

TIRUNELVELY CONSPIRACY CASE – NEELAKANTA BRAHMACHARI

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Introduction

The 1908 'Tirunelvely Riot' became the first stepping stone for all political happenings. Neelakantan did not involve himself in this riot; he stood by himself in these revolutionary activities; But the riot affected him also. Neelakanta Brahmachari dedicated himself to the revolutionary movement, from that time onwards he cut off all his connections with his family. In 1908, he received a letter from his father in which he informed him that he had lost all tier family property except a house. His father knew no other job than to teach Vedas. So he expected monetary help from Neelakantan. But Neelakantan did not even send a reply to him. At that time he had a large sum of money under his custody as the fund they had collected for revolutionary movement. But he did not misuse it. So his father shifted his family from Erukkoor to Mayavaram and there he started teaching Veda.¹ Neelakantan gave prior importance to National cause and not to his personal interests.²

Formation of Bharatha Matha Association

Between September 1909 and November 1910 Neelakantan was 1910 was the founder of the Bharatha Matha Association in Shencottah, of which Vanchi Iyer, Jegannath Iyengar, Harihar Iyer, Pichumani Iyer and Venkatrama Iyer were members. The objects of this association were the encouragement of Swadeshi goods in addition to the reading of newspapers obtained from Pondicherry. This Association eventually developed in to a secret society. Though there was nothing illegal in its avowed objects, the unfortunate impression that Swadeshi will be crushed as at Tuticorin and those who are responsible for it will meet Chidambaram Pillai's fate is the only explanation for the association being converted into secret society. Almost all the member of this association eventually became members of the secret society organized by Neelakantan.³

Suppression of newspapers and conviction of important persons compelled him to have his headquarters at Pondicherry. He tried to adopt other methods of spreading their propaganda and for this purpose the 'Bharatha Matha Secret Society' was formed on the 10th April 1910 at Tenkasi⁴ and the first meeting held by

Neelakanta Brahmachari which had for its purpose the starting of a revolutionary movement.⁵

First Meeting of Bharatha Matha Association

The first meeting was held in the Madathukadai Chidambaram Pillai's house at Tenkasi. He was financing Neelakantan entry now and then. Neelakanta Brahmachari presided over the meeting, Sankarakrishnan Iyer, a cultivator aged 22, Madathukadai Chidambaram Pillai, a grocer aged 24, K.V. Arumugam Pillai, a young vellala clerk of Tuticorin, Vande Madharam Subramania Iyer, a school teacher, aged 26, attended the meeting.⁶ Neelakantan explained his views that Chidambaram Pillai, Subramania Siva, Krishnaswamy Sharma lectured but nothing came out of it, that Government arrested them and sent them to jail that some tried to publish in newspaper but we have not obtained Swadeshi and Swaraj by that or by lectures and in consequence we have devised a new plan for that purpose, namely to hold secret meetings in all big towns and villages and arrange to kill all Europeans as was done of 1857. Sankarakrishnan also spoke at the meeting. Neelakantan mixed sandalwood paste and kunkumam in water and after dipping some flowers in the mixture, he offered them to the Kali. He said that the red liquid was the blood of the English and that was thrown as a sacrifice to Bharatha Matha. Some Vande Madharam songs were sung by Sankarakrishnan from memory.

A half sheet of white paper was taken, some ten lines of Vande Madharam songs were written on it, and underneath was written, "To establish Swaraj in India, we should drive the English from India. For this purpose sacrifice our bodies, souls and property. We should not marry as marriage would be hinderance to the carrying out of these objects and that if anyone when arrested by Government should divulge the names of the members of the society or its existence he should be killed as Goshein of Calcutta was killed and would go to hell".⁷ Neelakantan asked them if they would join the new movement. The persons who attended the meeting were assented to these views and agreed to become members of the new movement. Then Neelakantan gave them new names to carry on secret correspondence. These new names were written below the oath described above. Each of the member read the oath paper, drank the red solution saying

that was the white man's blood, cut his thumb with a razor and affixed his thumb impression in blood opposite to their new names. Neelakantan asked Arumugam to enlist recruits and to distribute the Dharmam paper published at Pondicherry. Arumugam agreed to do so. After this, the meeting dispersed.

Arumugam left Tenkasi and reached Tuticorin. There, he met Somasundharam who had consented to become a member. Neelakantan went to his village and then to Pondicherry. There he met his old friend Mr. Chakkravarthi Iyengar, a Cuddalore advocate.⁸ When Chakkravarthi Iyengar came to know about Neelakantan's revolutionary activities, warned him that it was dangerous path. But Neelakantan threw a book title "The War of Indian Independence" and asked him to read it.⁹ Chakkravarthi Iyengar had asked Bharathi to advise Neelakantan against becoming an anarchist. But Bharathi had said that he was not in Pondicherry to teach the sons of India like Neelakanta Brahmachari, but to charge the views of the cowards like Chakkravarthi Iyengar.¹⁰

About the middle of June 1910 Neelakantan went to Mettupalayam. Just about this time Sankarakrishnan left Tenkasi on 2nd June 1910, met Vanchi Iyer on 3rd June 1910 on the Punalur Railway Station platform as previously arranged, and spoke to him on some urgent and confidential matter, and reached Alleppey the next day. From there Sankarakrishnan and Harihara Iyengar, a merchant went to Cochin. Then Sankarakrishnan alone went to Mettupalayam and met Neelakantan as previously arranged. Then both of them visited Cochin and Alleppey.¹¹ All these places, Neelakantan first delivered lectures on Swadeshi and Boycott and then preach on the evils they suffer from. These were easily brought home to the mofusal riots. He possessed himself a vedantist not concerned in the material affairs of this world, he told them disregard the body and sacrifice themselves for the country. He deifies the country and makes it an object of worship.¹²

Harihara Iyer was introduced to Neelakantan at Alleppey and he became so enamored of Neelakantan that he spent out of his pocket and described him in one of his letters to Vanchi Iyer as the first born son of Mother Bharatha. From Alleppey, Neelakantan and Sankarakrishnan went to Punalur via Quilon where they met Vanchi. From there they went to Shencottah. After staying in Shencottah for about a week they went to Tuticorin, one after the other about the middle of July 1910. Arumugam made necessary arrangements for their stay in Tuticorin. He engaged the upstairs portion of one

Pattialammal's house in Tuticorin and arranged for their food and conveyance. Arumugam had already enlisted the sympathies of Somasundharam and Madasamy.¹³

Second Meeting of Bharatha Matha Association

In Tuticorin, another oath taking meeting (second meeting of the Bharatha Matha Association) was held. At this meeting Neelakanta Brahmachari, Sankarakrishnan, Muthukumarasami Pillai, a pot seller, Subbaya Pillai, Vakil's Gumastah, Madasamy, Arumugam and Somasundharam took the oath of blood preciously in the same manner as at Tenkasi.

After a stay about a week in Tuticorin Neelakantan went back to Shencottah and stayed Courtallam in the Rama Rao's bungalow for about a fortnight till 9th August, 1910 when he left for Punalur. There he was met by Ramasami Iyer.¹⁴

Neelakanta Brahmachari had a number of aliases, Neelakanta Iyer, Narayana Govinda Bai, Narayana Govinda Duboi, Govinda Narayan and Neelakanta Datta.¹⁵ As Narayana Govinda Duboi he was at Tirunelvely, Palayamkottah and other places in Tirunelvely Districts in 1908.¹⁶

Dharmaraja Iyer wrote a letter to Neelakantan to hold a meeting at Shencottah. Neelakanta Brahmachari accepted it and went to Shencottah. Vanchi and Dharmaraja Iyer arranged Sivagaminatha Pillai's house for meeting. This meeting was attended by Sankarakrishnan, Vanchi, Jagannath Iyengar, Pirchumani Iyer, Savadi Arunachalam Pillai, Ramaswamy and Subramania Pillai. Everyday, after meals in the night, Neelakantan delivered addressee to the members. At that time Neelakantan told that it was their duty to see that native industries were fostered, that trade should be developed and that English goods should not be purchased at all but they should purchase only Indian goods.¹⁷

Neelakanta Brahmachari also delivered addressee on the attaining of Swaraj. He told the people that machines and looms should be established and that the English were ruining the country very much that disease was spreading in the country, people were being oppressed with severe taxes and for that reason they must be driven out of the country were being prepared at Pondicherry. Then finally they took an oath which was in many respects like that already taken at Tenkasi and Tuticorin.¹⁸

Books from Bharatha Matha Association

Before this meeting Neelakanta Brahmachari got money from Vanchi, who got it from Dharmaraja Iyer, for the publication of his books "History of Japan" and

“Santhana Dharma”(In Tamil). Bharathi read the manuscripts of this books, made some corrections, and published some of the essays in the “Dharma” newspaper. Then Neelakantan gave the manuscripts to the Madras “Guardian Press” with small amount of advance for the publication.¹⁹

The meeting of the Bharatha Matha Association presided over by Neelakanta Brahmachari was held at Shencottah “Kasppa” “Alagapillai’s house. Dharmaraja’s friend Venkataraman joined the Bharatha Matha Association. Many Swadeshi songs were sung by the members and finally usual oath was taken. After the meeting was over, Vanchi asked Neelakantan about the publication of two books. Neelakantan said that he gave it to the “Guardian Press” at Madras for publication. Vanchi told him to publish the books within 15 days.

Neelakanta Brahmachari went to Pondicherry from Shencottah.²⁰ At Shencottah, Vanchi reported to other members of the Bharatha Matha Association about the publication of books and the activities of Neelakanta Brahmachari. The members advised Vanchi, to go to Pondicherry to inform the leaders about Neelakantan’s failure to publish the books. They all suspected that Neelakantan misused the money.

Bharatha Matha Association’s Letter to Ashe

Before going to Pondicherry Ottapidaram Madasamy Pillai, Shencottah Dharmaraja Iyer, Madathukadai Chidambaram Pillai and some other members met Vanchi in his house; they discussed about the cruelty of Ashe. They decided that, if they failed to kill Ashe, he would kill the members of the Bharatha Matha Association. From that time onwards they were watching the daily activities of Ashe to find suitable time to kill him.²¹ Madasamy already sent a threatening letter to Ashe, it was as follows:

Vande Madharam

“we members of the Bharatha Matha Association do hereby warn you to the following effect:

Don’t interfere in to any public concern. If you be stubborn, inspite of this warning then your head will be smashed to pieces within a short time”

Your’s truly,

Bharatha Matha Association members.²²

Bharatha Matha Association Members in Pondicherry

When Vanchi and Sankarakrishnan reached Pondicherry, Neelakantan left Pondicherry to Erukkoor to attend his sister Velambal’s marriage.²³ Vanchi and Sankarakrishnan met V.V.S.Iyer found that Vanchi was the

suitable man for his principles. So he trained him to use a browning pistol (which was received from Madam Cama against Ashe, the Collector of Tirunelvely).²⁴

Unexpectedly, Neelakanta Brahmachari came to Pondicherry and stayed in the usual residence, the Dharma office, where the newspapers India and Dharma were printed. Bharathi met him and Neelakantan described him the activities of his society members against him and also the money problem in publishing his two books. Because of these problems, he thought of going to North India and asked Bharathi to come with him. Bharathi could not accompany him because of his wife’s sickness.²⁵

Neelakantan came to know that Vanchi was taking revolver training from V.V.S.Iyer, he did not like it. Because V.V.S.Iyer advocated individual massacre and violence to the only means for ousting the Europeans from the country. Through Bharathi Neelakantan met V.V.S.Iyer, both of them exchanged their own ideas and principles. But V.V.S.Iyer’s principles were quiet contrary to Neelakantan’s views. Finally Neelakantan came out without accepting V.V.S.Iyer’s views.²⁶ In October 1910, V.V.S.Iyer established the Dharmalayam where he taught boxing, wrestling, shooting practices etc to young and able men. He was a believer in terrorism, the assassination of individual Europeans and their helpers. In the Dharma office, Vanchi with some other friends discussed about Neelakantan when they saw him, they showered praises on V.V.S.Iyer and acknowledged him as the true patriot. They also told that V.V.S.Iyer would be the leader of the Bharatha Matha Association and Neelakantan was no more the leader of that Association.²⁷ Then Neelakanta Brahmachari made arrangements to return the money to Vanchi through Bharathi and told him that he would be going to North India leaving Pondicherry with broken heart.²⁸

Tirunelvely Conspiracy Case

The terrorists decided to murder Ashe. Having trained in revolver practice under V.V.S.Iyer at Pondicherry, Vanchi and Sankarakrishnan were entrusted with that job. At that time Ashe has succeeded Wynch as Collector of Tirunelvely and the members of the Bharatha Matha Association had bitter feelings.²⁹ On the morning of 17th June 1911, Ashe the Collector and District Magistrate of Tirunelvely left Tirunelvely Bridge Railway Station with his wife by the 9.30 a.m. train reached Maniyachi at 10.30a.m. He was seated in a first class compartment in which he and Mrs.Ashe were the only occupants waiting for the Ceylon Boat Mail. The station platform was almost empty.

Here and there, there were few passengers. The Maniyachi railway station master's two sons were standing almost opposite to the first class compartment in which Mr. and Mrs. Ashe were seated. Just then two men went up to the first class compartment, one in green coat and the other a young Brahmin wearing his waist cloth like a Malayali. The Green coated man (Vanchi) peeped in to the compartment and stared at Mr. Ashe while the other went further up and stood in front of the servant's compartment. Mr. Ashe was annoyed at the green coated man looking in to the compartment and frowned at him. The man then pointed a pistol at Mr. Ashe. Mr. Ashe grew alarmed, stood up, took off his hat and threw it at him. It missed him and fell down on the platform. But the man fired at Mr. Ashe, who was hit on the right side of his chest. Mr. Ashe tried to get out the compartment but was prevented by Mrs. Ashe, and both of them fell on the floor of the carriage. Mr. Ashe died shortly afterwards.

Vanchi after shooting Ashe ran in to the latrine challenging any one to approach him. The latrine was surrounded by the Railway Police and the crowd, but no one apparently attempted to enter it and the assassin (Vanchi) eventually shot himself and died.³⁰ Sankarakrishnan who accompanied Vanchi, escaped from the scene. But with the help of Vanchi's letter he was arrested later and was identified by the two sons of the Maniyachi railway station master.³¹ On the evidence of these letters and pamphlets, the police came to know that the connection between Neelakanta Brahmachari, Vanchi and other members. At the same time Neelakanta Brahmachari went to Calcutta. Because, when he was in Varanasi, he read the newspaper reports of Ashe's Assassination. The Government offered a reward of Rs.1000/- each for the capture of Neelakanta Brahmachari and Madasamy.³² Neelakanta Brahmachari stayed in Calcutta in Madarasi Hotel at Siyanda. From Hotel, he wrote a letter to the Commissioner of Police, Calcutta. He also wrote a letter to the Amrita Bazar Patrika for publication.³³ He was arrested on 7th July by the Calcutta Police and his belonging searched. He was brought down to Tirunelveli on 11th July 1911.

Conclusion

The judgement was delivered by the Special bench on 15th February 1912. In the end of the judgement the first accused Neelakanta Brahmachari was sentenced to seven years rigorous imprisonment, second accused Sankarakrishnan Iyer to four years rigorous imprisonment, seventh accused Harihara Iyer to three years rigorous

imprisonment, third accused Madathukadi Chidambaram Pillai to two years rigorous imprisonment, and the remaining accused, fourth Muthukumarasami Pillai, fifth Suppiah Pillai, sixth Jagannadha Iyengar, eighth Babu Pillai and fourteenth Pichumani Iyer alias Venkatachalam Iyer – to one year rigorous imprisonment each in Special Bench Case number 1 of 1991. The third count was withdrawn by the Government pleader and second accused Sankarakrishnan Iyer was discharged.³⁴ Two men of Bharatha Matha Association committed suicide. One of them was Dharmaraj Iyer of Shencottah, knew that the evidence against him was overwhelming. To prevent all disgrace he committed suicide. The other one was Venkateshwara Iyer, a pleader of Punalur. He was found with gashes on his throat and chest, which were self-inflicted. He died a few hours later.³⁵ Madasamy absconded from the scene.³⁶

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