

## V.O.CHIDAMBARAM PILLAI



Valliappan Olaganathan Chidambaram Pillai (1872–1936), popularly known by his initials, V.O.C. also known as Kappalottiya Tamilan "The Tamil Helmsman", was a Tamil political leader. He was a disciple of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. He launched the first indigenous Indian shipping service between Tuticorin and Colombo with the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company, competing against British ships. At one time a member of the Indian National Congress, he was later charged with sedition by the British government and sentenced to life imprisonment; his barrister license was stripped. V O Chidambaram Pillai spent such an impoverished lifestyle after he was released from prison and he died on November 18, 1936.

## V.O.CHIDAMBARAM PILLAI



### **Where & when born**

V.O.Chidambaram Pillai was born on 5 September 1872 in Ottapidaram, Tuticorin district to Olaganathan Pillai and Paramayee Ammal

### **Brief life history of the person**

When Chidambaram was six years old he learnt Tamil from the teacher Veeraperumal Annavi. He heard stories about Lord Shiva from his grandmother and stories from Ramayana from his grandfather. He heard stories from Mahabharatha told by Allikulam Subramanya Pillai.

As a child, he played goli (marbles), kabaddi, horse riding, swimming, stilt walking, archery, wrestling, silambattam and chess.

He learnt English from a Taluk Officer named Krishnan in the evenings. When Krishnan was transferred, Chidambaram's father built a school with the help of the villagers and appointed Aramvalarthanatha Pillai from Ettayapuram as the English teacher. The school was run by a priest at Pudhiamuthur. At fourteen, Chidambaram went to Thoothukudi to continue his studies. He studied at St. Xaviers High School and Caldwell High School, Thoothukudi and Hindu College High School, Tirunelveli.

Chidambaram worked as Taluk office clerk for some time before his father sent him to Tiruchirappalli to study law. He passed his pleadership exam in 1894, returning to Ottapidaram to become a pleader in 1895.

V O Chidambaram Pillai married Valliammai in the year 1895, but she died prematurely in the year 1901. He married Meenakshi Ammiar a few years later. The couple had four sons and four daughters. His eldest son died when still a child, the second son was a politician, the third son was the employee of the American Embassy in Madras and the fourth son, still alive is settled in Madurai. All his daughters had been married in Madras. The



## V.O.CHIDAMBARAM PILLAI

descendants of V.O.C Pillai still live in various places across Tamil Nadu.

From 1892 Chidambaram was influenced by Tilak Maharaj, and became his disciple. Along with Subramanya Siva and Subramanya Bharathi, he became a prominent spokesperson for the cause in Madras Presidency.

In Chennai, Chidambaram met Ramakrishnananthar, a saint who belonged to Swami Vivekananda Ashram (monastery), who advised him to "do something for the nation". Here he met the Tamil poet Bharathiyar who shared his political ideology. The two men became close friends.

Apart from his works as an eminent lawyer and a politician, V O Chidambaram Pillai was also a scholar. He started his autobiography while in prison and completed it soon after his release in the year 1912. V O Chidambaram Pillai was the author of a couple of novels; he translated several James Allen works in Tamil and made compilations of important Tamil works like the Thirukural and the Tolkappiam.

V O Chidambaram Pillai spent such an impoverished lifestyle after he was released from prison that Justice Wallace who sentenced V O C to prison restored his bar license. But V O C was never successful in repaying his debts and lived in poverty till the end of his life on November 18, 1936. V O Chidambaram Pillai breathed his last at the Indian National Congress office in Tuticorin.

### **Political Life**

Following the partition of Bengal in 1905 Chidambaram entered politics, joining the Indian National Congress and taking a hardliner stance. He also presided at the Salem District Congress session.

Chidambaram established many institutions like Swadeshi Prachar Sabha, Dharmasanga Nesavu Salai, National Godown, Madras Agro-Industrial Society Ltd and Desabimana Sangam.

In response to the British India Steam Navigation Company's trade monopoly, Chidambaram started an Indian-owned shipping company. He registered the Swadeshi Shipping Company in October 1906. The capital of the company was ten lakh rupees. The number of shares was 40,000 and the face value of each share was Rs. 25/- . Any Asian could become a shareholder. The director of the company was Pandi Thurai Thevar, a Zamindar and the Founder of "Madurai Tamil Sangam". Janab Haji Mohammed Bakir Seit paid Rs. 200,000 for 8000 shares, which was the first capital for the Company.

In the beginning, the Company didn't own any ships, instead leasing them from Shawline Steamers Company. The



## V.O.CHIDAMBARAM PILLAI

B.I.S.N.C. pressured Shawline Steamers to cancel the lease; in response, Chidambaram leased a single large freighter from Sri Lanka. Realizing the need for the Swadeshi Shipping Company to own its own vessels, Chidambaram travelled around India selling shares in the company to raise capital. He vowed, "I will come back with Ships. Otherwise I will perish in the sea". He managed to secure sufficient funds to purchase the company's first ship, the S.S. Galia; shortly afterwards they were able to acquire the S.S. Lavo from France.

In response to the new competition, the B.I.S.N.C. reduced the fare per trip to Re.1 (16 annas) per head. Swadeshi company responded by offering a fare of Re.0.5 (8 Annas). The British company went further by offering a free trip to the passengers plus a free umbrella; however, nationalist sentiment meant that the free service was underused. The B.I.S.N.C. attempted to buy out Chidambaram, but he refused the deal.

The ships commenced regular service between Tuticorin and Colombo (Sri Lanka), against opposition from British traders and the Imperial Government.

On 23 February 1908 Chidambaram gave a speech at Thoothukudi, encouraging the workers at Coral Mill (now part of Madura Coats) to protest against their low wages and harsh working conditions. Four days later, the workers of the Coral Mill went on strike. Chidambaram and Subramanya Siva led the strike. Their demands included incremental earnings, weekly holidays and other leave facilities.

Chidambaram ensured the strike was widely publicised, and it quickly gained popular support. On 6 March the head clerk Subramanya Pillai met Chidambaram and said that the management was ready to concede their demands. Chidambaram went with 50 workers and met the managers, who agreed to increase the wages, to reduce the working hours and to give leave on Sundays. The workers went back after a nine-day strike. The outcome of the strike encouraged the workers of other European companies, who also gained increased wages and better treatment. Aurobindo appreciated Chidambaram and Siva for the unequalled skill and courage with which the fight was conducted in his Vande Mataram daily on 13 March 1908.

By 1908, Chidambaram's political involvement drew the attention of the British. Hearing of his intention to speak at a rally celebrating the release of Bengali leader Bipin Chandra Pal, Winch, a British official invited Chidambaram to meet him in Thirunelveli with his political comrade Subramanya Siva. At the meeting, Winch expressed concern at Chidambaram's activities and asked him to give assurances that he would not participate in any political revolt. Chidambaram refused to accept his conditions, and so he and Siva were arrested on 12 March 1908 and sentenced for four years in prison.



## V.O.CHIDAMBARAM PILLAI

Upon Chidambaram's release he was not permitted to return to his Tirunelveli district. With his law license stripped from him he moved to Chennai with his wife and two young sons. There he ran a provisions store and a kerosene store.

In 1920, Chidambaram withdrew from the Indian National Congress, citing ideological differences with Mahatma Gandhi. He focussed his efforts on establishing Labor Unions in Madras and writing.

After moving to Coimbatore Chidambaram worked as a bank manager. Dissatisfied with the income, he petitioned the court seeking permission to practise law again. Judge E.H. Wallace gave permission to restore Chidambaram's pleadership license; to show his gratitude Chidambaram named his last son Valacewaran.

Chidambaram moved to Kovilpatti and practised as a lawyer. He rejoined the Congress party in 1927 and presided over the third political conference held at Salem. He said that he wanted to join Congress again because he noticed a remarkable change in the policies of Congress and he was happy to note that the policies which he did not approve of were withdrawn one by one. However, after the Salem conference Chidambaram again severed his contact with Congress.

In 1932 he moved to Thoothukudi, where he spent his time writing and publishing Tamil books.

### **Critical moments in his life**

After his arrest met on Mar 1908, a widespread protest organized in Thirunelveli where shops, schools and colleges were closed in protest, and rioting broke out. Thirunelveli municipal office, post offices, police stations and municipal courts were attacked. A general strike was declared in Thoothukudi, which was probably the first political strike in India. Public meetings and processions were held, and four people were killed by the police.

Although his supporters were able to raise sufficient funds for bail, Chidambaram refused to leave the jail without the release of Siva and his other comrades. Subramanya Bharathi and Subramanya Siva also appeared in the court for questioning for the case instituted against Chidambaram. He was charged under sections 123-A and 153-A of the Indian Penal Code for speaking against the British and giving shelter to Siva. Chidambaram refused to take part in the proceedings.

He was charged with sedition and a sentence of two life imprisonments (in effect 40 years) was imposed. He was confined in the Central Prison, Coimbatore (from 9 July 1908 to 1 December 1910).

The judgement was widely condemned in the popular press, with even the British Statesmen magazine claiming that it was unjust. Chidambaram appealed the sentence in High Court, gaining a reduced punishment of 4 years



## V.O.CHIDAMBARAM PILLAI

imprisonment and 6 years in exile. An appeal to the Privy Council led to a further reduction in sentence.

Chidambaram was interned in Coimbatore and Kannanoor jail. He was not treated as a 'political prisoner', nor was the sentence 'simple imprisonment', he was rather treated as a convict sentenced to life imprisonment and required to do hard labour, which caused his health to suffer. The historian and Tamil scholar, R. A. Padmanabhan, would later note in his works that Chidambaram was "yoked (in place of bulls) to the oil press like an animal and made to work it in the cruel hot sun...". From prison Chidambaram continued correspondence, maintaining a steady stream of legal petitions. He was finally released on 12 December 1912.

To his dismay, the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company had already been liquidated in 1911, and the ships auctioned to their competitors. The company's first ship, the S.S. Gallio was sold to the British Shipping Company.

### **Awards & Achievements**

- Posthumously, Chidambaram is known by the titles Kappalottiya Thamizhan ("the Thamizhan who drove the ship") and "Chekkiluththa Chemmal" ("a great man who pulled the oil press in jail for the sake of his people". His ship is situated near marina beach.

### **Writings**

- Meyyaram 1914.
- Meyyarivu 1915
- Anthology 1915
- Autobiography 1946
- Many articles in various magazines
- Translation works
- Literary notes of Thirukural

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