeshi nationalists of Tamil were erudite scholars and sharp intellectuals and were resource persons, and all of them belonged to poor and middle class families. They belonged to the school of Extreme Nationalism.

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