

# Suchindrum Police Firing during Car Festival in 1947: An Incident of Freedom Movement in Kanyakumari District

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to describe the police gunfire incident, which was related to freedom movement that led to hardhearted massacre of more than thousand people of Kanyakumari district, during the car festival of Shri Thanumalayan temple at Suchindrum in 1947 and the pros and cons of that silent battle between the Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress (TTNC) and the Dewan Sir C.P. Ramasami Iyar (1936-1947) on behalf of the ruling King Shri Chithirai Thirunal Balarama Verma (1919-1991 A.D). The Dewan, on behalf of the ruling King who wanted independent Travancore State, for the purpose of controlling mass clashes by freedom fighters, ordered to the Inspector General for issuing firing order to the police force to open firing that could end with massacre of thousands of innocent people during the car festival. While the temple administrators informed that some people had hoisted congress flag on temple car to the Dewan through cable, the Dewan ordered the IG to issue firing order to the police force to kill the rivalries disturbing the car festival and sent the Travancore military force in support of police to prevent any further quarrel. Here, the victims were innocent people who had visited the temple for worships and death of clashed party had not been reported.

**Key word:** Athiri Markazhi-(Dec-Jan)

## Introduction

Sthanumalayan temple is located on the left side of the NH-66 at Suchindrum just 14.3km away from Kanyakumari and is famous for accommodating the trinity of Hinduism- the Lord Siva, Vishnu and Brahma-in one idol of *Sivalingam* that was installed by the popular sage *Athiri Maharishi* about 1600 years ago. In this temple, car festival has been celebrated in the month of *Markazhi* every year for the last 300 years,<sup>1</sup> during which the temple cars (*Swami ther* and *Amman ther*) are decorated by hoisting a divine *Khavi flag* on their top and with flower garlands and cloths, whereupon the idol of Uthsavamoorthi and Amman are brought into their respective cars in the early morning and after that the *Swami ther* and *Ammal ther* are pulled along the street around the temple by crowd of people who make visit to the temple for worshipping the God and Goddess, which almost ends at about 3 PM.<sup>2</sup> It is came to know that *Chithirai Thirunal Maharaja* of Travancore was in severe penance and worshipping his deity in the palace till the conclusion of the car festival at Suchindrum and the Maharaja ate only after he heard that the car was festival was over.<sup>3</sup> In the very moment when the cars finally stay at their respective places, it is informed to the legal heir of Maharaja of Travancore even today.<sup>4</sup> One such a car festival was celebrated on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1947 and thousands of people gathered in the premises of Sthanumalayan temple to worship the God for getting his divine blessings, but what happened was the police firing that caught the lives of thousands of innocent people.

### Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress (TTNC)

Kanyakumari district was once popularly known as South Travancore in the Travancore Princely State under the sovereigns of the Maharaja of Travancore who ruled the country with Malayalam as the official language and Dewan as the chief administrator in every department. The Travancore Royal family was always hand-in-hand with the British Residents, in Madras, who were representatives of the British Crown in India to administer the State in whatever the way as the condition permitted, and who were in fact responsible for early social reforms among the people. With the effort of the residents, Christian Missionaries were brought to Travancore for introducing English Education and Christianity among the oppressed people, which would result in much social reformation in the State at the initial stage and at the same time created much violations and riots between caste Hindus and oppressed castes. People of South Travancore where Tamil is the mother tongue for most people suffered serious problems in Travancore due to their minority and discrimination in education.<sup>5</sup> In order to get a linguistic relief from dominant Malayalees, some youngsters, who were active Tamil members of Travancore State Congress, announced that Malayalees could had no right over South Travancore where most people speak in Tamil and their proposal was placed before the Nagercoil division of the Travancore State Congress Committee for approval on 18<sup>th</sup> November 1945.<sup>6</sup> Notable leaders of South Travancore strongly resisted their proposal because of the belief that it would not be safe to accept the claims of the Kerala committee over South Travancore and hence they walked out of the meeting to show their protest.<sup>7</sup> As there appeared objections against the proposal, the Tamilians of South Travancore planned to instigate a political revelry for the benefits of Tamilians, in the name of Nanchilnad Tamilian Congress.<sup>8</sup> The name Nanchilnad originally include the areas of Agasteeswaram and Thoivalai taluks, but Kalkulam and Vilavancode taluks do not come under Nanchilnad. Therefore, the delegates under the headship of Sam Nathaniel met at Nagercoil on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1945 and initiated the political party, the All Travancore Tamilian Congress, which was afterward renamed as Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress (TTNC) in March 1946.<sup>9</sup>

The working committee of this party constituted Sam Nathaniel as the president, R.K. Ram as the secretary, E.R. Velayutha Perumal and V. Dhas as the joint secretaries and Gandhi A. Raman Filial, P.S. Moni, K. Nagalingam and V. Markantan as nominated members.<sup>10</sup> The TTNC demanded South Travancore as a separate district for Travancore Tamilians, whereupon Tamil separatist movement got the thought of people of South Travancore; thus, a constructive situation was built up for the Tamil Identity Movement by releasing pamphlets and by organizing public meetings. Without delay after inception, it gained much support from linguistic renaissance groups of Vellalas and Nadars for working together to achieve their goals and the strength of the TTNC increased in full fledge. The leaders of the TTNC preached about class hostility and stressed the need for a separate Tamil province to squash out the social howlers.<sup>11</sup> To get mass support from people outside the Travancore, the leaders of TTNC released their active propaganda in Tamil speaking areas of Madras Presidency and met prominent congress leaders of Madras State like K. Kamaraj, M. Bhaktavatsalam, L.S. Karayalar and Muthurengamuthaliar and sought their prop up for their theme.<sup>12</sup> Highly appreciated personalities such as N. S. Krishnan, T.K.S. Brothers and P. Jeevanandam, who are all natives of South Travancore, came forward to assist the TTNC along with the backing of three million Tamilians of Madras State in their agitation. Hence, the TTNC became a popular movement that gained the strength at the grassroots level in South Travancore.<sup>13</sup>

The Cochin ruler On 29<sup>th</sup> July 1946, the Cochin ruler announced the formation of a linguistic Kerala State by merging the Malabar District of the Madras Province with the princely States of Travancore-Cochin and it was supported by the State Congress in the Trichur convention,<sup>14</sup> but it in fact widened the cleft between the State Congress and the TTNC. Thereafter, the TTNC, in the meeting at Nagercoil on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1946, strongly claimed for separate province for Tamilians with right to self-determination.<sup>15</sup> Having influenced by the arrival of leaders of United Kerala Movement and T. Prakasam of Madras to South Travancore, the leaders of the TTNC maintained contacts with the leaders of the Indian National Congress and leaders of Madras State Congress.<sup>16</sup> In “Tamil Murasu” dated 6<sup>th</sup> September 1946, M. P. Sivananam wrote an article entitled *Puthiya Tamilakam* (=New Tamil Nadu) and then on invitation, he visited South Travancore on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1946 and addressed meetings held by the TTNC at Vadassery, Mylaudy and other places of South Travancore.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the TTNC had been actively claiming separate district for Tamilians in Travancore under the support of the Indian National Congress.

### **Suchindrum Car Festival and Police Firing**

In the Sthanumalayan temple at Suchindrum, the 10 days long *Markazi festival* was started with the hoisting of flag on December 26, 1946, and celebrations were going continuously with prayers, poojas and Saiva commentaries on behalf of Thiruvadudhurai Atheenam. On January 1, 1947, the State Congress, in which the member are all Malayalees, conducted a meeting at Suchindram, wherein Muthukaruppa Pillai condemned the activities of the TTNC that urged separate district in Travancore and the proposed some constitutional reforms as substitutes for it.<sup>18</sup> To oppose it, on the same day, TTNC conducted another meeting at Suchindram under the leadership of Veerabhadra Thevar, but that meeting was abruptly stopped by howling and bawling of slogans by the well-wishers of State Congress.<sup>19</sup> The supporters of TTNC however sought against it and planned to hoist the flag of the Indian National Congress on the temple car on the day of car festival.<sup>20</sup>

On the 6<sup>th</sup> January 1947, the temple cars –the *Swami ther* and *Amman ther* – were embellished with flower garlands and pretty cloths, plantains and others in the early morning at about 6.30 AM and the cars were ready for their procession along the streets around the temple.<sup>21</sup> At about 7.00 AM, while the Uthsavamurthis were brought into the respective cars, a group of people belonged to the Youth Wing of TTNC, who had clad khathi cloths rushed here and there along the streets along with the crowd of devotees and some of them sought to hoist the tricolour flag of the Indian National Congress on the small pillar on the top of each car.<sup>22</sup> Following this, one young man named Gajapathi, who held a congress flag on his right hand, had climbed on the *Swami ther* and hoisted the congress on it after throwing away the khavi flag previously hoisted on it.<sup>23</sup> Some sorts of quarrels had happened between the priests and the TTNC members to dispose the congress flag, so that the priests informed it to the temple authorities. When the temple authorities tried to dispose the congress flag from the car, the TTNC members fought with the Devaswom officers.<sup>24</sup> At about 7.30 AM, the police force allotted for security informed that situation to the Inspector General from whom message might have sent to the Dewan. At 8.15 AM, the IG who got permission from the Dewan issued firing order to the police force. What happened as a result was that police opened firing without mercy for about another hour so as to execute massacre of hundreds of people who visited to worship the god.<sup>25</sup> In the next two hours, the military force also joined with the police force to control the mass clashes. The people who visited to pull the temple car rushed away in all the directions and one of the three elephants brought to the festival got animated and ran in its own direction, which resulted in death of many children and women in that occasion by its legs.<sup>26</sup> During this clash, the villages got in their houses and no death was reported from the villages but death of nearby villages was abundant. However, the police record shows that the death due to firing was only four and four were injured.<sup>27</sup>

Hundreds of people who are aggravated by the incidents of firing ran antagonistically fell in the temple tank by slipping and died, so that more than hundred women and children were found dead floating in the tank.<sup>28</sup> The *Hindu Bhoomi* dated December 2015 and some informers state that the number of death was actually thousands of people and injured were more than thousand. There is a possibility for thinking the death of thousands of people because at least 5000 people might have visited the temple for worshipping the deity while about 2 thousands of people might have visited to purchase equipments which were available only in such occasions.<sup>29</sup> Mr. Vasanthan's father was severely injured and his friend became handicapped after he got a bullet in his pelvis, and his father had told him that death should be more than 1000 people from nearby villages and he had seen that the temple tank was full of dead bodies.<sup>30</sup> Mr. Vasanthan's father had further stated to his son that the incident was completely merciless because the police forced had stolen the golden jewels from the corpses that were carried on military lorries to graveyard wherein they were mass buried after setting fire using petrol. He had also heard from the public that the Dewan C.P. Ramasamy Aiyar was responsible for such as merciless massacre in Suchindrum during the festival. *Hindu Bhoomi* clearly states that the Government had purposefully masked the incident by simply revealing that four persons were killed and four were injured in the police firing and the historians simply neglected it for unknown reason.<sup>31</sup> All through the day of 6<sup>th</sup> January, the disposal of dead bodies was the duty of police and military. So, there was no car festival on that day and the cars did not move even a step from their residence.<sup>32</sup>

On 7<sup>th</sup> January, 1947, the car festival was conducted at the temple in the early morning, but there was no one devotee was there in the premises of the temple to pull the temple cars along their routes around the temple and even the villages did not come to pull the car on that day. Finally, the police and soldiers of military came forward, after undid their shirts and boots, and drew the *Swami ther* and *Amman ther* around the temple and concluded the car festival at 2.30 AM.

After that police firing incident, there was heated discussion about the necessity of Tamil province in Travancore, which in turn helped to collapse the efforts of State congress and to favour the growth of the TTNC in South Travancore. The working committee of the TTNC uttered its heartfelt empathy to the families whose members died as well as to those who were injured in the police attack,<sup>33</sup> which was typically an eyewash to people because the activity of TTNC was the whole cause for the police firing. But, followers of TTNC condemned the action of the State Congress authorities and the police. The *Chithirai Thirunal Maharaja*, the ruling King, wanted the whole of Travancore as independent Princely state under his rule,<sup>34</sup> so that the Dewan who served for Travancore King needed to control the activities of the members of TTNC which had the support of Madras state congress and the National Congress Party which fought for freedom of the whole of Indian Union.<sup>35</sup> For controlling the mass conflict, the Dewan therefore needed immediately to issue firing order to police and to send the military unit to prevent any further mass clashes at Suchindrum. For that reason, police firing during the car festival of Suchindrum temple in 1947 was purely an incident relating to freedom movement in the extreme south of India.

## Conclusion

Silent rivals between the Malyalees dominated State Congress and the Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress (TTNC) consisted of Tamilians for many years brought a conflict in Suchindrum by the way of political meeting on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1914. In order to overcome the effects of the State congress, the members of TTNC attempted to hoist the Congress flag on the temple festival on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1947. The Diwan Sir C.P. Ramasami Iyar (1936-1947), on behalf of the ruling King Shri

Chithirai Thirunal Balarama Verma (1919-1991 A.D), for the purpose of controlling mass clashes by freedom fighters, ordered to Inspector General for issuing firing order to the police force to open firing that could end with massacre of thousands of innocent people during the car festival. The members of TTNC should not have selected the car festival day to express their eagerness in isolated district of Travancore and even if they had selected that day, they should not have interfered with ritual activities of the temple. When members of TTNC show their violence on temple car managed by Devaswom Board, it seemed to be the duty of Dewan to control hostilities for protecting the temple and temple cars, which had urged him to use his force for firing on wrongdoers.

### Endnotes

1. *Dhinakaran* (Tamil daily), Nagercoil, dated 9.02.1999, p.8.
2. K.K. Pillai, *The Suchindrum Temple- A Monograph*, Madras, 1953, pp.230-240.
3. Mr. Ramakrishnan (age 87), Pooja performer at Suchindram temple gave this information.
4. Information from temple authorities dated on 20-11-2013.
5. *Dinamalar*, 1 November 1956, p.
6. V.P. Menon, *The Story of the Integration of the Indian States*, New Delhi, 1950, p.236.
7. Sam Naheniell, "History of the TTNC, 1945-1947", *Kanyakumari*, 28 November 1973 p.5.
8. P.S. Moni, *Tiru Tamilar lyakkam* (Tamil), Kanya Prasuralayam, Nagercoil, 1956, p. 12.
9. B. Maria John, *Formation of the State of Tamil Nadu*, Nagercoil, 2004, p.28.
10. *The Hindu*, 26 September 1962, p.5.
11. E.Rs., Trivandrum, C.S.F. No. D.Dis.776 of 1946, Police Report on the Tamil Nadu Congress meeting at Thampanur, 6 December 1946.
12. P.S. Moni, *Tiru-Tamilar lyakkathil Ma. Po.Si. (Tamil)*, Nagercoil, 1956, pp.21 -22.
13. File No.D.Dis.3894/1946, Judicial, dated 17.10.1946, Memorandum Submitted by T.M.Chidambarathanu Pillai, M.L.C., Nagercoil, dated 10-9-1946, K.A., TVM.
14. E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *Kerala - Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, Calcutta, 1968, p. 185.
15. *The Hindu*, 29 September 1946, p.7.
16. Travancore Police Daily Report, Secret Bulletin, No.99, April 1947.
17. P.S. Moni, *op.cit.*, p.10.
18. File No.D.Dis.103/1947, C.S., dated 18.3.1947, Dally Report-Secret Bulletin from I.G. of Police to Government, dated 6.1.1947, K.A., TVM.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. Information from old priest Sundaram Aiyar (age 86) dated 10-10-2019.
22. E.Rs., File No. 103 of 1947, Letter from Trivandrum District to the Registrar, Huzur Secretariat, Trivandrum.
23. The name Gajapathi was not reported in the police record and no action was taken against him. He returned to Suchindrum in 1952 and lived until 2014. This information was given by Mr. Ramakrishnan (age 78), Suchindrum dated 10-10-2019.
24. *Hindu Boomi* (Tamil), December 2015, p.14.
25. *Ibid.*

26. E.Rs., File No. 103 of 1947.
27. *Hindu Boomi* (Tamil), December 2015, p.14.
28. *Ibid.*
29. R.Vasanthan (age 66), Vaithiyanathapuram, dated 10-11-2019.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Hindu Boomi* (Tamil), December 2015, p.14.
32. Information from old priest Sundaram Aiyar (age 86) dated 10-10-2019.
33. File No.D.Dis.235/1948, Legislative, dated 14.4.'48, Resolution of the Executive Committee of TTNC, dated 13.1.1947, K.A., TVM.
34. R. Ramakrishna Nair, *Constitutional Experiments in Kerala*, The Kerala Academy of Political Science, Trivandrum, 1964, p. 22-23.
35. *The Hindu*, 13 June 1947, p. 6.