



# Tamil Renaissance and Indian National Movement

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## Abstract

Renaissance refers to the literary, cultural, social reform and political movements that took place in Tamilnadu. Tamil Nadu history begins in the 3rd century BC. When the British Crown took over the administration of the country from the British East India Company, there was a rapid rise in literacy levels in South India. The response of a people to invasion by aliens from a foreign land is a measure of the depth of their roots and the strength of their identity. It was under British conquest that the Tamil renaissance of the second half of the 19th century gathered momentum.

**Key notes:** *Boycott, Nationalism, Renaissance, Swadeshi, Press*

Tamil renaissance which had its cultural beginnings in the discovery and the subsequent editing and printing of the Tamil classics of the Sangam period. These had existed earlier only as palm leaf manuscripts. Arumuga Navalar in Jaffna, in the island of Sri Lanka, published the Thirukural in 1860 and Thirukovaiyar in 1861. Thamotherampillai, who was born in Jaffna but who served in Madras, published the grammatical treatise Tolkapiyam by collating material from several original ola leaf manuscripts.

It was on the foundations laid by Arumuga Navalar and Thamotherampillai that Swaminatha Aiyar, who was born in Tanjore, in South India, put together the classics of Tamil literature of the Sangam period. Swaminatha Aiyar spent a lifetime researching and collecting many of the palm leaf manuscripts of the classical period and it is to him that we owe the publication of Cilapathikaram, Manimekali, Puranuru, Civakachintamani and many other treatises which are a part of the rich literary heritage of the Tamil people.

Tamil from Jaffna, Kanagasabaipillai served at Madras University and his book 'Tamil - Eighteen Hundred Years Ago' reinforced the historical togetherness of the Tamil people and was a valuable source book for researchers

in Tamil studies in the succeeding years. It was a Tamil cultural renaissance in which the contributions of the scholars of Jaffna and those of South India are difficult to separate not surprisingly, it was a renaissance which was also linked with a revived interest in Saivism and a growing recognition that Saivism was the original religion of the Tamil people. Arumuga Navalar established schools in Jaffna, in Sri Lanka and in Chidambaram, in South India and his work led to the formation of the Saiva Paripalana Sabai in Jaffna in 1888, the publication of the Jaffna Hindu Organ in 1889 and the founding of the Jaffna Hindu College in 1890.

In South India, J.M.Nallaswami Pillai, who was born in Trichinopoly, published Meykandar's Sivajnana Bodham in English in 1895 and in 1897, he started a monthly called Siddhanta Deepika which was regarded by many as reflecting the 19th century 'renaissance of Saivism'. A Tamil version of the journal was edited by Maraimalai Atikal whose writings gave a new sense of cohesion to the Tamil people - a cohesion which was derived from the rediscovery of their ancient literature and the rediscovery of their ancient religion.

### **Early Modern Nationalist Movements in Tamil Nadu**

The earliest modern political organization in Madras was the Madras Native Association (MNA). Founded in July 1852, the MNA was an outgrowth of the Hindu Literary Society, begun in Madras in 1830. Most members of the Madras Native Association came from an affluent commercial background: Lakshmanarasu Chetty and Srinivasa Pillai were two such examples. Members also included the rich mirasdar C.Yagambaram Mudaliar, and graduates such as V.Sadagopah Charlu and V. Ramanuja Chari<sup>1</sup>.

During the closing two decades of the nineteenth century, a series of controversial issues, including the notorious Ilbert Bill, fueled the growth of modern nationalism in India.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the constitutional method employed by the first generation of nationalist leaders in their adversarial relationship with the British was inviting growing criticism. Congress leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai and Bipin Chandra Pal began pressing for the adoption of more forceful, directly agitational methods of struggle. In essence, two distinct trends or entities, the 'old party' and the 'new party', began to emerge within the fledgling nationalist movement. Tilak defined the divergence of approach in the following terms.<sup>2</sup>

### **The partition of Bengal and Tamilnadu**

On the eve of the 1905 partition of 'Bengal, the political atmosphere in Tamil Nadu was already hostile to the partition plan: in the city of Madras, a number of protest meetings were held condemning the proposed partition! Following the vivisection of Bengal in July, anti-partition agitations electrified Tamil Nadu. In Madras, meetings and rallies condemned the 'Reign of Terror' in Bengal.<sup>3</sup> Young people were particularly responsive to the new mood of political protest and activism. At a 'boycott-foreign-goods' meeting held at Marina Beach in Madras on 15

September, 1905, the students population of Madras was well represented. A resolution moved at the meeting congratulated the student of Bengal on the energy and spirit with which they had entered the national struggle<sup>4</sup>.

Anti-partition feeling also ran high in the districts of Tamil Nadu. In Thanjavur and Kumbakonam, N.K. Ramaswami Iyer, a prominent local lawyer, played a leading role in the agitation.<sup>5</sup> At Kumbakonam, 'feverish excitement' was evident at a mass meeting organized by the Students' Association, an occasion marked by impassioned speeches and protests against the British Government.<sup>6</sup>

The Deputy Collector of Mannargudy, Mir Sultan Sahib, reported to the Madras Government on the intensity of anti-partition feeling among the young. When Annie Besant commented on the erratic course of the anti-partition agitation and stressed the need for loyalty to the British, the Mannargudy youngsters did not take it kindly, burning an effigy of Besant in protest at her remarks<sup>7</sup>.

In Chengalpattu district, T.V. Venkatasubaiyer, a lawyer, provided leadership: Kancheepuram was a focal point of protest. At Vellore in North Arcot district, a large gathering attended by young and old, officials and non-officials, artisans and traders expressed its total opposition to partition<sup>8</sup>," At Madurai, a meeting held in People's park under the presidency of G. Srinivasa Rao, the local Municipal Chairman, began with the 'Swadeshi Anthem,' an adaptation of the anthem sung at the 1904 annual session of the Congress<sup>9</sup>. Most of the speeches were conducted in Tamil. Another large and enthusiastic meeting was held in Cuddalore on 18th October, 1905, at the Manjakkuppam Anglo-Vernacular School; this was presided over by a pleader and Municipal councillor called Srinivasachariyar<sup>10</sup>.

This wave of protest meetings prepared the ground for the more vigorous swadeshi movement which was launched soon after the 1905 annual session of the Congress. At the 1905 Congress, all the delegates from Madras supported the resolution which condemned partition as the most heinous of those political blunders committed by Lord Curzon. To the surprise of the delegates, the resolution calling for the launch of a boycott movement, proposed by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and seconded by Lala Lajpat Rai, won the support of V. Krishna swami Iyer, the representative of 'that sedate, sober province, Madras'.

In the charged political atmosphere created by the anti-partition agitation, a 'new movement' was emerging in opposition to the constitutional approach and political moderation of the Madras Mahajana Sabha.

### **'New Movement' Leaders in Tamil Nadu**

The leadership of Tamil Nadu's new agitational politics comprised largely young people in their twenties and thirties. It was, however, not so much age as ideology which bound them together.

At the core of the new movement lay the Mandayam family (in particular, S. Srinivasachari, S.N. Tirumalachari and M.P. Tirumalachari), C. Subramania Bharati, V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, V. Chakkari Chetti and Ethiraj Surendranath Arya. Many of these individuals were attracted by the ideals of the Ramakrishna Mission: Bharati, for

example, composed songs in praise of Sister Nivedita of the Mission, and V.D. Chidambaram was also drawn into nationalist politics by the Mission's activities.

In turn, Bharati, who had a large following among the students of Madras, attracted others into New Movement politics. Among those thus drawn in was V. Chakkari Chetti, a student of Madras Christian College and a Christian by faith. Surendranath Arya, who in 1906 became editor of *Satyavadhini*, had a kind of religious restlessness which brought him into contact with the Theosophical Society, the Ramakrishna Mission, the Arya Samaj and finally the Bramos, Sivanatha Sastri, Bipin Chandra Pal and Hema Chandra Sarthar. It was Bipin Chandra Pal's Visit to Madras in 1907 which drew Arya into the vortex of nationalist politics<sup>11</sup>.

These leaders came from varied social and economic back- grounds. The Mandayam family, originally from Mysore, was one of wealthy Iyengar brahmins, in a position to invest capital in newspapers and in the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company, In contrast, Subramania Bharati. Also a brahmin by birth, lived in poverty till his death. Bharati started his chequered career at the Ettayapuram zamindar's court. He became a sub-editor at the Tamil newspaper, *swadesamitran*, later becoming editor of the Tamil weekly, *India*. Bharati held progressive views on social and political matters. A non-conformist and revolutionary, he promoted the liberation of women, social equality and social justice. His political views were equally forthright and uncompromising: he praised the 1905 Russian Revolution and, later the 1917 October Revolution.<sup>16</sup> He also visualized India as a free nation long before its actual independence.

V.O. Chidambaram Pillai of Ottapidaram came from a well-to- do middle class family. After graduating in law, he entered the legal profession<sup>12</sup>.

### Nationalist songs

Tamil pamphlets bearing the message of swadeshism, boycott and -other elements of Extremist politics also contained translations of the songs of the swadeshi movement. Within Tamil Nadu, a fine tradition of political folk music and songs soon began to develop.

Tamil Nadu possessed a potent tradition of folk music; for example, various episodes from the 1799 and 1800-01 poligar uprisings had been presented in the form of folk songs. This tradition was now turned to good account by lyricists such as Subramania Bharati, who composed nationalist' lyrics in a simple, lucid style suitable for singing. In December 1907, Bharati published his first collection of political songs in a volume entitled *Swadesa Geethangal* ('Songs on Swadeshism'). The songs stressed the importance of unity, condemning casteism and urging the people to form a united front against the British. Secondly selected extracts from the *swadesa Geethangal* were circulated as pamphlets so as to reach wider sections of society; it was this large scale dissemination which perhaps first drew the Government's attention to the phenomenon of political songs. The person behind the free distribution of these pamphlets was V. Krishnaswami Iyer, long castigated as a Moderate by Subramania Bharati but who now covered the cost of producing 5,000 copies of the pamphlets so that school students could be taught the songs.

At first, the British response was low-key. The Government reacted nonchalantly to the involvement of V. Krishnasami Iyer, declaring 'the incident is of importance only as showing how thoroughly disloyal the brahmin vakil is'. As far as the songs were concerned, the Government dismissed them, noting that 'there is nothing indictable in the songs'.

Besides Bharati, a number of other poets composed swadeshi songs. A. Shanmugam Pillai of Madurai was one; his songs had *Vande Mataram* as their central theme. A number of women also composed songs, among them Cuddalore Asalambigai Ammal and Chidambaram Agilandammal. The latter was credited with having written a series of swadeshi songs called the *Vandemataram Kummigal*<sup>13</sup>.

The first *Vandemataram Kummigal* series was published under the title 'Swadeshism', and one thousand copies were distributed free of charge. More than two thousand copies of the second series were distributed in Karaikal, Pondicherry, Chidambaram, Kumbakonam, Tiruvallur and Thanjavur. The popularity of these songs, with their simple verses and catchy phrases, compelled the Madras Government to warn the District Magistrates of Thanjavur and South Arcot that 'much harm is done by the diffusion of cheap literature of this kind' and to demand action against 'the writers as well as the printers and publishers of these pamphlets'. The seriousness with which the Government now began to view the dissemination of swadeshi songs composed in Tamil was enhanced by the fact that the pamphlets in which they appeared did not confine themselves to the promotion of swadeshism. Some hinted at revolution against the British Raj, others suggested the formation of secret societies, and a few even threatened the lives of British officials. The authorship of such leaflets were always shrouded in mystery.

## Swadeshi lecturers

The Extremists further increased their political influence by means of itinerant lecturers. The origin of this class of 'preachers' can be traced to B.C. Pal's 1907 visit, which saw the appearance in Madras of a body of professional lecturers. Travelling widely, the lecturers worked to propagate the seeds of nationalism sown by Pal. They were paid Rs 25 per month, were given their third class train fare and, when they travelled by road, were allotted two annas per mile.

One such lecturer was young Krishnaswami Sarma, a native of Kanchipuram. He later moved to the Mylapore area of Madras and hence became known as Mylapore Krishnaswami Sarma; he also assumed a variety of other names in his stormy political career. A Matriculate of Pachaiyappa's College, Madras, Krishnaswami Sarma authored several books on Indian and world history, all of them in Tamil. He was drawn into the swadeshi movement by Bipin Chandra Pal's Madras lectures. When Sarma in turn began to lecture on swadeshism, boycott and swaraj, he delivered his talks in such a characteristic way that it was difficult for police reporters from the cm to follow his language. Sarma's oratory included in its arsenal resourcefulness and great wit, factors which helped to excite his audiences. Sarma added to the drama by wearing a pink silk head cloth tied in the Punjabi fashion. From 1908 onwards, Sarma was a regular speaker at Coimbatore, Salem and Erode, all of them major weaving centres for which the message of swadeshism had special relevance and urgency.<sup>14</sup>

The resistance against British imperialism and the struggle for independence had a powerful impact upon the growth of literature. There came into existence a series of historical ballads. *Khan Sahib Chandai* on the history of Khan Sahib's struggle against the Nawab and the English, *Panjalankurichi Azhivu Charithira Kummi* on the rise and fall the Kattabommans and Sivagangai Seemai Charithiram on the history of Marudus' struggle against the English East India Company. These were so popular that they were recited at the festivals in the villages. The nationalist movement of the twentieth century produced a galaxy of literary stars. Subramonia Bharathi (1882-1921), the most outstanding of them, was not only a freedom fighter but also a nationalist poet. He edited the Tamil weekly, *India*, and composed patriotic songs in folk music forms with the India, and composed patriotic songs in folk music forms with the primary object of promoting nationalist fervour among the masses. In 1908 he published his collection of *Swadesa Geethangal* and in 1909 *Janma Bhoomi*. As a social reformer, he considered the *Smritis* as a trap, for it drew a distinction between the Brahmin and non Brahmin in the legal system. Because of his role in active politics against the British, he was jailed at Cuddalore in 1918. Though he was released from prison, he died early in life. His significant contributions to the nationalist literature and Tamil renaissance are noteworthy. Bharatidasan (1891-1964), one of his disciples, came under the influence of socialism. His songs and novels were conspicuous for their revolutionary content. Namakkal Ramalingam Pillai was a Gandhian in his way of life. The song that he composed for the Salt Satyagraha at Vedaranyam and the narrative poem, *Avanum Avalum* were the noted among his compositions. V.O.Chidamparam Pillai, patriot and scholar, wrote a literary criticism on *Tirukkural*. V. Kalyana Sundara Mudaliar (1883-1953) popularly called Tiru Vi. Ka. was the editor of the Tamil newspapers, *Desabaktan* and *Navasakti*. A powerful speaker and a fascinating writer, he contributed to an elegant style in prose. Kalki, who received training under Tiru Vi. Ka edited the magazines, *Ananda Vikatan* and *Kalki*.<sup>15</sup>

The struggle against social iniquities too contributed to the growth of Tamil literature. It led to the writing of works on social protest. The ballads *Kathavarayan Kathai* and *Madurai Veeran Kathai*, were two of the earliest of the works of this kind. The Christian scholars, A Vedakkan, C.Masillamani, Vedamanikkam, Sivagurunathan and Pakyanathan wrote articles and composed poems for propagating the gospel of social equality. Pudumaipithan, an effective short story writer, used his themes for attacking evils in the society. Rajam Aiyar wrote *Kamalambal Charithiram* and Madavaiya composed *Padmavathi Charithiram* –both on social themes. This trend reached its culmination in the works of E.V.Ramaswami Naicker and C.N.Annadurai. Naicker's philosophy on the destruction of caste and distribution of wealth found expression in a series of publications, particularly the *Kudiyarasu* and the *Puratchi*. As the script of the Tamil language appeared unscientific, he advocated reform in this direction too. C.N.Annadurai *Or Iravu* (One Night) and *Velaikkari* (Maid Servant) with their accent on social criticism were popular among the common people. In fact the works on the struggle for political freedom and social emancipation represented a unique contribution to the political and social content of Tamil.

Apart from these, there were other developments but they were mostly in imitation of the West. Thus numerous writers engaged themselves in a variety of literary output – they edited literary works, wrote historical novels, short stories, literary criticism, biographies, travelogues and the like. V. Swaminathaier (1855-1942) edited

and published the great classics, *Pathupattu*, *Silappathikaram*, *Manimekhala*, *Chinthamani* and *Purananuru*. *Ramachandra Kavirayar* and *Parasurama Kavirayar* wrote some of the early dramas in Tamil. Sundaram Pillai composed the famous song, 'Neerarung Kadaludutha' in veneration of Tamil home land in his work. *Manonmaniyam*. Kavimani Desiga Vinayagam Pillai (1876-1954) wrote short stories in a style, which was noted for simplicity and charm, Maraimalai Adigal (1876-1950) insisted upon purism in Tamil. Vaiyapuri Pillai and T.P. Minakshisundran through their extensive studies revolutionised linguistic research. As a result of the endeavours made by these devoted scholars. Tamil gained in elegance and style. The Tamil poetry that developed during this period was of two categories-the prose poetry patterned on the western form of free verse in which rhythm was patent or absent and musical songs written for films. The verses of Kamarasan and Mu Metha were good examples of the first kind, while those of Kalyanasundaram and Kannadasan were of the second category.

Despite the phenomenal progress so far made, certain inadequacies continue as glaring. Usually no word, as it can be pronounced, and no sentence, as it is to be spoken or written, can be completed without borrowing a letter or word from Sanskrit. Attempts have been made to effect translations, but many of them are found as misleading.<sup>16</sup> For instance, when the English word imperialism is translated into Tamil, it implies dictatorship. As in medieval times many of the writers still live in temples and palaces rather than in fields and huts. The themes, that they select for writing, are oriented towards what is bourgeois and what is noble, detached from what is common and what is natural. Even the literary trends are modeled after what are western. The temptation to adore the past and to worship the dead is so strong that critical approach is discouraged and stagnant thinking is strengthened. The resultant demoralization has prevented the emergence of literary men of stature comparable to Valluvar or Kambar in the literary world of the Tamils. As Professor C. Yesudhasan of Kerala University has pointed out criticism does not flourish much in Tamil. "The conflict of thoughts and interests in Tamilnad is so heated that the prospect of having anything like a literature of sane, balanced and healthy criticism is as yet very remote". Added to these what is evident is that language being the vehicle of ideas, it can develop only when the source of ideas is widened and strengthened. But frequently linguistic fanaticism has so much blurred the imagination that useful areas of knowledge to the background. As a result while many of the other languages march ahead, Tamil is forced to follow them through endless translations, that itself without success.<sup>17</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century Tamil Nadu, spotted with villages and farms, presented the appearance of a society of peasants and workers. Madurai had extensive fortifications, large avenue trees and neglected mantapas, but it concealed in its bosom the memories of a suppressed glory. Madras emerged as the capital of the Presidency. With two and a half lakhs of people in 1800, it was one of the major cities of the world. Yet it was exceedingly unlike a modern city. The waves of the monsoon-sea broke so close to the residential areas that they frequently spread panic among the inhabitants. The Europeans had their shops, taverns and ball rooms in Fort St. George but slowly they extended them along the Mount Road. The nearby villages supplied fish, meat, fruits and grain for the support of the white population. Crabs and oysters reached from Ennore or Pulicat and turkeys and geese from Karaikal or Sadras.

Prices of articles fluctuated from season to season, depending upon supply and demand. A few banking institutions functioned but their resources were limited. Among them were the Carnatic Bank, the Madras Bank and the Asiatic Bank, all owned by the Europeans. The coins were of a wide variety for by 1815 there were in circulation some seventy two varieties of gold coins, sixty varieties of silver coins and twenty five varieties of copper coins. Naturally this gave scope for confusion as well as corruption in commercial transactions. However in 1818 the rupee was made the coin of account. Roads were few and the existing ones were dusty and irregular. The major roads connected Madras roads were developed across the jungles because of wars and rebellions. Between 1830 and 1837 tram ways and railways made their appearance. By 1860 plans were formulated for the extension of the railway system from Madurai To Tutukudi and to Quilon. The political stability and communication system promoted the growth of trade and towns. Because of official patronage, the western system of education gained ground, but its benefit went by and large to the town dwellers and 'higher' communities. In this background came nationalism.<sup>18</sup>

## Discourses, dramas, coins

Swadeshi *Kalatchepams* (discourses) provided another avenue for the politically creative use of Tamil. In 1906, for example, Venkatarama Sastriar conducted a Swadeshi *Kalacheepam* in Madras city; his narration of the 'History of Chandrahas' included songs calling for the regeneration of handicrafts and spelling out the meaning of swadeshism<sup>19</sup>.

Dramas, too, helped attract the attention of ordinary people. But while theatrical performances are known to have helped spread the national movement at the all-India level in this period evidence that plays were enacted as a mode of preaching swadeshism in Tamil Nadu is scanty. However, the laws passed by the Madras Government from time to time to prohibit 'seditious' dramas in various parts of the Presidency hint at the existence in Tamil Nadu of Theatrical troupes working to popularize nationalism.

The circulation of swadeshi gold coins was yet another method by which nationalist politics were popularized in Tamil Nadu. As the swadeshi movement gathered momentum and people began to identify with articles identified as of swadeshi manufacture, goldsmiths began to produce a new type of swadeshi gold coin, to be used essentially as an ornament. The coins became so popular that the Madras Government became curious to learn more of their process of manufacture. A police enquiry into the matter revealed that special machines had been producing the coins in Tuticorin, Tirunelveli, Chingleput, Coonoor and the city of Madras from 1907 onwards. A sovereign was first passed through a rolling machine until it was reduced to the required thickness. Five coins would then be produced from each flattened sovereign. A typical plant was capable of producing 400 such coins per day. One goldsmith, Kandasami Asari, alone made 5,000 swadeshi coins during the period 1908-1909.<sup>20</sup>

There were several types of swadeshi gold coins in circulation. One form had the word 'swadeshi' and letters 'P.N.' encircled by a wreath, the whole surrounded by the words 'Chastity our house- hold divinity'. On the reverse was inscribed '61/3 MJDS 1907', again encircled by a wreath surrounded by the words 'faith, hope and success', A second form of coin contained on one side the words 'South Indian' encircled by an ornamental wreath; on the reverse was

found the figure of the goddess Lakshmi. On a third type of coin, the words 'Indian Gold' appeared, encircled by a wreath and surrounded by the words 'God Bless Fine Neck Jewel 1907'. On the reverse, the goddess Lakshmi in a standing posture was surrounded by the words 'Lakshmi in Lotus'.

The idiosyncratic nature of these designs points to a diversity of producers. Some of the nationalist inclined (or demand conscious) goldsmiths are known to us by name: for example, the already mentioned Kandaswami Asari, T. Ramayya Chetty and Venkata- ramanjulu Chetty of Madras, Narayana Asari of Palamcottah, O.R.P. Paramasivam Pillai of Tuticorin, Shanmugam Chetti of Tirunelveli and Subhan Asari of Tuticorin.<sup>21</sup>

#### End Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Madras Mail, 20 May 1884.

<sup>2</sup> The Hindu, 9 March, 1905.

<sup>3</sup> The Hindu, 21, September, 1905.

<sup>4</sup> The Madras Mail, 16 September, 1905.

<sup>5</sup> The Hindu, 25, September, 1905.

<sup>6</sup> The Madras Mail, 31 October, 1905.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 13, December, 1905.

<sup>8</sup> The Hindu, 27 September, 1905

<sup>9</sup> The Hindu, 14 October, 1905.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 24 October, 1905.

<sup>11</sup> V.O.C Suyacharithai, 1946,p.41.

<sup>12</sup> Ethiraj Surendranath Arya, "Avar Sarithiramum Rajanindani Casum," R.V Press, Madras, 1908,p.III.

<sup>13</sup> S.A.Ramaswami Pulavar, " Tamil Pulavar Varisai- XVIII", Madras 1958,pp.131-138.

<sup>14</sup> The Swadesamithran, 19 October, 1906.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> The Swadesamithran, 23, October, 1906.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> K.Rajayan,"A Real History of Tamilnadu",

<sup>19</sup> The Swadesamithran, 19 October, 1906.

<sup>21</sup> Prem Narain, "Press and Politics in India", Munsiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1970,p. 2