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A Historical Analysis of the Freedom Movement in Thiruvarur

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ABSTRACT

The Indian freedom movement, while often viewed through the lens of national leaders and major urban centers, also drew immense strength from grassroots struggles in rural regions. This study presents a historical analysis of the freedom movement in Thiruvarur District, a culturally rich and politically significant area in Tamil Nadu. The research aims to highlight the local dimensions of the anticolonial struggle by examining the contributions, challenges, and collective spirit of the people in this region. Using archival records, government reports, oral histories, and secondary sources, the study traces the evolution of nationalist sentiments in Thiruvarur from the late 19th century to 1947. It explores early forms of resistance, the influence of Gandhian movements such as the Non-cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements, and the district's active participation in the Quit India Movement. The paper further documents the role of lesser-known freedom fighters, social reformers, students, and women, many of whom remain absent from mainstream historical narratives. This research also investigates the role of local institutions, press, and folk culture in mobilizing public support. It sheds light on the repressive measures taken by colonial authorities and their sociopolitical consequences on the local population. In contextualizing these findings within broader national developments, the paper aims to restore the rightful place of Thiruvarur in the annals of India's freedom struggle. This study not only contributes to regional historiography but also emphasizes the importance of decentralized perspectives in understanding the multifaceted nature of India's independence movement.

Keywords: Freedom movement, National leaders, Thiruvarur, Anticolonial struggles, social reformers, public support

INTRODUCTION

The history of India's freedom struggle is often narrated through the lives of iconic national leaders and landmark movements. However, the true strength of the movement lay in its ability to reach and mobilize the masses, even in the remotest parts of the country. In this context, local histories serve as a vital lens through which the richness and diversity of the Indian independence movement can be better understood. They reveal how national ideals were interpreted, adapted, and acted upon at the grassroots level. The study of such regional contributions not only complements the broader national narrative but also honours the sacrifices of numerous unsung heroes whose stories remain untold.

This paper focuses on Thiruvarur District, a region with a vibrant cultural heritage and a notable yet underrepresented role in the anticolonial movement. The rationale for selecting Thiruvarur lies in its strategic position in the Cauvery Delta, its active participation in Gandhian movements, and the presence of a politically conscious society influenced by both nationalist and social reformist ideologies.

The scope of this study extends from the late 19th century to India's independence in 1947, emphasizing significant movements, events, and personalities linked to the region. The objectives are to trace the historical trajectory of the freedom struggle in Thiruvarur, to document the roles of local leaders and common people, and to analyse how national movements were localized in this district.

This research is based on a combination of archival documents, government records, oral histories, newspaper reports, and secondary literature. The methodology includes historical analysis with a qualitative approach to interpreting primary and secondary sources.

The article is structured into sections that deal with the historical background of the district, early forms of resistance, participation in national movements, key local figures, the role of institutions, British repression, and the postindependence remembrance of these struggles. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Thiruvarur's contribution to India's freedom movement from a regional perspective.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THIRUVARUR

Geographical and Political Profile

Thiruvarur District, located in the fertile Cauvery Delta region of Tamil Nadu, has long been a land of agricultural abundance and cultural richness. Bounded by the districts of Thanjavur, Nagapattinam, and Pudukottai, it enjoys a strategic geographical position that made it both agriculturally

prosperous and politically active. The district is home to many rivers and canals that supported intensive paddy cultivation, making it a crucial part of the region's agrarian economy.

Historically, Thiruvavarur was part of the Chola heartland and later came under various dynasties and colonial powers. During British rule, it was initially part of the Tanjore District in the Madras Presidency. The colonial administration-imposed revenue systems and administrative structures that altered traditional systems of governance and landholding, deeply impacting the local sociopolitical landscape.

Socio-economic Conditions During Colonial Rule

Under British colonial rule, the economic structure of Thiruvavarur underwent significant changes. The Permanent Settlement and ryotwari systems imposed heavy land taxes on peasants, leading to widespread debt and poverty among cultivators. Though the region remained agriculturally productive, the benefits were largely appropriated by zamindars and colonial authorities.

Socially, the district had a complex caste structure, with land ownership and access to resources often aligned with social hierarchies. However, it was also a site of early social reform, influenced by movements such as the Self-respect Movement, which challenged caste-based inequalities. Education began to spread, particularly through missionary and nationalist efforts, creating a new class of politically aware youth.

Role of the District in the Pro-independence Period

Thiruvavarur's role in the pro-independence period was shaped by its socioeconomic grievances and growing political consciousness. The district responded actively to the nationalist call for resistance, with local leaders participating in the Indian National Congress and other political forums. The early 20th century saw the formation of local associations and student groups that played a significant role in mobilizing the masses.

The influence of Mahatma Gandhi's visit to nearby regions and the spread of Swadeshi and Khadi movements had a profound effect on the people of Thiruvavarur. The district served as a hub for the dissemination of nationalist ideas through public speeches, newspapers, and cultural activities. Over time, it evolved from passive resistance to active participation in national movements like the Non-cooperation Movement and the Civil Disobedience Movement.

Thus, the historical background of Thiruvavarur District provides the necessary context for understanding its dynamic and evolving role in India's broader struggle for independence.

EARLY RESISTANCE AGAINST BRITISH RULE

Peasant Uprisings and Local Revolts

The agrarian economy of Thiruvavarur District, though fertile and productive, became a site of discontent under British colonial rule due to exploitative land revenue systems. The introduction of the Ryotwari system and the imposition of high taxes severely burdened the peasantry. Unable to cope with rising debts and falling returns, peasants began to resist through both passive and active means. Instances of tax refusal, grain hoarding, and spontaneous local uprisings became more frequent during periods of drought or economic stress.

These localized revolts, though not as organized as the later mass movements, were early signs of resistance to colonial exploitation. Some village level leaders and cultivator groups took to protecting lands from revenue collectors and resisting forced labour. While these uprisings were often suppressed with force, they sowed the seeds of political awareness and collective protest among the rural population.

Influence of Early Reformers and Local Leaders

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Thiruvavarur saw the emergence of local leaders who began to question colonial rule and social injustices. Influenced by the Indian National Congress, moderate leaders in the district began organizing meetings and petitions to demand reforms. The influence of regional reformers and the Justice Party also had a significant impact, particularly in creating political consciousness among the educated classes and non-Brahmin communities.

Leaders inspired by Swadeshi ideals encouraged the boycott of British goods and promoted indigenous industries. Local teachers, lawyers, and social workers became early agents of political change, using education, newspapers, and public discussions to raise awareness. Though they initially adopted moderate methods, their efforts laid the ideological foundation for the larger nationalist movements that followed.

Response to British Economic and Administrative Policies

The people of Thiruvavarur District were deeply affected by British economic and administrative decisions. The commercialization of agriculture, favouring cash crops for export, disrupted local food production and increased dependence on external markets. Colonial policies prioritized revenue extraction over rural welfare, leading to faminelike conditions, especially during poor monsoons.

The introduction of Western education and bureaucratic systems also altered traditional structures of power and employment. As local elites began losing influence, a new class of English educated youth emerged, who viewed British rule with increasing scepticism. These individuals, many of whom would later join the Congress or local nationalist organizations, began to articulate a more structured critique of colonialism.

The combined impact of economic hardship, social transformation, and political awareness during this period marks the beginning of Thiruvavarur's active resistance against British rule. Though fragmented at first, these early expressions of dissent created a fertile ground for the broader freedom movement that would follow in the decades to come.

PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL MOVEMENTS

Thiruvavarur District played an increasingly active role in India's nationalist movement from the early 20th century onwards. The people of the region, motivated by both political idealism and socioeconomic hardships, responded with enthusiasm to the nationwide calls for resistance led by the Indian National Congress and Mahatma Gandhi. Each phase of the national movement witnessed a distinct form of participation from Thiruvavarur, blending local activism with national objectives.

Non-cooperation Movement (1920–22)

The launch of the Non-cooperation Movement by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920 found significant resonance in Thiruvavarur. Influenced by Gandhian ideals, local leaders and students began boycotting government schools, law courts, and foreign goods. Khadi spinning, Swadeshi promotion, and village level campaigns were actively promoted.

The movement also saw the rise of volunteer corps (Seva Dals) in the district, which organized meetings, rallies, and public awareness campaigns. Many youths left English educational institutions in protest and joined national schools. Though the movement was withdrawn in 1922, it had a lasting impact in politicizing the masses and creating a culture of nonviolent resistance.

Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34)

Thiruvavarur was also quick to respond to Gandhi's call for Civil Disobedience. Satyagrahis in the region participated in salt satyagraha campaigns, defiance of forest and tax laws, and symbolic acts of protest British authority.

Women from Thiruvavarur took part in picketing liquor shops and foreign cloth stores marking a major moment of female political participation in the district. Local Congress committees became more organized and began mobilizing villagers through door-to-door campaigns. Several activists from the district were arrested during this phase, and underground pamphlet distribution became a notable method of continuing the struggle.

Quit India Movement (1942)

The Quit India Movement of 1942 marked the most intense phase of anticolonial agitation in Thiruvavarur. The British crackdown was brutal, but it failed to suppress the spirit of resistance. Protesters organized mass rallies, burned official records, removed railway tracks, and hoisted the Indian flag at public places in defiance of colonial rule.

Several students, teachers, and workers from Thiruvavarur were jailed, and martial lawlike restrictions were imposed. Despite limited communication facilities, the people used folk songs, street theatre, and village meetings to convey patriotic messages. The British surveillance system was frequently bypassed by the use of coded messages and oral networks.

Broader Impact on Local Society

Each of these movements helped politicize different sections of society in Thiruvavarur peasants, students, women, artisans, and traders alike. The sense of collective identity as Indians grew stronger. The movements also exposed people to ideas of freedom, self-governance, social reform, and economic self-reliance, which continued to influence political developments in the postindependence period.

Thiruvavarur's deep engagement in these national movements stands as testimony to its unwavering commitment to India's freedom struggle, often at the cost of imprisonment, loss of property, and personal hardship.

PROMINENT FREEDOM FIGHTERS FROM THIRUVARUR

While national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Jawaharlal Nehru inspired millions across India, the success of the freedom struggle relied heavily on the dedication of regional leaders and local patriots. Thiruvavarur District produced several such unsung heroes, who played vital roles in organizing protests, mobilizing public support, and enduring hardships during British repression. Though many of them remain relatively unknown in mainstream historical narratives, their contributions were crucial to the progress of the movement in the region.

Mr. Abdul Majeed

Mr. Abdul Majeed was a lesser-known yet courageous freedom fighter associated with the southern regions, including Thiruvavarur. Known for his deep commitment to secular nationalism and social unity, he worked actively to mobilize Muslim youth in support of the Congress led national movement. He also used his background in education and community service to spread awareness about Swadeshi ideals and constitutional rights. His work in the hinterlands of the delta region helped bridge religious and caste divides during the national struggle.

K. Raghava Pillai

A strong follower of Gandhian principles, Raghava Pillai played a key role in organizing Khadi campaigns and promoting village industries in Thiruvavur. He was actively involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement, leading salt marches and participating in public defiance of British laws. His frequent arrests did not deter his activism; he became a symbol of moral courage for younger volunteers.

V. Subramania Pillai

An educator and nationalist thinker, Subramania Pillai used schools and public lectures as platforms to instill patriotic values among students. He was known for writing and reciting revolutionary poems in Tamil that motivated youth and villagers. His contribution was intellectual as well as organizational, helping create a politically aware generation during the 1930s.

Smt. Lakshmi Ammal and Others

Thiruvavur also witnessed the rise of women leaders like Lakshmi Ammal, who took active part in picketing liquor shops, promoting Khadi, and conducting underground communication during the Quit India Movement. Despite social restrictions, these women broke barriers to become powerful symbols of courage and sacrifice.

Students and Youth Activists

Several unnamed students and teachers from local schools and colleges joined the freedom struggle, particularly during the Quit India Movement. They organized secret meetings, distributed pamphlets, and even disrupted colonial administration. Though many of them were imprisoned or fined, their actions kept the spirit of resistance alive in villages and towns across Thiruvavur.

These local freedom fighters, though not always documented in official records, formed the backbone of the national struggle in Thiruvavur. Their selfless service, moral leadership, and civic courage inspired many and laid the foundation for a politically conscious society that would continue to engage in democratic nation building after independence.

ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS

The freedom movement in Thiruvavur District was not solely driven by individual heroes; it was also sustained and expanded through the efforts of educational institutions, social reform groups, cultural platforms, and grassroots organizations. These institutions played a critical role in spreading nationalist ideas, mobilizing the masses, and shaping political consciousness in both rural and urban areas.

Educational Institutions as Centers of National Awakening

Schools and colleges in Thiruvavur acted as vital spaces for nurturing political awareness among the youth. Many teachers and students became active participants in the Non-cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements. Some institutions voluntarily disaffiliated from government recognition in solidarity with the nationalist call for non-cooperation. Educators used classrooms and school events to discuss Swadeshi values, Indian history, and Gandhian principles.

Nationalist leaders frequently visited local schools to deliver lectures and encourage student activism. The emphasis on Khadi promotion, village reconstruction, and community service turned education into a powerful tool for resistance.

Role of Libraries and Reading Circles

Local libraries and reading clubs were instrumental in disseminating information about the national movement. These spaces housed banned literature, Congress pamphlets, and journals like *Young India* and *Harijan*. In villages and small towns, public reading sessions of nationalist speeches and newspapers became common, especially for the illiterate population.

Libraries became informal political hubs, where discussions on colonial policies, social reform, and Indian self-rule were actively held. Many of these establishments were started by local freedom fighters and continue to exist today as heritage institutions.

Religious and Cultural Organizations

Temples, mutts, and village cultural societies also became subtle platforms for political messaging. Religious festivals and local theatre performances were used to stage patriotic dramas, promote indigenous ideals, and criticize colonial oppression in symbolic forms.

The use of Therukoothu (street drama) and folk songs was especially impactful in rural areas, where illiteracy was high. These performances conveyed themes of resistance, self-reliance, and sacrifice, embedding the freedom message in familiar cultural formats.

Involvement of Social Reform Movements

The influence of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy's Self-respect Movement was also felt in Thiruvavur. While the Self-respect Movement had a distinct sociopolitical agenda, its call for social justice, eradication of caste inequalities, and self-rule resonated with the broader anticolonial sentiments. The coexistence of nationalist and social reformist strands helped diversify the freedom movement in the district.

Role of Trade and Agricultural Associations

In agrarian Thiruvavarur, farmers' cooperatives, trade unions, and weavers' guilds took part in Swadeshi activities. These groups organized boycotts of foreign goods, support for Khadi, and village level protests against unfair taxation. They also supported families of arrested activists and provided logistical help during strikes and marches.

BRITISH REPRESSION AND LOCAL IMPACT

As the freedom movement in Thiruvavarur District intensified in the 1920s through the 1940s, so did the response of the British colonial administration. The growing involvement of students, women, farmers, and local leaders posed a direct threat to British authority. In retaliation, the colonial regime implemented harsh repressive measures to suppress dissent and maintain control. These actions not only disrupted everyday life but also had long-term social, political, and psychological effects on the region.

Colonial Surveillance and Censorship

Thiruvavarur came under tight surveillance, particularly during peak movement periods like the Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movements. British intelligence closely monitored Congress workers, student activists, and local institutions. Secret police reports were compiled on public meetings, and printing presses were frequently raided. Pamphlets, leaflets, and newspapers suspected of containing seditious material were seized, and their publishers were fined or imprisoned.

Postal censorship was another major tool employed by the British to restrict the spread of nationalist ideas. Private letters were often intercepted, especially those exchanged between known political activists.

Arrests, Imprisonments, and Police Brutality

Numerous activists from Thiruvavarur were arrested under preventive detention laws, such as the Defence of India Act and Rowlatt Act provisions. Many were jailed without trial, while others were subjected to long periods of imprisonment in distant jails such as Alipur and Vellore.

Peaceful demonstrations and satyagraha's were often met with lathi charges, firing, and mass arrests. Police brutality was reported during village level protests, where even women and children were not spared. Such incidents created a climate of fear but also galvanized public opinion against British rule.

Economic and Social Disruptions

The repression severely impacted the economic life of the district. The closure of local businesses during hartals and the boycott of British goods led to loss of income for traders. Families of arrested activists often faced economic hardship, as their primary earners were jailed or dismissed from jobs.

The educational sector was also affected. Schools that participated in nationalist activities were denied grants, and teachers suspected of spreading anti-British sentiments were suspended. Despite these setbacks, public morale remained high, with local communities supporting each other in times of distress.

Psychological and Cultural Impact

British repression unintentionally strengthened the resolve of many freedom fighters. Rather than silencing them, acts of state violence became a source of public outrage and fuelled greater participation. The stories of imprisonment, police torture, and court trials were shared in village meetings, folk songs, and dramas, turning political martyrs into local legends.

Young people were inspired to take part in the movement after witnessing or hearing about the courage of their elders. The emotional and cultural memory of repression thus became a catalyst for continued resistance.

Shaping Local Identity and Resistance Culture

The shared experiences of suffering under British rule helped forge a collective identity among the people of Thiruvavarur. Across caste, religion, and class lines, people united in common defiance. This resistance culture persisted even after independence and influenced local politics, literature, and civic life in the decades that followed.

POSTINDEPENDENCE REFLECTION

The dawn of Indian independence in 1947 marked the culmination of decades of struggle, sacrifice, and resilience. For the people of Thiruvavarur District, independence was not merely a political achievement but a validation of their long and determined resistance to colonial rule. However, the postindependence period also brought with it new challenges and opportunities especially in terms of recognition, remembrance, and the preservation of historical memory.

Recognition of Local Freedom Fighters

Following independence, several freedom fighters from Thiruvavarur were recognized by the Government of India through pension schemes, commendation letters, and public honours. However, many grassroots activists, particularly women, students, and rural satyagrahis, remained unrecognized, largely due to inadequate documentation or political marginalization.

In recent decades, efforts by local historians, cultural associations, and descendants of freedom fighters have helped bring some of these names to light. Yet, much work remains to ensure that unsung heroes are acknowledged in both state and national records.

Memorials and Public Commemoration

Some towns and villages in Thiruvavar District have established statues, commemorative plaques, and memorial arches to honour their freedom fighters. Public buildings, such as schools and libraries, have been renamed after local martyrs. Annual events like Independence Day and Republic Day celebrations serve as opportunities to retell the stories of local resistance, especially in educational institutions.

Despite these efforts, there remains a lack of dedicated heritage centers or museums in the district to chronicle the rich history of its freedom movement. The absence of such infrastructure has limited the public engagement with local history.

Integration into Academic and Popular Narratives

The contributions of Thiruvavar to the freedom struggle are often underrepresented in mainstream history textbooks, which tend to focus on national leaders and urban centers. While Tamil literature, especially regional novels and essays, has occasionally referenced the district's role, more needs to be done to integrate its history into academic syllabi and popular media.

Oral histories and family archives remain an untapped resource that could greatly enrich the historical record if systematically collected and studied.

Continuing Legacy and Democratic Engagement

The spirit of resistance and public participation that defined Thiruvavar's freedom struggle has continued in postindependence civic activism. The district has remained politically conscious and has shown strong engagement in electoral politics, social justice movements, and language rights campaigns in Tamil Nadu.

The ideals of equality, self-reliance, and local empowerment which were central to the freedom movement still echo in the district's social and political life.

CONCLUSION

The history of India's freedom struggle is incomplete without acknowledging the contributions of its districts, villages, and countless ordinary individuals who gave their all for the nation's liberation. This study of Thiruvavar District reveals a vibrant and determined local movement that paralleled and at times directly fed into the national momentum against British colonial rule.

From early agrarian unrest and passive resistance to the district's active role in the Non-cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India Movements, the people of Thiruvavar consistently demonstrated their political awareness and patriotic zeal. They mobilized through local institutions, expressed dissent through folk culture, and endured colonial repression with remarkable courage. The district not only produced dedicated freedom fighters but also sustained a grassroots network of teachers, students, farmers, and women who contributed to the national cause in profound ways.

The study also underscores the importance of local histories in constructing a more inclusive and comprehensive narrative of India's independence. Thiruvavar's experience exemplifies how the freedom movement was not confined to urban centers or elite circles, but deeply rooted in rural India's social, cultural, and political fabric.

Postindependence, while some efforts have been made to honor the district's role, gaps remain in documentation, academic recognition, and public commemoration. Bridging these gaps is essential not only for historical accuracy but also for inspiring future generations with the values of resistance, unity, and democratic participation. In bringing to light Thiruvavar's role in the freedom movement, this research contributes to a richer understanding of how regional struggles collectively shaped the destiny of a nation.

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