



NATIONALIST STRUGGLE : TIRUNELVELI TWINS: V.O.CHIDAMBARAM AND BHARATHI

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ABSTRACT

Towards the end of the period of George Nathaniel Curzon's viceroyalty (1899- 1905), the Presidency of Bengal was partitioned into a Muslim-majority eastern half and a Hindu-majority western half. Considering the action as an open show of divide and rule, all of a sudden, there spread wide spread condemnation and commotion across much of India. Punjab's Lala Lajpat Rai, Maharashtra's Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bengal's Bipin Chandra Pal- the renowned Lal-Bal-Pal trio-became the popular household names across India. In south, especially Tamil Nadu, was infected, its unrest was well exposed by the patriotic leaders like Valliappan Olaganathan Chidambaram Pillai (V.O.Chidambaram), and the poet Subramania Bharati.

KEYWORDS: V.O.Chidambaram , Bharati, Tirunelveli, Madras, Tuticorin , British , Congress, Vande Mataram, Swadeshi.

EXTREMIST .V.O. CHIDAMBARAM

V.O.Chidambaram (1872-1936) was born in a Saiva Vellala family in Ottapidaram village near Tuticorin Town, not far from the scenes of Kattabomman's exploits, in the erstwhile Tirunelveli District.

Captivated early by Tamil literature and Saivite doctrines, V.O.Chidambaram passed a pleadership examination in Tuticorin, made that port town his base, and befriended a young Saivite orator, Subrahmanya Siva. When the Madurai journal *Sen-Tamil* (Classical Tamil), which was started in 1901, wrote an article on India's traditional arts and crafts, V.O.Chidambaram complimented the journal in a letter in verse.¹

Along with Lal-Bal-Pal, persons like V.O.Chidambaram and Bharati saw the partition of Bengal as an attack on Indian nationalism and, directly, on the I.N.C., some of whose leaders, including Pal, were born in east Bengal. When, in response, Lal-Bal-Pal urged a boycott of British products and the promotion of Swadeshi, they were wildly cheered.

Uttered by foes of the Bengal partition, the two words, 'Vande Mataram' (I bow to Thee, Mother) -taken from a poem in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's 1882 novel, *Anandamath*-were quickly adopted by numerous patriots, including V.O.Chidambaram Bharati.

V.O.Chidambaram's adoption of political and economic nationalism has been connected to a 1906 meeting he had with the Madras city chief of the Ramakrishna Mission.² Taken by the cry of 'Vande Mataram', V.O.Chidambaram thought the two words should be the greeting whenever Indians met one another, besides also being an Indian crowd's rallying slogan.

Attracted by the call of Swadeshi and by tales of seafaring activities of the Tamils and their activities in the past, V.O. Chidambaram launched the Swadeshi Steamship Company in October 1906. He wished to compete on the Tuticorin-Colombo maritime route with the British India Steam Navigation Company. Raising funds and identifying investors, he became the company secretary. In May 1907, two ships ordered by his company arrived at Tuticorin.³

However, the British India Steam Navigation Company was too powerful, and the venture was failed. One of the Swadeshi's ships was, in fact, sold to the British India Steam Navigation Company. V.O.Chidambaram left his company to become an agent from the outside, but had to give up that position too. Nonetheless, the episode earned him the name of *Kappalottiya Tamizhan* ('The Tamil who sailed a ship').⁴

Later in 1907, V.O.Chidambaram attended the stormy Surat session of the Congress, where the body split into two. V.O.Chidambaram sided with extremist camp headed by Tilak and Aurobindo Ghose at Surat.⁵ After the 1907 split, which witnessed the moderates retaining their hold of the Congress. A new Nationalist Group was formed by the extremists who chose a secretary for each presidency: Tilak for Bombay, Aurobindo for Bengal, and V.O.Chidambaram for Madras. Bipin Chandra Pal arrived in Madras in 1907 and made rousing speeches. Whether V.O.Chidambaram met him then is not clear.

V.O.Chidambaram and his friend Subrahmanya Siva sowed the seeds in Tirunelveli for a labour movement. In February 1908, the two addressed workers of the British-owned Tuticorin Coral Cotton Mills. After a strike that began on 27th February 1908, wages were raised, and Sunday was declared a holiday.⁶ From Calcutta, Aurobindo praised the successful strike. But after four men were killed in demonstrations and police firing in the wake of a meeting that V.O.Chidambaram and Siva had called, the two were arrested, along with a few others.

V.O.Chidambaram was awarded bail by the Madras High Court, but since it was withheld from Siva and another arrested associate, he declined the offer. Aurobindo commented that V.O.Chidambaram had 'shown us the first complete example of an Aryan reborn'.⁷ Trying him in Tirunelveli, a judge called A. F. Pinhey sentenced V.O.Chidambaram to forty years of exile and transportation for life-twenty years for seditious speech and another twenty for abetting Siva with his fiery lectures. Siva was adjudged a tool in V.O.Chidambaram's hands.

Appeals went to the Madras High Court and to London, where the Privy Council reduced the sentence to six years of rigorous imprisonment. Confined from 9th July 1908, first in Coimbatore Jail and then in Cannanore in Malabar, V.O.Chidambaram was placed among criminals. A yoke was tied to him, and he was ordered to do heavy grinding. The brutal treatment of the British authority to V.O.Chidambaram made him a popular and a patriotic hero across the Madras Presidency.

For a while, the nationalist current flowed strong, but it soon ebbed. In 1909, the Empire doubled down and created a separate Muslim electorate across India, without inviting a strong reaction. Since imperial strategy required sops to both sides, within two years, in 1911, Bengal was reunified. Simultaneously, the British moved their Indian headquarters from Calcutta to Delhi.

Due to the formidable and unshakeable Empire, nationalist fervour died down. There were no welcoming crowds in December 1912 when, four and a half years into his sentence, V.O. Chidambaram was released. His Swadeshi Navigation Company, its ships auctioned to competitors, had been liquidated the previous year.

Barred from his Tirunelveli District, and his law license revoked, V.O.Chidambaram moved with his wife and two young sons to Madras, where this nationalist hero of yesteryears ran a shop selling provisions and another selling kerosene.

V.O.Chidambaram had suffered greatly in jail, as had Tilak, who was sentenced to six years in 1908.⁸ Tilak was deported to the distant Mandalay for writing in defence of Khudiram Bose, whose bomb had killed two Englishwomen in Bihar. But India was not ready for a revolt. Clandestine groups willing to kill and be killed could create a thrill but not an open movement.

In April 1910 in Tirunelveli District, a twenty-one-year-old Brahmin named Neelakanta, also known as Brahmachari, raised a secret 'Bharatha Matha Association', where, performing rituals before a

picture of goddess Kali, members swore to kill European officers. In the following year, Robert William Ashe, the District Collector, was shot while sitting with his wife in a railway compartment at Maniyatchi station, about 15 miles inland from Tuticorin and close to where V.O.Chidambaram was born.⁹

Minutes later, the assassin, twenty-five-year-old Vanchinathan Iyer, killed himself. Betrayed, caught and later tried, Neelakanta Brahmachari was sentenced to seven years. Shunning violence and politics after his release, he led a sanyasi's life under another name.¹⁰

When, starting with 1919, the Gandhi-led movements began to enlist large numbers across India, including in the south, V.O.Chidambaram did not join. He continued, however, to work for labour unions. The hero of 1908 was now short of money. Moving to Coimbatore, V.O.Chidambaram worked there as a bank manager. A judge named E. H. Wallace granted him permission to practise again as a pleader, and the thankful nationalist named his youngest son Walleswaran.

Years passed in the shadows did not quench an inner flame. When death found him on 18 November 1936, V.O.Chidambaram happened to be in the Tuticorin office of the Indian National Congress, pledged by now to the goal of complete independence.

NATIONALIST POET, BHARATHI

Chinnaswami Subramania (1882-1921) was born in a Brahmin family at Ettaiyapuram in Tirunelveli District. His teachers admired him at his eleven-years for his facility for lyrics and named him Bharati, a synonym for Saraswati, the goddess of learning.¹¹ Interested also in languages, the boy was soon fluent, apart from Tamil, in Sanskrit, English and Hindi, perhaps helped with the last by an early journey to Varanasi.

In 1904, he joined the *Swadesamitran* in Madras, working for eighteen months as a sub-editor and translator under G. Subramania Iyer, the forceful editor.¹² Influenced or encouraged by Iyer, Bharati attended three Congress sessions, in Varanasi in 1905, Calcutta in 1906, and Surat in 1907. In Calcutta, Vivekananda's Irish disciple, Sister Nivedita as she was called, inspired Bharati, and he acquired a smattering of Bengali.

Alongwith Bharati in Surat was V.O.Chidambaram, who was older to him by ten years. Sharing similar interests and views, the two had become close friends. When the Congress split in Surat, Bharati had no hesitation in siding with the extremists led by Tilak, Aurobindo and V.O. Chidambaram.

In journals, in Madras, now edited by Bharati-interestingly, the Tamil one was called *India* and the English journal *Bala Bharatham* (Young Bharat)-he defended the extremists and mocked the moderates, including in cartoons. The latter were a new feature in South Indian Journalism, with Bharati usually conceiving a cartoon and hiring an artist to sketch it.¹³

Like V.O.Chidambaram, Bharati responded with intensity in 1907 to Bipin Chandra Pal's speeches in Madras, and he have made popular orations of his own on the beach. The Tirunelveli artist, a master of romantic and mystical poetry, who 'transmuted vague feelings of Tamil patriotism into lyric expression'¹⁴ was now on fire as an activist.

However, preferring exile in Pondicherry to arrest in Madras, he moved in 1908 to the French territory, where he read, composed anew, or translated texts such as the Gita, Bankim's 'Vande Mataram' song, and pieces by Tagore, into Tamil verse or prose. He remained in Pondicherry during World War I, interacting on occasion with other eminent exiles, including Aurobindo Ghosh.

The Pondicherry years were financially hard, and callers found Bharati agitated.¹⁵ A correspondent of *The Hindu* who met Bharati in the French territory was struck by the poet's 'manner of speaking'. Apparently Bharati would suddenly stand up in the middle of a conversation, or suddenly sit down, and 'thump' with passion.¹⁶

In November 1918, when the war ended, he ventured out of the French territory. Detained in nearby Cuddalore, he was released after three weeks-the result, apparently, of an intervention by an Irishwoman who had made India her home-Annie Besant.¹⁷

In Madras in the following year, when Gandhi visited the south, his host, Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, introduced Bharati to him as 'our national bard'. Patriotic verses, devotional, philosophical and autobiographical ones, verses narrating great stories-Bharati had written them all.

But Madras, where he lived in a house in Triplicane, seemed to neglect him. Bharati was only thirty-nine when he died there on 12th September 1921¹⁸, the eventual result, it was said, of an injury received from a temple elephant he had regularly fed. Not many mourners joined the funeral of one after whom cities across India would later name streets. During his last rites, the people sung Bharathi's swadeshi songs. The death of Bharathi was mourned not only by the Tamils but also the Indian national leaders.¹⁹

Renaming a street would prove easier than translating the poet. In 2012, his granddaughter S. Vijaya Bharati, a scholar herself, would write in evident distress thus :As far as English is concerned, Bharati has never found a good translator. I have been reading translations of Bharati's poems by various authors over the past four decades, and I have yet to see a satisfactory translation of Bharati.²⁰

To conclude, the second phase of the Nationalist Movement between 1907 and 1919 was the period of the Extremists. In Tamil Nadu, the Extremists were led by V.O. Chidambaram and Bharathi. V.O. Chidambaram sacrificed his entire life and wealth for the cause of the liberation of the Country. Bharathi, as a nationalist poet and a journalist contributed much for the spread of extremist ideas among the minds of the youth. Due to the arrest of V.O.Chidambaram, there spread violence in the twin cities of Tirunelveli and Tuticorin. Besides, the arrest paved the way for the assassination of Collector , Ashe at Maniyatchi Station. The extremist movement in Tamil Nadu was volatile only in the Tirunelveli District because of the patriotism shown by the Tirunelveli Twins- Vo.Chidambaram and Bharathi.

END NOTES

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