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Vanchinathan - Southern India's Voice for Freedom

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Abstract

Vanchi Iyer, born at Shenkottah in Travancore State in 1886 was the son of Ragupathy Iyer. He was employed as a forest guard at Punaloor in the then Travancore state. He was one of the members of the secret society called Bharatha Matha Association, organized by Nilakanda Brahmachari. At Maniyachi near Tirunelveli in 1911, he shot down British Collector Ashe. Ashe murder was the first political assassination of the freedom movement of South India. Vanchinathan occupied a permanent place in the history of freedom struggle in Southern India.

Key Words Kumkum, suppression, rechristened, swadeshi, annoyance

Introduction:

India, world's largest and greatest democratic country is a free nation now. To be a free and democratic republic, India had paid a heavy price to attain that position. That price was paid in the form of sufferings, tears and bloodshed by great Indian patriots. Many leaders including known and unknown were suffered imprisonment for long years and had the annoyance by the British rulers and their police. We hear the names of great leaders whose contributions for the freedom movement from Tamil Nadu especially in present Tirunelveli District. Vanchinathan occupied a permanent place in the history of freedom struggle in Tamil Nadu. He was a real hero of Tirunelveli. At Maniyachi near Tirunelveli in 1911, he shot down British Collector Ashe. Several newspapers particularly The Hindu denounced it as a dastardly act but the enquiry into the incident that it was the outcome of a widespread conspiracy against British Imperialism.

Early Life:

Vanchinathan was born on 1886 in Senkottah at Travancore state. He was the son of Reghupathi Iyer and Rukmani Ammal. His early name was Sankaran. His father was an employee of Senkottai Devasthanam. He did his schooling in Senkottahs and graduated in M.A from Sri Moolam Maharaja College at Thiruvananthapuram. He married Ponnammal at the age of twenty three and began his family life. In that time he got into a lucrative government job. He started his career as a temple accountant and later appoint as Travancore forest guard in the Travancore forest department. In that time V.O.Chithambaram, Maduthukadai Chithambarm Pillai, Subramonia Siva and Neelakanda Brahmachari took active part

in the independence struggle. As the desire for independence did not exempt Vanchinadan became the member of the Bharatha Matha association, an extreme organization, which constantly acted against the British government. He resigned his job as a forest officer at Punaloor in Travancore and indulged himself completely in the freedom struggle.



Vanchinathan

Bharatha Matha Association:

The secret society Bharatha Matha Association was generally believed to have come into existence in January 1910. Neelakanta Brahmachari probably acting in accordance with directive from a high command either in Pondicherry or in Bengal was successful in established the first branch of Bharatha Matha Association in the princely Travancore strategically close to Tenkasi and the western most taluk of Tirunelveli district. This extremist organization constantly acted against the British Government. Other members of the society were Sankara Krishna Iyer of Krishnapuram, Madathukadai Chidambaram Pillai of Tenkasi, Dharmaraj Iyer and Harihara Iyer of Shencottah, Madasami pillai of Ottapidaram and Arumugam Pillai of Tuticorin.

1910 April 10 they held their first meeting in Tenkasi at the residence of on Madattukadai Chidamparam Pillai where the plan was evolved. The meeting was followed by the performance of Pooja to taking of blood oath. There was a kali's picture which were sprinkled the red liquid made of *kumkum* and water then administered to the foot that the lives and property of the persons took were dedicated for the purpose of obtaining Swaraj, that the secrets of the society should not be divulged and that if any one did so, he would be killed. The participants drank the kumkum water to symbolize the drinking the blood of the Englishmen. After reciting the 'mantra' and shouting 'Vande Mataram' the members present read the oath in turn, cut their thumbs with a knife in order to affix their thumb impression in blood against their names. The Oath was, "Vande Mataram, We should kill all white men. No one should reveal the affairs of the society. Our life, property and everything should be sacrificed for the society. Whoever reveals the affairs of this society will be taken to the hill and killed.

Neelakanda Brahmachari, Krishna Iyer and Chidambharam Pillai, took the blood oath. New names were given to the members to conceal their identity. Vanchi Iyer was an active associate of Neelakanta bhrmachari.

Vanchinadan and V.V.S Iyer

Varahaneri Venkatesa Subramaniam Iyer, also known as V.V.S Iyer was an Indian revolutionary from Tamil Nadu, who fought against the British in India. V.V.S.Aiyar also known as Maharishi was in London for some years, working in close collaboration with Vinayak Damodhar Savarkar, Shyamji Krishnavarma and Madam Cama. He was a scholar in Sanskrit and a master of English prose. On his return to India in January 1910, he settled at Pondicherry. He was a well-known patriot and extremist in Indian nationalist politics. He believed in violent, revolutionary means to obtain India's freedom. He was of the opinion that training to the citizens in the free use of arms and heroic deeds are necessary for free India. Thus practice in using the revolver was one of the items taught to young recruits who were sent to Pondicherry for moral and physical training. Pondicherry was found suitable for smuggling of small arms and also for printing secret pamphlets. Later the venue was converted to be the political asylum of the Swadeshi nationalists of Madras Presidency.

Vanchi was a close collaborator of V.V.S.Iyer, another freedom fighter who sought arms to defeat the British. Vanchi became well acquainted with the character of a revolutionary long before his first met V.V.S.Iyer, Vanchi went in long leave initially for a period of month, later extended by another two months. He rejoined duty in April 1911, finally leaving the forest department on May 15, 1911. During that five to six months period, Vanchi appears to have undergone some form of personal transformation, emerging at the end with a clear commitment to put family problems aside and focus on what he described as 'the welfare of the nation is in ruined circumstances'.

Assassination of Ashe

Robert William D Escourt Ashe was born on November 23, 1872 at Ireland. In 1894, Ashe passed fortieth, among 61 successful candidates in the Indian Civil Service Examination. On December 4, 1895, he arrived in India, where he began his career as an assistant collector and rose on Magistrate and Collector at the small seaport of Tuticorin, in the southern most reaches of the Madras Presidency in 1907. Ashe was the first and only colonial official during the Indian Independence movement. He hated Indian who cleared to ask him "why" and the man he hated most in that town famed for pearl fishing was the celebrated V.O.Chithambarm. He took charge of Tirunelveli district on August 2, 1910, as Acting Collector.



Family of Ashe

In that time people of North Indian revolted against the British involving themselves in the war of Independence. The steps taken by Lord Curzon to subdue the revolt created restlessness and enmity among the people. To protest that order, people rose in revolt under the leadership of Balagangadhara Tilak. The government suppressed this revolt; many were prison particularly Bibin Chandra Pal was torched inside the prison. In 1907 Bibin Chandra Pal who was released. His extremist principles awakened the Tamils and they began to campaign against the government. At the same time great martyrs like V.O.C, Subarmania Siva and like leaders were arrested and imprisoned. Hearing the atrocities suffered by the people in prison Vanchinathan wanted to eliminate Collector Ash who responsible for the prison sufferings.

In that circumstance, his wife who had gone for delivery lost the new born child. When his father conveyed that message to Vanchinathan he told his father “birth and death are very common and you think that I am also dead and forget me, I have an important work to finish. My country is greater than my child and family”. With these words he sent back his father.

The selection of Ashe was reportedly due to the role he had played in the suppression on Tirunalveli riots and in the subsequent closure of the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company. However on the face of it, Ashe was a less obvious candidate for assassination than was L.M.Wynch, the Tirunelveli District Collector who had conceived and executed the plan removing the Combative Swadesi leader V.O.Chidambaram from the political scene. Ashe had in fact taken charge as joint

Magistrate only on March 3, 1908, a few days before the events at Tirunelveli and Toothukudi.

The plot to murder Ashe was drawn. All the particulars about him were collected. His wife was visit Tirunelveli by the first week of June and during that time Ashe and his wife were go to Kodaikanal to see their children, who studied in the convent at Kodaikanal. It was decided to kill Ashe secretly by a group of Bharathmatha Organization consisted of Madaswamy Pillai, Arumugham Pillai, Neelakanda Pramachari, Azahappa Pillai and Vanchinathan. Among them Vanchinathan took up the responsibility of killing Ashe.

V.V.S .Iyer was generally believed to have masterminded the plot. Decisions on this plot were taken at Pavanasam and Punaloor. Hence Vanchinadan was selected to execute this critical decision. Serving the forest department of Travancore, Vanchinadan was eagerly waiting for opportunity to execute the plan. He was roaming secretly with a gun to kill Ashe. V.V.S.Iyer selected Vanchi to perform the deed. Vanchi accepted the assignment despite his burden some domestic responsibilities. V.V.S.Iyer trained him in shoot in for continues twenty days. Vanchi returned Thoothukudi.

Vanchinathan and his companion Sankara Iyer kept a constant watch of Ashe's movements when an attempt to entre Ashe's house failed. Vanchi decided to carry out his assault in broad day light at a public place.

On June 17, 1911, Saturday Ashe boarded the 9.30 a.m Maniyachi mail at Tirunelveli Junction with him his wife Mary Lillien Patterson, who had arrived from Ireland only a few days earlier. They had married on April6, 1898 in Berhampore. Mary was about a year older than Ashe. They were on their way to Kodaikanal where their four children, lived in a rented bungalow.

At 10.38 the train pulled in at Maniyachi. The Ceylon Boat Mail was due to arrive at 10.48. As Ashe sat facing each other in the first class carriage, waiting for the mail to arrive, a neatly dressed man with tufted hair and another young man wearing a dhoti approached the carriage. The former boarded the carriage and pulled out a Belgian made Browning automatic pistol. The bullet hit Ashe in the howling wind. After shooting Vanchi ran into a latrine where he shot himself dead, having shot himself in mouth. Sankara Krishna Iyer who had accompanied him to the station quietly left the scene. In Vanchi's pocket was found the following letter.

“Three thousands of us Madrasees have branded ourselves together for the purpose of killing him as he sets his foot in our country. In order to make this known, I, the least among them have this day done this deed. This is the duty which every tone in Hinduism should perform’. The body of Vanchi Iyer was conveyed to Tirunelveli Bridge in a close truck was under the custody of the Superintendent of police. Three days later a hotel keeper Ramalinga Iyer by name, of Viraraghavapuram, Tirunelveli recognized the body as that of Vanchi Iyer, son of Raghubathi Iyer.

The Consequences of the Murder of Ashe:

The English government considered that murder to be challenge many aspects were arrested and case was filed against fourteen extremist among them. These fourteen persons were arrested and charged with conspiracy to murder Ashe. Two others committed suicide-Dharmaraja Iyer slit his throat. Madaswamy widely believed to be Vanchi's accomplice and who was seen running away after the assassination, was never traced.

The trial of that case began in the High Court at Madras on 11 September, 1911. Trial continued under several justices, headed by Arnold White. The trial continued for 79 day without a break. During the trial, if Chief Justice Charles Arnold White and Justice Ayling of the Madras High Court accepted this approver's testimony, the third judge, C. Sankaran Nair, went even further. He narrated the sequence of events starting from the fervent Swadeshi Propaganda in Tirunelveli district, and elaborated on the efforts of V.O.Chithambaram in launching the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company and leading the Coral Mill strike and on the eventual arrest of Swadeshi movement leaders, which led to riots. After the trial three gave their verdicts separately. On the basis of that judgment rigorous imprisonment was given to Neelakanda Prahmachari, Sankarkrishna Iyer, Madathukkadai Chidambaram etc. with the imprisonment of the leaders in prison, the revolutionary activities in Tamil Nadu weakened.

The body of Ashe was interned in the Glorinda's church in Tirunelveli and a memorial was erected by the British administration on beach road in Thoothukudi. This has still under the maintenance of Municipality.

Ashe murder was the first political assassination of the freedom movement of South India. This was not just an act of a few individuals. It had links with revolutionaries functioning under Madam Cama in Paris, France. In Bengal, Punjab, Maharashtra and other parts of India secret societies of the revolutionary terrorism were started which had branches in London, Paris, New York, etc. The members of the society were mostly educated youth. Abinav Bharath Samithi of Maharashtra, India House, London, Paris and Indian association in Paris were few such secret societies. The factors that led to conclude that the Ashe murder had connection with the secret societies of India and abroad are,

1. The Browning Pistol used for shooting Ashe was sent by Madam Cama who also hailed the assassination in her journal Vandemadaram.
2. V.V.S.Iyer, a member of Abinav Bharath Samithi trained in shooting.
3. The pamphlet titled Aariyarkalukku Oru Amutha Vakkiyam(watchwords of Aryans) were brought by Vanchinathan from Pondichery to Tirunelveli and circulated among the members of the Bharath Matha Association.

4. This pamphlet was the publication of the revolutionary terrorist movement.
5. Copies of pamphlet were found in the houses of the members of the association who were accused in the case.
6. V.O.Chidambaram Pillai was member in the Abinav Bharath Samithi.

From the above factors, it is clear the assassination of Ashe was master minded by the Abinav Bharath Samithi. Though it created a flutter among the people it could not succeed in bringing about the people of Tamil Nadu.

Conclusion

Ashe murder was the first political assassination of the freedom movement of South India. The Ashe murder and Vanchi remain etched in Tamil memory. In some narratives it is seen as a watershed in the freedom struggle in Tamil Nadu. In a region short of patriotic martyrs, Vanchi, evoking the image of a selfless young man who laid down his life for a nationalist cause he believed in, secured a sacred halo, so he was a real hero in Tirunelveli. His name has been given many radical characters in Tamil fiction. Maniyachi, now rechristened as Vanchi Maniyachi in commemoration of the martyrdom of Vanchinathan, has been written with red letters in the history of the freedom movement. The Maniyachchi Railway Station where Vanchinathan shot Ashe was renamed to Vanchi Maniyachchi Railway Station in honour of him. The long felt demand of people of the State, particularly those of southern districts for a memorial dedicated to freedom fighter Vanchinathan was fulfilled with the Tamil Nadu Government in Shencottai a place from which the freedom fighter hailed.



Vanchi Maniyachchi Railway Station



Vanchi memorial at Shencottai

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