

# Salt Satyagraha Movement in South Arcot District

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**Abstract—** This Research paper discusses the Civil Disobedience Movement in Tamil Nadu, guided by Gandhian ideals, featured extensive salt satyagraha and mass protests. Leaders such as Rajagopalachari and Nainappa Pillai inspired people in regions like Madras, Vedaranyam, and South Arcot. The paper also emphasizes the emergence of South Arcot district as a significant centre of early resistance, initiating salt satyagraha even before the Vedaranyam March. The movement involved diverse social groups, including students, fisherfolk, and local volunteers, who actively participated in defying the Salt Laws by boiling seawater and organizing public demonstrations. Despite strong repression from colonial authorities, through arrests, police action and legal restrictions, the movement sustained its momentum through public meetings, processions and propaganda.

**Keywords:** Civil Disobedience Movement, Nainappa Pillai, Rajagopalachari, Salt Laws, Salt satyagraha, South Arcot district, Tamil Nadu.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The greatest and most effective, however, is civil disobedience, including non-payment of taxes. The decision on the timing and approach has nominally been left to the All-India Congress Committee.<sup>1</sup> Gandhi declared on 26<sup>th</sup> January, 1930, that the British Government in India has not only deprived them of their freedom but has ruined India economically, politically, culturally and spiritually. Therefore, we must sever the British connection and attain Purna Swaraj or Complete Independence. We must withdraw our voluntary association from the British Government and prepare for Civil Disobedience, including non-payment of taxes.<sup>2</sup> On 15<sup>th</sup> February, 1930, the Congress Working Committee meeting in Ahmedabad authorised Gandhi to initiate and control civil disobedience.<sup>3</sup> Civil Disobedience was sparked by the issue of the Salt Tax,

which Gandhi described as the “most inhuman poll tax that human ingenuity can devise”.<sup>4</sup>

Political agitation in South Arcot began with the rise of the Home Rule, Non-Co-operation and Khilafat Movements. These movements, coming, as they did, in the wake of the commotions caused by the First World War, and inspired, as they were, by outstanding national leaders, created everywhere in the whole State, political consciousness which speedily became powerful.<sup>5</sup> A previously unseen level of nationalism swept across the entire country of India, prompting Congress leaders nationwide to coordinate large-scale gatherings, salt satyagraha, no-tax movements and boycotts of government officials.

In February 1919, Gandhi's southern propaganda tour highlighted that civil disobedience represented the power of truth, the power of the soul and entailed the renunciation of all physical violence. He visited South Arcot in 1921 by which time the Non-Cooperation movement was in full swing in the whole state.<sup>6</sup> As a result of Non-Cooperation Movement, Provincial Congress Committees, the District Taluk and Village Committees were established all over the state,<sup>7</sup> which held public meetings and exhorted the people to follow Gandhi's words.

## II. CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT IN TAMIL NADU

Tamil Nadu played a prominent role in conducting the Civil Disobedience Movement on Gandhian lines. In Madras city, a party of satyagrahis led by Prakasam and Nageshwara Rao boiled sea water on the beach and later at Prakasam's house.<sup>8</sup> On 13<sup>th</sup> April, 1930, a group of about 100 volunteers, headed by Rajagopalachari, began his march to Vedaranyam near Cape Calimere, where it is proposed to collect salt.

This party includes a few recruits from districts of Madras, Trichinopoly, Tirunelvely, Malabar and the remaining Tamil and Telugu Districts.<sup>9</sup>

The state of Tamil Nadu has several locations that instilled a sense of nationalism in people's minds, such Marina Beach in Madras, Vedaranyam, Sholinganallur, Chidambaram and Tuticorin, as well as the coastal villages of Killai, Owari, Devanampattinam, and Thiruvaikulam.

### III. CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT IN SOUTH ARCOT DISTRICT

The history of the Civil Disobedience Movement in the South Arcot district dates back to 26<sup>th</sup> January 1930, observed as "Independence Day," when the Congress Executive decided to organize mass demonstrations. The Lahore Congress Resolution spurred the Congress activists, with meetings being organised in Cuddalore, Panruti and Chidambaram. In Cuddalore, the movement was organised by Congress Secretaries Kumaraswamy Pillai and Sudarshanam Naidu, both of whom were concerned in non-cooperation Movement in 1921.<sup>10</sup> South Arcot District was the first district in the Presidency to start the Salt Satyagraha, even before the Vedaranyam march.<sup>11</sup>

In Panruti, the movement was conducted under the auspices of Ratnam Pillai, who was later elected as the President of the South Arcot District Congress Committee after P. Srinivas Iyengar, ex M.L.C. resigned his post. In Chidambaram, the movement was held by Nainappa Pillai, son of Devanayagam Pillai, a leading political leader who was leading the South Arcot Salt Satyagraha Movement in Cuddalore.<sup>12</sup>

In 1928, he delivered inflammatory speeches advocating strike by government officers and employees of railways, telegraph, postal and police departments. He was about to be prosecuted under section 108 of the C.P.C., but the chargesheet was withdrawn in view of his conviction under section 124-A of the I.P.C. for inflammatory speeches in Tuticorin.<sup>13</sup> He organised a procession in Chidambaram on the Independence Day on 1930. However, as the intelligentsia of the town did not support him, he took the help of 200 students of Sri Minakshi College, Chidambaram. They marched through the principal streets of that town shouting

"Gandhi ki Jai" and eradicate the imperialism.<sup>14</sup> Leaflets containing Tamil translations of the open declaration of the Independence Day declaration were sent from the Madras Congress office, printed locally and openly distributed to the audience.<sup>15</sup>

### IV. KILLAI SALT SATYAGRAHA

On the 9<sup>th</sup> April, 1930, Nainappa Pillai decided to break salt laws at Killai in Chidambaram Taluk. He found lack of response from the public and to decide to join C Rajagopalachari in his Vedaranyam campaign.<sup>16</sup> With this object he interviewed C. Rajagopalachari at Miss Peterson's bungalow in Porto Novo.<sup>17</sup> Rajagopalachari asked him to take up the fight in his own district and so Nainappa Pillai changed the venue of his operations to Cuddalore, where he could get his activities sufficiently advertised for. In Cuddalore there was the local correspondent of the Hindu to do it for him.<sup>18</sup>

Nainappan started Salt Satyagraha in Killai near Chidambaram on the morning of the 11<sup>th</sup> April, 1930, instant with the help of 5 volunteers, including Srinivasaragava Iyengar, Raju Iyer, Murugan, Krishnamoorthy Rao of Chidambaram, and tailor Balaraman of Vridhachalam, a temporary resident in Chidambaram, who started their march towards Killai.<sup>19</sup> They reached Killai at 5.a.m. They set off from No.8, Kamaleeswaran Kovil Street, Chidambaram, the residence of Nainappa Pillai, shouting anti-British slogans. They reached Killai after a four-hour march and boiled the brine.<sup>20</sup> But the salt peons extinguished the fire by pouring water on the oven. And this was repeated on the 12<sup>th</sup> April, 1930, and on the morning of the 13<sup>th</sup> April, 1930, by these Satyagrahis acting under instructions from Mr. C. Rajagopalachari, who held a meeting in Porto-Novo on the 9<sup>th</sup> April, 1930.<sup>21</sup>

The party returned to Chidambaram on the evening of the 13<sup>th</sup> April, 1930, and in the meeting held that night; Nainappan produced four packets of black earth and auctioned it as contraband salt for Rs.3 and 14 annas. As proof of manufacture, he showed his audience the pot, which he had taken good care to thoroughly blacken in Killai village (not on the seashore).<sup>22</sup>

## V. DEVANAMPATTINAM SALT SATYAGRAHA

Nainappa Pillai and his associates began to concentrate on conducting a salt satyagraha at Devampatnam. On the 14<sup>th</sup> April, 1930, four Satyagraha volunteers arrived from Chidambaram. A notice was given by Srinivasaraghavan, one among the four, to the District Magistrate on the 15<sup>th</sup> April, 1930, that salt Satyagraha would be offered by him and four others forming the first batch of salt satyagrahis from the next morning on the beach near Fort Saint David.<sup>23</sup>

The salt satyagrahis have been attempting to prepare salt every morning since the 16<sup>th</sup> April, 1930, up to date (except on Saturday morning last); as usual, when they were boiling the seawater, a salt peon came there an attempted to extinguish the fire by pouring the sea water on the oven. However, the desire of the satyagrahis to break the salt law never subsided.<sup>24</sup> Leaders like Nainappan, Kumaraswamy Pillai and Sudarsanam Naidu, who sentenced to four months R.I. for non-co-operation and Khilafat propaganda in 1921, watched the manufacture from a distance of 50 yards.<sup>25</sup>

Vadivelu Pathan took part in boiling brine along with Srinivasaraghavan, Krishnamoorthi Rao, Raju Iyer and Balaraman of Vridhachalam on the first morning when salt satyagraha was started here on the 16<sup>th</sup> April, 1930.<sup>26</sup>

A small procession went to the beach to manufacture salt. An interested and sympathetic spectator was Anjalai Ammal, who had been convicted in the Neil statue case.<sup>27</sup> Leaders were encouraging the satyagrahis and speaking at the close of each day's effort at boiling brine to the assembled fisherfolk and others to break the Salt Act more and more and telling them that jail has no terrors for the brave sons of India.

The general plan was to:

- ❖ To boil the brine in the morning, followed by a small lecture on the seashore
- ❖ To hold meetings in the evening on the Gadilam sands and deliver lectures to bigger audiences largely composed of students, the population of Cuddalore.<sup>28</sup>

They returned to Cuddalore on the 17<sup>th</sup> April, 1930, and spoke and in a meeting held on the Gadilam sands that evening. He deplored the absence of the intelligentsia of the town, who, he said, ought to have attended meeting of this kind. He said Englishmen were sticking to India like leeches and just as leeches can be removed only by putting salt on them, salt satyagraha was the only remedy to get Englishmen to leave India.<sup>29</sup>

On the morning of 18<sup>th</sup> April, 1930, Nainappa Pillai, along with Kumaraswami Naidu and Sudarsana Pillai, gathered; on that occasion, the volunteers boiled brine on Devanampatnam seashore. As per the plan and arrangements of V. Ramachandra Iyer, District Superintendent of Police of Cuddalore poured water on the oven and seized the contraband salt.<sup>30</sup> This was a new way of prevention during earlier stage, but he allowed the satyagrahis to manufacture salt and then seized the contraband salt from their closed fists.

On the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup> April, 1930, Nainappa Pillai, Sudarsanam Naidu and Kumaraswamy Pillai (a forest ranger, who had resigned his job and who is now the secretary of the District Congress Committee) went to the village of Kandakadu, two miles off Devanampatnam and exhorted the village there (including fisherfolk) not to be afraid of the Government but to join them in larger and larger numbers in salt satyagraha. That evening there was a meeting in Cuddalore O.T. in which Kumaraswamy Pillai, Nainappa Pillai, ex-sepoy Singamani Raju, native doctor Muthurama Pillai, Adinarayanaiya of Bangalore and others spoke. Nainappa Pillai said that India was the biggest market for the British and that if they were driven out of India, they would have to go begging; that the British are treating Indians as slaves and are maintaining an expensive army; and the British officers are the highest paid in the world. Towards the close of the meeting, Nainappan advised the audience that if they were not able to enlist as volunteers to offer salt satyagraha at Devanampatnam, they might at least take a potful of water from the sea and boil the same in their respective houses. Three persons enlisted themselves as volunteers at the close of this meeting.<sup>31</sup>

There is a popular fishing village on the Cuddalore beach called Devanampatnam (literally, David's town). The Satyagrahis tried to enlist the sympathies

of these simple fisherfolk. The villagers began to help the volunteers with the fuel and refreshed them with coconuts when they returned after their day's activities. Someone or other of the assembled congressmen treated them to a lecture that was usually anti-government in character. The police did a certain amount of counterpropaganda work, and in a few days, they were counter demonstration. The volunteers began to lose courage and so Nainappa Pillai decided to move in other directions.<sup>32</sup>

On the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> April, 1930, instant, fresh batches of salt satyagrahis, including Balaraman of Vridachalam, attempted to boil brine, but were repulsed in the usual manner. The first batch of satyagrahis and Nainappa were simply looking on at the commencement, but later Nainappa encouraged some fisher boys to boil brine in broken pots and they did so but were similarly prevented. The same evening, there was a meeting on the Gadilam riverbed when Nainappa spoke and said that they should all be proud of the fact that South Arcot District was the first district in the Presidency to start salt satyagraha.<sup>33</sup>

On the morning of 21<sup>st</sup> April, 1930, the volunteers under the leadership of Nainappa and Sudarsanam Naidu attempted to boil brine in two different places on the seashore. The volunteers were led by R. Manickam Chetty, a ruby merchant of Bhuvanagiri, and by Srinivasaraghavan, already mentioned. A third party of fisher boys and a few students were setting fire to rubbish here and there, giving out they were also going to manufacture salt, and at 9:30 a.m., Venugopal Naidu, a student of Pudupalayam, came running to the leaders, saying that they had succeeded in making salt. As a proof thereof, he brought a broken piece of pot on scraping, from which some sand was taken, and Nainappa cried that salt had been manufactured and he took charge of the pot and said he would auction it on the 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 1930.<sup>34</sup> Nainappa distributed some pots to the fisherboys, encouraging them to manufacture salt openly on the seashore.<sup>35</sup>

At this Juncture, salt peons No. 62 and 100 reported to the Salt Assistant Inspector, Makhari Shahib, that at both the places crowds abused them while they attempted to thwart their attempt. Even Mr. Thathachari, Honorary Magistrate and Agent of the Hindu, who was present there, advised Nainappa that

the behaviour of the crowd and their attitude to the salt peons was objectionable and Nainappa advised his audience to behave peacefully.<sup>36</sup>

So, on the 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1930, Nainappa Pillai announced that only five men would go to the beach to make salt and that the others would be diverted to do propaganda work in connection with the khaddar and anti-drink campaigns. As a matter of fact, the main body of volunteers went about with the flags begging in the streets and they all foregathered on the Gadilam sands in the evening where speeches were delivered.<sup>37</sup>

#### VI. SALT SATYAGRAHA IN DINDIVANAM

In April, a small band of men enlisted themselves as volunteers, inspired by Nainappa Pillai's speech at Dindivanam. One among them was Sarangapani, son of Somu Mudali. They became very active and gave notice to the British authorities that they proposed to make salt on 12<sup>th</sup> June, 1930.<sup>38</sup>

In view of the possibility of the formation of salt satyagraha parties in inland districts marching to the coast, the Government considered it advisable to communicate to all District Magistrates a review of their conclusion.<sup>39</sup>

The police at Dindivanam decided to arrest the principal leaders, Sarangapani and Govindaraju. They were brought before the Joint Magistrate on the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> June, 1930, who convicted them to one year of rigorous imprisonment each. The bazaarmen, led by Somu Muthali, the resented the action of the authorities. Immediately, after the prisoners were entrained, a hartal was declared and a body of men numbering over a thousand went to a place called Eachangal Odai to gather salt Earth. As the crowd did not make a secret of their intention to assault the police, the local Police Inspector, along with his Sub-Inspector and the bundobust party stopped the crowd on its way back from the odai and ordered the men to disperse seventy-four.<sup>40</sup>

The crowd did not disperse but instead attacked the Police Inspector, who thereupon opened and ineffective fire. The firing was ill-conducted and misdirected and the police were overpowered and put to flight. Three of them were very seriously injured. The Agricultural office, where the Police Inspector

had taken shelter, was entered into by the mob, where furniture and records were damaged and destroyed. Eighty of the rioters were charged and seventy-four of them were put on trial in the Sessions Court.<sup>41</sup> Towards the end of the month, volunteers began to picket liquor shops in Cuddalore and an order under section 144 was passed.

#### VII. SALT SATYAGRAHA IN CHIDAMBARAM

On the 6<sup>th</sup> July, 1930, a group of volunteers made contraband salt at Lalji Chowk in Chidambaram. The men formed a ring around the fire and there was also a bonfire of foreign cloth. Three of men who took part in the day's proceeding were charged after local investigation by the District Superintendent of Police and were convicted. On the 9<sup>th</sup> July, 1930, another man did the same and was charged and convicted. Ramachandra Iyer, a Teacher of Nandanar School of Chidambaram, was dismissed by the order of the District Magistrate as he had joined the salt satyagraha movement.<sup>42</sup> Bangalore Adinarayanayya was arrested at Tirukkoyilur, charged for his speeches at Cuddalore and convicted on the 12<sup>th</sup> July, 1930, without delay.<sup>43</sup>

#### VIII. COUNTER PROPAGANDA

Early in the month of May, the District Magistrate held a meeting in his office with influential persons of the various communities in the district, including members of local boards and municipalities and spoke to them about the activities of civil disobedience.<sup>44</sup>

The active support of the loyalists was enlisted and the Government Pleader openly took a strong stand in favour of the government and was duly unpopular. Later, the District Magistrate presided over two large meetings, one at Nellikuppam and another at Villupuram. The Revenue Divisional officer and The

Tahsildar also held several meetings in their respective areas. The Village officers, as a body, were specially addressed on the civil disobedience campaign at the annual (unofficial) Village Officers' conference.<sup>45</sup>

#### IX. CONCLUSION

Among Tamil districts, South Arcot became the first to break the salt laws. Later, the moment largely shifted to Tanjore, where C. Rajagopalachari conducted his March to Vedaranyam. The South Arcot march was an organised effort in support of the Civil Disobedience Movement. It is noteworthy that the men who started the movement in South Arcot district were all active workers in the Non-Cooperation movement of 1920 to 1921.<sup>46</sup> The movement soon gained considerable strength and was well provided with funds. Leaders made serious efforts through salt demonstrations and speeches, which had the usual stirring effects.

With the return of persons convicted in April month, little enthusiasm was initially aroused at this stage. However, there was a sense of honor associated with the returned convicts. Instructions were issued to prevent them again taking part in Civil Disobedience Movement. Lathi demonstration by the Reserve Police followed at once and order under section 144 used to stop the demonstrations of the volunteers. The Hindu reporter, Srinivasa Tattacharya, happened to send a short report. He was pulled up by the district magistrate at the meeting which he held in Cuddalore early in May. Nearly all the accused were placed in 'C' class and given rigorous imprisonment from the outset by the District Magistrate and the Sub-Divisional Magistrate, as soon as the district authorities were permitted to take action.<sup>47</sup>

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