

An Insight into the Eventful Journey of a Freedom Fighter, Writer and Social Reformer

Dr. AR. Saravanakumar¹, T. Ganapathy Rajan², Dr. P. Madhan³

¹Associate Professor, Department of Education, CDOE, Alagappa University, Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu, India

²Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Alagappa University, Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu, India

³Professor & Head, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Alagappa University, Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu, India.

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ABSTRACT

Chinna Annamalai, a passionate freedom fighter, a remarkable Tamil enthusiast and a dedicated social reformer played a significant part in India's freedom struggle in the southern part of Tamil Nadu and contributed to various social causes. He earned several nicknames like "Desiya Semmal," "Thiyaga Semmal". and " Tamizh Thondar." He had his early education in Karaikudi and pursued his higher secondary education at Nagarathar High School in Devakottai. Influenced greatly by his cousin Litterateur Kamban Adippodi Sa. Ganesan, he became involved in the Congress Movement and met Mahatma Gandhi during his visit to Karaikudi. Impacted at the very first sight by Gandhi's charisma and simplicity and integrity, Chinna Annamalai became a staunch supporter of the Congress Movement and remained a staunch member of the party throughout his life. As an enthusiastic advocate of India's liberation, he participated in numerous events and processions that resulted in temporary suspension of his education at Devakottai. He later studied in Vairavizha High School in Gopichettipalayam. Chinna Annamalai's activism and oratory skills drew the attention of great leaders; and he had the opportunity to speak at the Congress Conference in Gobichettipalayam and his fiery speech elicited appreciation for its eloquence. From then on he started wearing Khadar and continued that habit till his death. He remained actively engaged in various movements of India's independence struggle, including the Quit India Movement. To divert young Chinna Annamalai's attention from the freedom struggle activities his father sent him to Malaysia and his participation in protests against alcohol in Malaysia led to his expulsion from that country. Again in India he participated in the freedom struggle with renewed vigour. His dedication to the cause of India's freedom resulted in several arrests and imprisonments, with an instance of public support for his release from the jail. His exhortations to the Tamil community to participate in struggles for India's freedom remains a significant part of his legacy. Chinna Annamalai also made contributions to Tamil literature and the film industry, writing scripts for successful movies with social messages and establishing a Fan Club for a star actor Shivaji Ganesan. By launching Tamil Pannai, a publishing concern, he inspired many to establish similar companies that richly contributed the growth of modern Tamil Literature. In short his life was one of endless pursuits and achievements contributing to the national and societal welfare.

Key words: Freedom Fighter, Visionary, Social Reformer, Literature, Legacy.

EARLY LIFE

Chinna Annamalai, originally named Nagappan, was born on June 18, 1920, in O. Siruvayal Village near Karaikudi to Nachiyappa Chettiar and Meenakshi Achi. He had his early education in Karaikudi and later he pursued his studies at Nagarathar High School in Devakottai. He was not only a literary enthusiast but also one of devoted Members of the 'Kamban Kazhagam'. Freedom fighter and a Tamil Scholar Kamban Adippodi Sa. Ganesan was his cousin and he exerted a great influence on young Chinna Annamalai and it was through Sa.Ganesan that Chinna Annamalai became acquainted with the Congress Movement and the national liberation struggle. As a young enthusiast, he had the fortune of meeting Mahatma Gandhi, when Gandhi visited Karaikudi. Chinna Annamalai actively participated in the struggle for India's independence, delivering fiery speeches and joining processions taken out in various places at a very young age. These activities disrupted his early education and it led to his enrollment at Vairavizha High School in Gopichettipalayam later for continuing his studies.[1] It was there that the renowned freedom fighter Theerar Sathyamurthy, who visited the school, provided Chinna Annamalai with an opportunity to address a Congress Conference. It was at this meeting his oratory power was recognized. Sathyamurthy also encouraged him to wear the humble Khadar dress. At the age of 13, Chinna Annamalai married Umaiyal and became a father to a son named Karunanidhi. Despite his growing family responsibilities and involvement in his father's business, he did not retract from his commitment to his political ideologies, freedom struggle activities and social causes.[2]

CHINNA ANNAMALAI'S INCARCERATION DURING THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE

Recognizing his son's unwavering commitment to the Congress and to the cause of nation's freedom, Chinna Annamalai's father sent him to Penang, Malaysia, to oversee their plantation business. There, he was deeply moved by the plight of Tamil laborers enduring harsh conditions in exploitative "black shops." He began campaigning vigorously for the prohibition of alcohol. His powerful speeches inspired local women to take bold action, setting fire to these black shops. In response, the Governor of Penang promptly deported him back to India.[3]

Upon returning to Tamil Nadu, Chinna Annamalai resumed his active participation in protests organized by the Congress Party. His emotion-charged speeches swayed countless young men to join the Congress Movement. However, the outbreak of the Second World War marked a turning point. When Mahatma Gandhi initiated his anti-war Satyagraha, Chinna Annamalai participated in it and was arrested and subsequently sentenced to six months imprisonment. This occurred during Annamalai's 270-mile foot pilgrimage from Devakotta to Chennai.[4]

Chinna Annamalai's deep-seated desire for both freedom and the promotion of the Tamil Language made him a dedicated activist on two fronts. In 1941, at the age of 21, he became involved in the 'Tamil Rebellion' and organized a significant Tamil Isai Conference in Devkottai with his comrades. It may be mentioned here that Tamil Isai was shunned in Tamil Nadu by many eminent musicians then. The positive protests were organised to encourage Tamil Isai. It, in fact, became a Tamil Isai Movement supported by wealthy people like Annamalai Chettiar of Kanadukathan and all well-meaning Tamils throughout Tamil Nadu.[5]

In 1942, during the 'Quit India' August Revolution led by Gandhi, Chinna Annamalai traveled from town to town, tirelessly campaigning against the British rule. The police were keen on apprehending him, and on August 9, 1942, the day of Gandhi's arrest, Chinna Annamalai was scheduled to speak at Jawahar Maidan in Devkottai. A massive crowd had gathered, making it difficult for the police to arrest him. Eventually, they

detained him at midnight, imprisoning him in Thiruvadanai Jail, 22 miles away from Devakottai.

News of Chinna Annamalai's arrest and imprisonment spread like a wild fire, inciting anger among the nationalists and young people of Devakottai.[6] Approximately 20 thousand individuals marched towards Thiruvadanai Jail and reached it. They forcibly released Chinna Annamalai, carried him on their shoulders, and triumphantly returned to Devakottai, chanting slogans like "Victory to Annamalai". This remarkable event, a powerful symbol of sacrifice and resistance, remained largely confined to the southern part of the country, escaping widespread recognition.[7]

As the jubilant crowd from Thiruvadanai approached Devakottai, the British police opened fire. Many volunteers sacrificed their lives to shield Chinna Annamalai, leaving behind a poignant chapter of sacrifice etched in red. Chinna Annamalai remained in hiding for a month before surrendering. He was subsequently sentenced to four and a half years of rigorous imprisonment. Fortunately, with the intervention of eminent leader Rajaji's eloquent arguments and appeals, Chinna Annamalai's release was secured within six months.[8]

FORAY INTO THE PUBLISHING INDUSTRY

Following Rajaji's wise counsel, Chinna Annamalai relocated to Chennai and founded the "Tamil Pannai," a publishing house. This momentous venture embarked on its historical journey with the launching of its maiden publication, 'Tamilan Dharam,' written by Rajaji himself. Tamil Pannai in a short period became renowned for producing books of high quality at affordable prices. Chinna Annamalai's patriotism was fueled by Namakkal Kavignar Ramalingam Pillai's soul stirring patriotic songs, his meeting with Gandhi, and the influence of distinguished leaders like Sa. Ganesan and Theerar Sathyamurthy. It was the writings of Kalki, a profoundly imaginative and eloquent writer with a historical sense that left an indelible mark on Chinna Annamalai.[9] The camaraderie of Ma.Po.Si., a natural Tamil language enthusiast and scholar played a pivotal role in making Tamil Pannai Publications as a model for Tamil writers and it also became a sanctuary for patriots. This publishing house proudly showcased works by eminent Tamil personalities such as Rajaji, Sathyamurthy, TKC, Kalki, Va.Ra, TS chokkalingam, Namakkal Ramalingam Pillai, Kannadasan and Nadodi. Additionally, it encouraged budding talents like poet Vali, never failing to support emerging voices. In a remarkable gesture, it was Chinna Annamalai who astounded Tamil Nadu by generously offering 20,000 rupees to the impoverished Namakkal poet in 1944 under the aegis of Rajaji's leadership.[10]

GANDHI'S BLESSING AND ENTRY INTO FILM INDUSTRY

Harijan, an English weekly magazine, run by Mahatma Gandhi to combat untouchability, expanded its reach by including regional editions in languages like Gujarati and Hindi. To oversee the Tamil edition, a young individual with a keen sense of commitment and social consciousness was needed. At this juncture, it was Rajaji who proposed the name of Chinna Annamalai for the task. Gandhiji acknowledged this recommendation and penned an article in the English edition of Harijan, endorsing and blessing the Tamil version.[11]

The remarkable success of Tamil Pannai Publications drew numerous luminaries to its bustling office, nestled in a charming building near Panagal Park in Thiagaraya Nagar, Chennai, complete with a bookstore. Among the notable visitors was the star actor Shivaji Ganesan, who not only frequented the Tamil Pannai to procure books but also developed a close bond with Chinna Annamalai. Their friendship flourished to the extent that they collaborated on several films starring Shivaji. Notably, Chinna Annamalai directed the film 'Dharmadurai' for Shivaji, which was filmed in Japan.[12]

Chinna Annamalai played a pivotal role in encouraging and advising PR Bandulu, a fellow film director and producer and collaborated with him working on the film “Thangamalai Rahasiyam.” He also helped him create films like “Kappalottiya Tamilan” and “Veerapandiya Kattabomman.” Through these cinematic endeavors, he made subsequent generations to comprehend vividly and emotionally the sacrifices made and valour shown by the freedom fighters through the powerful silver screen.[13]

Nalli Kuppusamy Chettiar, a contemporary of Chinna Annamalai’s son Karunanidhi, dedicated himself to documenting the legacy of Chinna Annamalai as a nationalist, Tamil enthusiast and the pioneer of the Tamil publishing industry. Chinna Annamalai’s grandson Meenakshi Sundaram and Tilak have compiled a centenary repository of information about this remarkable figure of Tamil Nadu.[14]

POLITICAL LIFE

Chinna Annamalai made his debut as a speaker in front of the Congress Leaders when he was very young. He traveled extensively throughout Tamil Nadu, attending Congress meetings and delivering speeches. Chinna Annamalai involvement in the freedom struggle with great vigour made him a prominent figure in Gandhi’s ‘Quit White’ Movement in Tamil Nadu. Throughout his political journey, Chinna Annamalai forged valuable friendships and associations with prominent figures such as Kalki, C. Rajagopalachariyar, Theerar Sathyamurthy, Namakkal poet V Ramalingam Pillai, D.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar, Professor A. Srinivasa Raghavan and A.K. Chettiar. Chinna Annamalai participated in the procession of the 1930 Congress Conference held at Kunrakkudi in Ramanathapuram district and received the tricolor flag from Perunthalaivar Kamarasar. In 1936. He was suspended for failing to appear in the SSLC examination at the Nagarathar High School in Devakottai on the occasion of the death of Kamala Nehru. It was Rajaji who gave him the name Chinna Annamalai. Later in 1969 he started the “All India Shivaji Ganesan Fan Club” to attract youth to the Congress Party. He organized many gatherings and meetings for seven years and strengthened the Congress Movement. It was his flourishing publishing business that brought him fame in his later life and he was called the father of Tamil publishing industry.[15]

LITERARY LIFE

Chinna Annamalai organized a special ceremony to honour the renowned Namakkal Poet V. Ramalingam Pillai. Who was a nationalist to the core. The distinguished presence of Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar and Rajaji, was a noteworthy factor at the event. It provided an opportunity for them to commend Annamalai’s exceptional contributions. In doing so, he affectionately singled him out with the name ‘Chinna Annamalai,’ a moniker that would eventually become his well-known pen name. Under this newfound identity, Chinna Annamalai penned a series of essays and stories, with “Seenathu Singari” marking his inaugural foray into the world of short stories. These stories were subsequently compiled into a book bearing the same title. Chinna Annamalai’s biography, serialized as ‘Sonnal Nambamateergal’ (You Won’t Believe If I Told) in Kumudam Weekly, later found its way into book form. [16]

In addition to his writing pursuits, he ventured into the world of publishing, establishing ‘Tamil Pannai,’ guided by eminent men like AK. Chettiar. However, his dedication to publishing took a toll when the British government imposed a six-month prison sentence upon him for releasing books such as ‘Annavisaram’ and ‘Boottai Udaiyada.’ His contributions encompassed both Tamil journalism and publishing, earning him recognition as one of the pioneering figures in modern Tamil writing. Kalki himself praised Chinna Annamalai, stating, “Sri Chinna Annamalai has the power to write as well as the power to speak. He has penned beautiful short stories, excellent novels, and captivating travel essays. I am proud to call him my friend.”[17]

In the realm of journalism, Chinna Annamalai, who had earlier worked for a short period at AK Chettiar's 'Kumarimalar' magazine, embarked on a new journey by launching the weekly magazine 'Vellimani' in 1946. He also played a pivotal role in bringing Mahatma Gandhi's articles, originally published in his English magazine 'Harijan,' to Tamil readers under the name 'Tamil Harijan,' with Gandhi's blessings. Chinna Annamalai's admiration for actor Shivaji Ganesan led to the establishment of the very first Shivaji Fan Club in August 1969 and he assumed the role of president. He also published a magazine titled 'Shivaji Fan,' catering to the ardent lovers of the legendary actor.[18]

Savi served as the editor of "Vellimani". Within its pages, Annamalai penned a captivating series titled 'Sankarapathi Kottai.' With Kalki, he embarked on extensive journeys across India, chronicling their experiences under the compelling title 'Kanak Kan Kodi Vendum.' Inspired by Gandhi's English publication 'Harijan,' he decided to popularize it among Tamil Readers. Having secured direct permission from Gandhi himself, Chinna Annamalai brought the magazine to Tamil readers. This publication featured contributions from distinguished writers such as Namakkal Poet V. Ramalingam Pillai and P. Thirikutasundaram Pillai. In addition to 'Tamil Harijan,' Annamalai presided over the publication of 'Sangap Palagai' magazine. Furthermore, he helmed 'Shivaji Rasikan' magazine as the President of the Shivaji Fans Club.[19]

A JOURNEY INTO THE FILM INDUSTRY

The stories of films like 'Thangamalai Ragasiyam' and 'Nan Yar Theriyuma?' were written by Annamalai. He produced films like 'President Panchatcharam', 'Airam Rubai' and 'Kadavulin Kulanthai'. Chinna Annamalai also produced films like 'General Chakravarthy' and 'Dharma Raja' starring Shivaji. [20] In August 1969, Chinna Annamalai formed and coordinated the All India Shivaji Fans Club. The purpose of Chinna Annamalai was to unite Shivaji's fans with the Congress party of which Shivaji was a staunch member. That was why he started and ran the magazine 'Shivaji Rasikan'. [21]

In the Post-Independent period Chinna Annamalai was known to people as the president of the Sivaji Ganesan Fans Club. But he was a multifaceted personality. Known in many fields as a writer, story writer, journalist, an eloquent speaker and film producer, he was in close contact with many people in the world of art. An interesting news that not many people knew is that he was the one who introduced "Kannadathu Paingili" Sarojadevi in Tamil Film, who remained the dream girl of Tamil fans for more than thirty years.[22][23]

CONCLUSION

Chinna Annamalai's early life and background laid a strong foundation for his remarkable journey as a freedom fighter, writer, and social reformer. Born into a family with a strong sense of patriotism, he was exposed to nationalist ideals at a young age. His education in Malaysia broadened his horizons and exposed him to the challenges faced by Indian communities abroad. Upon returning to India, he became deeply involved in the Indian freedom struggle, drawing inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi and other leaders. His early experiences and exposure to social issues instilled in him a commitment to both political and social reform, which defined his life's work.

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