

Research Paper

QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT IN TIRUPPATTUR TALUK OF RAMNAD DISTRICT IN TAMIL NADU –A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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Introduction

The entry of Japan in the Second World War in December 1941 created a grave situation in Asia. The Allies desperately needed India's willing cooperation. The American public opinion pressed for a fair deal to India. The British Government decided to placate American criticism by sending out Sir Stafford Cripps to India. The Cripps Offer promised freedom after the war and at the same time sought to introduce Pakistan through the back door. Regarding the present, it was proposed to Indian's the Executive Council. But the reformed Council was not to be treated as a responsible cabinet. Besides, Defense was to remain in British hands. No wonder, the Cripps mission was a failure. The manner, in which negotiations ended, sent a wave of resentment throughout the country. There was also the danger of India becoming a threat of war. All these induced Gandhi and the Congress to make an all out effort to get rid of the British rule. The nation could wait no longer for independence. On 8th August, 1942 at Bombay, the All India Congress Committee passed the Quit India resolution. It demanded the immediate withdrawal of British from India,

The setting up of a provisional Government representing all parties and pooling of all resources to defend India. In order to secure the immediate withdrawal of Britain, the Congress sanctioned a nationwide non violent mass movement under the leadership of Gandhi. At the end of the session Gandhi declared: "I am not going to be satisfied with anything short of complete freedom. We shall do or die. We shall either free India or die in the attempt. On the next morning Gandhi and other members of the Working Committee were arrested, and prominent Congress leaders were rounded up all over India. The Congress Organization was also banned"¹.

So far as Madras was concerned C.Rajagopalachari had by this time resigned from the Congress on the issue of Pakistan and the other leaders had been imprisoned. The people were more or less left to themselves and their resentment in many places resulted in acts of violence. Indeed, a study of the records indicates that the policy of the Government was largely responsible of these acts of violence. For, the Government not only imprisoned all the leaders who could have exercised a restraining influences on the people but also banned all non-violent activities such as hartals, meetings, processions and demonstrations. The result was that popular violence broke out with virulence hitherto unknown in the political annals of the Madras Presidency. People lost patience, resorted to all sorts to acts, including sabotage and arson, and counted imprisonment in large numbers².

In the Presidency of Madras the movement so far had consisted chiefly of hartals, processions and strikes. Strikes were confined to educational institutions. Twenty-three merchants of Ramnad District were convicted for observing a hartal on 6th September. The Ramnad District Board at its meeting held on 30 August passed a resolution against the detention of Gandhi and other leaders. Soon the District Board was superseded by the Government for having passed resolutions supporting the All-India Congress Committee decision. This is microscopic study and it traces Tiruppattur taluk alone in Ramnad district.³

TIRUPPATTUR TALUK

On 11th August 1942 at Karaikudi, a public meeting was held by Congressmen at which they condemned the Government for arresting the Congress leaders and advised the students to boycott Government offices. Soon after the

meeting at about 8.30 pm huge crowd went about demonstrating, and a constable on duty was assaulted. His coat was torn and his lathi taken away. The letters R.D were removed from his turban in the open street. The police had to disperse the crowd by force. A few persons pelted stones at the police. One man seriously injured in the lathi charge. Three persons were arrested in this connection. That morning a mob staged a demonstration before the local high school⁴. On 9 August, as a precautionary measure, the police arrested A.R. Chockalingam Chettiar, former president of the Karaikudi Town Congress Committee.⁵ There were also hartals, processions of students and Congressmen and public meetings. The Taluk Magistrate issued Orders under section 144 C.P.C. banning all public meetings or processions at Karaikudi for a period of one month from 12 August.⁶

The town of Karaikudi had been the center of trouble and there was much lawlessness leading to police firing on instant. On that day the local leaders attempted to hold a public meeting in defiance of the order. When the efforts of the police to disperse the crowd appeared useless, they tried to bring down the national flag that was flying on a post nearby. Thereupon the infuriated mob turning against the police shouted and warned them not to lay hands on the flag. A lathi charge was then ordered. The crowd temporarily dispersed, but collected again at some distance and pelted stones at the police. The mob brandished sticks and spears at the police in the intervals of stone-throwing and assumed a menacing attitude. As the crowd did not disperse, the police fired two rounds. This shooting hardly had any effect and the crowd continued to pelt stones at the police. As the police were surrounded on all the sides by the hostile mob, the police had to fire again. Three persons were hit and the crowd on one side ran away.⁷

The Deputy Superintendent of Police on learning that the Reserve Party sent for their help was prevented from joining them by the rioters, preceded towards the police Station. As the streets were barricaded with heavy stones they had to be removed by the police. There was a heavy barrage of stone-throwing from the mob. Thereupon fire was again opened and either round was fired. The crowd then dispersed.⁸ It was now learning that the telephone exchange was being mobbed and that considerable damage had already been done to the building and machinery. The Deputy

Superintendent of proceeded to the spot. As there was heavy stone throwing, fire was opened again to disperse the attackers. One round was fired in which a lad lost his life on the spot. Six persons received bullet injuries. Nearly thirty persons sustained injuries in the lathe charge. Several Congress volunteers were arrested. The town continued to be turbulent even afterwards, but was only checked by the presence of the military and the reserve police. The townsmen attended three Civil Disobedience meetings before they were prohibited en-masses during the month of August there were three proclaimed hartals. The mob also damaged three police beat posts. The buses used by the police on 12 instant patrol were stoned and damaged.⁹

Frequent threats to attack and burn the police Station were made. A.R. Arunachalam Chettiar, a diamond merchant and a member of the War Committee, was forced to wear khaddar and put up a Congress flag. His shop was looted. Similarly Rao Bhadur A.R.M. Perianan Chettiar was mobbed in his house on 11 August and he was threatened for being pro- Government. The loyal people and the police constables were afraid to go out into the streets. A very strong effort was made to prevent the police and the military from getting supplies from hotels and from retail shops. The cutting of telephone wires around Karaikudi was widespread, and complaints were even made that lines-men restoring the wires were threatened. It was therefore found necessary to Station a police force in this town for one month".¹⁰

The inhabitants of Karaikudi refused to render all assistance in apprehending the agitators. Threatening letters to Government servants were emanating from Karaikudi even in September". Karaikudi had a population of 30,000 and was considered a place of enormous riches. It was the place of at least two first class agitators. Under the circumstances the District Magistrate proposed a collective fine of Rs. 1 lakh on this town. However, the Governor reduced the fine to Rs.50,000.¹¹

The Muslims of Karaikudi had not taken part in the disturbances and so they were exempted from collective fine. Title holders, motor companies who helped the police, corporate bodies, some shop-keepers and some individuals were also exempted. The Valayars had not come forward even to join the village watch.

There was therefore no case to exempt them. All the Asaris (carpenters) had taken part and therefore no exemption was granted for the Community.¹²

The Chettiars Welfare Association, Karaikudi appealed to the Government that their Community might be exonerated from the collective fine. It was pointed out that almost all the Nattukkottai Nagarathars had for the past so many generations been the loyal subjects, well wishers of the British cause and hence the favour. The Association also passed a resolution praying for the success of the Allies in the war. However their appeal was turned down".¹³

Poolankurichi

On 15th August 1942 at Poolankurichi, a gang burgled the post office and stole, away the properties. On 18th August a group of men led by a Congress leader waylaid the mail bus in broad day light and removed eleven mail bags and burnt them. The villagers had also cut roads in three places, dismantled culverts and cut off telegraph wires. Picketing of buses became intense and road traffic was disrupted for three days. On 25 instant a Reserve Police party went there but was forced to retreat due to intense stone throwing by the people.¹⁴

The next day the District Magistrate and the District

Superintendent of Police proceeded to the place with a strong party of 100 men. On the approach of the party, the mob which had gathered ran up the hill with their guns and arrivals and taking up positions there, aimed their guns at the party and rolled down heavy stones on them. Fire was opened and the crowd disappeared. Several persons were hit and seen falling and they were all removed by the mob.¹⁵ The police charge-sheeted 30 persons in the case and arrested 27 persons. They were all imprisoned and fined. Several Congress workers went underground. The police and the army men doubtless committed many atrocities in the village and caused untold miseries to the people. The house and shops of many Congress workers were looted and properties destroyed therein. Many women were tortured by the police and kept in lock-up for several weeks.

The whole movement was organized by the Maravars who were an important section of the population of the village. The richer section of the villagers was composed of Chettiars whose relations with the Maravars in the beginning of this agitation had not been beyond suspicion, but they behaved fairly-well when the police forced their way into their village and they rendered all possible help in tracking the group of agitators that had retired to the hills. In these circumstances, the District Magistrate considered it inexpedient to subject the Chettiar Community to a collective fine.¹⁶ There were 201 propertied Maravars in the village and they behaved as if the British Government had ceased to exist. The Government imposed a collective fine of Rs. 5000 on the Maravar Community alone of Poolankurichi village. All other communities were exempted from the fine.¹⁷

Natarajapuram

At Natarajapuram the Railway Station was an unimportant flag Station which consisted of two old railway coaches. On 24 August at 11 p.m. a crowd of about sixty men of the Panangudi village armed with aruvals etc., entered the railway Station, silenced the point's men by threatening to do harm to them if they raised an alarm and set fire to the coaches which were completely burnt down with the contents. The police charge-sheeted 33 persons in this case. In the meantime at Panangudi 3 houses were looted and burnt down by the Reserve Policemen. On 25 August at Natarajapuram a bunk was burnt. At Karaikudi Unnikrishnan and Karuppiah Chettiar were arrested under the D.I.R. for alleged objectionable Speeches delivered by them. On the night of the 3 September at Karaikudi the thatched building of a Municipal Elementary School was burnt down. Except a few benches almost all the furniture were destroyed. The postmortem shed, a tiled building, was partially burnt down.¹⁸

Parapets and culverts in Trippathur-Singampunari Road were dismantled. A bridge near Keelavalavu village on the Melur-Triuppathur Road was damaged'. Toddy shops were picketed at Triuppathur and Pillaiyarpatti. At Triuppathur Kittu Iyer and his wife were arrested. At Nerkuppai, Kunnakudi and Pillaiyarpatti several volunteers were punished for anti-Government activities. At Karaiyur a toddy shop was burnt down and in this connection six local volunteers were convicted. The police burnt down four houses at Manchinipatti.¹⁹

On 10 September telegraph wires were cut at Pallathur. The next day peaceful picketing of toddy shops in Sakkottai and Kandanoor villages was carried on by Congress volunteers 26 of the students of the S.M.S. High School, Karaikudi stayed away from their classes on 15

instant as a protest against the collective fine imposed on Karaikudi. At Kandanoor, some persons who picketed toddy shops were dispersed by a lathi-charge.²⁰ The order banning processions and public meetings in Karaikudi was extended for another month from September. On the 17th instant a Congress public meeting was held at Tiruppattur. The Speakers criticized the various acts of violence resorted to by rioters in the district and appealed to the people to be non-violent.

On 19 September a curfew order was promulgated in Karaikudi town. The order was a sequel to the attempt of some persons to defy the ban order in force there. 'Congress House', the premises of the Karaikudi Town Congress Committee, was searched by the police on 20 September. Tamil Publication called 'Vanga Puratchi' and some pamphlets were seized. On 24th instant the premises of the Karaikudi town Congress committee was taken possession of by the police. Copies of a notice prohibiting the Karaikudi Congress Committee from using the funds of the committee were served on the President and Secretary of the committee.²¹

On 25th September a proclamation ordering S.A. Ganesan to appear before the court was issued and a copy of it was later affixed to the front wall of Ganesan's house at Karaikudi. Following this, most of the movable properties in the house were attached by the police and removed. S.A. Ganesan after the arrest of the leaders of the A.I.C.C. addressed several public meetings at Karaikudi. In all his speeches he advocated boycott of schools and courts, non-payment of taxes and chanting of the words "White men Quit". India He advocated boycott of the police by the traders and hotels and the gathering of people in thousands before courts to prevent them from functioning. The people who listened to his stirring and emotional speeches immediately attacked and molested police officials and others who were showing sympathy to the Government officials. They started to commit acts of Sabotage. S.A. Ganesan was considered responsible for all the lawlessness in Chettinad. Ganesan also pointed out the inefficiency of the armed strength of the British Government in not being able to quell the rioting in Bombay and wondered how inadequate was the supply of arms and ammunitions at Karaikudi to quell any such rebellion that might be started there. Consequently a procession of the students was taken at Karaikudi on 12th August 1942. S.A. Gansean surrendered before the Commissioner of Police at Madras on 30th September. His hands and legs were chained and were taken to the sub-jail at Triuppathur. He was sentenced to undergo FIR. For 2 years. In view of the very huge crowd expected at Karaikudi from the surrounding villages during the Vijayadasami festival and the likelihood of a breach of peace therein, the Taluk Magistrate passed an order on 14 October prohibiting any meeting and any procession whether political or religious for one month within the limits of Karaikudi Municipality.²²

The Quit India Movement remained active in the Madras Presidency only for a few months roughly from August to December 1942. Thereafter it gradually died down. The political atmosphere in the whole country however continued to remain dark and sullen with the detention of Congress leaders in jail. News about Mahatma Gandhi fast in February 1943 excited public interest to a very considerable extent the newspapers continued to devote much attention to it. Hartals were reported from Ramnad District. The Municipal Council of Rajapalayam passed resolutions for the unconditional release of Gandhi. Many schools in Ramnad District were closed following the death of

Kasthuri-bai Gandhi in February 1944. ²³ Attempts of hartal were spoiled by police intervention.

A period of quit followed in the district after the rebel movement had been quelled, but this would last long. Pamphlets inciting Government servants to resign and inducing the public to revive the rebel activities same into circulation. A number of volunteers from both Ramnad and Madurai districts were frequently staging demonstrations at Madurai, and many of them were sent to jail. These activities were traced to Madrura-Ramnad Satyagraha Council, an Underground Organization working surreptitiously for the revival of the August Movement in both the districts. Eventually in November 1943 this Organization was unearthed and the leading Organizers were sent to jail. When Gandhi was released in May 1944, meetings were held in a number of places. Congressmen were now actively engaged in raising money for the Kasturibai National Memorial Fund. In Ramnad District the target was put at rupees two lacs.²⁴ Emphasis was made on the non-political character of the fund, with the result that people of all shades of opinion and joined these committees. In Ramnad the President of the District was Kumara Raja Sir Muthiah Chettiar. ²⁵ The Gandhi-Jinnah talks had begun in September, and Congressmen held meetings in Ramnad District canvassing support for such an agreement, and Communists were participating with the Congressmen at those meetings. The Communists also took out processions and held meetings. They further obtained signatures in the district for a mass petition to the Government to release the Congress leaders.

Conclusion

To conclude the freedom struggle continued in the district vigorously till the dawn of independence. Secret societies were however formed in some places of the district and revolutionary activities were carried on for some time but with little success. Muthuramalinga Thevar indulged in violent attacks upon the Government and their responsibility for the atrocities of 1942. Now the leadership in Tamil Nadu passed into the hands of Kamaraj, the President of the T.N.C.C. India became independent on 15th August 1947 and the dawn of freedom was greeted with great rejoicings.

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