

The Salt Satyagraha in Tamil Nadu: Regional Participation in India's Freedom Struggle

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Abstract: The Salt Satyagraha in Tamil Nadu formed a significant event in India's Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930, reflecting the regional dimensions of the national struggle against British colonial rule. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's Dandi March and the call to defy the Salt Act, the movement in Tamil Nadu was led by C. Rajagopalachari through the historic Vedaranyam Salt March and was complemented by parallel campaigns in Madras, Sholinganallur, Tuticorin, Rameshwaram, Satyavedu, and the South Arcot district. This study examines the organisation, spread, and impact of the Salt Satyagraha across the Madras Presidency, highlighting the participation of political leaders, Congress volunteers, women, students, and local communities. It analyses how regional initiatives challenged the British salt monopoly through the manufacture of contraband salt, public meetings, processions, and other forms of non-violent civil disobedience despite severe colonial repression, including arrests, prosecutions, and prohibitory orders. The article also explores the strategic role of local leadership in mobilising diverse social groups and adapting Gandhian methods to regional conditions. By examining archival records and contemporary reports, the study demonstrates that the Salt Satyagraha in Tamil Nadu not only strengthened nationalist consciousness but also broadened popular participation in the freedom movement. It argues that the movement transformed the struggle for independence into a mass-based campaign, reinforcing the ideals of non-violence, sacrifice, and collective resistance while making a lasting contribution to India's quest for independence.

Keywords: Salt Satyagraha, Tamil Nadu, Civil Disobedience Movement, Salt Tax, Mahatma Gandhi, C. Rajagopalachari, Madras, Vedaranyam, Sholinganallur, North Arcot, South Arcot, etc.,

Introduction

The Salt Satyagraha in Tamil Nadu, was one of the most significant phases of the Civil Disobedience Movement. The movement aimed to challenge the British monopoly on salt and protest the unjust Salt Tax imposed by the colonial government. Several prominent freedom fighters participated in the movement, Tamil Nadu conducted Salt Satyagraha on the Gandhian model in various places like Marina beach at Madras, Sholinganallur, Vedaranyam and Tuticorin and in the small coastal villages like Killai, Owari, Devanampattinam and Tharuvaikulam and non-coastal areas Such as Madurai, Salem, Nilgris, Coimbatore, Ramnad, etc which imbibed the spirit of nationalism among the minds of people.¹

Background to the Salt Satyagraha

Viceroy Irwin declared on 31st October 1929 that the goal of British policy was to confer Dominion Status on India.² The Lahore session of the Congress in 1929 passed a resolution that the ultimate goal of the Congress was the attainment of 'Purna Swaraj' or complete independence and it had authorised the Working Committee to

¹ V. Venkatraman, *Swadesism and Nationalism in Colonial Tamilnadu 1905-1947*, p.329.

² Saroja Sundararajan, *March to Freedom in Madras Presidency, 1916-1947*, p.460



launch a programme of civil disobedience including non-payment of taxes.³ On January 9, Gandhi observed in *Young India*: "Granted a perfect non-violent atmosphere and a fulfilled constructive programme, I would undertake to lead the mass civil disobedience struggle to a successful issue in the space of few months"⁴. Gandhi declared on January 26th 1930 that the British Government in India has not only deprived of their freedom but has ruined India economically, politically, culturally and spiritually. Therefore, we must sever the British connection and attain Purna Swaraj or Complete Independence. We must withdraw our voluntary association from the British Government and will prepare for Civil Disobedience, including non-payment of taxes.⁵ The Congress Working Committee on February month 1930 authorised Gandhi and his associates, to start civil disobedience as and when they desire and, in the manner, and to the extent, they decide⁶. Civil Disobedience was sparked by the issue of the Salt Tax, which Gandhi described as the "most inhuman poll tax that human ingenuity can devise".⁷

Gandhi's Salt March and Its Influence on Tamil Nadu

Gandhi's ultimatum of 31st January to Lord Irwin, stating the minimum demand in the form of 11 points⁸. As these demands had been ignored, there was now only one way out: civil disobedience. Gandhi announced his decision to open his campaign by opposing the Salt Act: "The Salt Tax was to be attacked; the salt law was to be broken".⁹ Having made his stand on the salt law explicitly clear, Gandhi commenced his famous 'Dandi March'.¹⁰ On March 12, 1930, Gandhi began his march with the batch seventy-nine satyagrahis to Dandi to break the salt law. He appealed to the country come forward to manufacture salt and disobey the salt act.¹¹ Gandhi and satyagrahis reached Dandi on 5th April, 1930¹². Gandhi broke the salt law on 6th April, 1930 at 8:30. a.m. by taking a lump of natural salt.¹³

Marina Salt Satyagraha

C. Rajagopalachari selected a place called Vedaranyam, quite away from Madras and paid his attention there and south of the Madras Presidency.¹⁴ Hence, in the absence of C. Rajagopalachari and due to the indifferent attitude of local leaders, T. Prakasam decided to fill the void and organise the Salt Satyagraha. Two Andhra leaders, however, T. Prakasam and K. Nageswara Rao, seized the opportunity to cultivate what promised to be fertile soil.¹⁵

On 13th April 1930, 46 Congress volunteers led by T. Prakasam and K. Nageswara Rao left the Swarajya Office and proceeded through Broad Way, China Bazaar Road, Mint Street, General Hospital, etc., to the Marina to manufacture contraband salt. They arrived there accompanied by a crowd of some 800 people. The crowd then dispersed¹⁶. On the same afternoon, T. Prakasam produced salt at his residence the police seized both the

³ Bipan Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence*, New Delhi, 1989, p.270.

⁴ *The Young India*, 9th January, 1930.

⁵ *Young India*, January 23, 1930.

⁶ U.S.S. File, 661, 9th April, Strictly Confidential, 26th March, 1930.

⁷ D.G. Tendulkar, *'Mahatma, Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi,'* Vol. III, p.13.

⁸ *The Young India*, 30th January, 1930.

⁹ J.C. Johari (ed), *Indian Freedom Movement and Thought*, New Delhi, 1983, p. 76.

¹⁰ *The Swadesamitran*, Madras, 14th April, 1930.

¹¹ *The Young India*, 12th March, 1930.

¹² *The Bombay Chronicle*, 6th April, 1930.

¹³ *The Sudandira Sangu*, 28th March, 1930.

¹⁴ *The Civil Disobedience Movement, (1930-31)*, p. 136.

¹⁵ *The Civil Disobedience Movement, (1930-31)*, p. 136.

¹⁶ U.S.S. File, 683(A), Strictly Confidential, 30th April, 1930.



manufactured salt and the utensils. T. Prakasam was arrested under Section 55 of the Madras Salt Act, but was released immediately. This was followed by a public meeting at the High Court beach, attended by 6,000 people¹⁷.

Organization of the Vedaranyam Salt Satyagraha

Authorised by the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee and the All-India Congress Committee to direct the Salt Satyagraha in Tamil Nadu, Rajagopalachari approved the task with characteristic caution¹⁸. The Tamil Nadu Congress Committee came forward to play its role in the movement. J.A. Thorne, Collector of Tanjore, wants to make the *satyagrahis* suffer in his jurisdiction to threaten the people of Tanjore even before the march started¹⁹. On 13th April 1930, a batch of Satyagrahis, about 100, left Dr Rajan's residence under the leadership of C. Rajagopalachari, went through the big bazaar street in Trichy, and went to Srirangam on foot²⁰. The party went through Koviladi, Tirukattupalli, Thiruvadi, Tandankorai, Rajagiri, Papanasam, Tiruvadi, Kumbakonam, Thiruthurai pundi. The party arrived at Vedaranyam on the evening of the 28th²¹. On the 29th night, C. Rajagopalachari sent a letter to the Sub Divisional Magistrate of Manargudi, who was camping at Vedaranyam, informing him that he and 16 volunteers would commence breaking the Salt Law at 6:00 a.m. on the 30th April²². The salt swamps were being vigilantly guarded by the police and excise officers. Early the next morning, C. Rajagopalachari, with the 16 volunteers, proceeded to the salt swamp and broke the salt law²³. Then he was arrested and sentenced under the section. 145, I.P.C., to 6 months simple imprisonment and under section. 74 of the Salt Act to a fine of rupees 200²⁴.

Regional Participation in Tamil Nadu

The movement spread to several districts, including Chengalpattu, Ramnad, Tirunelveli, and South Arcot.

Sholinganallur Salt Satyagraha

Sholinganallur, a coastal village in the Chengalpattu district, is situated nine kilometres from Madras.²⁵ A batch of thirteen Salt Satyagrahis from Gudiyattam who had arrived in Madras on 17th April, 1930, and they had to reach Sholinganallur by bus. But they were prevented from getting into the bus by the police²⁶. So marched next day afternoon at about 3 o'clock to 'Sholinganallur' for the purpose of manufacturing of contraband salt²⁷. The District Magistrate of Chengalpattu visited the village of Sholinganallur on 18th April, 1930, in the afternoon at about 4 p.m. and remained there for about 6.30 p.m. The Sub-Magistrate, Saidapet and Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Saidapet, also visited the spot and was there from the forenoon till 6.30 p.m.²⁸. The satyagrahis dug a pan about

¹⁷ FNR, Strictly Confidential, First Half of April, 1930.

¹⁸ David Arnold, p.118.

¹⁹ *The Sudandira Sangu*, Madras, 12th April, 1930.

²⁰ History of Freedom Movement-Bundle No.65, p, 83. or S.F.No.687, Dated 31st May 1930.

²¹ History of Freedom Movement-Bundle No.65, p, 85.

²² *The Young India*, 15th May, 1930.

²³ *The Young India*, 15th May, 1930.

²⁴ History of Freedom Movement-Bundle No.65, p, 86.

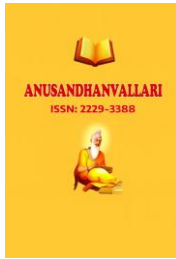
²⁵ History of Freedom Movement Bundle-Vol.No.65, 1930, p. 138, TNA.

(Here after referred as H.F.M. Bundle)

²⁶ *The Sudandira Sangu*, Madras, 19th April, 1930.

²⁷ H.F.M. Bundle No. 65, 1930, p. 138, TNA.

²⁸ Under Secretary Safe File 699 (B) 6th May, 1930, Javed Hussain, District Magistrate of Chingleput Letter to the Chief Secretary, Fort St. George, Madras (Strictly Confidential) 19th April, 1930.
(Here after referred as U.S.S.File)



6' x 4' and stocked Buckingham canal water in the hope of getting salt²⁹. They also took some water from the canal in two small vessels, along with a little earth, apparently to mix with the water and boil it to obtain salt³⁰.

The vessels of Buckingham canal water boiled down yielded a negligible quantity of a salt of the most impure kind. Satyagrahis asked the villagers to taste it, while they themselves used no salt in their food. The villagers declined³¹. On 18th April, 1930, Sankara Iyer, a prominent volunteer, delivered a lecture to an audience of more than thirty people. He asked the villagers to manufacture salt and said that if they failed to obtain any, they should use water from the Buckingham Canal with tamarind in their curries instead of salt³². On 22nd April, 1930, the salt satyagraha campaign took place at Sholinganallur. The volunteers were near the pans, expecting one of them to yield salt once the water had completely evaporated³³.

On 23rd April, 1930, two batches of volunteers totalling 26 at Sholinganallur were joined by a further batch of 10 volunteers (day before yesterday). Some of the villagers seemed to have helped the volunteers in making the pans. The salt authorities visited the spot, inspected the pans, and opined that one or two of the pans may yield within a couple of days. But steps taken by the authorities to see that the salt does not reach its final stage of salt formation³⁴. Anjalai Ammal from Madras, aged 30, visited the village on the evening of the 23rd April 1930 and spoke in the usual train, belittling the authorities³⁵.

Camp at Semmanjeri:

Semmanjeri village was located 1.5 miles from Sholinganallur. The salt pans at Sholinganallur are not yielding a good quantity of salt, and to avoid the authorities interfering in their task. On 25th April, 1930, in the morning, the leader of the Volunteers' camp at Sholinganallur, with fifteen volunteers, went to the village of Semmanjeri, as it seemed to them a better place for the manufacture of salt in pans. The salt pans prepared by the volunteers in Sholinganallur were unsatisfactory, so they could not collect as much salt as they had expected³⁶.

Regarding the salt satyagraha in this district, some developments occurred. The villagers who have been generally apathetic so far now show some sympathy for the satyagrahis³⁷. The Satyagrahis have been manufacturing good salt every day, not only for their own consumption but also for sale in Madras and the surrounding villages. Also, *Swarajya* opined that "they are still manufacturing very good salt, at least as good as the table salt which we get in the market"³⁸.

²⁹ *The Civil Disobedience Movement, (1930-31)* District Magistrate Letters to the events of the Movement, Strictly Confidential, Madras, 1931, p. 88.

(Here after referred as *The Civil Disobedience Movement, (1930-31)*)

³⁰ H.F.M. Bundle No. 65, 1930, p. 138, TNA.

³¹ U.S.S. File, 699 (B) 6th May, 1930, Javed Hussain, District Magistrate of Chingleput Letter to the Chief Secretary, Fort St. George, Madras (Strictly Confidential) 19th April, 1930.

³² *Ibid.*,

³³ U.S.S. File 699 (B) 6th May, 1930, Javed Hussain, District Magistrate of Chingleput Letter to the Chief Secretary, Stone House Hill, (Strictly Confidential) 23rd April, 1930.

³⁴ U.S.S. File 699 (B) 6th May, 1930, Javed Hussain, District Magistrate of Chingleput Letter to the Chief Secretary, Stone House Hill, (Strictly Confidential) 25th April, 1930.

³⁵ U.S.S. File 699 (B) 6th May, 1930, Javed Hussain, District Magistrate of Chingleput Letter to the Chief Secretary, Stone House Hill, (Strictly Confidential) 25th April, 1930.

³⁶ *The Hindu*, Madras, 25th April, 1930.

³⁷ H.F.M. Bundle No. 65, 1930, p. 145, TNA.

³⁸ *The Swarajya*, Madras, 2nd May, 1930.



On 6th May, 1930, two leaders of the volunteers at Sholinganallur, namely Sankara Iyer and Swami Shanmugananda, were charged before the Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Saidapet, under section 117 I.P.C., read with section 74 of the Salt Act ³⁹.

Satyavedu Satyagraha

On 9th and 10th June, the local Congressmen attempted to hold meetings in the villages of Madirpakkam and Manallur, respectively, in the Satyavedu division. But no meeting was allowed to be held on these dates as the Sub Magistrate and the Sub-Inspector of Police dispersed it. Four persons were, however, charged under the Towns Nuisance Act and fined. With this, the trouble ended here⁴⁰.

Ramanathapuram District

K. Natesa Ayyar, M.L.C., of Colombo, intended to launch a Salt Tax Campaign in the near future, with Rameshwaram as headquarters. He recruited volunteers from Madurai and Ramanathapuram, but more particularly Ceylon⁴¹.

For propaganda purposes, he was first intended to engage a bus with Ceylon volunteers in the Ramanathapuram District and other places, before proceeding to the Rameshwaram camp. The actual site of the camp is a house in Vanathirthan, five miles from Rameshwaram, where there are reportedly old salt pans and fresh water in the garden⁴². Instructions were given to the District Superintendents of Police, who K. Natesa Ayyar was expected to visit. He left for Ceylon on 3rd July, 1930 ⁴³.

Salt Making at Rameshwaram

Rameshwaram, a well-known place of pilgrimage, saw a proposal to start salt production in Ramanathapuram shortly after Gandhi's arrest, but the leaders didn't sanction it⁴⁴. In the middle of May N.S. Ramaswamy Ayyar came from the Trichinopoly district to recruit some people. By the 26th May, preparations were completed, and five Salt makers operated on the morning of the 28th May. They were arrested and convicted on 29th May, Mr N.S. Ramaswami was charged and convicted. On the 30th May, nine more volunteers were convicted⁴⁵.

Salt Law Violations at Tuticorin

Plans were made from time to time from April to June to produce salt at certain places along the seacoast, such as Ovary (southeast of Nanguneri), Tuticorin, Tharuvaikulam (seven miles from Tuticorin), Veppalodai, and Anjengo. The plans were abandoned in every instance shortly before the dates fixed for their maturation. The population in the villages along the coast consist mainly of Parava Christians who have no sympathy for the movement. And they are under the wholesome influence of the pastors, who could be relied on to dissuade the

³⁹ H.F.M. Bundle No. 65, 1930, p. 150, TNA; S.F.No 699(C) Dt. 22nd May 1930. Vol III (Civil Disobedience, General Salt File Vol III.

⁴⁰ *The Civil Disobedience Movement, (1930-31)*, pp. 90-91.

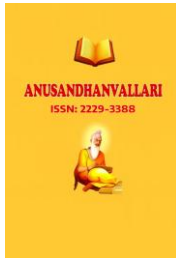
⁴¹ U.S.S.F 743, dt 12th October, 1931 Javed Hussain, District Magistrate of Chingleput to the Chief Secretary, Stone House Hill, 10th June, 1930; Chief Secretary's D.O. letter to the District Magistrate, No. 1591-C, 10th June, 1930.

⁴² *Ibid.*,

⁴³ U.S.S.F 743, dt 12th October, 1931, Letter from the Office of the Deputy Inspector – General of Police, Railways and C.I.D., to under Secretary to Government, Stone House Hill, D. O. No. 1918-C, (Strictly Confidential), dt. 4th July, 1930.

⁴⁴ *The Civil Disobedience Movement, (1930-31)*, p. 151.

⁴⁵ *The Civil Disobedience Movement, (1930-31)*, p. 151.



villagers in their charge from any movement to manufacture contraband salt. The salt contractor at various factories along the coast was also a powerful ally of the Government⁴⁶.

S. Palaniyandi Mudaliyar, the Secretary of the District Congress Committee, was an ardent supporter of the Civil Disobedience Movement and was deeply involved in violating the salt law in this region⁴⁷. On 28th April 1930, Palaniyandi Mudaliar, F.V. Fernandos, G. Madasamy and Ponnambalam, with more than 200 Satyagrahis, assembled at Thoothukudi beach. Then, by 2 p.m., they began preparing to manufacture salt in violation of the salt laws. S. Palaniyandi Mudaliar gave instructions to all Satyagrahis on how to collect saltwater and violate the salt law. Then the Satyagrahis began manufacturing salt. They set ovens, collected firewood and seawater, and boiled it⁴⁸. The District Magistrate, a Salt Inspector, Sub-Inspectors, Criminal Investigation department officer and a shorthand reporter, all five were stunned to see the busy operation and then threatened the salt attempt by pouring water on the Oven⁴⁹. On 5th July, the houses of J.P. Rodrigues, P. Kandarsami Pillai and A. Masilamani Pillai in Tuticorin were searched, and three persons were arrested⁵⁰. The police promulgated a prohibitory order under section 144 of the Cr.P.C., and a meeting announced for the evening of 5th July was forestalled⁵¹.

South Arcot District

South Arcot District was the first district in the Presidency to start salt satyagraha, even before the Vedaranyam march⁵².

Killai Salt Satyagraha

Nainappan started Salt Satyagraha in Kille near Chidambaram on the morning of the 11th instant with the help of 5 volunteers, including Srinivasa Ragava Iyengar, Raju Iyer, Murugan, Krishnamoorthy Rao of Chidambaram, and tailor Balaraman of Vrindhachalama, a temporary resident in Chidambaram, started their march towards Killai⁵³. They reached Killai after a four-hour march and boiled the brine⁵⁴.

Devanampattinam Salt Satyagraha

Nainappa Pillai and his associates began to concentrate on conducting a salt satyagraha at Devampattinam⁵⁵. The salt satyagrahis have been attempting to prepare salt every morning since 16th April, up to date (except on the last Saturday morning). As usual, while they were boiling the seawater, a salt peon came by and attempted to extinguish the fire by pouring seawater onto the oven. However, the desire of the satyagrahis to break the salt law never subsided⁵⁶. A small procession went to the beach to manufacture salt. An interested and sympathetic spectator was Anjalai Ammal, who had been convicted in the Neil statue case⁵⁷. Leaders were encouraging the

⁴⁶ *The Civil Disobedience Movement, (1930-31)*, p. 172.

⁴⁷ *The Civil Disobedience Movement, (1930-31)*, p. 170.

⁴⁸ Report on the Administration of the Madras Presidency, 1930-31, pp. 237-42; Government of order, No. 320, public (Political) Department, Madras, 1930, p. 668.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*,

⁵⁰ *The Civil Disobedience Movement, (1930-31)*, p. 169.

⁵¹ Dr. K.S.K. Velmani (ed), *Gazetteer of India; Tamil Nadu State, Thirunelveli District*, Madras Vol. I, 2002, p. 268.

⁵² U.S.S. File, 699 F September 1930, Strictly Confidential 22nd April, 1930.

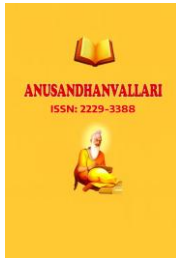
⁵³ U.S.S. File, 699 F September 1930, Strictly Confidential 22nd April, 1930.

⁵⁴ Kumar. V, *Britisher's Salt Monopoly in South Arcot District*, Ulundurpet, May 2008, p.75.

⁵⁵ *The Civil Disobedience Movement, (1930-31)*, p. 71.

⁵⁶ *The Hindu*, Madras, 13th April, 1930.

⁵⁷ *The Civil Disobedience Movement, (1930-31)*, p. 71.



satyagrahis and, at the close of each day's effort to boil brine, speaking to the assembled fisher folk and others to break the Salt Act more and more, and telling them that jail has no terrors for the brave sons of India.

On the morning of the 18th April, he was present with Kumaraswamy Pillai and Sudarsana Naidu (both political suspects) when the volunteers boiled brine on the Devanampatnam seashore, and the salt peons poured water in the ovens according to the authorities' plan of arrangement and instructions⁵⁸. On 19th of the meeting Nainappan advised the audience that, if they were not able to enlist as volunteers to offer salt satyagraha at Devanampatnam they might at least take a potful of water from the sea and boil the same in their respective houses. Three people volunteered at the close of this meeting⁵⁹. The attempts at salt-making and the evening meetings continued, and the ringleaders were picked out and convicted day by day⁶⁰.

Salt Satyagraha In Dindivanam

After local leaders were arrested, there was a riot in Tindivanam. The police attacked and overran the mob, and for few hours, they controlled the town.⁶¹ On April Nainappa pillai delivered a speech. As a result many of them enrolled as volunteers, one of them namely Sarangapani son of Somu Mudali. Thousands of volunteers marched to Eachangal Odai to gather salt but they were stopped by police and ordered to disperse from that place. As the crowd did not make a secret of their intentions to assault the police. The local Police Inspector, with his Sub Inspector and the bundobust party, stopped the crowd on its way back from the odai and ordered the men to disperse, seventy-four⁶².

Salt Satyagraha In Chidambaram

On the 6th of July, a band of volunteers made contraband salt at Lalji Chowk in Chidambaram. The men formed a ring around the fire, and there was also a bonfire of foreign cloth. Three of the men who took part in the day's proceedings were charged after a local investigation by the District Superintendent of Police and convicted. On the 9th July, another man did the same and was charged and convicted. Bangalore Adinarayanayya, but came back to create trouble. He was arrested at Tirukkoyilur, charged for his speeches at Cuddalore and convicted on the 12th July without delay⁶³.

Conclusion

The Salt Satyagraha in Tamil Nadu was a landmark event in the Indian freedom struggle. Led by C. Rajagopalachari through the Vedaranyam Salt March, it inspired thousands of people to oppose British rule through non-violent civil disobedience. The movement strengthened the spirit of nationalism, encouraged public participation, and demonstrated the power of peaceful protest. It played an important role in uniting people and paving the way for India's independence in 1947. Even though the movement faced strong British repression, the role of national and regional leaders and the participation of different social groups made the salt satyagraha movement successful. Its lasting impact inspired greater participation in the independence movement and contributed to India's eventual freedom.

⁵⁸ H.F.M. Bundle No. 65, 1930, pp. 190-191, TNA.

⁵⁹ U.S.S. File, 699 F September 1930, Strictly Confidential 22nd April, 1930.

⁶⁰ *The Civil Disobedience Movement, (1930-31)*, p. 74.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.12.

⁶² *The Civil Disobedience Movement, (1930-31)*, p. 74.

⁶³ *The Civil Disobedience Movement, (1930-31)*, p. 75.