



## A SHOCKING ASSASSINATION IN WAKE OF SPREAD OF EXTREMISM IN THE EXTREME PART OF TAMIL NADU : TIRUNELVELI CONSPIRACY CASE

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### ABSTRACT

*A certain political circumstances paved the way for the growth of the ideals of extremism and subsequent assassination of Collector Ashe by Vanchinathan in the wake of the arrest V.O.Chidambaram, a celebrated patriot hailed from Tuticorin. Further, the paper deals with the Tirunelveli conspiracy case in the wake of the assassination of Collector Ashe . This case attracted the attention of the nationalists of the entire India. The name and fame of V.O.Chidambaram and Vanchinathan spread all over India as her great sons. The repressive measures taken by the British Government against any kind of protest or agitation made some Indian patriots believe that independence could be achieved through terrorism. The American of Independence , the French Revolution and partial class revolution that occurred in Russia in 1905 seemed to inspire revolutionaries in India. Knowledge of the world's revolutionary movements came easily to Indians who had studied Western education.*



**KEYWORDS:** V.O.Chidambaram, Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company, Vanchinathan, Tirunelveli, Nilakanta Brahmachari, Tuticorin.

### INTRODUCTION

Those who believed in terrorism found London a safe city where Indian youth could be secretly trained in armed conflicts and incendiary tactics. They camped in London and attracted into their group many Indian students who had come there for higher studies.

A Marathi lady named Madam Cama, of Parsi origin, settled in London and carried out revolutionary activities. She was also editing a paper titled 'Vande Matharam' and using it for the publication of her group's revolutionary principles and plans.

One Shyamji Krishna Varma of Kathiawar went to London in 1905 and founded a revolutionary association called 'Home Rule League' and the following year established a camp called 'India Hostel'. This in the course of time became a camp for young revolutionaries. Krishna Varma also run a paper titled, *Indian Reformer* for the propagation of revolutionary ideas. Among the people who camped at India Hostel the most notable were Vinayak Damodar. Savarkar, Madanlal Dhingra, V.V. Subramania Iyer and Trichy Doctor, T.S.S. Rajan. These people believed in armed revolution. They attended international conferences organized by other revolutionary and militant organizations and drew inspiration from them.<sup>1</sup>

## ASSASSINATION OF CURZON WYLLIE

The first shot for political revolution in India was fired in London in 1908 by a revolutionary named, Madanlal Dhingra who shot dead a Britisher, called Curzon Wylie called, mistaking him for Lord Curzon who had partitioned Bengal in 1905. The young man's courageous confession of his crime shocked the entire British Empire. He hanged in London.

After this assassination, the British police kept India House under surveillance. Therefore, the Indian revolutionaries moved their camp to Paris. Vir Savarkar was arrested before leaving England, taken to India, charged with conspiracy against the government and he was sentenced to life imprisonment. He was also deported to Andaman. V.V.S. Iyer escaped from the British police and reached Pondicherry and carried out revolutionary activities from there.

Further, the Government did everything possible to destroy the Congress organization, giving high positions to moderate leaders and remove them from Congress, while at the same time dealing vindictively with extremists by imprisoning them, deporting them or hanging them. It must be said that the tactics of the rulers, as far as the moderates were concerned, were a success, since these men who were given high positions helped the British government to strengthen its repressive measures Against Extremists.

C. Sankaran Nair, who had been the President of the 1897 Amaravathi session of the Congress, was later one of the judges who investigated the Tirunelveli conspiracy case. In his opinion, he noted that Bharathi's song, 'When will our thirst for freedom end?' was responsible for the Ashe's assassination.

Norton, a famous lawyer and one of the moderates in Congress, appeared as a government lawyer in the Alipore bomb case (1908) and showed all his ingenuity in trying to get the death penalty for Aurobindo.

Under these circumstances, some Indian youth developed a defeatist mentality and became terrorists. They believed that independence could be achieved by assassinating British officials and thus terrorizing the government.

In Delhi, while Viceroy Hardinge was riding a procession on an elephant, a bomb was thrown at him and he escaped but seriously injured. In Bengal the bomb aimed at a magistrate missed its target and killed the women of the Kennedy family. One Kuthiram Bose, an eighteen year old youth, accused in the case, was sentenced to death. The young man's photograph was sold throughout India. Nine young Bengali young men, including Aswini Kumar Dutt, were deported. This resulted in a series of bomb blasts across Bengal for some time.<sup>2</sup>

Tamil culture was not conducive to terrorism. This was why V.O. Chidambaram constructively opposed British rule by establishing a rival shipping company. As the government decided to punish even such a patriot with double life imprisonment, the Tamil youth were furious.<sup>3</sup> A.F. Pinhey, a Judge sentences V.O.Chidambaram for forty years of exile and transportation for life –twenty years for seditious speech and another twenty for abetting Subramania Siva with his fiery lectures. Siva was adjudged a tool in the hands of V.O.Chidambaram.<sup>4</sup>

## Assassination of Collector Ashe

The severe sentence pronounced against V.O.Chidambaram and the constant harassment he was subjected to in prison inflamed some Tamil youth to think of terrorist activities. An enraged Tamil youth decided to follow Kuthiram Bose's example.

On 17<sup>th</sup> June 1911, Tirunelveli Collector Ashe was traveling by train in the company of his wife for Kodaikanal to spend a few days with his four children who were at school there. His wife had returned from England just five days earlier.

Passengers coming from Kodaikanal had to transfer to Maniyachi station. Since the connecting train had not arrived, Ashe and his wife were waiting at their compartment. Suddenly, a well-dressed young man appeared at the compartment window and said 'Good morning, Ashe'. The collector was shocked and dismissed him with a contemptuous 'Good morning'. The young man took his automatic pistol and shot Ashe, who tried to dodge the bullet by throwing his hat at the attacker. The bullet,

however, pierced his chest on the left side. Ashe tried to get out of the compartment to catch the young man but his wife stopped his desperate movement. He was taken on the same train for treatment in Tirunelveli, but died during the journey.<sup>5</sup>

One of the Collector's assistants tried to grab the attacker and the two men rolled onto the platform. Then the young man got rid of the employee, ran into the lavatory of a railway compartment and committed suicide by shooting a bullet into his mouth. He did it on purpose so his identity would not be discovered.

Since the face was destroyed, it was necessary for the authorities to expose the identity of the young man. He was found to be one Vanchinathan, son of Shencottah Ragupathy Iyer, an official of the Forest Department. Vanchinathan was also serving in the same department in Punalur and was on leave for three months at the time of this incident.

A note explaining his action was found in Vanchinathan's pocket. It read that all Indians were determined to remove the British and establish Swaraj in India. In this holy land which had been ruled by great heroes like Rama, Krishna, Shivaji, Govind Singh and others, preparations were underway to crown George- V, the King of England, as the Emperor of this country. Collector Ashe's assassination and the death of Vanchinathan were advance warnings to those concerned that no self respect Indian would allow this coronation and the celebration that accompanied it.<sup>6</sup>

### Reaction of the V.O.Chidambaram

The news of Ashe's assassination was conveyed to V.O.Chidambaram who was in Kannanur prison, Kerala, by the medical assistant. His immediate reaction was joy that his nemesis had got hold of the evil person responsible for his imprisonment and the liquidation of the Swadesi Shipping Company. But, later, in a letter to Salem C. Vijayaragavachariar, who was legal advisor to the Shipping Company, V.O.Chidambaram observed that he saluted friends who continued the agitation against British rule even after his imprisonment. But he regretted that assassinations contrary to his principles occurred. The patriots were fighting against the British regime which could not be eliminated simply by assassinating British officials. His principle was that the patriots should not do harm individually, even if they were bad. Please pass this on to those who were interested in the revolution.

Ashe's assassination occurred before the Gandhian era. The Gandhian principle of *ahimsa* or non-violence. It became known only after 1917, when Gandhi began practicing and propagating it. This principle had become guiding principle of the Congress in the Gandhian Era.

Vanchinathan had not been under the influence of Gandhi or his principle, *ahimsa*. He lived in a time when the patriots spoke enthusiastically about the American War of Independence and the French Revolution. It was at Vanchi's day the day the Irish rebelled against the British administration. These and the example of Madanlal Dhingra put violent thoughts in Vanchi's mind.

Vanchinathan was just twenty five years old when he ended his life. He left behind a widowed girl, Ponnammal. He had married her when she was a child. And by the time she came of age, he was dead.

### Tirunelveli Conspiracy Case

From the note found in Vanchinathan's pocket, the police suspected that a gang was behind him. The secret police department was alerted, Vanchinathan's house in Shencottai was searched and from the fifty letters found there, the addresses of forty of his collaborators were recorded.<sup>7</sup> The houses, shops and other concerns with which they connected were searched. Accordingly, cases were filed against fourteen persons for conspiracy to assassinate Collector Ashe and overthrow the British administration in India.

Two respectable gentlemen, Venkateswara Iyer of Punalur in Travancore State and Dharmaraja Iyer of Shencottai, committed suicide when their houses were raided. Both were believed to be orthodox Brahmins and preferred death to humiliation at the hands of the police. One Madasamy of Ottappidaram suspected to be involved in the Tirunelveli conspiracy went into hiding and could not be traced to anyone.

The government appointed a special tribunal consisting of two British judges, Arnold White and Ailing, and an Indian judge, Judge C. Sankaran Nair, to try the case. After a detailed investigation, they went to conclusion that all the fourteen accused were guilty<sup>8</sup> and that the conspiracy was for a revolution similar in intensity to the Sepoy Revolt of 1857.<sup>9</sup> They sentenced Nilakanta Brahmachari to seven years and others to between four and one year in prison.

Nilakanta Brahmachari escaped from Bellary prison after two years, in 1914 he was caught after two days and his sentence was increased to seven and a half years. He was released in 1919. Brahmachari, who entered prison as a revolutionary in 1912, came out in 1919 as a communist. In 1922 he was imprisoned with ten years as rigorous sentence. When he was released, he went straight to Nandi Hills in Karnataka, established an *ashram* there and lived as a spiritualist there until his death in 1978.<sup>10</sup>

### V.O.Chidambaram and Shipping Company

In the absence of V.O.Chidambaram, the Swadeshi Shipping Company suffered losses on the spot. Forgetting the V.O.Chidambaram's sacrifices had done to found the company, the shareholders sent him a warning, holding him responsible for the losses and also obliged to compensate them. Upon receipt of the legal notice, V.O.Chidambaram wrote to the Company's legal advisor. Accordingly, V.O.Chidambaram conveyed his regards to all those who had contributed financially for the commencement of the Swadeshi Navigation Company. Loss of shares should be borne by the all the share-holders. If they not obliged, he would make up for the loss. However, please bear with him until he got his release.

The Swadeshi Shipping Company was liquidated and the ship S.S. Gallia was sold to the rival British company.<sup>11</sup> Although the shipping company's shareholders decided to forget V.O.Chidambaram, the hero's friends did not forget him. Forty-eight years after the sale of the Galea, the friends of the V.O.Chidambaram purchased a ship which they called the S.S. V.O, Chidambaram and organized its maiden voyage. It was the elder statesman Rajaji who flagged it off. Unfortunately, this venture also failed due to lack of support from traders.

Subsequently, the central government stepped in and restarted transport between Tuticorin and Colombo in a big ship called S.S. Chidambaram and that ship is carrying out the ambitious project of V.O.Chidambaram even today.

### End of the V.O.Chidambaram Era

V.O.Chidambaram era can be said to have ended with the liquidation of the Shipping Company. V.O.Chidambaram had grown great heights within fifteen months after joining Congress. The British administration was so alarmed by his activities that it tried to get rid of him completely by sentencing him to double life imprisonment. Aurobindo realized his greatness and selfless service and called him, an 'Indian Hero'.<sup>12</sup> Subramania Bharathi described him as 'man of action' and an 'exemplary sacrificer'.<sup>13</sup>

When this hero entered prison, the entire population of Tuticorin crowded into the streets and expressed their admiration for him. But when they released him, there was no one to welcome him.<sup>14</sup> Such was the fear that the government's repressive measures had penetrated the hearts of the people.

### End Notes

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