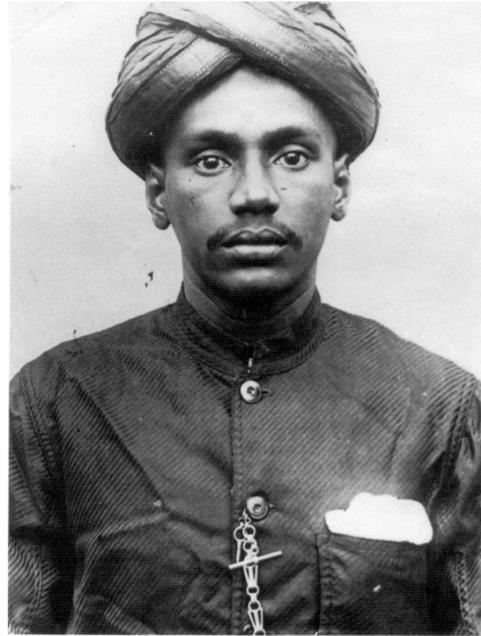


Indian Freedom Fighter



V.O. Chidambaram Pillai of Ottapidaram, Tamil Nadu

Presented by VTS @ Indian Azadi Divas (Independence Day Celebrations)

August 18, 2007, 4:00-6:00 PM, Heritage Hall, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL 32399

Last year during the celebration Indian Independence day, I spoke about my great grand father Sardar Vedaratnam Pillai of Vedaranim, Tamil Nadu. This year while we are celebrating the 60th Indian Independence Day (August 15, 1947) I will speak about another Indian freedom fighter, V.O. Chidambaram Pillai (also known as Vaa. Vu. Ce in Tamilnadu). Chidambaram Pillai was born on 5th September 1872 in Ottapidaram in Thirunelveli district to Vulaganathan Pillai and Paramayee Amma. His father was a famous and a well known attorney in Thirunelveli district. He was the eldest son for his parents. He belonged to the Pillai community that had a long tradition of being influential and important people in Tamilnadu (then known as Madras region).

Mr. Chidambaram completed his early schooling and went on to become an attorney. As an attorney he took cases representing poor peasants and at times found

himself on the opposing side of his own father. He won cases against corrupt officials and releases for poor and innocent people. During this time he was attracted to the Swadeshi Movement (swadeshi means supporting materials made locally as opposed to made abroad) started by B.G. Tilak and L.L. Rai. It was early in the Indian Independence movement and M.K. Gandhi was still in South Africa. However, in Madras, Tamil poet Bharathi, S. Siva and others had started working on the Movement and Vaa Vu Ce joined them.

Mr. Chidambaram was also influenced by Swami Vivekandana's disciple and answering the requests from his own people decided to start an indigenous (Swadeshi) shipping company. In 1906, Vaa Vu Ce bought two steam ships with help from B.G. Tilak and others and started service between his adopted home town of Tuticorin and Colombo. This brought him in direct conflict with the British Raj. That is because, until Vaa Vu Ce started his service, British India Steam Navigation Company was the only service available to Indians and that monopoly was being challenged by this brash young entrepreneur. Mr. Chidambaram and British Raj started to fight with each other by lowering the price charged to move cargo and people. The British had hoped by lowering the earnings of Mr. Chidambaram, his business will go bankrupt and he will simply disappear. However, Vaa Vu Ce spoke to Indians and made them aware of his dedication to the country and told them to support his company, despite it was bit more expensive.

His speeches and actions made British angry and they arrested him on charge of sedition (incitement of rebellion). Vaa Vu Ce not only had friends in Madras, but had the support of large number of freedom loving people from Calcutta (through the newspaper Bande Mataram) and Indians living in South Africa. They collected money and fought for his release in the court. The Tamil poet Bharathi and S. Siva appeared in the court questioning the charges against Vaa Vu Ce. However, the court controlled by British government found him guilty of the charges and in 1908 sent him to life in prison. Since he was treated as a political prisoner and the British Raj was afraid of his influence on

people even behind bars, they made him do hard labor. This meant he had endure harsh treatments like torture, long hours of hard work with little rest, and including pulling a yoke of oil pressing machine like a bull. This made him very weak. People started to call him “the great human being who was made to work like a bull”. Even during all these ordeals Vaa Vu Ce never lost the desire to see India become a free country and have self-determination to run a Swadeshi business.

After several years of hard labor, in 1912 he was released from the prison. He had expected that the Indians who were with him when he was sent to prison will be there to welcome him. Sadly, people had forgotten about this great human being who had sacrificed his comfortable life of being a famous lawyer to pursue the dream of seeing India as a free country. He was very disappointed. His shipping company had been sold off, his license to practice law was stripped, and he had lost most of his wealth. Almost completely broke he moved to Madras with his young children and struggled. Later his attorney license will be reinstated and but he could never regain the his wealth.

On November 18, 1936 he died in Indian National Congress office at Tuticorin as he had wished. In personal life, Vaa Vu Ce married Valli Ammai who died due to complications in pregnancy. Then he married Meenaskhi Ammal and they had four sons and four daughters. One of his sons worked for a Tamil daily newspaper called Dinamani. Another son worked for Labor Welfare department.

He was fond of Tamil and wrote an autobiography, wrote commentary for Thirukkural, and works on Tamil grammar. The Indian Department of Posts issued a special commemorative postage stamp in 1972 to honor him on his 100th birth day.

I am very proud to tell you about him and thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today.

Thank you.

Resources:

- 1) Wikipedia, Free Encyclopedia.
- 2) www.tamilnation.org
- 3) India Department of Post
- 4) Vaa Vu Ce's family for providing pictures of him