

The Madurai Riots of 1942: A Study of the Quit India Movement Violence in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Movement in India Rowlett Satyagraha (1919), the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22), the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-34), the Individual Satyagraha (1940) and Quit India Movement (1942) are a remarkable major event in the history of the Indian Freedom Struggle. They're the non-violent struggles for Indian independence rehearsal prepared for immediately after the Second World War to the dominion of India Cripps Mission eligibility belated announcement of the promise. Cripps titirena went to leave particularly India (12 April-1942) in pursuit of the British government, aroused suspicion and the thread of Japanese invasion of India was at any given time. Britain, India to save the event of such a situation was to no guarantee. British invoking stayed Japan to attack India. During the struggle of Quit India Movement, urban centres played a dominant role in Madurai district in Tamil Nadu, was one such nationalist urban centre whose contribution deserves a deep study. Madurai was an active town in the Indian Independence Movement. So, the struggle Gandhi a launched the Quit India Movement.

Key Words: Gandhiji, Quit India, Madurai, Struggle, Resolution, Quit India Movement.

Introduction

The Quit India movement saw the yearning of freedom flow through every Indian's blood, making it a massive movement of mass participation. The country was more determined than ever to "do or die" in the case of India's freedom. The movement ignited the spirit of freedom like never before and spread throughout the country like wild fire affecting each Indian heart. Once the idea was born, it gripped Gandhiji completely and he started devoting all this time to the elucidation and justification of his formula which soon became famous as the "Quit India" demand. It is remarkable that although throughout the year 1942, an atmosphere of tense excitement prevailed in many parts of India, there was no communal disorder anywhere except on a very minor scale in isolated areas. The third stage witnessed the birth of Non-Co-operation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement. These three movements were the brainchild of Mahatma Gandhi. Of these three phases, the Quit India Movement played a vital role in the freedom struggle. Madurai District which was part of the Sivagangai and Ramanathapuram district during the

Quit India Movement of 1942 lies in south western Tamil Nadu in India. This district was also the home of the freedom fighters which proved by the fact that the number of participants in the Quite India movement in the district. An earlier many attempts were attempted to survey the participation of freedom fighters in the Madurai of Tamil Nadu in every phase of the Independence struggle.

Birth of Quit India Movement

India's struggle for freedom, reached the peak with the passage of Quit India Resolution, which reverberated the national demand for independence and declared that India could line up with the Allies in the war only as a free nation. In March 1940, the Congress met in sessions at Ramgarh and reiterated demand of complete independence. It decided on Civil Disobedience as the next plan of the Congress. Quit India resolution Gandhi's strategy to examine new protest committee met in ward on 14 July 1942. In Bombay the all-India congress committee approved on August 7th speaking at the meeting, attended by Gandhi was the cry. "I have a little mantra that teaches you, '*Do or Die*' is the magic. We are one of India to release or abandon the effort alive again in through to the extent that we should not live life". All India congress committee meeting in Bombay on 8 August 1942 and ended at 10 pm. Gandhi and other congress leaders were arrested in the early hours of the next day. The movement has arrested a week all over the country figures in the congress. On 8 August 1942, the Quit India resolution was passed at the Bombay session of the All-India Congress Committee (AICC). The draft proposed that if the British did not accede to the demands, a massive Civil Disobedience would be launched. However, it was an extremely controversial decision. At Gowalia Tank, Mumbai, Gandhi urged Indians to follow a non-violent civil disobedience. Gandhi told the masses to act as an independent nation and not to follow the orders of the British. The British, already alarmed by the advance of the Japanese army to the India-Burma border, responded the next day by imprisoning Gandhi at the Aga Khan Palace in Pune. The Congress Party's Working Committee or national leadership was arrested all together and imprisoned at the Ahmednagar Fort. They also banned the party altogether. Large-scale protests and demonstrations were held all over the country. Workers remained absent a masse and strikes were called. The movement also saw widespread acts of sabotage, Indian under-ground organisation carried out bomb attacks on allied supply convoys, government buildings were set on fire, electricity lines were disconnected and transport and communication lines were severed. The disruptions were under control in a few weeks and had little impact on the war effort. The movement soon became a leaderless act of defiance, with a number of acts that deviated from Gandhi's principle of non-violence. In large parts of

the country, the local underground organisations took over the movement. However, by 1943, Quit India had petered out.

Quit India Movement in Madras

During Second War, after the failure of the Cripps's Proposals Gandhi had launched the Quit India Movement. In Tamil Nadu Quit India Movement drew the factory workers, students and common people. It was a wide spread movement. The Buckingham & Carnatic Mills, Port Trust and the Tramway workers joined the movement in large numbers. Quit India Movement was launched in places like North Arcot, Madurai and Coimbatore. There was police firing at Rajapalayam, Karaikudi and Devakottai. In Madras, the trouble started from 11th August onwards. Telegraph and telephone lines were cut and railway stations were attacked and burnt down. Many trains were derailed. These disturbances started from Guntur and spread to West Godawri, Ramnad and Tanjore districts. Schools and colleges were closed. Mills were close in Coimbatore district. On 24 August, Sullur aerodrome was attacked and twenty-two lorries and 3 drivers were burnt. Sabotage activities like felling trees across the roads, breaking culverts and cutting telegraph lines before they planned an attack continued in Anantpur, East Godawri, Nellore, Tanjore and Cuddapah districts. Schools, colleges and law courts were picketed. Even women took part in this demonstration. The 1942 movement was indeed a movement of the youth. They took the arrest of the top Congress leaders as a challenge. The student community played a leading role and was, in fact the most troublesome element in cities. Different classes of people participated in the movement because of their sympathy with the Congress which commanded a wide measure of support in the province but the ferment among students seemed largely due to their romantic hero-worship of Jawahar Lal Nehru.

Madurai Riots, 1942: Quit India Violence in Tamil Nadu

In the early morning of August 15, a crowd set fire to a Madurai city police bus. Two post offices and a sanitary inspector's office were also burnt. Attacks were made on the ARP premises and equipment. In one warden post, all the stirrup pumps were thrown into the tank. A Municipal fire engine was attacked and put out of action and the crews were badly hurt by stones. The police opened fire at Chinnakadai Street, West Gate, and at North Masi Street. In all, 20 rounds were fired, killing six persons and injuring eleven. Three streets were deserted and most of the shops remained closed. None of the post offices in the town worked on that day in view of the disturbed conditions.

The city magistrate, Madurai, passed an order on August 15 under section 144 Cr. P. C., directing the public to remain indoors between 7 p.m. and 4 a.m. The curfew order was to apply to Madurai Municipal limits and 21 villages within a radius of three miles. Reserve Police were sent from Trichy and Tinneveli. The Area Commander, Trichy, was also asked to send troops and in the evening the troops arrived at Madurai. There was a case of violation of curfew order by one young man who was shot dead by the police on the night of August 15. It has been reported that the men who violated the curfew order had a genuine reason. He had come out in the night to call a doctor to attend to his wife who was about to deliver a child. But he was mercilessly shot dead. Unable to bear the loss of her husband the women also died.

Thus the events from August 10 to 15 took the lives of 14 people in 14 Madurai. Eleven people died due to police firings on August 10 and 15. Two persons died due to police revolver shots on August 14 and one was killed for violation of the curfew order on August 15. From August 15 onwards, the entire town was in the hands of the army and police personnel. As the Government banned all Congress organizations and as there was rigid control of the press, the nationalists of Madurai communicated the information about the Quit India Movement through some cyclostyled materials. These materials were found pasted in several electric lamp posts and other places in Madurai town. A.N. Viswanathan, Treasurer, of the Congress Socialist party, Madurai, kept a cyclostyling machine in his residence at Mahal, First Cross-Street, and carried on the cyclostyling activity secretly and successfully.

An important piece of study associated with the Quit India Movement in Madurai is the account of the "Madurai Acid Throwing Case". Acid was thrown on Viswanathan Nair and two others on October 23, 1942, and the case relating to this event was called "Ordinance Case No. 1 of 1942" or popularly the "Madurai Acid Throwing Case" in the Court of the Special Judge of Madurai.

Viswanathan Nair was serving as the Circle Inspector of Police at Madurai during the 1942 August movement. He took a prominent part with other police officers in quelling the August revolt in Madurai. Even peaceful non-violent demonstrations were met with severe lathi-blows. The lathi-blows on A.N. Rajan and M. Ramalingam were mute examples of the violent, repressive and inhuman policy followed by the police authorities in Madurai. Some of the common methods of torture by the police in Madurai were "to take the arrested persons far into the jungle, beat them mercilessly, burn all their clothes and then release them." It was

reported that on October 2, 1942, two women who took part in the procession held in connection with the birth-day celebrations of Gandhiji (Gandhi Jeyanthi) were arrested and taken in a police lorry to a place in Natham road about 12 miles away from Madurai, stripped naked and were left on the road alone in the late night. T.T. Krishnamachari, a member elected from Tanjore-cum- Trichy Non-Mohan-Medan Rural Constituency, while speaking about (this event in the Central Legislative Assembly on February 12, 1943, said "In the town of Madura I have heard of a well-authenticated report of bad handling of two women. Two women were taken away by the police, stripped off their clothes, dressed in rags, and then left in an open road 12 miles away from the city." It was alleged that Viswanathan Nair was responsible for the ill-treatment meted out to the two women satyagrahis in Madurai. It was for these atrocious acts that a group of young men in Madurai, chief among them being Krishnamoorthy, Neelakantan, B.K. Rajagopal, A.N. Viswanathan, D. Ramakrishnan, O.B. Sundar Rao, wanted to teach a lesson to Viswanathan Nair.

The first definite step in the conspiracy was taken 10 or 15 days before October 23, 1942. On that day, B.K. Rajagopal asked D. Ramakrishnan to prepare some acid to be thrown on Viswanathan Nair so that the injuries might stop him from attending to his work for a time. The acid was to be thrown on Viswanathan Nair and crackers were to be used to create panic and help the persons that threw the acid to escape. Ramakrishnan was working as a paid warden at the E-2 ARP post and the conspirators used to meet at this place often. On October 18, D. Ramakrishnan told his friends that everything was ready and asked them to meet him on October 23.

On October 23 Viswanathan Nair went to the Meenakshi temple for worship. It was a Friday and he usually went to the temple on Friday evenings. Kumara Menon, the Circle Inspector's friend and Palaniappan, a Police constable in mufti, accompanied the Circle Inspector to the temple on that day. After worshipping at the shrines of Sri Meenakshi and other shrines in the temple, all three men came near the gateway to the southern tower of the temple. It was about 8.30 p.m. and while they were emerging from the southern gateway, a few of the conspirators, Lakshmanan, Ganapathy, M.D. Neelakantan, Gomathi and Gurnathan, who were standing at the entrance to the southern tower of the temple, executed the conspiracy. It is probable that the acid might have been thrown by Gurnathan, who resides at Talayari Gurnathan Temple, South Masi Street, Madurai. Some corrosive acid was thrown and it injured all three. Loud explosions were made by the conspirators by firing the

crackers. The men escaped after achieving their goal. All three injured had burns on the face and neck. There were extensive burns on Viswanathan Nair and several injuries on the other two. After being given first aid at a dispensary nearby, Viswanathan Nair was rushed to the Government Hospital. The other two men reported the matter to the police and then went to the hospital for treatment. Palaniappan, the constable, was an in-patient in the hospital till November 20, and Kumara Menon, the Circle Inspector's friend, was an in-patient till December. The Circle Inspector was in the hospital even after January 9, 1943.

The throwing of acid on the Circle Inspector and two others thrilled the entire town of Madurai. In connection with his incident, the police arrested 16 young men in Madurai in during October-November. The trial of the 16 young men began in the Court of the Special Judge of Madurai on December 7. The case for the prosecution was that the sixteen accused entered into a conspiracy to cause injuries to Viswanathan Nair and in pursuance of that conspiracy to cause injuries were caused to him with sulphuric acid and nitric acid on October 23. "Though it was no part of the conspiracy to cause injuries to kumara Menon (Circle Inspector's friend) and Palaniappan (Police Constable), they were also injured as they happened to be in the company of the Circle Inspector when the acid was thrown on him". The story of the alleged conspiracy and the occurrence on October 23rd had been set out by A. Krishnamoorthy, a student of about 18 years, who accepted pardon and turned approver.

The trial went on for about two months and the Special Judge (Rajagopalan) pronounced the judgment on February 11, 1943. The following were the convictions, B.K. Rajagopal and D. Ramakrishnan who were considered by the special judge as "the ring leaders of the conspiracy" were sentenced to 7 years; R.I.M.D. Neelakatan, M. Lakshmanan and Gomathi were sentenced to five years and R.I. Kayambu Thevar was sentenced to 3 years R.I. The other accused were acquitted, but some of them were rearrested immediately under Defence of India Rules and were kept in detention. Among the detained were Obla R. Sundra Rao T.N. Gopalachari, A.N. Viswanathan, Gurunathan Sangili Thevar, Somu Pillai and Narayanan. The convicts filed a revision petition to High Court, Madras. The High Court, however, only confirmed the sentence awarded by the Special Judge, Madurai. The convicts were released by the Government on November 20, 1945. On grounds of a general amnesty.

The throwing of corrosive acid on Viswanathan Nair, Circle Inspector of Police, was an exciting episode in the history of the Indian freedom struggle and in the local history of Madurai. The Circle Inspector ought not to have ill-treated the women *satyagrahis* in

Madurai during the 1942 Movement. If the two women *satyagrahis* had committed any wrong, the police officer had every right to charge sheet them and the court was there to punish them. But he took law into his own hands and his action in stripping off their dress was a crime for all ages. Unable to bear this insult and humiliation, the Madurai youth took law into their own hands and threw acid on the Circle Inspector in an attempt to punish him for his savage behavior. The action of Viswanathan Nair and the reaction shown by Madurai youth were tantamount to that Non-violence was infinitely superior to violence at all times and throwing corrosive acid on a police officer in public to redress a grievance was not a Gandhian Principle. At the same time, it cannot be denied that the humiliation and blood-curdling ill-treatment meted out to the two women *satyagrahis* of Madurai by the police authorities was a social crime of great magnitude. The Lack of the spirit of nationalism on the part of some Indian officials who served in British India was one important factor that contributed to such inglorious occurrences.

Conclusion

At evening the mob of about 200 people armed with sticks, spears and bill- hocks surrounded the taluk office. The estate Chat ram and estate rest house attacked and intimidated the estate official of whom a firefly large number were present. They set fire to the buildings and records there, looted the granary, burnt are carried away the properties of some of the officials, set fire to the estate collectors car and committed other act of. After the rebellion of 1857, above the great struggle emotional in 1942. In Indian movement the culmination of the struggle for liberation, Indian countries became open prisons. Tirelessly to free the people of the great veneration for this role Devakottai, Thiruvadanai placed correctly. This is the final struggle for India's independence. 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 15 August 1947 and the dawn of freedom was greeted with great rejoicings. The above *Satyagrahis* of this district contribute their service to the mother country. Their steadfast patriotism made India free. Thus the district played very significant role in the movement.

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