

**V. O. CHIDAMBARAM  
PILLAI**      **R. A. PADMANABHAN**



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# V.O. Chidambaram Pillai

R. A. PADMANABHAN



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## INDIA'S MARITIME GLORY

INDIA HAS A long coastline, stretching from New Kandla in the west to Calcutta in the east running into a length of over six thousand kilometres, nearly four thousand miles. The great peninsula in the south, open to the seas on three sides, has from time immemorial played an important role in India's contacts with distant lands of the world across vast stretches of water. From remotest antiquity, long before the historical period, Indian ships and Indian merchants crossed the seas taking much-valued Indian merchandise to such ancient countries as China and Egypt, Babylon and Chaldea, and Palestine and Rome.

In the west, Indian ships went through the Persian Gulf to the mouth of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, from where their goods were transported by river craft and camel caravan to Nineveh, Ur, Babylon and other cities in the interior. Other ships passed through the Red Sea to reach the mouth of the Nile, near which they had a big emporium where Indian merchants stocked and traded their precious goods for worthwhile items from other lands. From the mouth of the Nile, other Indian ships carried the goods across the Mediterranean Sea to Rome and Greece.

In the east, crossing the Bay of Bengal, Indian ships traded with countries on its fringe such as present-day Burma, Siam, Indo-China and Malaya and, crossing the

Straits of Malacca, moved on to reach Java, the Philippines and the vast country of China. The catamarans and dhonis of the Coromandel (Chola-mandala) coast, masula boats from Andhra, sea-going craft from Kalinga (Orissa) and Bengal were familiar sights on the seas of South-east Asia and the Far East. Schooners and brigs from Kathiawad and sailing vessels from around Cape Comorin, and Malabar and Konkan were similarly well known to countries in the west bordering the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the North African coast.

What were the precious goods that these ancient Indian mariners carried to distant lands? How extensive was their trade?

Evidence in this regard is profusely available. There are many references in the records and literatures of olden times to treasured items imported from India. Babylon on the Euphrates, in present-day Iraq, which at the height of its splendour, between 1800 and 539 B.C., was the greatest commercial mart of the western world, was very familiar to Indian merchants who were a common sight there. In the seventh century B.C., King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon obtained cedar wood from Malabar in South India for use in his famous palaces and temples. In Ur of the Chaldees, also in the Euphrates-Tigris valley about this time, teak wood from Malabar was used in the great temple of the Moon God. The Old Testament in the Bible mentions that King Solomon of Jerusalem (973-933 B.C.) took pride in the gold, silver, ivory, sandalwood, apes and peacocks imported from the Malabar coast. When the Queen of Sheba visited Solomon, she brought with her a great train of camels bearing large quantities of spices, gold and precious stones which came from India. The

Phoenician king Hiram had a major port in the Red Sea to which large ships from India flocked bringing prized goods.

Citizens of ancient Rome brought gossamer cotton cloth and other goods from Indian traders in such large quantities paying for them in Roman gold coins, that at one time there was a hue and cry that the wealth of Rome was being drained away by imports from India.

The unknown author of "Periplus", the noted Greek travel account written about A.D. 40, who visited South India in the course of his wide travels, says he saw the ports of South India abounding with ships from Arabia and Greece laden with cargoes for sale or exchange. Large quantities of Roman coins in gold and silver discovered in many parts of South India confirm the extensive trade contacts between Rome and India. Trade flourished to such an extent that Pandyan kings of Tamil Nadu had their own ambassadors in the Roman capital during the reign of Emperor Tiberius-(42 B.C.-37 A.D.).

Likewise, there is ample historical evidence from Egypt also pointing to intense trade between that country and India from very early times. According to the historian K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, "trade by sea between India and Egypt in the second millennium B.C. is attested to by many Egyptian recods of the times which mention specifically South Indian products; and this contact with Mediterranean lands might even have begun earlier as it certainly continued into the first millennium B.C. and later."

In Chinese historical texts too, there are references to maritime traders from India bringing typical Indian products to China as far back as the seventh century B.C. The Chinese seem to have been much fascinated by the muslim

cloth from Masula (Masulipatnam in Andhra) and unrivalled pearls of the southern sea (present-day Tirunelveli district coast). Glass beads, bangles, precious stones, knives, axes, daggers, spear-points and pottery were among the other goods brought to China by Indian ships. Such products of Indian origin have been unearthed by archaeologists also in the Malay peninsula, Java, Sumatra, North Borneo, Indo-China and the Philippines, leading to the conclusion that this maritime trade between India and the East was both extensive and ancient.

Even in the olden days, India was well advanced in the matter of a sound knowledge of tides and winds, building of sea-worthy ships, maintenance of ports and port towns, and strict enforcement of standard weights and measures. In addition to this, India had knowledge also of customs regulations. Indian seamen knew of the monsoon winds long before the Egyptian pilot Hippalus revealed by about 45 A.D. their existence to the West. Taking advantage of these seasonal winds, Indian sailing craft crossed the oceans fairly on schedule. Ships built in India with timber from Malabar, water-proofed with coir bindings and having durable hawsers of coir were larger than those of Egypt or China. Ports were maintained with care and port towns were cosmopolitan centres of trade and residence, with separate sections allotted for foreign residents.

Innumerable ports, on the western and eastern coasts of India, are mentioned by Indian as well as foreign sources. Barygaza (Broach in Gujarat); Kanheri (on the Konkan coast in Maharashtra); Naura (Cannanore), Tondi (Ponnani), Kollam (Quilon) and Muziris (Cranganore)—all on the Malabar coast; Comari (Cape Comorin), Korkai (at the mouth of the Tamraparani river), Puhar



(at the mouth of the River Cauvery) and Marakkanam (near Pondicherry)—all on the Coromandel coast of Tamil Nadu; Masula (in Andhra); and Dhauli (at the mouth of the Mahanadi)—these are some of the seaports of ancient India known to have been busy as early as 300 B.C.

The Tamil Sangam poem "Pattinappalai", written by about the first or second century A.D., gives a picturesque description of the kind of trade carried on in Puhar, the most famous of the seaports of ancient Tamil Nadu and of life in the port town. Puhar was mainly a commercial centre and its inhabitants were mostly merchant princes carrying on trade with distant lands. The bazars were lined by tall mansions several storeys high, the ground floor being used for business purposes and the other floors for residence. The poem says that the mansions had many doorways, verandahs and corridors, and that trade went on briskly everywhere. The shops overflowed with goods, both those assembled for export and those received through incoming ships. Flags of the ships of many lands fluttered on the masts of ships in the harbour. There were also other flags and pennants advertising different kinds of merchandise and the fashionable "grog shops".

Puhar was a first-class port and big ships entered the harbour "without slacking sail". They unloaded their merchandise on the beach. One heard many many tongues and saw many many foreign nationals. Along the streets came horses brought ashore by Yavana (Greek) ships; bag-loads of pepper moved in carts wending their way towards harbour; another cart came with a strong escort of soldiers: it carried gold and gems from the mountains of the north. Loading went on in one place: sandalwood was being piled into the holds of ships due to leave shortly

for Mediterranean lands. Elsewhere, some merchants were seen bargaining about the price of coral and pearls from the south. Water from the Ganges, foodgrains from Eezham (Ceylon), gold from Kataham (Burma), and goods of every kind were piled up in the shops along the streets, their packings showing the seals by the customs officers, indicating approval for export.

The "Periplus" says that Muziris on the Malabar coast abounded in ships sent there with cargoes from Arabia and Greece. They brought coins of gold and silver, topaz, linen, copper, tin, lead and some choice wines. They took back pepper, sandalwood, ivory, fine pearls, and precious gems. The Yavanas sailed their ships into Muziris. Three types of craft were said to be used on the Indian seas: small sailing craft doing coastal routes, large vessels of logs of wood secured together, and big sailing vessels making voyages to distant lands.

Megasthenes, Strabo, Pliny the Elder, Ptolemy, Yuan Chwang, Fa-hien, I-Tsing, and Niccolo Conti, Wang Ta-yuan, Cheng Ho, Ibn Batuta and Marco Polo are some of the foreign visitors to India who have left us first-hand accounts of Indian maritime prowess in the later centuries. There are records in the Chinese annals of embassies exchanged between China and the Pallava court of Kanchi in the eighth century and the Chola court in the eleventh. Mentioning this, Nilakanta Sastri observes: "A fair amount of trade was carried on between China and South India in the following centuries and Chinese junks visited Indian waters pretty freely. The great Mongol emperor Kublai Khan sent a number of embassies to South Indian states..." Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram) was the greatest seaport on the east coast during Pallava days.

From the ninth century A.D., Arab travellers and geographers helped to establish Arab trade with India, and much of the trade of the Indian Ocean was in their hands. Among Arab writers on India, Ibn Batuta's personal account of his travels and experiences in South India in the fourteenth century A.D. ranks high.

Marco Polo was a Venetian who reached the court of Kublai Khan in China after a hazardous land journey across Asia. After seventeen years in Peking, the Khan's new capital, where he became a great favourite of the Mongol ruler, he left China in 1292 A.D. by sea escorting a princess of the Khan's family on a bridal journey to Persia. Passing through the China Sea and the Indian Ocean, he visited many countries on the way, later on recording vivid descriptions of what he saw and heard. "The Travels of Marco Polo, the Venetian" tells us that he found "the commerce of India stretching like an immense chain, from the territories of Kublai Khan to the shores [of the Persian Gulf and of the Red Sea." He mentions Cael, which was the greatest seaport on the southern Tamil Nadu coast at the time. "Cael is a considerable city, governed by Astiar, one of four brothers," he says, "kings of the country of Maabar [the name by which South India was then known to Western travellers], who is rich in gold and jewels, and preserves his country in a state of profound peace. On this account it is a favourite place of resort for foreign merchants, who are well received and treated by the king. Accordingly, all the ships coming from the west—as from Ormus, Chisti, Aden and various parts of Arabia—laden with merchandise and horses, make this port, which is besides well situated for commerce..."

The king whom Marco Polo met was Sundara Chola Pandya, otherwise known as Jatavarman Sundara Pandya, "one of the most famous warriors and conquerors of South India under whom Pandyan power attained its greatest splendour."

By this time, the Cholas and Pandyas had become great naval powers and many countries bordering on the seas to the east of South India were conquered and colonised by them. The naval might of Rajaraja Chola and Rajendra Chola was followed by the naval prowess of Jatavarman Sundara Pandya, in the south.

It was in this Pandyan country, noted in earlier centuries for sailors, sea-traders and naval heroes, that V. O. Chidambaram Pillai was born. The great traditions of a marine past were part of the historical background that belonged to Tirunelveli district in which he was born and bred. Additionally, he was also heir to a more recent tradition of lofty patriotism as exhibited by the Poligars, Puli Thevan and Katta Bomman, whose valorous defiance of creeping British influence made them legendary heroes ever alive in the folk songs and ballads of the district. We shall look into these fountain sources of patriotic endeavour in the next chapter.

## 2. HEROIC TIRUNELVELI

THE TIRUNELVELI district in which V. O. Chidambaram Pillai was born in 1872 was the southernmost district of the then Madras Presidency which sprawled from Tirunelveli to Ganjam in the north, and included Malabar and South Kanara districts in the west.

Centuries before the Christian era, the district was the realm of the Pandyan rulers who had their capital in Korkai at the mouth of the Tambraparani river. According to one tradition, the Pandyan, Cholan and Cheran were three brothers who at first ruled in common at Korkai. But eventually, the Cholan went north to establish a kingdom of his own in the Cauvery basin and the Cheran went west to rule over the Malabar coast. These were the three major divisions of Tamil polity which were to become individually famous in the course of centuries.

The earliest mention of Pandyan rule is contained in a Sinhalese record of 600 B.C. informing us of the marriage of a Pandyan princess to a king of Ceylon. Three centuries later, Megasthenes mentions a Pandyan country in the south, descriptions of which given by him tally well with all that we know of the Pandyan kingdom of Korkai. His particular observation about fine pearls obtained there confirms such a deduction. The southern coast of Tirunelveli has been from very early times famous for its pearl fisheries and "pearls from the southern seas" have been prized gems in the east as well as the west.

Korkai, the Pandyan capital, was also a well-known seaport from which Tamil ships sailed for distant lands. The Greeks knew it as "Kolkai Emporium" and it was the first port to be visited by Greek ships after they rounded Cape Comorin. Silting by the Tambraparani river and a gradual recession of the sea in the course of time left Korkai high and dry in the interior, and a new port, Kayal, which was between Korkai and the sea, became famous during the Middle Ages. This was the "Cael" port visited by Marco Polo in 1292 A.D. In later years, Kayal too suffered a similar fate, and yet another port, Maramangalam took its place. Large quantities of broken Arabian pottery and China porcelain found in the area—Bishop Caldwell in the last century said he could have "collected a cart-load in a single day"—speak of the extensive trade Kayal and Korkai must have carried on in those days with the distant countries of the world.

Facing the comparatively calm Gulf of Mannar, and shielded from the turbulent ocean by the island of Ceylon across the Gulf, these ports of the Tirunelveli coast have been ideally situated as ports of call. While these old ports no longer retain their pristine glory, a new seaport, Tuticorin, has shown its head a little further north on the coast and has fast become one of the most important ports of the south. Tuticorin was the scene of Chidambaram Pillai's labours seventy years ago.

Placed as it is at the tail end of the South Indian peninsula, the Pandyan kingdom of Korkai was easily free from external trouble for more than a thousand years. It was only in the fourteenth century A.D. that an invader, Malik Kafur, a general of Alauddin Khalji of Delhi, came as far south as Tirunelveli. He ravaged the country like a

tornado, and for two or three decades his subordinates ruled the land, shifting the capital to Madurai city further north inland. The Pandyan rulers who regained control after this held sway for nearly two centuries until the Nayak governors of Vijayanagar gained supremacy. The Nayaks were famous builders and administrators, as the Tirumalai Nayak Mahal and the Minakshi Temple in Madurai testify. Early in the eighteenth century, the last of the Nayaks died and the land passed over to the Nawab of Arcot, whose title to sovereignty was questioned by the Poligars of Tirunelveli and Ramanathapuram districts, who were bent on remaining independent.

Meanwhile, European nations were also fishing in the troubled waters. Though the Portuguese were the earliest to arrive in India, they lost control of Ceylon and the Coromandel coast to the Dutch in the seventeenth century. Colombo and Tuticorin passed over to the Dutch, and they lost no time in establishing factories and trading posts in many parts of Tirunelveli district. Further, they gained control of the pearl and chank shell fisheries on lease from the local ruler at Madurai. But soon the English showed themselves as powerful rivals to reckon with. Tuticorin changed hands four times between the Dutch and the British, finally becoming British in 1825 A.D.

The "Poligar Wars" of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were among the earliest Indian-militant attempts to oppose creeping British domination over the country. These wars have made Tirunelveli proud of its forbears, proud of their love of freedom, proud of their heroic stand in the face of heavy odds. Puli Thevar and Katta Bomman are two Poligar names

to conjure with; they are historic personalities who live to this day in the hearts of the people in folk songs, ballads and folk plays.

Puli Thevar was the Poligar of Nelkattarseval and the earliest to organise stiff opposition to the British. Born in 1710, he was a leader noted for his personal bravery, indomitable courage, and haughty endurance in battle. An able diplomat, he negotiated alliances with neighbouring Poligars as well as with Travancore State and Mysore, the latter under Hyder Ali. He also contacted the Dutch and the French. The insidious British had offered military assistance to the Nawab of Arcot and a Col. Heron attacked the fort at Nelkattarseval in 1735. He was easily repulsed. Puli Thevar scored a second victory in the battle of Kalakkad inflicting a crushing defeat on Masfus Khan, the Nawab's general. These notable victories made him the spearhead of Poligar opposition to the alien Muslim and British invaders. It took almost a quarter of a century for the Nawab and the British to reduce him; one by one his forts were despoiled and the hero had to escape capture. He died after spending five or six years in the wilderness. Orme and other British writers have paid tribute to the military and diplomatic skill of Puli Thevar. Preceding as he does the heroes of the Sannyasi Rebellion in Bengal (1763-1800) by nearly three decades, Puli Thevar can perhaps be considered the earliest freedom fighter of our land.

The next glorious chapter in Tirunelveli's and the South's fight for freedom was the valorous stand of Jagveera Pandya Katta Bomman Naicker, Poligar of Panchalamkuricchi. Panchalamkuricchi is in the northeastern part of Tirunelveli district and its governance was apportioned



to the Poligar in the reign of Visvanatha Nayak of Madurai, early in the sixteenth century. The Poligars were feudal nobles subservient to the ruler but independent otherwise. They collected revenue on behalf of the ruler, and, paying him an annual subsidy, managed their affairs fairly freely. The lord of some eighty to a hundred villages, Katta Bomman had a fortress in Panchalamkuricchi. It had a double fortification, a thick earthen wall and a wide moat of thorns. In the words of one author, "The Company's officers began by laughing at it, but as their war progressed, they named it 'The Gibraltar of the South', the fall of which was a prize worth some of the bitter fighting in the region."

Refusing to accept the supremacy of the Nawab of Arcot or their alien adviser-representatives the British, Katta Bomman questioned their right to collect tribute from him and others. In 1798, the British Collector called upon Katta Bomman to present himself and explain his actions. When Katta Bomman presented himself at Ramanathapuram, the Collector played the notorious trick of harrying the visitor by not meeting him and fixing him other engagements at other places. Such shabby treatment naturally irritated Katta Bomman and created doubts in his mind about the true intent of the Collector. At last when they met, the Collector seems to have used harsh words and acted most tactlessly, and Katta Bomman, thinking it was all a trap to put him under duress, fought his way out.

The very next year, 1799, fresh from their success in the Mysore Wars, where Tipu Sultan had been killed, the British sent one Major Bannerman to lay siege to Panchalamkuricchi and demand an unconditional surrender.

After a week's resistance, Katta Bomman escaped with two of his younger brothers. He was, however, betrayed and handed over to the British. The Major arranged a big show of a trial, but according to folklore, Katta Bomman asserted his independence and spoke the memorable words, "The earth doth yield when rains the sky; a free king, tribute to none owe I."

Katta Bomman was sentenced to death and, like a felon, was hanged by a roadside tree in Kayattar. He met his end with becoming dignity like a hero, regretting that he was not destined to die fighting. Thinking they had crushed all opposition and throwing off all pretence, the English pensioned off the Nawab of Carnatic and assumed overlordship of all the South.

But the people of Panchalamkuricchi were far from subdued and would not so easily accept the British dictate. In February 1801, dozens of armed men broke into the jail which housed the younger brothers of Katta Bomman and rescued them. Reaching Panchalamkuricchi 30 miles off, they gathered their men who turned up in thousands. Workers and soldiers brought out a large store of hidden arms and three thousand men set to work to achieve a remarkable feat, that of rebuilding the ravaged fortress of Panchalamkuricchi. With astounding speed, they rebuilt in fourteen days and nights the entire fort, to the chagrin of the British.

Within five days, the British started an offensive, but were unable to break through. Oomai Thurai, the younger of the two brothers, born dumb, exhibited rare leadership. Showing praiseworthy loyalty, the people of Panchalamkuricchi defeated the British. The British then sent a fresh force under one General Agnew and a major battle

ensued, "the largest operation in the South other than the Mysore Wars." After terrible carnage, Panchalamkuricchi fell in May 1801. But Oomai Thurai and his brother Sevattayya escaped.

Oomai Thurai was saved on the battle-field by the noble sacrifice of a dying soldier and his rustic mother. A village woman searching the battle-field for her wounded son, at last discovered him. But he refused to be attended to and wanted his mother at once to remove to safety his "swami" (master) lying bleeding and unconscious nearby. The mother left her own son and carried Oomai Thurai to safety and nurtured him back to health.

A last-ditch battle was fought by Oomai Thurai and his brother, with the aid of the Marudu Brothers of Sivaganga, who had collected forty thousand soldiers. In a few months, the ding-dong battle ended in an English victory. Oomai Thurai and his brother Sevattayya and the Marudu Brothers were all hanged.

With childish spite, the English, so afraid of Panchalamkuricchi raising its head once again, not only razed the Panchalamkuricchi fort to the ground, but further ploughed the area with the aid of asses and sowed thorns and thistle where the fortress stood. The very name of Panchalamkuricchi was deleted from all maps and official papers, and villages of the principality were distributed among loyal Poligars, mainly the Poligar of Ettiyapuram.

Despite all this, Katta Bomman and his brothers and helpers continued to live—and live to this day—in folk songs and rustic open air plays as the heroes of an independent past. At the site of Katta Bomman's execution, passers-by each threw a stone and a small hillock grew

thereby. This hillock perpetuated his memory for a long time. In recent years, an impressive statue of Katta Bomman has been erected at the place and a new fort has been built in Panchalamkuricchi, a replica of the old fort, as fitting memorials to the great hero and his valiant brothers.

Within a few years of the crushing of Katta Bomman and his brothers, another revolt rocked British hold on the South. The sons of Tipu Sultan were lodged after the Mysore Wars in Vellore Fort in North Arcot district. Inspired by them, the soldiers in the employ of the English revolted in Vellore Fort in July 1806. "Thousands of fugitives who fled Coimbatore and Mysore after discomfiture," says Dr K. Rajayyan, "made Vellore their centre of activity. Recruited from the broken ranks of the rebels of Tirunelveli, the Twentythird Regiment played the most conspicuous role in the mutiny. It was the introduction of a new type of hat, designed by Gen. Agnew, the principal executioner of the rebels of Tirunelveli, that touched off the flame. Betels and small *chappatties*, as in the revolt of 1800-01, served as summons to bring the insurgents to the arena of conflict. As the rebels of South India fought for the overthrow of British power, the sepoys of Vellore too made a similar bid." But, unfortunately, like the heroes of Tirunelveli and Ramanathapuram, the Vellore sepoys too were unable to stem the tide of growing British influence.

Dr K. Rajayyan draws attention to one unique characteristic of the revolt of Katta Bomman and his allies. He says:

As a popular and violent movement of major proportions, the Rebellion of 1800-01 was the first and

last of its kind in India. While the Great Rebellion of 1857 was substantially a sepoy mutiny, the Nationalist Movement of the recent past was fundamentally a non-violent struggle. The South Indian Revolt, on the other hand, combined in itself the military features of the one and the popular character of the other. In organisation as well as in implementation, it preserved its popular characteristic and swept over a region as extensive as the Rebellion of 1857 did. The British records repeatedly refer to the inhabitants flocking to the standard of the insurrection voluntarily. Substantially no vested interests were involved. Guided by a zeal of disinterested patriotism, the insurgents rushed to the arena of conflict not only for the emancipation of Jambu Dweepa from the control of the English and to re-establish their rajahships on a footing of former dignity, but to regain their freedom for the pursuit of their economic welfare. In fact, the patriots transcended their communal, linguistic, regional and religious barriers in their struggle for the attainment of a national ideal.

Not only was the Rebellion organised on an extensive scale, it was fought with remarkable determination. The English had suffered the heaviest casualties they ever did in any of the internal disturbances in India before 1857. The Madras Council in its letter to George Barlow, the Governor-General of Bengal (1805-07) has admitted that 'the magnitude of this evil appeared to increase, with the increasing demands upon the military and pecuniary resources of this (Madras) Presidency'. It further asserted that the Company lost more European blood in this insurrection than even in the conquest of

Mysore. But the patriots paid more dearly. Neither well disciplined nor adequately armed, they faced not infrequently total annihilation.

The struggle witnessed the British savagery reaching unprecedented heights. Stories of these atrocities passed from generation to generation losing none of their awe in the process of transmission while the sight of the desolated villages and forts added a melancholy note to this sad memory.

This then was the heroic background that Chidambaram inherited in his boyhood days. Additionally, he was to grow to manhood in an era that saw the establishment of the Indian National Congress and the advent of Bal Gangadhar Tilak as the robust champion of virulent Indian nationalism.

## A POOR MAN'S PLEADER

VALLINAYAKAM OLAKANATHA Chidambaram Pillai, known to posterity as V. O. Chidambaram Pillai, was born in a family of old-time pleaders in the small town of Ottapidaram, Tirunelveli district, on the 5th of September, 1872. Ottapidaram was then the headquarters of a *taluk* of that name which included within its borders more affluent and better known towns like Tuticorin, Koilpatti and Maniyacchi. Two-thirds of the taluk was zamindari area, the Ettiyapuram zamin with 349 villages being the principal one. The famous rebel Poligar centre of Panchalamkuricchi was also within the taluk borders, located almost next door to Ottapidaram.

Ottapidaram taluk was almost uniformly black cotton soil, a plain relieved by tamarind clusters here and there. Acacia thickets abounded in every tank bed. The rich loamy soil produced not only cotton, but also Bengal gram, *cumbu* (a coarse grain) and *cholam* fodder. The tanks, called "oorani", were numerous; fed by the north-east monsoon, they provided water for the crops. Well cultivation with the aid of bullocks was common, and with careful manuring good crops of tobacco, *cholam*, chillies, vegetables and betel leaf were obtained in some places. *Vellalas*, *maravas* and *shanars* were the main communities in the taluk, in that numerical order. The vellala community, to which Chidambaram Pillai belonged, was a reasonably well to do group, conservative, cultured, ortho-

dox and strictly vegetarian. A few among them had taken to learning the alien English tongue; even without school education in English, some of them were able to pass the test to practise as pleaders in the courts of the day.

Chidambaram Pillai's grandfather and father, also a paternal uncle of his were all pleaders. As a matter of fact, the ancestral house was commonly known as "the house of the vakils".

Chidambaram was named after his grandfather, whose sound knowledge of Tamil literature and versification got him the popular title "Poet Chidambaram Pillai." The grandson also imbibed this love of literature; even if he were not to achieve fame in the political and marine fields, Chidambaram Pillai's name would still be remembered for his contributions to Tamil literature.

Chidambaram Pillai's father was Olakanatha Pillai and his mother Paramayi Ammal. They had seven children, five boys and two girls.

Young Chidambaram first went to school in Ottapidaram. It was a "pial school" of the good old days; boys would sit on an open "pial" or verandah in the teacher's house, learning to write the alphabet in sand spread on the ground. By this method, the boys learnt by rote several complicated multiplication tables, and verses from Tamil poets, particularly some admonitory works like "Nanneri" and "Moothurai", which emphasized good conduct and sound character. They would do sums by "mental arithmetic" producing correct answers sooner than the modern student could write down his sum with pen and paper.

But, English education was also necessary since it was needed for dealings with Government institutions. There was no school in Ottapidaram where Chidambaram Pillai's



son could learn English. Hence a school was established in the town, with a teacher brought from Tuticorin. After acquiring sufficient knowledge of English, Chidambaram went to Tuticorin to join the St Francis Xavier High School. After finishing high school, he passed the Matriculation Examination from the Caldwell College, which was also in Tuticorin.

As a young man, Chidambaram was reputed to be a turbulent youngster interested in games and sports such as horse-riding, swimming, climbing trees, "silambam" (indigenous stick-play), sword-play, wrestling, archery and shooting. He was uncontrollable and got into many scrapes, which annoyed his father, who often chastised him. On one occasion, Chidambaram, unable to put up with the beatings he got from his father, decided to run away from home. Getting his head shaven, he quietly left home, imagining he would be a mendicant for life. Wandering in this guise, he reached Madurai city, but after a week or ten days, the ardour for a life of mendicancy lost its charm to him and he wanted to return home. By this time, his people were also frantically searching for him. Coming to know of his presence in Madurai, the father rushed there and brought him home. Tears on both sides ended the row.

Back in Ottapidaram, Chidambaram was sent to work as a clerk in the local Taluk Office; it was hoped this would sober him. But, Chidambaram did not like the work, and asked his parent's approval for studying law to take up the profession of his elders. The gratified father arranged for him to stay with two legal luminaries in distant Trichinopoly town. In those days law could be studied privately and Chidambaram showed keen interest

in studies. He appeared for the Pleadership Examination of the High Court of Judicature, Madras, held in Tirunelveli in February 1894, and passed in the Second Grade. Chidambaram was now a "Second Grade Pleader", which pleased the elders of the family greatly.

Chidambaram Pillai then started practising in the Sub-Magistrate's Court in Ottapidaram, and showed an aptitude for Criminal cases. He excelled in cross-examination and soon started earning more than many established seniors. But he was not money-minded; he prided himself as the protector of justice. He decried the system of "touts", which according to him only enriched lawyers at the expense of the clients. When needed he appeared without fees to extricate hapless victims of police persecution. He soon earned a reputation as "the poor man's lawyer".

The police, naturally, did not take kindly to this "youngster" who made things difficult for them. They were waiting for a suitable opportunity to put him in his place, and this occurred when a Police Head Constable was attacked by someone. Desiring to prevent Chidambaram Pillai from appearing for the defendants, the police cleverly included him among the accused. All the same, they unofficially bargained with him promising to remove his name from the list of accused if he would not appear against the prosecution. To their pleasant surprise Chidambaram Pillai readily assented and got his name removed. When the case came up for hearing, however, they discovered to their dismay that the main pleader for the defendants was none other than Chidambaram Pillai himself. He had cleverly outwitted them. The prosecution case was shattered by Pillai's arguments and the

defendants were acquitted to the great chagrin of the police.

Not content, the police instituted another case against him charging him of tampering with the witnesses for the prosecution. Here again, Chidambaram Pillai came off with flying colours, Lionel Wibert, the Joint Magistrate, dismissing the case with cost. The Head Constable who was instrumental in putting Pillai to all this trouble got dismissed.

Not only the police, but other officials too had reason to fear Chidambaram Pillai. He was dead set against corruption in the services and got a sub-magistrate and two officials punished for illegal gratification. While this pleased the public at large, it left his father unhappy. The old man, brought up in the old loyalist school, could not take kindly to his son crossing swords with officialdom like this. He was afraid Chidambaram was sure to come to grief sooner or later.

Another case at about this time highlighted the differences between father and son. An indigent man had taken a small loan from an European businessman through an intermediary. The intermediary had an eye on a piece of ancestral land belonging to the indigent fellow, and hoping to possess it, got the European businessman to institute legal proceedings. The white man engaged Olakanatha Pillai, Chidambaram's father, to conduct his case. The distraught defendant approached Chidambaram Pillai and unburdened himself. Chidambaram Pillai assured him of all help and told him not to worry. On the day the case came up for hearing, when Olakanatha Pillai had finished his arguments ably, the Magistrate turned to the defendant and asked him if he had no

*vakil* to plead his case. For a moment it looked as though his case would go by default, but then a voice was heard in the court and everyone turned round to see Chidambaram Pillai standing up saying, "Here I am."

In his cross-examination, Chidambaram tore to pieces the evidence led by his own father and proved many of the witnesses false. The case was decided in favour of the defendant. Chidambaram had won against his own father, who was reputed to be an able and successful pleader himself. Congratulations poured in from all sides, and the defendant fell at Chidambaram Pillai's feet to thank him for having been his saviour. This poor man whom Chidambaram Pillai saved became one of his staunchest lieutenants in the years that followed. Madasami, the man, stood by Chidambaram Pillai unflinchingly during the stormy days of the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company and remained Chidambaram Pillai's right-hand man in all his political work. Madasami also became a revolutionary of repute. We shall hear more of him later.

One of the results of the father-son confrontation was that Olakanatha Pillai came to the conclusion that his son Chidambaram should go to Tuticorin for practice. Perhaps the father wished to avoid more of such courtroom encounters, and thought his son would sober down in populous Tuticorin. While he certainly succeeded in the first objective, he was, however, disappointed in the second. Chidambaram Pillai in Tuticorin was to become more "recalcitrant" than ever and lose himself totally in public work. He was lost to the family, but became a gain to the nation.

#### 4. SWADESHI STEAM NAVIGATION COMPANY

IN 1900 Chidambaram Pillai moved to Tuticorin to set up legal practice there. The town owed its affluence to the port which had been in existence for several centuries. Tuticorin was naturally endowed to grow into a big port: The Gulf of Mannar in which it was situated is almost land-locked and rarely visited by storms. The harbour opened into the gulf and remained calm throughout the year despite the two monsoons that visited the district. Hare Island gave protection during the south-west monsoon and Church Island similarly helped during the north-east monsoon.

Ships used to anchor five miles off in the sea and unload into lighters; only those goods that could be handled by manual labour could be unloaded. There was a fine harbour for boats, a short public jetty and many private jetties. At the time Chidambaram Pillai moved into Tuticorin, the port's main traffic was with Colombo, and the British India Steam Navigation Company, a purely British concern, was operating a daily service. It was a virtual monopoly.

Tuticorin had a mixed population, and the percentage of Christians was higher than the district average. This was due to a historical reason: almost the whole of the sea-faring Parava community was converted *en masse* to Christianity in the sixteenth century. St Francis Xavier

was among those who had toiled in the area and other missionaries had also worked strenuously in the district.

As a lawyer, Chidambaram Pillai easily made headway. He made many friends, both in the profession and outside it. Somasundara Bharati, Chionna Annasami Iyer, P.L. Vengu Iyer, K.R. Venkatarama Iyer and S. Visvanatha Iyer were some of his professional friends. They used to meet frequently if not daily in the house of another mutual friend Dr Perunkulam A. Narayana Iyer. Their discussions ranged from Tamil literature in which many of them were interested to politics of the day in which all exhibited some interest.

Chidambaram Pillai was a married man when he shifted to Tuticorin. Five years before, he married Valliammai, who proved an ideal companion. She was soft-spoken and quiet, but was not unlettered like most girls of the day. Her father had taught her enough Tamil to enable her to read and appreciate the classic "Kural" of Poet Tiru-Valluvar, the most popular didactic work in the Tamil language. The maxims of Valluvar containing mature wisdom on all aspects of life have formed the warp and woof of Tamil culture for almost two thousand years. Chidambaram Pillai, himself an ardent admirer of Valluvar, was naturally very happy with her.

Valliammai also proved to be a person with courage of conviction, which again was to Chidambaram Pillai's taste. Once Pillai entertained a blind sage at home and Valliammai willingly served him food. But soon, relatives grumbled that the man was of a low caste and it was improper that he should be entertained at home. Pillai had no great faith in caste differences, and Valliammai told him not to bother about what other people said or

felt. She stood by him solidly and Pillai was able to keep the sage in his house even after this. That not only Chidambaram Pillai but his wife should also dare to stand for the so-called downtrodden castes nearly eighty years ago greatly redounds to the credit of both of them.

They were an ideal couple. But this idyllic marriage was not to last long. Almost within a year of his shifting to Tuticorin, Pillai lost his wife. He was only 29 then, and there was no issue. A second marriage was mooted and Pillai married Minakshi, another girl from the same family; she bore him eight children, four boys and four girls.

At this time, during his professional visits to Madras, Chidambaram Pillai came to know Swami Ramakrishnananda, the founder of the Sri Ramakrishna Math and Mission in Madras. The fact that Swami Vivekananda realised his destiny in Cape Comorin, that he had many ardent disciples in the city, and that it was M.C. Alasingaperumal, a poor schoolmaster disciple of his in the city, who was instrumental in sending him off to Chicago, endeared Madras to the Swami and likewise endeared him to the people of the city. While the earlier call by Raja Ram Mohan Roy had few listeners in the south, Swami Vivekananda's vibrant call for spiritual and national resurgence found a ready echo. Thus it was, that soon after Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa's demise, "Sasi Maharaj" (Swami Ramakrishnananda), who was the Master's devoted personal attendant, was sent by Vivekananda to start a Math in Madras. Ramakrishnananda was an able organiser and endeared himself to the elite of the south. He not only set the Math on a solid footing but also patronised many other good causes.

Chidambaram Pillai, who met him at the time of the Partition of Bengal, was advised by Ramakrishnananda to take up Swadeshi work in right earnest. Pillai took the advice to heart and soon made Tuticorin the envy of even Madras. He 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. Thanks to Pillai's indefatigable energy and enthusiastic work, all these units thrived well.

The successful manner in which Pillai was conducting these institutions induced some local merchant princes to urge him into a new venture. They wanted Pillai to do something to break the strangling monopoly of the British shipping concern in the coastal trade with Ceylon. As a man of the world and as an able organiser, they thought he could help them.

The railway line to Rameswaram and Dhanushkodi now connecting India by ferry boat with Ceylon had not been opened at the time, and Tuticorin port happened to handle all India-Ceylon traffic in passengers as well as cargo. It was a time when indentured labour was being sent in large numbers to distant places like Fiji and Mauritius, South Africa and South America. Annually, at least a lakh of passengers were embarking at Tuticorin. Besides, there was a large trade in the export of cattle to Ceylon, in addition to the usual movement of rice, cotton and salt. British merchants had established themselves in Tuticorin, primarily because of its textile and salt potentialities, and they were always able to get decided advantage from the British shipping company. The company fattened on in-



come from the Indian customers, but was always partial to the British traders and indifferent to Indian complaints.

Earlier, attempts were made in the South to overcome the British monopoly, but they however did not last long. A leading Indian Christian gentleman, Dr Dhanakoti Raju of Tuticorin, guided by public interest, had in the eighteen-nineties run a rival steamer company and compelled the British company to convert their weekly service to Tuticorin into a daily one.

Still earlier, a firm belonging to a Chettiar family of Athangudi in nearby Ramanathapuram district, with overseas interests, the "Na. Mu. Company" of Moulmein, Burma, had defied the British monopoly by operating its own steamer cargo service between Tamil Nadu and Andhra. Its 810-ton cargo vessel carried cotton from Nagapatnam port to Kakinada, passing Madras en route.

With these precedents in mind, the Tuticorin merchants consulted Chidambaram Pillai. They had only the chartering of a ship in mind, but Pillai placed before them a wider plan. Combining patriotism and business, Swadeshism and shipping, he suggested to them the idea of floating their own steamship company which would operate a fleet of its own and thus prove an answer to all their problems. They agreed, but entrusted Pillai with the responsibility of organising such a service. Thus the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company Ltd. came into being in Tuticorin in October 1906.

Chidambaram Pillai could easily have made the new company a privately owned shipping concern; he could easily have avoided the nomenclature "Swadeshi". But he was first and foremost a nationalist at heart desiring economic independence as much as political freedom; he was

one who believed in the largest public interest. So he made the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company a joint stock, public limited company, with shares open to the people at large.

The Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company Ltd. was on October 16, 1906 registered under the Indian Companies Act of 1882, as Registered No 13 of 1906. Its Registered Office was in No 85, Great Cotton Road, Tuticorin. The capital of the company was ten lakh rupees, divided into 40,000 shares of Rs 25 each, "to be held exclusively by Indians, Ceylonese and citizens of other nations of the East."

P. Pandithoreyswamy Thevar, Zamindar of Palavatham and President of the Madura Tamil Sangam, Madura was President and Secretary of the Company. Pandithoreyswamy Thevar was not only a rich zamindar, but a well-known lover of the Tamil language; Chidambaram Pillai had come to know him intimately because of this common interest, and in May 1905, Pillai had been "gratefully accepted" as an Examining Member of the Madura Tamil Sangam, of which Thevar was President.

Besides the President, thirteen leading men agreed to be on the initial Board of Directors. They were: S.V. Nallaperumal Pillai; A.M.M. Arunachalam Pillai; S.S.V. Krishna Pillai; B. Venkata Ramanujam Naidu; S.T.A. Arumugam Pillai; A.S.V. Velayudham Pillai; V.A.A. Athinarayanan Chetti ; V.A.V.S. Venkatachalam Chettiyar; A.S.V. Thiruchittambalam Chettiyar; A.A.A. Arumugam Chettiyar; N.S. Deivanayagam Pillai; M.V. Maya Nadar; and Ismail Hajee Abdool Rahiman Sait.

An Assistant Secretary managed the day to day affairs of the Company, and Chidambaram Pillai was prevailed

upon to undertake its responsibility. He had to give up his legal work since conducting a modern shipping service was no mean task and demanded his total attention.

The five Legal Advisers of the Company were all eminent men: C. Vijayaraghavachariar, District Court Vakil of Salem; the Honourable K.R. Guruswamy Aiyar, B.A. B.L., High Court Vakil, Tirunelveli and the Honourable M. Krishnan Nair, B.A.B.L., High Court Vakil, Calicut—both of them Members of the Madras Legislative Council; Paul Peter Pillai, Barrister-at-Law, Madurai; and P.L. Vengu Aiyar, B.A.B.L., District Court Vakil, Tuticorin. C. Vijayaraghavachariar, “the Lion of Salem”, was an outstanding lawyer and constitutional authority, who was elected President of the Indian National Congress in 1920; Krishnan Nair became Law Member of Madras in the 'twenties. K.R. Guruswamy Aiyar was a noted Moderate leader of the day. Three Chettiar firms and one Bank acted as Bankers to the Company: Messrs A.I.A.R., V.E.N.K.R.M.A., A.R.A.R.S.M. and the South India Bank Ltd., Tuticorin.

The most noteworthy aspect of the new Company was its list of Objects. These were wide-ranging and clearly stated in the Prospectus, and showed categorically that the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company was not to be just a commercial shipping service but the very basis of an all-round shipping industry in India. The Objects listed were:

1. To facilitate travelling and trade as well as to establish a cheap and reliable Steamer service between Tuticorin and Colombo and all such other ports and places as the Company may hereinafter decide.

2. To popularize the art of Navigation to Indians, Ceylonese and other Nations of the East and to make them profit by it.
3. To impart practical instructions in the art of Navigation and the art of Ship-building.
4. To promote and bring about union and co-operation among the Indians, Ceylonese and the other Nations of the East with regard to Navigation and trade.
5. To employ Indians, Ceylonese and other Asiatics as Travelling Agents for studying the questions concerning the demand and supply in various commercial centres.
6. To open Docks and Yards for the cleaning, repairing and building of Steam Ships, Sailing Vessels, Steam Launches, Boats, etc.
7. To carry on trade in, and to improve, such indigenous industries as the Company may from time to time think expedient.
8. And generally to do all such acts and things, as, in the opinion of the Company, are incidental or conducive to the attainment of all or any of the objects of the Company.

In the matter of dividend, the Prospectus assured: "The traffic and commerce between the ports of Tuticorin and Colombo are in a flourishing condition. The prospects of the Company are very promising and a dividend of more than 100 per cent is assured."

Another paragraph in the Prospectus left no doubt about the national character of the venture. It said: "It is fervently hoped that all patriotic Indians, Ceylonese and other Asiatics will cordially co-operate in promoting the

laudable objects of the Company, by taking a large number of shares and otherwise doing their utmost to further the concern whose motto is no other than advance of the mother country."

Half-page advertisements in the newspapers of the day gave the additional information that the Company would establish Schools for teaching Indian, Ceylonese and other Asiatic students the theory of navigation as well as the rudiments of ship-building.

The Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company, in short, was not a mere profit-oriented business concern, but a truly national venture with the larger idea of Asian resurgence and co-operation to boot. It was neither a mere shipping service between two ports, but was intended to be the nucleus of an all-embracing shipping industry in India and other countries of Asia, owned and operated by the nationals of India and other countries of Asia. It was a challenge by resurgent Asia to established and entrenched British vested interests.

## 5. SWADESHI FORGES AHEAD

THE FOUNDING of the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company was hailed as a landmark in Indian industry all over the land. Chidambaram Pillai sought the blessings of his guru, Lokmanya Tilak, for the venture. Tilak Maharaj was very happy and wrote in his papers "Kesari" and "Mahratta" lauding the effort and calling for the fullest support to it. In Calcutta, Babu Aurobindo Ghose took a keen interest in getting shares for the concern. In Madras, G. Subramania Iyer, the doyen of journalists and himself an ardent promoter of industrial resurgence, welcomed the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company in the pages of his daily "Swadesamitran". Poet Subramania Bharati, editor of the fiery pro-Tilak weekly "India", lauded Chidambaram Pillai's daring entry into the unknown field of modern shipping and said that it behoved everyone generously to invest in the shares of the company. Kasturiranga Iyengar, editor of "The Hindu", editorially observed: "We cannot speak too highly of the object and aim of the Company to popularise the art of navigation to our countrymen. The Company proposes to establish Schools for teaching our countrymen the theory and art of navigation and ship-building. This is one of the greatest national wants at present, and in whatever humble and limited a scale the Company may succeed in supplying it, it shall have the remarkable credit for having been the pioneer in that direction."

Noting that a "strong and influential Directorate" has been formed, that "leading Nattukkottai Chettians are on the Board, which is a guarantee of the efficient business which the Company may be expected to do", and that "leading Chettiar Banks have agreed to be the Company's bankers", "The Hindu" went on to observe: "We read in the Prospectus that the prospects of the Company are very promising, and that a dividend of more than 100 per cent is assured. The shareholders are required to co-operate with one another for the success of the Company and as such are bound to travel and traffic only by the steamships and other vessels of the Company to the exclusion of others. There is an extensive traffic and commerce between Tuticorin and Colombo, and when the shareholders begin to utilise fully the advantages afforded by the new Company, the extraordinary dividend of 100 per cent put down by the Company should be quite easily realised. We trust our patriotic countrymen will consider it their duty to co-operate and promote the laudable objects of the Company as best as they may. We wish the venture our heartiest success."

The first major purchase of shares in the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company was by a Bombay businessman, Hajee Mohamed Fakir Sait, whose two lakh rupees for 8,000 shares provided the working capital for the Company to function with speed. Pandithoreyswamy Thevar, the President, subscribed for 2,000 shares valued at Rs 50,000. The public-spirited Mandayam family of Madras, under the influence of Mandayam Srinivasa-charya, provided some 70,000 rupees, contributed by various members of the family circle, men and women, who pledged their jewelry to buy the shares. By December

end, the Managing Director of the Company announced that "the preliminary work of the Company in the collection of shares is in full swing. Over 10,000 shares have been subscribed." The response from the public was indeed very heartening.

While the Swadeshi company was negotiating for the purchase of its own ships, it also came to an understanding with the Shah Lines of Bombay, an Indian company, to run a chartered service between Tuticorin and Colombo. When the ship was put on the line on November 20, 1906, a hectic competition began between the British line and the Shah Lines actively supported by the Swadeshi company. A contemporary report from a Tuticorin Correspondent appearing in "The Hindu" of December 10, 1906 says:

Since the 20th ultimo, the Swadeshi steamer *Shah Allum* has been running between Tuticorin and Colombo. The majority of Indian merchants shipped their cargo in the Swadeshi steamer. Every time the Swadeshi steamer carries more passengers. This has naturally aroused the jealousy of the British India Steam Navigation Company which had hitherto monopolised shipping. Trade competition between the two companies is very keen, each company lowering its tariff and fare day after day. The authorities have not always been impartial. The impression that the white Civilian is likely to favour the white trader is gaining ground.

The Correspondent then went on to say how this partiality has been noted:



Both companies have their booking offices opposite the railway station. The B.I. has the audacity to place on a blackboard the word 'Swadeshi' very prominently as 'Swadeshi Tapals and Passenger Carrying Company'. This, to say the least, is likely to decoy passengers who search for the Swadeshi office. Hearing that a breach of peace is likely to occur at the railway station premises where these booking offices are located, Mr Waller, Joint Magistrate, had ordered the Sub-Magistrate and the Police to attend the station daily when the morning train brings many Colombo passengers. On Friday (Dec. 7) morning, the Sub-Magistrate was absent and a scuffle took place between a Railway Ticket Collector and Mr Murugiah of the Swadeshi Steamer. Mr Murugiah was illegally arrested and brutally assaulted by the Police and placed before the Sub-Magistrate, who, within half an hour of the arrest, without giving an opportunity to the accused to engage Counsel, without examining defence witnesses, even before the masters of the accused whose office is only a furlong off could know of the arrest, tried the accused summarily at the railway station and convicted him to undergo one week's imprisonment and a fine of rupees ten.

The South Indian Railway, at the time, was a European-owned private company and its officials too were siding with the British India company against the Swadeshi company.

But this case was not to remain closed like this. A petition for enlarging accused Murugiah on bail was presented before the Joint Magistrate who called for an explanation from the Sub-Magistrate. While it was

reported "great excitement prevails in the town and the appellate authority's action is anxiously awaited", *The People's Guardian*, a weekly published in Tirunelveli and *The Hindu* of Madras both took up the matter in right earnest. In a lengthy editorial, "The Hindu" said:

There is a very keen competition between the British India Steam Navigation Company and the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company of Tuticorin regarding the booking of passengers to Colombo. Ever since the spirit of Swadeshim sprang up at Tuticorin, the B.I. company have lost thousands in the competition, and the tactics adopted by them to suppress their successful rival are sometimes questionable. For a long time, the B.I. enjoyed a regular monopoly, and their influence with and hospitality to officials were well-known. The agents, brokers and peons of both the companies usually go to the railway station add vie with each other in securing Colombo passengers to their respective steamship companies. On the 7th instant, the B.I. people were admitted into the railway station platform without tickets, but a Swadeshi man named Murugiah was prevented. He resented and the result was a scuffle. The Station Master sent a report that his Ticket Collector was assaulted and the police charge-sheeted Murugiah under Secs. 121 and 122 of the Railway Act. The Sub-Magistrate appears on the scene and holds a judicial trial on the station platform with guards all round to prevent egress and ingress. The whole trial was over in a trice and in the twinkling of an eye. The Sub-Magistrate showed to the railway authorities what a mighty man he was . . . He has adopted a Russian

method of trial and gave absolutely no chance to the accused to conduct his defence . . .

Ultimately, Murugiah was released on bail and a retrial was ordered by the Joint Magistrate. A Correspondent reported, "The public of Tuticorin displayed great enthusiasm . . . by carrying Murugiah in a chariot in grand procession through important streets with *Bande Mataram* shouts."

Could the British company keep quiet? A news report said:

As a tit for tat, the B.I. Company organised a counter-demonstration and led a Passenger Broker in a regular procession in a palanquin and had the picture of the Emperor and Empress in a carriage behind. With cheers of hip, hip, hurrah, this loyal procession was paraded through Tuticorin streets. The object of this procession was evidently calculated to irritate the feelings of officials towards the Swadeshi people . . .

Besides these propagandist efforts, the British company was also acting behind the scenes. It brought pressure to bear on Essaji Tajbhai of the Shah Lines in Bombay, thereby preventing the further running of their ship on the Tuticorin-Colombo route. Their ship *Shah Allum* was quietly withdrawn from the route and it later resumed service under new conditions, probably instigated by the British company. These new terms of shipping service were not to the taste of the merchants of Tuticorin and they refused to accept them. This necessitated the Swadeshi Company immediately making arrangements to put in

steamers of their own. Chidambaram Pillai rushed to Colombo and returned with a big ship taken on lease.

But leased operations did not prove fully satisfactory. Operational costs also proved uneconomical. Chidambaram Pillai decided it was best that the Swadeshi company procure two ships of its own and place them on the Tuticorin run. For this purpose, towards the last week of December 1906, Pillai went to Bombay, got two ships for the Swadeshi company.

These words were not lightly spoken. For, soon after Chidambaram Pillai left for Bombay, his first-born, son Olakanathan, fell seriously ill. Pillai's wife too was in delicate health, being in the family way. Friends and relatives hectically urged him to make a flying visit to Tuticorin, but he flatly turned down their plea. "I leave the welfare of my son to the hands of God", he wrote, "who is any day a surer master of destiny than a humble mortal like myself." Pillai's trust in God did not go misplaced; little Olakanathan survived the ordeal.

In Bombay, Tilak Maharaj gave letters of introduction to influential merchant princes of the city urging them to do their best to help the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company in all ways, both in investments and in procuring vessels. Procuring a ship is not an easy task any day; and, in those far-off days, when India had no ship-building industry of its own, it was entirely dependent on ships built in Europe or America. New ships were virtually not available and only second-hand ships could be procured, and that too after a great deal of search and parleying. Japan was a new star in the East and there were hopes that contacts with that country might help. Chidambaram Pillai left no stone unturned.

Evidence of this is available through a news item sent to "The Hindu" of Madras by "The Indian Glass Student in Japan", who by all indications seems to have been Ogale, the founder of the Ogale Glass Works. Ogale had gone to Japan to learn the art of glass technology and, after a great deal of effort, was able to make friends with the Japanese. The news item sent by him and published in "The Hindu" of December 20, 1906, says:

The other day I received a letter from Tuticorin asking me to let the Swadeshi Steamship Company know the cost of a second-hand steamer of a certain capacity. I called upon a journalist to advise me as to how to proceed in the matter and whom I should contact for the estimate. In the course of our conversation, he told me that the whole sea-borne trade of India is in the hands of foreigners engaging 9,000 steamers from all parts of the world. He said that Britain contributed 90 per cent of the steamships. India is a large harvest field for England!, he exclaimed. The next necessary question was, "Why is India sleeping? Are there no rich people in India who can own ships and manage the affairs on commercial lines?" I had nothing to say. The Japanese, it seems, have built many ships in time of war and some of these are idle. If India wishes to open Swadeshi steam navigation lines, the Japanese merchants will be glad to co-operate with them and open ocean lines to all parts of the world. They are ready to subscribe and work with the Indians to promote the welfare of the two nations. In commerce, he says, England monopolises 62 per cent of the imports of India. We are Asiatics, he says, and we wish that better commercial rela-

tions should exist between the two countries than now (now  $1\frac{1}{2}$  per cent of the imports). He added that the Indo-Japanese Association will do all that lies in her power to promote the commercial relations of the two countries, to send experts to India to open any business or trade, to import raw materials or export products of Japan. He requested me to write to all the leading papers about the Association which has the full support of all the people of Japan and India as well.

The "war" referred to here is the Russo-Japanese War of 1904, a major surprise for all the world, in which the newly formed Asian State of Japan scored a tremendous victory over an established European power like Russia. The British in India were not unaware of Japan's solicitude for close and friendly relations with India; they, of course, neither encouraged it nor did they promote any development of trade and industry in the manner envisaged in the above news item. Chidambaram Pillai could not extend the contacts nor benefit by them.

However, information received from another quarter proved useful. Learning that ships were available for purchase in France, Chidambaram Pillai got one of his friends, S. Vedomurti Mudaliar, to rush to Paris. Crossing many preliminary hurdles, Vedomurti Mudaliar was able to buy two ships for the Swadeshi company. Two steam launches were also procured simultaneously. The ships were re-conditioned and fitted to suit their plying as passenger-cum-cargo vessels on the Tuticorin-Colombo run. The Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company proudly announced on December 24, 1906: "One beautiful Mail steamer has been purchased for the Company. Its net tonnage is 1,817;

gross 2,504. It has accommodation in saloons for 44 first class, 24 second class and 1,000 third class passengers on deck. It can carry 2,500 tons of cargo. It is fitted with electric lights. Its speed is 15 knots per hour. The steamer will be placed on the Colombo-Tuticorin line before the middle of January."

The two ships and launches arrived in Bombay soon after. Chidambaram Pillai had a hero's welcome when he returned home with the ships flying the national flag of the day bearing the words "Vande Mataram" inscribed in Nagari characters on it. The entire town of Tuticorin presented a gala appearance, with flags and bunting. People flocked in thousands to the beach to see the ships "S.S. Gaelia" and "S.S. Lawoe" anchored at some distance in the sea. Bharati's "India" weekly depicted the scene with a lead-cut picture showing the ships flying the national flag and the enthusiastic people of Tuticorin welcoming them wildly. Editorially, he remarked that Bharata Mata, their Common Mother, was sure to rejoice over this happy event.

## 6. BRITISH MACHINATIONS

THE ADVENT of the two *Swadeshi* ships, while it roused Indian enthusiasm to fever-pitch, however, alarmed the British India Steam Navigation Company and its allies—the white merchants and white officials of Tuticorin. When the *Swadeshi* company was formed, the British monopolist had ridiculed it as a nine-day wonder which would have an abrupt ending. However, it not only survived but promised to provide tough competition. The facilities provided in the *Swadeshi* ships were not only more modern and uptodate, but also less costly than those in the British ships.

“People who have known Tuticorin and the townspeople a few years ago”, observed a correspondent in *The Press*,

would scarcely believe the news that it has become a stronghold of Swadeshim, and that the changes that have come over its people are, indeed, marvellous. The spirit of Swadeshim which has wrought marvellous changes in Bengal has slowly crept down far South and is exhibited in the attitude of the Tuticorin merchants who were using hitherto the British India Navigation agency as their shippers to ship their cargo to Ceylon. Mr V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, the great *Swadeshi* leader at Tuticorin was the first to start the idea of Swadeshim and to develop it in a marked degree. For



a very long time the B.I. enjoyed a monopoly, and the rival steamers now have deprived that company of a good deal of profit . . .

Worsted in a straight commercial competition, the British company started using its leverage with the Indian Government and the Madras Government to bolster itself. Secret instructions were issued by Government to officials in Tirunelveli district to render all help to the British company as against the Swadeshi one. Taking this cue, Mr Waller, a European who was Head Assistant Collector and Joint Magistrate in Tuticorin, assumed an unfriendly attitude to the Swadeshi company. In one instance, he passed an *ex-parte* order under Sec. 144 I.P.C. restricting the movements and the actual starting of the Swadeshi ships; the order had to be later cancelled by the District Magistrate.

Waller also issued a secret circular to all officials under his jurisdiction advising them to dissuade people from travelling in or using the Swadeshi ships. The "Swadesa-mitran" daily pointed out that Waller transferred to his own file the complaint preferred to the Sub-Magistrate by the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company against the British India Steam Navigation Company for having wilfully brought about a collision between their respective steamers and that no further action had been taken by him though it was over two weeks since the case was transferred to his file. The paper further said that Waller asked the Police Inspector, who was instructed by the Superintendent of Police to enquire into the complaint, "not to interfere in the matter" but to leave everything to himself! Waller was also reported to have directed

Annakutti Sahib, a canvasser of the Swadeshi company, not to go to the port or the railway station, and to have threatened Guruswami Aiyar, Station-House Officer of Police, that he would be transferred to another place for "being interested in the native steamer service" and later to have got this officer transferred to Kulasekharapatnam.

A still more glaring piece of news was given by "Swadesamitran" when it said that Mr Campbell, Agent of the British India Steam Navigation Company in Tuticorin, had been all along putting up with Mr Waller in the same house and only now removed himself to another house.

Other European officials of Tuticorin too exhibited racial partiality quite openly. British officers of the Tuticorin Port, like Port Officer Carlyon and Additional Port Officer Bassett who had control over shipping operations in the vicinity, harassed Swadeshi ships by delaying clearance for departure on some excuse or the other; the ships of the British line were always let off without hitch thus enabling them to score over the Indian rival.

The Colonial Doctor and the local Health Officers joined the game in their own way. As all passengers had to be declared fit for travel, the officers were able to prevent Swadeshi ships leaving whenever there was the slightest show of epidemic disease in the town. For their part, the Customs Officers held up Indian users by delaying customs clearance for their cargo.

In spite of the British official support, the British India Steam Navigation Company lost heavily in income, and, determined to regain its former position, it started an unholy rate war. At first it reduced its freight and passenger rates to a ludicrously low level; Chidambaram Pillai's

influence with the merchants and public of Tuticorin offset this. The British line thereupon offered free trips, yes, free trips and even a free gift of an umbrella, if only they would travel in its ships. Even such enticing offers failed to regain for it the customs lost to the Swadeshi line, as Chidambaram Pillai made it plain to the Indian users that the British company was not so much interested in providing them proper or cheap service—it was already universally accepted that the Swadeshi ships were superior to those put on the route by the British line—as in regaining its lost monopoly. Once the Swadeshi line was put out of action, he added, the British line would not lose any time in raising its rates and fleecing them as before to compensate for the losses now sustained.

When this attempt failed, the British company tried one more tactic: they attempted to buy Chidambaram Pillai off. They offered him a lakh of rupees, no small sum in those days, on one condition that he would give up his connection with the Swadeshi company. Chidambaram Pillai spurned the offer as unworthy of any attention.

While this commercial war between an established and affluent British company and a newly formed Indian company was providing the surprises it did, an impetuous young man by name William D'Estecourt Ashe came on the scene to provide a new impetus to the struggle. Ashe came as the Sub-Collector of Tuticorin and the British officials and merchants of the town lost no time in prejudicing his mind against Chidambaram Pillai and his Swadeshi venture. L.M. Wynch, B.A., C.I.E., I.C.S., the die-hard Collector of the district, was already against Pillai. The Sub-Collector's and Collector's policy was in tune

with the policy of the 'no-nonsense' imperialist in Madras, Governor Sir Arthur Lawley. Lawley himself felt he was carrying out the all-India policy of the day, Viceroy Lord Minto's dual deal of Reforms on the one hand and Repression on the other, of pats on the back for co-operating Moderates and harsh treatment for recalcitrant Extremists.

All too unwittingly, Chidambaram Pillai had stirred the hornet's nest and become a pawn in big game politics.

## SURAT CONGRESS

THE YEAR 1907 saw a turning point in the political climate of the country, because of the Surat Congress. To Chidambaram Pillai both 1907 and 1908 proved to be busy and eventful years.

Although Chidambaram Pillai was very much involved in the task of running the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company, he also found time to take active interest in the affairs of the Congress. Of course, Swadeshi and Congress work went hand in hand, and mostly young men actively working for the Congress were the best canvassers for the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company. One of them, Parali S. Nellayappan, in later years became a famous editor, poet and publisher; another, Nilakantan of Erukkur became famous as Nilakanta Brahmachari, the leading revolutionary of South India,—erroneously made First Accused in the Ashe Murder Case of 1911.

Ever since the Partition of Bengal in 1905, the political situation in India had been simmering. The Swadeshi Movement which started in Bengal swept the country with its three slogans, Swadeshi, Boycott (of British goods) and National Education. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai and Bipin Chandra Pal, the "Lal-Bal-Pal" triumvirs of national action, carried on intensive campaign throughout the country. In May 1907, Bipin Chandra Pal visited Madras for a series of lectures on five consecutive days, presided over by G. Subramania Iyer; his forceful oratory buttressed by his cogent presen-

tation or historical facts in a stentorian voice set the South on fire. Even Moderate leaders who disagreed, and Government servants, admired his eloquence and heard him on the sly. The Madras Government, afraid of the total impact, imposed certain conditions and Pal cancelled the last two of his addresses and left the City.

Meanwhile, arrangements for the 1907 session of the Indian National Congress brought the differences between the Moderates and Nationalists ("Extremists") into the open. Even in the 1906 session in Calcutta, Congress politics had taken an unexpected turn when the venerable Dadabhai Naoroji had virtually sided with the "Extremists" by declaring from the Presidential chair Swaraj as the goal of India. In an attempt to reverse this trend, the Moderates had arranged to hold the 1907 session in Surat, the birth place of Pherozeshah Mehta and a Moderate stronghold. A Moderate leader Dr Rash Behari Ghosh was expected to preside over the Surat session. In a pre-session circular about the subjects to be discussed, there was no mention of Swadeshi, Boycott, National Education or Swaraj.

Worried over the attempt to push the Congress back to an ineffectual past, Lokmanya Tilak decided to oppose the election of Rash Behari Ghosh. He sent word to all his supporters to gather in strength in Surat to defeat all Moderate attempts. Chidambaram Pillai and poet Subramania Bharati, as the chief disciples of Tilak in the South, took from Madras a large contingent of pro-Tilak delegates to Surat. Both Pillai and Bharati have described the events leading to Surat and the imbroglio there. Pillai's contribution to the book "Reminiscences of Lok. Tilak", Vol. III, edited by S.V. Bapat, 1928, reveals his

deep respect for the Lokmanya. Pillai says:

Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak is my political guru. From my twenty-first year, that is from 1893, I was closely following his writings and speeches on politics. They made me feel that India was my country, that the British were wrongfully retaining it and it must be got back from them. Then I considered and discussed with my friends all the ways and means to get it back from them. But I found that none of those ways and means suited the condition of my countrymen. I wanted to meet my political guru and discuss with him those ways and means. The session of the Indian National Congress that was to be held at Surat in 1907 was fast approaching then. I made up my mind to meet my political guru at Surat and discuss with him about those ways and means.

Just then our great patriot Lala Lajpat Rai was released from his deported destination. It struck me and some of my Madras friends that Lala Lajpat Rai was the proper person to preside over the Congress at Surat. I corresponded by wire with my political guru and with Babu Aurobindo Ghose of Bengal about the matter. We three agreed that Lalaji must be made to preside over the Congress. Then we wired about the matter to Lalaji. Although he was not willing at first to accept the Presidentship of the Congress, he finally yielded to our repeated telegraphic requests.

Meanwhile our Moderate friends nominated our great countryman Dr Rash Behari Ghosh to preside over the Congress. We three agreed by telegraphic correspondence that we should propose an amendment in

the open session of the Congress that Lalaji should occupy the chair and that we must, for our support, arrange to have with us a large number of Nationalist delegates from all provinces. Accordingly we wired to the Nationalist leaders of other provinces and they brought a large number of Nationalist delegates to Surat. We also took a great number of Nationalist delegates with us to Surat.

The thirty Nationalist delegates who were taken to Surat from Madras by Bharati and Pillai were led by a senior public worker, N.K. Ramaswami and included S. Duraiswami Iyer, Yatiraj Surendranath Arya and V. Chakkarai Chetty, all young men who were to make a name in South Indian public life later on. Chidambaram Pillai and Mandayam Srinivasacharya undertook to finance the trip of indigent delegates.

In Surat, pre-session efforts at a compromise failed. When the Congress session began on December 26, the Chairman of the Reception Committee finished his address and proposed Dr Rash Behari Ghosh for presiding over the session; Babu Surendranath Bannerjee seconded it. As soon as Surendranath stood up, there were shouts against him dubbing him "Betrayal of Midnapore", a reference to his having sought police help to disperse Nationalist opposition in the Provincial Conference at Midnapore. The day's meeting had to be adjourned at this stage because of the confusion.

Overnight consultations in both camps produced a calmer atmosphere when the Congress resumed the next day. Surendranath Bannerjee continued his speech in the midst of a deceptive calm. The moment his seconding



speech was over, Tilak rushed up the platform to propose an amendment to the nomination for President. Although he had given written intimation of his intention, attempts were made to prevent him from speaking. A volunteer tried to drag him away and shouts of "Push him out!" rent the air. Tilak refused to budge and stood his ground fearlessly. Dr Rash Behari Ghosh started reading his Presidential address and Tilak objected, telling him, "You haven't been duly elected. Why the hurry?" Rash Behari lost his temper and said to Tilak, "You are not permitted to talk!" and went on reading his address.

This was the start for arguments and fistcuffs. Someone throw a chair at Tilak and others rushed towards him. Nationalist delegates from Madras, Punjab and Maharashtra surrounded Tilak to protect him. In the midst of all this, some goondas and policemen showed their presence and started beating Nationalist delegates indiscriminately. Shouts rent the air, chairs, sticks, lathis, chappals flew in the air. A Maharashtrian delegate got hit in the head and blood flowed. The Congress session ended in a melee.

When the Madras delegates returned to their camp, Bharati found two of the Madras delegates badly injured. Describing the scene in his 1908 booklet "Engal Congress Yathrai" (Our Congress Tour), Bharati says:

But although they were hit, they stood unflinchingly to protect their leader . . . 'Where is Chidambaram Pillai of Tuticorin?' asked a friend anxiously . . . I had a doubt that the police might have arrested and taken away Chidambaram Pillai, Duraiswami Iyer, Surendranath Yatiraj Arya and Triplicane Krishnamachari

as pro-Tilak men . . . I went in search of them. They were to be found nowhere. Hearing that Tilak was taking rest in the Nagpur tent well protected by Nationalist delegates, I went there . . . Pillai was not there too. When I returned to our quarters, I saw Yatiraj and Krishnamachari, who told me that both Chidambaram Pillai and Duraiswami Iyer had come out of the Congress pandal and that no harm had befallen them. We heaved a sigh of relief.

After the final break of the Congress, the Nationalists met in Ghee Ganta Wadi under the presidentship of Babu Aurobindo Ghose and decided upon their further plans of action. Chidambaram Pillai was given the responsibility of organising work in the South; Bharati was put in charge of propaganda. Nationalist editors met and decided that week after week they should all simultaneously write on chosen topics and create public opinion.

Although the Congress session in Surat ended in confusion, Chidambaram Pillai's visit to Surat helped to integrate him with his guru Tilak more intimately. Tilak's inspiring personality, lofty ideals and spotless character captivated him. He had occasion to take food with his leader disproving the baseless charge that Tilak was "orthodox". He was happy to hear his guru state publicly "All patriots are of one and the same caste and creed" and sit amidst all of them and eat. Chidambaram Pillai returned to Madras very much invigorated in his pro-Tilak faith.

## 8. GATHERING STORM

RETURNING FROM Surat, Chidambaram Pillai immersed himself in political organisational work and the affairs of the steamship company. Soon after his return, a new star appeared on the Tuticorin horizon in the shape of an itinerant sadhu and *Swadeshi* preacher by name Subramania Sivam. His coming quickened the political tempo in Tuticorin.

Subramania Sivam was born in Batlagundu in Madurai district and early in life had tended towards renunciation. Being poor, his parents migrated to Trivandrum to take advantage of the free feeding facility provided by the "Oottup purai" institution there maintained by the munificent Maharaja of Travancore. While in Trivandrum, Sivam had come in contact with a visiting Arya Samaj preacher, Thakurkhan Chandra Varma, whose words ignited the fire of patriotism in Sivam's mind. An ebullient and irrepressible person, Sivam's philosophical speeches interspersed with political allusions got him into trouble with the Travancore authorities who expelled him. Sivam left the State on foot, spreading the gospel of *Swadeshi* wherever he went. Being a pungent and forceful speaker, his crossing into British India and Tinnevely town attracted attention. His sojourn was in Tuticorin, where he became a guest of Chidambaram Pillai. His arrival there "brought cotton and fire together" as the Tamil proverb goes. The able organiser Chidambaram Pillai needed a

mass orator and Sivam fitted into the role well. Soon they became intimate confidants.

From February 3 till March 9, 1908 Sivam and Pillai addressed meetings daily at the beach in Tuticorin, except for a few days when they did so elsewhere. People gathered in thousands—a ten-thousand crowd was a normal attendance—to hear them.

The main theme of all these speeches was fearlessness, support for *Swadeshi*, boycott of foreign items, and united effort to win freedom for the country. Though these speeches were misinterpreted by the police and other authorities, they were all reasonable and within the law, as we understand it now. For example, one of the speeches later considered offending and which brought punishment for Sivam, only said, “if all Indian people unite, we can easily drive away the Britishers by force; but we ought not to use force, though we ought to have no fear of them; our method of driving them out is by boycott of foreign goods and then they will automatically leave.” Though this was absolutely within the law, in 1908, the wooden-headed British authorities, both administrative and judicial, thought this was rank sedition!

Similarly, an appeal to workers of a textile mill owned by Britishers to stand united and strike for proper wages if their other appeals fail, an approved trade-union activity in all civilised countries, was in 1908 considered a heinous crime! Such were the “benefits” of British rule in those distant days!

The people of Tuticorin became enthusiastically pro-Swadeshi as a result of the speeches of Sivam and Pillai. The workers of the Coral Mills, a British-owned textile unit in Tuticorin, struck work on the 27th of February,

demanding higher wages. The mill was making huge profits and declaring a dividend of 60 per cent to its British share-holders, while the workers were getting only subsistence wages. Chidambaram Pillai and Subramania Sivam espoused the workers' cause.

An index of public sympathy for the workers' cause is the comment in the Tamil daily "Swadesamitran" edited by the great G. Subramania Iyer. Writing under the title "The Strike at Coral Mills", on the 27th of February, 1908, "Swadesamitran" observed:

This wonderful practice of labourers striking work to wrest a concession from their employers was hitherto peculiar to North India where with the help of this weapon workers have taught a lesson to many Feringhee employers. We are glad to see this spirit now spreading to South India and that the people of Tuticorin have begun to realise the value of this weapon. If only Indians stand united, what can the whites, who have come here only to earn money, do? Can they shake their little finger without the help of the natives of the land?

Chidambaram Pillai and Subramania Sivam organised relief camps for the striking workers and carried on negotiations on their behalf with the mill executives. As a negotiator, Pillai took a reasonable stand and the strike was amicably settled, adding to the popularity of the Swadeshi leaders. Although the white merchants welcomed the settlement, they were unhappy that the popularity of the Indian leaders should go on increasing, what with the success of the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company

for one thing and the Coral Mill settlement for another. They ardently desired to "put the Swadeshi leaders in their place" and waited for an opportunity.

The opportunity came in the shape of a new Sub-Collector, an impetuous young man by name Robert William D'Estecourt Ashe, I.C.S. As soon as Ashe took charge in Tuticorin, the whites of the town lost no time in poisoning his susceptible mind against Chidambaram Pillai and Subramania Sivam. He was told that unless something was done to check Pillai and Sivam, there would be a challenge to Government's authority in the whole district. This was a malicious invention, for, although Chidambaram Pillai was a popular hero, he had the least thought of subverting Government.

At this juncture, yet another incident helped to increase Pillai's prestige and anxiety of the white merchants. Many years before, in 1903, a man who was a public pest was murdered in Kulasekharanallur and seven persons were charged for this murder. Of them, the first accused could not be traced and the rest were tried and sentenced. Alagappa Pillai, the absconding first accused, was really an innocent person who had been unnecessarily implicated by the police. After being in hiding for some time, he became a *sannyasi* and assumed a new name, Arumuga Thambiran. In 1908, he was spotted by a constable and arrested. The case came before a sub-magistrate who was notorious for accepting bribes. Chidambaram Pillai appeared for Thambiran and got the case transferred to the Court of the Joint Magistrate, E.H. Wallace. During the course of the trial, the prosecution case was shattered by Pillai's merciless cross-examination and the judge dismissed the case even before

the defence let in its witnesses. Mr Blackstone, the Deputy Superintendent of Police, was so impressed by Pillai's conducting of the case that he publicly shook hands with him in the Court.

However, the ultimate commotion was sparked off by an all-India celebration called "Swaraj Day". The day, March 9, was planned to be celebrated to mark the expected release from jail of Bepin Chandra Pal who had been sentenced to six months for contempt of court, having refused to divulge the authorship of certain items published in his paper "Bande Mataram". Tuticorin and Tirunelveli were arranging to celebrate the day in a grand manner by processions and public meetings and the opening of a Bepin Pal Free Dispensary and a Bepin Pal Reading-room.

Sub-Collector Ashe timed his opening shot very well indeed. While Pillai and Sivam were busy with the celebration arrangements, Ashe prevailed on District Collector L.M. Wynch, C.I.E., I.C.S., a dyed-in-the-wool tory imperialist to take action against them. He was made to believe that Pillai and Sivam were disseminating sedition.

The District Magistrate came to Tuticorin on March 7, and calling at the office of the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company told Pillai that he must leave Tuticorin that very night and stay somewhere else for three months failing which he would be put under custody.

Pillai was sure the District Magistrate had no powers to order him like that and refused to listen. The next day, March 8, notices were served on Pillai, Sivam and another co-worker Swadeshi Padmanabha Iyengar directing them to appear before the District Magistrate on the following day—March 9, the very day they were preparing

to celebrate as "Swaraj Day"—to show cause why they should not be ordered to execute personal bonds for Rs 2,500 each and two surety bonds from respectable persons each for Rs 1,000 guaranteeing "good behaviour" for one year. A prohibitory order under Sec. 144 Cr. P.C. banning public meetings and demonstrations was also passed.

Notwithstanding these orders, the action of the authorities was explained at a public meeting in Tuticorin on March 8 addressed by Pillai, Sivam and others.

The next day Chidambaram Pillai, Subramania Sivam and Padmanabha Iyengar presented themselves before the District Magistrate in Tirunelveli.

The stage was set for an inexorable drama, a Greek tragedy as it were, that was to provide many ugly surprises to the authorities as well as the Nationalist leaders.



## 9. THE TIRUNELVELI RIOTS

ON MARCH 9, 1908, at the office of the Collector of Tirunelveli, Chidambaram Pillai, Subramania Sivam and Padmanabha Iyengar presented themselves.

Collector L.M. Wynch, full of arrogance, treated them with scant courtesy and threatened them with dire consequences. However, the Swadeshi leaders were of stronger mettle and they answered him in telling phrases. It was an argument between Imperialism and Nationalism, between British might and Indian right. It was a sensational meeting, details of which immediately inflamed the whole of South India. Poet Subramania Bharati preserved it for posterity by writing two poems, each consisting of seven stanzas in searing words. The poems were published by him soon after the meeting took place. As translated by the Official Tamil Translator to the Government of Madras and brought to Government's attention, the verses read:

Words addressed by Mr Wynch to Shri Chidambaram Pillai:

Reply to Mr Wynch by Shri Chidambaram Pillai:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| You have set the country ablaze by planting a desire for liberty in the minds of all the people; I will show you my strength, tease you and throw you into prison! | 1. We will no longer live to be slaves to foreigners in our land and will no longer be cowards. In which country can such atrocities be brooked? Will God permit them? |
| 2. You convened meetings, raised the cry of "Vande   | 2. We will revere (our Mother) with "Vande Mataram" and  |

Mataram" and abused us; with a view to drive us away, you started a Navigation Company and collected large sums for it.

bow (to her) till our lives ebb out. Is it beneath our dignity and disgraceful to worship our Mother?

3. You explained the truth to the wavering people and thus transgressed the limits of law; you mocked at people for being content to die poor and expressed bold views.

3. Is our wealth always to be robbed from us and are we to die? Even then, will we wail over the loss? Are we not men? Is life so sweet?

You have converted slavish eunuchs into men and erased meanness from their minds; you have instilled a desire for progress in the minds of persons who were content to live in poverty.

4. Are all the thirty crores of us dogs or the young ones of swine? Are you alone men? Is this justice or wantonness?

5. With a view to become famous, you have encouraged people who regarded service as a duty of their lives, to aspire to higher things; you have wiped out their laziness and shown them the ways of learning various industries.

5. Is it a sin to love the land of Bharat? (If it is not) why should this cause displeasure? Say, is it a crime to try to relieve our penury? (If it is not) why should this anger you?

You have sown the seeds of a desire for Swaraj throughout the country; can a small hare dare do the work of a lion? Are you to live a better life?

6. We have found out and well understood that union is our only means (of protection); (so) we will neither be confounded nor disturbed in mind by all your acts of oppression.

7. I will teach you a lesson by shooting you down and killing you; I will boldly imprison you and thus punish you for your mischief; will anyone prevent me from doing this?
7. Can you accomplish your objective even if you cut our flesh into pieces and will life become extinct even then? Will this wipe out the noble devotion (to our Motherland) which shineth in (our) hearts and can it obliterate even our consciousness?

This official translation does not convey either the verve of Bharati's words or the tempestuous metre of the verses. Still, it conveys in a way how the arrogant Collector Wynch threatened to shoot down Chidambaram Pillai, Subramania Sivam and Padmanabha Iyengar for their national activities, and how they defied him.

As the security proceedings had been taken under Sec. 108 Cr. P.C., Pillai and the others applied under Sec. 526(8) Cr. P.C. for an adjournment to enable them move the High Court for a transfer of the case. The Collector thereupon said he would grant the adjournment if they gave an undertaking not to return to Tuticorin. The three leaders refusing to do so, the Collector proceeded with the enquiry adjourning it from day to day until the 12th of March, on which date he asked them if they admitted the allegations contained in the notices served on them. The accused denied them and immediately they were remanded to custody. The three leaders said they were willing to provide the security as demanded, and that there was no reason for remanding them to custody. But the Collector said he could not accept the securities as they, the accused, had not accepted the allegations!

Following the remand order, the three leaders were taken in *juskas* (horse carts) to the District Jail. Surprised

at this sudden turn of events, a big crowd shouting "Vande Mataram" followed them for some distance.

Startling developments took place the next day, March 13. Angered by the arrest of their leaders, the people of Tirunelveli spontaneously expressed their resentment in many ways. Shops were closed down and all businesses came to a stop; students marched out of colleges and schools and swelled the streets. Huge crowds gathered in the main thoroughfares and started moving in the direction of the Municipal Office. Mass anger found a vent at the Municipal Office. The crowd rushed into the building, took out all official records and made a bonfire. With a bounteous flow of kerosene oil, the whole building was set on fire.

The Police Station was the next target. Two constables who were in charge were courteously asked to go out, and all things there—records, carbines, bullets, sticks, chairs, tables—were burnt, and finally the building itself.

The Additional District Munsiff's Court came in for attack next, and was partially burnt. A bag of money containing Rs 500 found there was distributed among the crowd.

The kerosene oil tank in the Pennington Market was then set on fire, and it burned for two days. Its fumes darkened the skies in huge clouds that hung over the town.

At noon, the Collector and District Magistrate, Wynch, arrived with a batch of officials and a posse of constables. With fixed bayonets the constables moved along the streets in an effort to disperse the crowds. Collector Wynch, a whip in one hand and a loaded revolver in the other, walked towards the town area. At one place, seeing some

decorations, he asked the persons there what they were for. When one of them innocently replied it was in celebration of Bepin Pal's release, out lashed Wynch's whip giving the man a bloody cut in the face. This infuriated the crowd, which had all along done only damage to property. But now stones were pelted at the police. The police opened fire without a warning and the officers used their revolvers. The day's toll was four dead, one of them an innocent youngster returning from a temple.

Rioting continued for three days, and spread to Tuticorin and Tachanallur also. In Tuticorin, ignoring the ban on meetings, a public meeting was arranged in an open-air cart stand. Educated and labouring classes attended the meeting, which was quite orderly. After the meeting started, however, mounted police suddenly charged into the crowd without any warning. Sub-Collector Ashe took a prominent role in this action and made himself the cynosure of public antipathy. Tension ran so high that many European residents of Tuticorin spent the nights in a ship anchored off Tuticorin. Indian workmen like barbers, washermen and butlers refused to serve European masters and also pro-British Indians. One advocate, a vakil for the British India Steam Navigation Company, was asked by his barber who was just starting to shave him why the whites should show such antipathy to the Swadeshi leaders. To this the advocate curtly told him that it was none of his business, and the barber equally curtly replied it was none of his (the barber's) business to shave him and left him half shaved. The poor advocate, to his utter shame, had to seek police aid and covering his head go to some remote village to have the shave completed! Such was the hold of the national leaders on

the working classes of the district.

The disturbances in Tirunelveli district were over in three days. Police reinforcements had been rushed to the area and all was calm. But the Government was in no mood to leave it at that. Punitive police were imposed in Tirunelveli, Tuticorin and Tachanallur. A virtual reign of terror was let loose.

Chidambaram Pillai and his colleagues appealed to the High Court against the order of detention by the District Magistrate of Tirunelveli; the High Court held the detention order illegal and ordered their release. But the District Magistrate did not carry out the order, but continuing to hold them in detention, moved the Government for permission to prosecute Pillai and the others for sedition. Security action was also launched against six leading advocates of Tuticorin and Tirunelveli, suspected to be supporters of Pillai. Sub-Collector Ashe visited the offices of the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company and behaved in a most threatening manner.

A deputation of Moderate leaders of Tirunelveli waited on Governor Sir Arthur Lawley in Madras, only to be told to mind their own business.

The Press in Madras had been covering the Tirunelveli disturbances in detail and editorial comment was universally critical of the handling of the situation by the District Magistrate. "All the facts which have hitherto come out place beyond doubt the fact that the disturbances neither at Tuticorin nor at Tirunelveli can be traced to any speeches made", wrote "The Hindu". "On the other hand what was at first considered a formidable strike of the operatives of the Coral Mills at Tuticorin was amicably settled by Mr Chidambaram Pillai and his friends,

A subsequent disturbance at Tuticorin was caused by the thoughtless action of the police in preventing a public meeting and B.C. Pal's celebration being held. If the magistrate and the police had not meddled in the matter, every thing would have gone on quietly as was the case in numerous other places in the country."

"It is the removal of these people (Pillai and others) into custody", wrote "The Indian Patriot" daily of Madras, "rather than their freedom that seems likely to disturb peace and public tranquillity, for undoubtedly there are large numbers of people who feel for them and who are indignant at the treatment to which they have been subjected."

Bharati's "India" Tamil weekly said: "Some think that there is no connection between politics and the industrial regeneration of the country and that we can improve the condition of our labourers without meddling in politics. That this is a wrong view has been clearly shown by the recent events at Tuticorin."

G. Subramania Iyer's "Swadesamitran" said, "It was Mr Wynch and not the people who gave the provocation (for the riots)." The paper also said it was "a known fact that the Editor of 'Swadesamitran' was under surveillance of the police."

Other papers like "Bhavani", Telugu weekly of Nellore, "Veerakesari", Kannada fortnightly of Madras, "Nadegannadi", Kannada weekly of Bangalore, "The West Coast Spectator" of Calicut, "Jananukulan", Tamil weekly of Thanjavur and "Hindu Nesan" of Madras had strongly critical observations on the behaviour of the authorities.

Despite the hue and cry in the press, official excesses continued under the policy of the mailed fist by Governor Lawley.

## 10. A "DOUBLE TRANSPORTATION" SENTENCE

THE SEDITION cases against V.O. Chidambaram Pillai and Subramania Sivam were taken up by the committing magistrate E.H. Wallace, Additional District Magistrate, on the 26th of March 1908. At the request of the pro-Tilak Nationalist Party of Madras, N.K. Ramaswami, a leading lawyer and public worker, appeared as Counsel for Chidambaram Pillai. But as the enquiry by the magistrate was proved to be a farce, at Pillai's request Ramaswami withdrew from the case, and Pillai refused to defend himself.

The Additional District Magistrate committed Pillai and Sivam to the sessions and released Padmanabha Iyengar. The Madras Government appointed a special sessions judge to try the cases and nominated a hand-picked judge, A.F. Pinhey, to conduct the trial. Sivam was charged under Section 124-A of the I.P.C. for three speeches made by him on the 23 and 25th of February and the 5th of March, 1908. Pillai was charged under Sections 124-A, 109 and 114 of the I.P.C. for two speeches made on the 23rd and 25th of February, and for abetment on the 5th of March, 1908. Poet Bharati and others gave evidence on the patriots' behalf.

Finding them guilty of the offences brought against them, Judge Pinhey sentenced Chidambaram Pillai to two terms of transportation for life, each of 20 years



and the sentences to run concurrently. Subramania Sivam was sentenced to ten years' transportation. Judgment was delivered on July 7, 1908.

In the course of his judgment, Pinhey said the accused "are morally responsible for all the lives lost in quelling the riots that ensued on their arrest" and added "that light sentences of imprisonment of a few months or may be a year or two are instances of misplaced leniency . . . The first object of a sentence is that it shall be deterrent not to the criminal alone but to others who feel any inclination to follow his example."

There were also other observations that were noteworthy. "The Hindu" reported:

Mr Pinhey has laid down in his summing up the following gems of political doctrine as applicable to India, and it is enough for us to set them down here for the delectation of our readers in India and England. Political speeches in the country were a novelty to him. There was no lawful occasion, so far as His Honour could see, for any man in this country to make a political speech . . . A speaker in England might say that he was persuading his audience to exercise their constitutional power in his favour at some future time. There was no such thing as that in this country. The masses of Tuticorin and Tinnevely had no vote . . . Therefore the chances were that when a speaker addressed an audience consisting of a mob in this country, he would be doing it only to persuade the crowd to exercise their physical power as human beings, and that was a dangerous thing. . .

Mr Powell (Public Prosecutor) said the meeting

called in honour of a person convicted of sedition was not strictly a seditious act. In His Honour's opinion, it was a clearly seditious act.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the sedition trials in Tinnevely were not without some farcical elements.

The "Double Transportation for life" sentence, an unheard of monstrosity, shocked the country. Newspapers far and near commented on the biased nature of the judge and the crudity of his abominable sentences.

Surendranath Bannerjee's "Bengalee" said, "Such sympathy as the public will spontaneously feel for him (Pillai) and the others will not be due to their opinions, but to the ferocious character of the sentences. . ."

"The Amrita Bazar Patrika" of Calcutta concluded a lengthy article with the words:

The wonder is not that a judicial officer with such extraordinary notions would convict an ardent apostle of industrial regeneration of India and impose life imprisonment on him, but that the Madras Government would select him to try the Tinnevely cases and bring such discredit upon British rule in this country. Now, if double transportation be the lot of those who make attempts to improve the industrial condition of their country, what, we wonder, might be the punishment for those who might really rise in arms against the British Government.

"Nadegannadi", Kannada weekly from Bangalore, was shocked that "Chidambaram Pillai and Subramania Sivam, two great patriots who were advocating swadeshism and

encouragement of indigenous industries" should be punished like this.

"Bharata Bandhu", Malayalam weekly from Palghat, wrote: "These noble patriots are accorded an atrocious and inhuman punishment . . . This cruel act will tend to perpetuate the uncommonly evil memory of this judge not only in this country but all over the world."

"Swadesamitran" said the judgment was "sure to spread a sorrowful gloom all over India", and added:

These sedition cases are the outcome of the eventful Viceroyalty of Lord Curzon, who posed as the friend of India. But in no case has the punishment been so severe as this. Mr Tilak, who was prosecuted for sedition in 1897, was sentenced only to 18 months' rigorous imprisonment. Even in subsequent cases the severest sentence till now is that of three years' rigorous imprisonment inflicted on the editor of "Swarajya" weekly of Bezwada. But Mr Pinhey has over-reached the expectations of the people even in this respect . . . If the *obiter dicta* in Mr Pinhey's judgment are to be taken as law, the whole Swadeshi movement must at once cease to be. It is curious indeed to hold that it is disloyal to speak ill of any European who might have come to India with an empty purse to eke out his livelihood.

"The Hindu" characterised Pinhey's summing up of the case for the jurors as "extraordinary" and said, "But few would have expected to hear so monstrous a sentence as is inflicted upon Chidambaram Pillai." In another editorial, the same paper observed:

A judge who draws upon his own powers of imagination for circumstances from which to derive the most damning proofs of guilt against an accused person before him, stands self-condemned. Mr Pinhey justifies the enormity of his sentences also on the topsy-turvy ground that Chidambaram Pillai is morally responsible for all the lives lost in quelling the riots that ensued on his arrest . . . The sentence may be what is called 'deterrent'. It may more fittingly be called vindictive and tyrannical, and the public would under all the circumstances refuse to attach any moral weight to it.

G. Subramania Iyer pointed out that the British-owned Press was dead silent about the sentence. Stung by this, "The Statesman" came out with a condemnation of the sentence, while another paper, "The Englishman" justified it.

"The Indian Patriot" daily of Madras prophetically summed up the situation saying, "We do not take seriously the savage sentences passed on the accused in the Tinnevely sedition cases; for, there is not the ghost of a chance of their being confirmed."

A tragic outcome of the Pinhey judgment on Pillai was the unfortunate effect it had on a brother of his. Minakshisundaram, the young man, ran berserk the moment he heard the savage sentence on his elder brother. He was throughout his life an unhappy imbecile bemoaning his brother's lot; he died in this condition in 1943.

But Chidambaram Pillai took things very bravely and went to jail telling his relatives he would come out a free man in the High Court appeal.

The Madras High Court, Chief Justice Arnold White

and Mr Justice Miller sitting, dismissed the charge that "the riot at Tinnevely was one of the natural sequences of the seditious speeches of Subrāmania Sivam", but held he "was rightly convicted" of the offence of sedition under Sec. 124-A. "As regards punishment, we think the law will be vindicated", the High Court said, "by the imposition of a sentence of Six Years' Transportation." In the case of Chidambaram Pillai too, the sentences of two transportations for life were cancelled and a sentence of Six Years' Transportation imposed in the appeal.

The High Court decisions made the public and the Press heave a sigh of relief, although as "The Indian Patriot" pointed out, they wished the High Court had shown a little more consideration.

"If the convictions in the two cases are sound", wrote "The Hindu",

The substantial reduction of sentences is a modification of the decision of Mr Pinhey which will mitigate the shock which his monstrous sentences and extremely crude notions of political principles have caused in the minds of the general public. The sentences even as they stand are extremely severe and out of proportion to the offences.

A further appeal by Chidambaram Pillai to the Privy Council got the sentence converted to one of Six Years' Rigorous imprisonment. Chidambaram Pillai was taken to Coimbatore Central Jail and Subramania Sivam to Trichinopoly Central Jail. Their sufferings were not yet over: in jail too they were to face much harassment.

## HARASSMENT IN JAIL

THERE WAS a spate of arrests and prosecutions in the Madras Presidency following the action on Chidambaram Pillai and Subramania Sivam. Surendranath Arya, a young nationalist worker, was sentenced to five years' rigorous imprisonment for his speech at a meeting in Madras to express shock at the sentences on Pillai and Sivam. In Karur, a young lad of eighteen, S. Krishnaswami Sarma, was sentenced to five years' rigorous imprisonment for a similar protest speech. A recently passed Press Act was put to use and M. Srinivasan, declared Editor of the "India" weekly on which poet Bharati was working as *de facto* editor, was sentenced for sedition for five years. In Kakinada, G. Harisarvottama Rao of the Telugu weekly "Swaraj" was sent to jail for a similar offence. Not even G. Subramania Iyer, the veteran editor and publicist, was spared; he was arrested while holidaying at the Courtallam Falls and kept in prison despite poor health and failing eye-sight; because of his health, he had to give an undertaking and come out.

In the all-India sphere too there were major prosecutions. Babu Aurobindo Ghose was already in custody in the Alipore case. And, within weeks of the Pinhey judgment on Pillai and Sivam, Lokmanya Tilak was sentenced by Justice Davar of the Bombay High Court to Six Years' Transportation and a fine of one thousand rupees. A wave of repression was passing over the land.

In Madras, a prosecution was expected any day against poet Bharati for his writings in the "India" weekly. Advised by well-meaning elders, Bharati reluctantly exiled himself to Pondicherry.

The Telugu weekly "Kesari" of Madras summed up public feeling in a nutshell when it said,

Already the arrest of Shri Aurobindo Ghose has sent a thrill through the whole of Bengal and the sedition cases against Messrs Chidambaram Pillai and Sivam have spread a gloom throughout the Southern Presidency. The events of Kakinada are still rankling in the minds of the people of the northern districts of this Presidency, and the Punjab has not yet forgotten the deportation of Lala Lajpat Rai and Sirdar Ajit Singh and the incarceration of Messrs Jaswant Rai and Athavale. Just at this juncture when every part of India is seething with discontent, the action of the Bombay Government in arresting Mr Tilak is sure to shake the whole of India to the very core.

When Pinhey passed the monstrous sentences on Chidambaram Pillai and Subramania Sivam, questions were raised in the British Parliament in London and the Secretary of State for India, Lord Morley, wrote to Viceroy Lord Minto: "I must confess to you that I am watching with the deepest concern and dismay the thundering sentences that are now being passed for sedition, etc. We must keep order, but excess of severity is not the path to order; on the contrary, it is the path to the bomb."

Notwithstanding this, the policy of vindictive treatment

of nationalist leaders continued in India. In Madras, particularly harsh treatment was extended to Chidambaram Pillai and Subramania Sivam, the first persons in the Presidency to be imprisoned for sedition. Although they had been sentenced for Transportation, they were kept in Indian jails since the Government of India had prohibited deportation of prisoners to Andamans because of overcrowding in the jails there. And, as Rigorous prisoners, Pillai and Sivam were given tortuous physical labour that would sap their energies. Minatchiammal, wife of Chidambaram Pillai informed the Press in November 1908:

The Jail Code Rule that the first months of rigorous imprisonment convicts shall be penal does not apply to my husband who is sentenced to Transportation. Still, he was and is made to work at an oil mill in the jail in the hot sun and push the burning plank and stone all day long. His head has been shaved and a big iron chain put on his ankles preventing him walking with ease. I have wired to His Majesty, the King-Emperor praying for at least commutation of the sentence to one of simple imprisonment. No reply has yet been received. I think he ought at least to be transported at once without being cruelly ill-treated and troubled here.

The oil press mentioned is an old type wooden mill for extracting gingelly (sesame) oil, drawn round and round by a bullock yoked to an extended wooden arm. Pillai was yoked to the oil press like an animal and made to work it in the cruel hot sun of Coimbatore. This was inhuman torture devised by the Superintendent of the Jail,



E.H. Gadsden, lovingly approved by the Inspector-General of Prisons, Lt. Col. Macnamara, M.D., I.M.S. The object was to break Pillai's morale somehow.

In the case of Subramania Sivam, he was put to the task of cleaning sheeps' wool soaked in lime. Apart from the work being a degrading one for a man of Brahmin birth like Sivam, the dust of the lime had damaging effect on the health of the prisoner. He coughed and spat blood; his health which had been fairly good in the earlier days was shattered. He became a victim of leprosy and the Jail doctor himself, a European I.M.S. man, recommended his being transferred to the Criminal Leprosy Ward. But this was flatly turned down by the Jailor onward to the Governor of Madras (Sir Arthur Lawley) in all stages of appeal!

Chidambaram Pillai submitted several petitions to the Madras Government, the India Government and His Majesty, King-Emperor requesting that he be transported to the Andamans or at least to some other jail. All of them were turned down. Lt. Col. Macnamara, the I.G. of Prisons, graciously wrote,

He (Pillai) is anxious to go out of Coimbatore and is particularly desirous of being sent to Port Blair . . . The circumstance that the convict dislikes the Jail, is, I think, the strongest reason for keeping him there and the highest encomium he could give to the Jail itself.

Pillai was arguing that he be sent to the Andamans for in that distant penal settlement, according to the rules then prevailing, prisoners were given freedom after four years and were permitted to move about the settlement

area. They could take up individual avocations and even bring [their wives to live with them, though they could return to their homeland only after fourteen years. Obviously, Chidambaram Pillai must have thought that transportation to the Andamans was less of a punishment than what was being meted out to him in Coimbatore Central Jail.

Harsh physical labour was not the only torture Pillai was put to. He was given scavenging work and given food he could not eat. As a strict vegetarian, he was made to eat food prepared in the non-vegetarian kitchen of the Jail, and it was full of maggots, not to mention its unworthy qualities otherwise. His protests went unheeded.

The brutal treatment by the jail staff made the prisoners of Coimbatore Central Jail revolt in December 1908. An attempt was made to murder the Jailor and one prisoner was shot dead. Chidambaram Pillai was suspected to have been involved and it was even thought there was to be an attempt to rescue him from jail. In the Sessions trial of the riot case, Chidambaram Pillai "gave evidence not very complimentary to the management at Coimbatore" (in the words of the I.G. of Prisons himself). This so much annoyed the I.G., that, when a non-official Jail Visitor recommended that Pillai be transferred to some other jail, the I.G. of Prisons wrote to Government:

It will be observed that the Non-Official Visitor has fallen into the trap, and it is not improbable that succeeding Visitors will follow suit. Nothing is easier than to pose as a martyr by being kept in a jail where the officials are prejudiced against him. He (Pillai) has nothing to fear if he conducts himself like any other

convict and to transfer him now would be almost tantamount to admitting that the Superintendent and his staff are not capable of treating him fairly.

While in the matter of humane treatment, everyone from the Jailor to the Secretary of State took the harsh line; they were laboriously arguing in file after file how many days' remission a sedition prisoner was entitled to to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the taking over of Indian administration by the Crown and the accession of King George V as King-Emperor of India! Strange indeed were British ways!

In 1911, the persecution of Chidambaram Pillai in the jail had an unexpected repercussion outside. Sub-Collector Ashe had now come back to Tirunelveli on promotion as the Collector of the district, and it was suspected all round that he was one of those primarily instrumental in making Government follow the repressive line, including the harassment of political prisoners in jail. Late in 1909, when a friend saw him in jail, Chidambaram Pillai exclaimed in exasperation, "Is there to be no end to the atrocities of Ashel" This was interpreted by friends of Pillai in Tirunelveli district as an indirect admonition to do away with Ashe, though Pillai as a true follower of Tilak never condoned political violence. Madasami, one of Chidambaram Pillai's staunchest followers who had gone underground after the Tirunelveli riots and was in hiding in Pondicherry, contacted some dacoit leaders in Tirunelveli district for the purpose of doing away with Ashe. They however said they had given their word to Nilakanta Brahmachari, a revolutionary leader, who was organising an armed revolt to come off in 1914, a revolt inspired and aided by the

German Government and worked out on an all-India basis by the Maharaja of Baroda and leaders of the revolutionary movement in Bengal. As such, they did not wish to do any thing without Nilakanta's approval. Nilakanta told their messenger that he was totally against political assassinations.

Disappointed by the dacoit leaders thus, Madasami was looking out for an opportunity to carry out his plan with the aid of others, when in October 1910, V.V.S. Aiyar, revolutionary and right-hand man of V.D. Savarkar in London, arrived in Pondicherry. Aiyar, hearing of Madasami's interest, agreed to take the lead, and soon enough spotted a young man belonging to Nilakanta's camp, by name Vanchinathan, as a fit person to carry out the assassination of Ashe. He decoyed Vanchi from Nilakanta's hold and gave him shooting and other training to carry out the deed. Vanchi shot dead Ashe at Maniyachi Junction in broad daylight on the 17th of June, 1911, and then shot himself dead when he found escape impossible.

The murder of Ashe, South India's single political assassination in British times, shocked officialdom into a frenzy. It only helped to harden official attitude to and treatment of political prisoners like Pillai and Sivam.

## 12. FREE MAN, BUT FORGOTTEN

CHIDAMBARAM PILLAI was released from Cannanore Central Jail on 12 December, 1912, after undergoing his full term of sentence. After long travails in Coimbatore, which included solitary confinement for some time, he was at last transferred to the Cannanore Jail in Kerala.

When he came out of jail, there was but a single person to welcome him—his old comrade Subramania Sivam, who had been released a short while earlier. None of his other friends, either of the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company or of Tirunelveli politics, were there to meet him. The atmosphere in the Presidency outside the jail was totally different now from what it was in 1908. The reign of terror let loose by Government since 1908 had had its impact on public and private behaviour and fear reigned in the hearts of every one. Few had the courage to come in touch with patriots striving for the country's independence.

Though released from prison, Chidambaram Pillai was served with another restrictive order. He was asked not to enter his native Tirunelveli district. The Government was still afraid of him and of the possibility of a revival of nationalist activity through his efforts.

Tirunelveli district, calm and under control, was still a "dark horse" in Government's eyes. They thought there might still be an undercurrent of seething discontent. The murder of Collector Ashe had shattered their self-satisfaction. Early in 1912, the Ashe murder case, officially called

"The Tinnevely Conspiracy Case", had concluded at the Madras High Court. It was one of the biggest political trials of the country, with fourteen young men charged with a conspiracy to murder Ashe and to overthrow the Government. Ironically enough, V.V.S. Aiyar who stage-managed the assassination was not among the fourteen, and Nilakanta Brahmachari, a revolutionary organiser, who actually dissuaded the assassination attempt was made the first accused in the case! Despite strenuous police effort, the conspiracy to kill Ashe was dismissed by the High Court, but the conspiracy to overthrow Government was sustained. Two of the accused, including Madasami, Chidambaram Pillai's henchman who had gone into hiding in Pondicherry, were "untraceable and absconding." Of the twelve who faced trial, five were acquitted and the rest sentenced. Nilakanta Brahmachari got Seven Years' Rigorous Imprisonment, his immediate lieutenant Shankarakrishnan got Five Years' Rigorous Imprisonment and the rest shorter terms.

In Tuticorin, the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company had been forced to wind up after unsuccessful attempts to keep it going. Lacking the forceful organising drive of Chidambaram Pillai, the Company was unable to maintain its successful competition with the British company, which had all the backing of unashamed officialdom. Badly needing funds to keep it going and for meeting the last instalment due on one of the ships purchased, the Swadeshi Company made hectic attempts to sell more shares and collect funds. But the atmosphere had changed now, and mutual bickerings among the executives of the concern also added to the confusion. Ultimately, the Swadeshi company was forced to sell its ships to the very British

company it was competing against. This "surrender" came like a stab in the heart to nationalist India, and persons like poet Bharati, himself in voluntary exile in Pondicherry, exclaimed it would have been better if the ships had been sunk in the Bay of Bengal!

All in all, Chidambaram Pillai had come out of prison only to a world in which Nationalism had been worsted and British officialdom had been enthroned by brute force. It was agonising torment for the hero released from jail.

There were other problems also facing him. Because of the ban on his return to his home district, he had to seek a living elsewhere. But, he could no longer practise as a pleader, as his sanad had been cancelled because of his sentence for sedition. He was literally at wits' end to make his living.

Chidambaram Pillai settled in Madras and lived there for many years. He tried to eke a living by tuitions to students, and even ran a provision shop selling household needs. These did not prove very successful, but he managed as best as he could.

In spite of his hand to mouth existence, he still took some interest in public affairs by working as Vice-President of the Railway Labour Union in Perambur.

While in Coimbatore jail, he had tried his hand in literary occupation, translating an English work, "As a Man Thinketh" by James Allen, into Tamil and preparing a commentary of his own on parts of the Kural of Valluvar. Literature once again gave him peace of mind and he devoted long hours to it. He wrote his autobiography in blank verse, and edited and published Ilampooranar's commentary on a chapter of the ancient Tamil work of grammar, "Tholkappiam". There were other works also.

In the midst of the gloom around him there were rare streaks of brightness too. From distant South Africa came an unexpected help. Barrister M.K. Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi), who was still in South Africa, hearing of Chidambaram Pillai's plight collected funds from friends there to help him. As there was some delay in sending the amount, Pillai thought that perhaps it had been spent for the Satyagraha campaign there and wrote to Gandhiji not to bother about it. But Gandhiji wrote back saying that the amount was intact and Chidambaram Pillai agreed to receive it. In his letter to Gandhiji, Chidambaram Pillai requested that he be provided with the names and addresses of the donors, "so that I could send them my works in Tamil as a humble token of my gratitude for their help."



## RETIREMENT FROM POLITICS

By 1914, Lokmanya Tilak, political guru of Chidambaram Pillai, was back in India after long years of transportation in Mandalay, Burma. Late in that year, when World War I started, the international scene became critical. The Germany of Kaiser Wilhelm was out to crush the British Empire out of existence, for which it had been making preparations for almost a decade. One of the Kaiser's plans was to incite an all-India revolt during the war—the revolutionary patriots of India carrying it out with large-scale arms supplied by Germany. Indian patriots abroad had been keeping in touch with leaders in India and organising underground opposition to the British.

With the return of Tilak, political activity in India warmed up, and efforts were being made to bring together the Nationalists (Tilak's followers) and the Moderates into the Congress. Tilak was contacting all his lieutenants to make himself up-to-date on all that had happened during his absence. Summoned by Tilak, Chidambaram Pillai went to Poona, reaching that city on March 6, 1915, the day the Moderate leader Gopal Krishna Gokhale passed away. Tilak came from Sinbagad and, after making enquiries about Pillai's welfare, went to pay his respects to Gokhale.

On March 8, Chidambaram Pillai and Lokmanya Tilak had a long conversation and continued their discussions on subsequent days. Recalling these discussions, Chidambaram

Pillai has said (in "Reminiscences of Tilak", Vol III, 1928):

He (Tilak) had a talk with me about the war in Europe and about a message that he had received from some of the Indian patriots who were then in Germany. The message was to the effect that certain occasions might arise during the course of the war and that Indian leaders should do such and such things on those occasions. We discussed for two or three days about the advisability, possibility and probable result of our carrying out the terms of the message. Here my guru predicted that the occasions referred to in the message might not arise at all as there were several complications in Europe in connection with the war.

The guarded reference to "certain occasions" obviously refers to the plans for a revolt in India aided by the Germans. The Germans did try to land arms in India, but, as foreseen by Tilak, the occasion for the all-India uprising did not come through as the British got wind of the schemes and nipped everything in the bud.

During these discussions, Tilak is also reported to have told Chidambaram Pillai, "Let each patriot do what he deems best for the country. Let not others put obstacles in his way." When Pillai asked about the advisability of patriots accepting Government service, Tilak is reported to have said: "Yes, I want all Government offices, both civil and military, to be occupied by real patriots. If all the Governors and the Governor-General are real patriotic Indians, we have then attained Swaraj." Regarding entering Legislative Councils, Tilak said, "I want real patriots to occupy not only all seats in all Legislative

Councils but also all seats and offices in all the institutions of the country, which will bring power, influence and money."

Within a year of this meeting, Tilak started his Home Rule Movement, and in the South it was spear-headed by Mrs Annie Besant. But because of personal reasons, Pillai did not participate in the Home Rule Movement. A man of strong views and likes and dislikes, he was, like some others in the South, suspicious of the *bona fides* of Mrs Besant. He explained his stand to the Lokmanya during his Madras visit in December 1919, and said: "I am your follower. But, I am keeping out because you have linked yourself with Mrs Besant in the Home Rule Movement. I have no confidence in the lady." Pillai felt that Mrs Besant was an agent of the British, diverting attention to the Home Rule Movement in order to prevent a bigger agitation against the British in India. Of course, Tilak did not agree with him. In the next year, Tilak passed away and the mantle of leadership fell on Mahatma Gandhi.

Chidambaram Pillai welcomed Gandhiji's call for a Satyagraha in 1919 against the Rowlatt Bills. He was among those who welcomed Gandhiji to Madras in March that year and spoke at a public meeting in support of the proposed Satyagraha. But, in the next year, 1920, he found himself disagreeing with the Mahatma when he announced his plans for the Non-co-operation Movement. While the idea of satyagraha was welcome to him, the idea of Non-co-operation was repugnant to him. Chidambaram Pillai attended the Special Session of the Congress in Calcutta and expressed opposition to Non-co-operation. By a majority vote, the Special Session approved Gandhiji's plan of action. Returning to Madras, Chidambaram Pillai

issued a statement in which he criticised the Non-co-operation idea in the words, "If the Government were to grant any of the rights we are pressing for, we must thank them for the same and co-operate with them; where they refuse the rights pressed for by us, we must non-co-operate with them. This is the policy of the Tilak group. In other words, co-operation and non-co-operation should go together." With this statement, Pillai also announced his resignation from the Congress.

In the years ahead, Chidambaram Pillai's differences with the Gandhian approach to political endeavour grew still further, and he thought it best to keep totally aloof from active politics. Many years later, in 1927, when Non-co-operation had been withdrawn, he was prevailed upon to join the Congress and preside over the Salem District Political Conference. But even then, he took no further active part in politics.

The growth of the Non-Brahmin Movement in Madras and their plea for what was called "Communal Representation in Services" was one more cause for Pillai's differences with the Congress leadership of the day. Congress condemned "Communal Representation", but Pillai thought it a reasonable demand. However, he staunchly rejected all attempts to make him join the Justice Party formed by the leaders of the Non-Brahmin Movement.

In 1922, Chidambaram Pillai applied for the restoration of his sanad to permit him practise again as a pleader. As fate would have it, E.H. Wallace, who had in 1908 committed Pillai to the Sessions for a trial on charges of sedition, was now Judge of the Madras High Court. Knowing of Pillai's heroic past and his present plight,

Wallace recommended his case for sympathetic consideration by Government and the sanad was restored to Pillai. Grateful Pillai named one of his sons "Wallace-waran", a far far cry from his uncompromising antipathy to the British in 1908. Permitted to return to his home district, Chidambaram Pillai re-started practice in Kollpatti and later moved on to Tuticorin. Even during this period, he did not hesitate to defend without fees a political worker of Madras, M.S. Subramania Iyer, charged with sedition.

## 14. HONoured IN DEATH

THE LAST years of Chidambaram Pillai were spent quietly, his literary interests predominating over other pursuits. His "Commentary on the Kural" was released at a function in the famous Murugan temple of Tiruchendur in 1934.

Chidambaram Pillai took as a dear disciple of his a Harijan political worker by name Swami Shahajananda, whom he taught the Tamil classics and kept him as a guest in his house for many years. Though Pillai differed with Mahatma Gandhi on questions like Non-violence as a political creed, he was all admiration for Gandhiji's efforts to uplift Harijans. When Mahatma Gandhi came on his Harijan tour to the South in 1933, Chidambaram Pillai presided over the preparatory meeting to welcome him to Karaikudi town. Speaking on the occasion Pillai said, "It is the great luck of this town that Mahatma Gandhi is visiting it. Following his example, the people of this town must give up all their wrong notions and drive away the devil of untouchability from their midst."

Though Chidambaram Pillai had been forgotten by the common man, the older generation of Congress leaders remembered him. In 1935, Babu Rajendra Prasad, then President of the Congress, called at his residence in Tuticorin during a South Indian tour, to pay his respects to the hero of the Swadeshi Movement.

Age and penury were telling on Chidambaram Pillai,

and he fell seriously ill late in 1936. After more than a month in bed, the great pioneer of India's shipping industry passed away on the night of November 18, 1936. He died listening to the inspiring poems of his friend and comrade Subramania Bharati, one of them extolling the Motherland as the land where their Mothers and Fathers had lived and loved, and another expressing the unquenchable thirst for freedom.

Even on his death bed, Chidambaram Pillai's thoughts were about the Motherland and its freedom. He was sure the country would be free soon enough. Some time before his demise, he declared: "Soon enough the world will be enveloped in another world war, and this time India is sure to regain its independence." His words were truly prophetic.

The greatness of V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, the Swadeshi hero, who long before others envisaged the importance of a merchant navy for India and drew plans for its all round development, the patriot who dared to challenge the supremacy of the British on the high seas and demonstrated that India could successfully manage a modern shipping service despite great odds, was only appreciated long after he was dead. It needed Independence to fully appreciate the lead given by him.

But even before Independence, his example was an inspiration to other Indian entrepreneurs. Walchand Hirachand and Seth Narottam Morarjee founded in 1919 the Scindia Steam Navigation Company, and profiting by experience of the earlier pioneers, were able to withstand fierce foreign competition and became the country's first successful shipping line. The second oldest Indian shipping company came into being in Calcutta in 1928, India

Steamships Ltd., under the chairmanship of Dr A. Ramaswami Mudaliar. Other shipping companies followed.

Walchand Hirachand led the way in ship-building also, another dream of Chidambaram Pillai, by starting the Scindia Ship-building Yard in Visakhapatnam in 1936. Launching the first vessel built in Visakhapatnam, S.S. "Jala Prabha", on March 14, 1948, Sardar Patel, Deputy Prime Minister of Free India, recalled with fervour the services rendered by the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company and Chidambaram Pillai.

History made a full circle when in 1949 a shipping service between Tuticorin and Ceylon operated by Indian interests was again started at the initiative of the merchant leaders of Tuticorin. Appropriately enough, their first ship was named S.S. "V.O. Chidambaram", and on February 9, 1949, C. Rajagopalachari, Governor-General of India, launched the vessel to the acclamation of a jubilant public.

V.O. Chidambaram Pillai came to be endearingly called "Kappalottiya Thamizhan" (the Tamil who launched a shipping service) and many memorials, big and small, began to be created in his honour all over Madras State. The house in Ottapidaram where Chidambaram Pillai was born in 1872 has been taken over by Government and made a public monument. In Tuticorin, a college, the V.O.C. College, inspires in young minds the lofty ideals of the Swadeshi hero. In front of the main entrance to the Madras Harbour stands a full length statue of Chidambaram Pillai erected by the Madras Government. The trials and tribulations of Chidambaram Pillai and his comrade Subramania Sivam have been portrayed on the



stage and screen by eminent artistes, drawing full crowds at every show.

The Centenary of the Birth of V.O. Chidambaram Pillai was celebrated on a grand scale all over the country on September 5, 1972. Newspapers and magazines highlighted salient aspects of his life and public meetings were held in a large number of places. The Indian Posts and Telegraphs honoured the patriot by issuing a memorial stamp bearing his portrait, with a ship in the background. The principal event of the Centenary Celebrations was held in Tuticorin, the scene of Chidambaram Pillai's main endeavours. The Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, declared open a full size statue of Chidambaram Pillai before the new Tuticorin Port, now enlarged and being converted into a major port. A dock in the port was also named after the hero.

Were Chidambaram Pillai alive today, he would have been extremely gratified by the rapid progress made by Indian shipping in the years after Independence. India, eclipsed during the days of foreign domination, is now the second largest ship-owning country in Asia, and ranks sixteenth in the world.

As of September 30, 1974, the number of Indian ships on the high seas was 289 with a total gross tonnage of 35.44 lakhs, with another 19.42 lakh gross tons of shipping under construction. These figures are to be seen against the less than 2 lakh gross tons in August 1947 at the time of our Independence, and 25.20 lakh gross tons with 257 ships in April 1972, about a quarter of a century after Independence. The planned target for the end of the Fifth Five Year Plan is 86.40 lakh gross tons in operation and 10 lakh gross tons under construction.

With the years, the tempo of growth of Indian shipping is increasing.

A remarkable feature of the growth of Indian shipping, one that would have pleased Chidambaram Pillai very much, is its total national orientation and spirit of self-reliance. India has been able to build up its shipping industry without looking for foreign assistance or collaboration. Indian expertise and Indian know-how, both commercial and technical, has helped to develop Indian shipping by the hard way. Indian officers and seamen man the large and growing Indian merchant fleet. There is a great demand overseas for Indian officers and seamen.

The Shipping Corporation of India and the Mogul Lines are operating in the public sector and some 33 shipping companies are in the private sector. The Shipping Corporation, with more than 79 vessels, operates passenger and cargo services on all the important sea trade routes of the world. It also operates overseas tanker services, overseas bulk carrier services and coastal tanker services besides coastal services for cargo and passengers.

The Scindia Steam Navigation Company, the India Steamship Company, the Great Eastern Shipping Company and South India Shipping Corporation are among the leading private operators.

The earnings of the Indian shipping industry are now on the way to becoming a major contributor to the country's earnings of foreign exchange.

There are six centres for the training of merchant navy officers and ratings: T.S. "Rajendra", Bombay (pre-sea training course for navigating cadets), the Marine Engineering Training College, Calcutta and Bombay (training course for engineering cadets), the Lal Bahadur

Shastri Nautical and Engineering College, Bombay (presea instructional course for navigation and engineering cadets), T.S. "Mekhala" and T.S. "Naulakhsi" (pre-sea training for deck and engine room ratings and bhandari cooks).

Three ship-building yards now operate in the country: the Hindustan Shipyard Ltd., Visakhapatnam, Mazgaon Dock Ltd., Bombay and the Garden Reach Workshops Ltd., Calcutta. The Hindustan Shipyard mainly caters for the needs of the merchant fleet, while the two others attend mainly to the needs of the Indian Navy. A fourth shipyard in Cochin is under way.

India now has eight major ports—Bombay, Calcutta, Cochin, Madras, Visakhapatnam, Kandla, Paradip and Mormugao—and two others, Tuticorin and Mangalore, are being developed into major ports.

In every sphere Indian shipping has developed in the quarter century since Independence. The great dreams outlined by Chidambaram Pillai in the Prospectus of the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company in 1906 are today realities of achievements. His dreams have come true now.



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V.O. CHIDAMBARAM PILLAI (1872-1936), remembered principally for the pioneering role he played in building India's shipping industry, was also a great freedom fighter who suffered long terms of imprisonment under British rule. The present book is an absorbing account of this great man's many-faceted life, courage and contributions to the nation.

R.A. PADMANABHAN is a journalist in English and Tamil and has received a Gold Medal for his researches on the life and works of Subramania Bharati. He has been a regular contributor to *The Indian Review* and his writings include several radio plays and short stories.

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