

MASSIVE UPRISING

When Tirunelveli erupted like a volcano in March 1908

People cutting across class, caste and religion plunged into the revolt; even, butchers stopped selling meat to Europeans

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There is a scene in *Kappalotiya Tamilan*, the film portraying the life of freedom fighter V.O. Chidambaram Pillai (VOC), in which an advocate would refuse to engage a barber because he raised the slogan *Vande Mataram*. But in reality, it was the barber, who stopped the work in the middle and the pro-British lawyer had to be escorted out of the district to complete his shaving.

“It happened [in Tirunelveli] 114 years ago in March 1908 after VOC and Subramania Siva were arrested for eulogising freedom fighter Bipin Chandra and calling upon people to boycott foreign goods. The incident exemplifies how society as a whole threw itself in the struggle against British rule,” said A.R. Venkatachalapathy, Professor, Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS).

Spontaneous response

It was a spontaneous uprising. People cutting across class, caste and religion plunged into it. Even, butchers stopped selling meat to their European customers and they were forced to import meat from Colombo.

According to the Seditious (Rowlatt) Committee Report,



Clarion call: VOC eulogised freedom fighter Bipin Chandra and urged people to boycott foreign goods. ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

1918, the protest was marked by wholesale and deliberate destruction of government property in open defiance of the constituted authority.

“Every public building in Tinnevely [Tirunelveli] town, except the Sub-Registrar’s office, was attacked. The furniture and records of these buildings were set on fire as well as portions of the buildings themselves; the

Municipal office was gutted. Twenty-seven persons were convicted and sentenced for participation in the riot,” says the report.

In India, Tirunelveli always remained one of the fearsome turfs for the British. The Poligars, including Poolithevan, Veerapandiya Kattabomman and his brother Oomathurai, defended their soil to death. A similar

spirit was exhibited by leaders of the district in the 20th century. VOC sought to destabilise the financial might of the British by launching the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company. The district came under British control only after the struggle, VOC and his navigation company were crushed. March 13, 1908 remains an indelible day in the freedom struggle.

Unsung sacrifice

But there is nothing today in Tirunelveli or Thoothukudi to remind the people of the events that shook the country and the British. “A memorial pillar should be raised to honour those who took part in this event. I request Chief Minister M.K. Stalin to take the initiative for an appropriate memorial,” said Mr. Venkatachalapathy, who has unearthed new details of the riot that followed the arrest of VOC and included them in his book *Thirunelveli Ezhuchiyum V.O.C-yum 1908*.

The details collected from the old issues of *The Hindu* and *Swedesamithran* tell how Tirunelveli erupted like a volcano as thousands of people took to the streets and attacked all government properties. A kerosene depot burned for three days. The municipal office was gutted and a police station was attacked. Rioters pulled down the portrait of King Edward

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VII. Though no European was harmed and their properties spared, rioters forced two Europeans to chant nationalist slogans. People shouted VOC’s name, *Vande Mataram* and *Swarajyam*.

As the news of the incidents reached Chennai, S. Kasturiranga Iyengar, the owner and editor of *The Hindu*, sent a special correspondent to Tirunelveli and Tuticorin to report for the newspaper. Records establish that ordinary people stood hand in hand with advocates and students. Those shot, arrested or convicted included at least 10 ‘jutka’ drivers, a barber, an eating joint owner, a goldsmith, a marriage broker, three retired policemen, a native doctor, a cattle dealer, a municipal overseer, a day labourer, one woodcutter, one weaver and many shopkeepers.

There were mammoth meetings in Tuticorin, Vandip

pettai and Melur in defiance of prohibitory orders. British officer Ashe, who was later killed by Vanchinathan, led the charge and fired into the crowd. The people retaliated with stones. Four people were shot dead in Tirunelveli. In Tuticorin, the entire workers of the Coral (Harvey) Mills, numbering more than 1,500, went on strike. Workers from other European establishments such as Ralli Bros and Best and Co. also struck work. More than a hundred persons were arrested following the uprising. Most of them were convicted. The government fought the cases hard, employing European lawyers from Chennai. When some appealed to the High Court, the government fought tooth and nail.

Free defence

“Though he was in prison, VOC supported and assisted those convicted of rioting. Many of the local lawyers defended those charged with rioting gratis, despite grave threats to them such as disqualification under the Legal Practitioner’s Act,” said Mr. Venkatachalapathy. In an act of collective punishment, the government stationed over 300 policemen – called ‘the punitive police force’ – for six months and imposed a punitive tax three-and-a-half times the property tax.