

# M. A. Eswaran - The Mascot of Freedom in Erode District

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## Abstract

The English East India Company had originally landed in India for trade, but gained momentum in political arena and became the virtual masters. With their ingenuity, the company established their sole supremacy over the Indian land. In the second half of the nineteenth century, India was ruled over by the British under the central authority. The British high handedness in India led the national awakening among the masses in the country. The nationalists emerged to free India from the clutches of Britishers. They fought with courage, true spirit, dedication and faced many hardships to attain independence. Many freedom fighters from Tamil Nadu rendered myriad services to the nation. In the district of Erode, some courageous traits wage war against British imperialism and responded to the national level struggles with a spirit of nationalism. Among them M. A. Eswaran, a great personality was a strong adversary of Britishers and raised his antagonism in many events. Here this study is going to unveil the involvement and contribution of M. A. Eswaran in the freedom movement of Erode.

**Keywords:** Boycott, Erode, Freedom Movement, Indian National Congress

## 1. Introduction

The English East India Company had originally landed in India for trade, but gained momentum in political arena and became the virtual masters. With their ingenuity, the company established their sole supremacy over the Indian land. In the second half of the nineteenth century, India was ruled over by the British under the central authority. The British high handedness in India led the national awakening among the masses in the country. The nationalists emerged to free India from the clutches of Britishers. They fought with courage, true spirit, dedication and faced many hardships to attain independence. Many freedom fighters from Tamil Nadu rendered myriad services to the nation. In the district of

Erode, some courageous traits wage war against British imperialism and responded to the national level struggles with a spirit of nationalism. Among them M. A. Eswaran, a great personality was a strong adversary of Britishers and raised his antagonism in many events.

## 2. Objectives

- To understand about the entry of M. A. Eswaran in freedom movement.
- To expose the contribution of M. A. Eswaran in freedom struggle.
- To focus the services rendered by M. A. Eswaran to Erode district.

### 3. Methodology

In pursuing the study, primary and secondary sources are widely consulted. Both narrative and descriptive method is adopted in the present study.

Erode District was formed on 17th September, 1979 by bifurcation of the then Coimbatore District that has been flourishing in agriculture, handloom industry, culture and art<sup>1</sup>. The district for its part had contributed in no small measure to sustain the freedom struggle and make its impact pronounced. In the district M. A. Eswaran, a staunch patriot was born to Muthukaruppan Pillai and Venkatalakshmi on 25th October 1895. His family resided at Karungalpalayam in Erode where the 'Bharathi Vasaga Salai' was situated. Under the able guidance of Thangaperumalpillai, the originator of Indian National Congress in Erode, M. A. Eswaran spent most of his time in 'Bharathi Vasagasalai'. When he read the news about the imprisonment and torture faced by V. O. Chidambarampillai, "The Tamil Helmsman" and great freedom fighter, it fired him to participate in the freedom movement. Along with this incident, poems of Bharathi and the historic activities of Tilak and Subramania Siva sowed the seeds of nationalism in the mind of M. A. Eswaran<sup>2</sup>.

The Home Rule Movement started by Mrs. Annie Besant, who was champion of human freedom had its response at national level and cooperation in Erode too. M. A. Eswaran along with Thangaperumal Pillai started campaigns in favor of the movement and conducted agitations against the Britishers. When he was studying in St. Joseph College, Trichy, Gandhiji asked the students across the country to boycott foreign educational institutions in 1920. Immediately Eswaran relinquished his college education and soon he became the full time member of the Congress then officially entered into freedom struggle. In the first week of August 1920 Mahatama Gandhi came to Erode along with Moulana Soukat Ali to receive support for the Khilafat Movement and Non-cooperation Movement. A joint meeting was held between Hindus and Muslims. In the meeting, slogans like "Hindus and Muslims are one", "Allahhu Akbar" were shouted by M. A. Eswaran, Periyar who was the Father of Dravidian Movement and E. M. S. Mohamed Hussain<sup>3</sup>.

Gandhiji moved a resolution on Non-cooperation in the special session of Indian National Congress held at Calcutta in September 1920 and annual session held at Nagpur in December 1920. M. A. Eswaran, vehemently participated in the Non-cooperation Movement under the leadership of Periyar in 1921 and was arrested and imprisoned for 3 months in Coimbatore jail<sup>4</sup>.

In Erode, Khadi movement was started in January 1921. The people were trained to make Khadi threads and clothes and were motivated to wear Khadi clothes. A textile factory was established in Erode on 26th October 1921, in which M. A. Eswaran was a member. Five thousand rupees was the amount invested to start it with fifty shares, and each share had been valued for rupees ten. Periyar, M. A. Eswaran and Thangaperumal Pillai met Gandhiji with the Khadi clothes when Gandhiji visited Madurai. Gandhiji praised the leaders for the quality of Khadi and M. A. Eswaran was very much inspired by Gandhiji's words<sup>5</sup>.

The fifth anniversary of Bharathi Vasaga Salai was celebrated in March 1921, in a grand manner with Subramania Bharathi, the great patriotic poet as the chief guest. There Eswaran met Bharathi for the first time and heard the patriotic songs. The Congress Committee of Erode town decided to conduct the struggle of "Abolition of Untouchability". Periyar and M. A. Eswaran approached the followers of the Congress and explained the necessity of it. They requested the young men and women to cooperate the abolition of untouchability. An organisation was created namely "Harijan Sangam" on 20th August 1921 with Periyar as the organiser.

In the third week of September 1921, Gandhiji again visited Erode and stayed at Periyar's house. M. A. Eswaran met Gandhiji and got blessings from him. It was during this tour that Gandhiji became the half -naked fakir, hearing this news M. A. Eswaran also vowed not to wear footwear and not to get married until India's independence<sup>6</sup>.

In Nagpur conference Gandhiji appealed the Congress followers to adopt total boycott of the foreign clothes within 30 September 1921. M. A. Eswaran took part in the conference and was attracted by Gandhiji's speech. As soon as he returned from Nagpur, he translated Gandhiji's new thoughts which were revealed in Nagpur conference into Tamil and distributed them to the followers at Erode. As a part of Non-cooperation movement in Erode, it

was decided that the boycotting of foreign clothes was to be conducted under the leadership of M. A. Eswaran, Thangaperumal Pillai, Periyar, R. Selamelu and E. M. S. Mohamed Hussain. Intensive arrangements were made to do the boycotting at several important places like bazaars and heart of the town on 12th January 1922 at 4.30 p.m. The police department, before two days of the event made some secret enquires. At about 4 o'clock in the evening M. A. Eswaran and Thangaperumal Pillai set fire on foreign clothes in front of thousands of people with slogans like "Mahatma Gandhiji Ke Jai" "Vande Matharam" and "Bharat Matha Ki Jai". Police took severe actions against the people who were associated with the boycott movement under the British government's order. The nationalist rallied under the leadership of M. A. Eswaran and requested the police constables to quit their jobs and join their Non cooperation Movement. The British officials were usually given higher posts and the Indians were given ordinary jobs. So the constables who were Indians also joined with M. A. Eswaran and their boycotting was completed at 8 p.m. at Chidambaram Park<sup>7</sup>.

The Prince of Wales visited India and he came to Madras presidency on 13th January 1922. The Congress committee of Erode also included itself in the hartal against the visit of Prince. All the shops were closed and people raised the slogans like "Go Back British Prince", "Don't slave Indians". The crowd under the leadership of M. A. Eswaran and Thangaperumal Pillai, which made the struggle continuing from morning till evening, attracted the eyes of police. It was announced that M. A. Eswaran and his companion were going to be arrested and produced before the court. Accordingly, he was arrested in the evening on 13th January 1922. When the Magistrate of Erode enquired him, he never responded and raised slogans in louder voice. The magistrate ordered the police to keep him in the jail for a week. When the news about the arrest of M. A. Eswaran reached the public, the nationalist like Thangaperumal Pillai, Arunachal Mudaliar and Mohammad Abdulla started procession against it and they were also arrested, but they were soon released<sup>8</sup>.

The Congress committee of Erode planned to conduct a huge public procession on 19th January 1922, the day when M. A. Eswaran was going to be released. The

British government decided to change the date of M. A. Eswaran's release because they were aware of the plan of the Congress Committee. Hence the date was changed to 18th January and it was kept as secret. Thangaperumal Pillai, R. C. Krishnan and other nationalist groups planned to receive their friend M. A. Eswaran and also planned to celebrate the day as "National Awareness Day". But M. A. Eswaran was released at 5p.m, on 18th January itself. The people were unaware of the fact that the British police thought that somehow they had controlled a huge political blast by releasing M. A. Eswaran one day earlier than the stipulated date. People gathered under the local leaders, conducted a public procession in all parts of the town at about 8 o'clock on 18th January itself. M. A. Eswaran addressed the meeting and explained various reasons under the title "Why I have gone to the jail?" and advised all the Indians to follow Gandhiji's Non-cooperation Movement and every citizen must sacrifice their life for the freedom of India<sup>9</sup>.

In March 1922, a "Farmers Association" was established under the leadership of M. A. Eswaran to involve all the farmers in the freedom struggle of India. It got succeeded and the whole credit of the success must be attributed to M. A. Eswaran. The unity of farmers under the roof of 'Farmers Association' can be well viewed on the incident of Non-cooperation movement in 1922. A general meeting was arranged at Erode and M. A. Eswaran, Thangaperumal Pillai and other Congress members had planned to lead the meeting. But the police arrested everyone and imprisonment of two months was awarded to them.

On 1st May, 1923, the police authorities at Nagpur objected to a procession carrying the National Flag and promulgated section 144 of the criminal procedure code to prohibit it. But the fighters disobeyed the order and were arrested and sentenced. From Erode M. A. Eswaran, Subarayulu Chettiar, Venkatachal Naicker and many others joined the struggle. M. A. Eswaran was awarded imprisonment for one year, because of his leading role in the struggle. Yet the flag struggle was successful one and they were immediately released<sup>10</sup>.

Gandhiji visited Chennai on 8th March 1925 to celebrate the success of Vaikam Satyagraha. Then he travelled to Trivandrum by train, on the way M. A. Eswaran met Gandhiji. After visiting Kerala, Gandhiji

reached Tirupur where he was accompanied by M. A. Eswaran. Later Gandhiji stayed for two days at Tiruchengodu Gandhi Ashram. M. A. Eswaran also stayed with Mahatma and became close friend to Rajaji<sup>11</sup>.

Periyar joined the Indian National Congress in 1919, but resigned in 1925. After his quit from the Congress, in Erode the vacant was filled by M. A. Eswaran. He toured many villages and induced the people against the British rule in India. From 1925 onwards M. A. Eswaran became a dominating figure in the Congress of Erode. Gandhiji took part in various programs in Coimbatore, at that time M. A. Eswaran accompanied with Gandhiji and supported in all his endeavors<sup>12</sup>.

The program of Civil Disobedience Movement was carried out in all the Tamil districts. In Vedharanyam salt march of 1930, the Congress members from Erode like M. A. Eswaran, A. Appukutty and N. Pallaniappa Gounder participated and transgressed the salt act. When the followers of the struggle prepared the salt but they were arrested by the police. C. P. Subbaiah Mudaliar, Secretary of Madras Provincial Congress Committee, B. Mahalingam Ayyar, Member of Madras Provincial Congress Committee and M. A. Eswaran, Secretary of Coimbatore District Congress Committee were arrested for their Civil Disobedience Programs and sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for 6 months each for the former two and 2 months for the third respectively<sup>13</sup>.

One of the programs of Civil Disobedience movement was picketing of toddy shop. In front of the toddy shop, M. A. Eswaran and sixteen followers continued the struggle from 13 June 1931. He advised the people to avoid drinking and tried to send the people back. By seeing this, the British Circle inspector ordered M. A. Eswaran to quit the struggle or face arrest. But they were firm in their struggle, the inspector was unable to do anything and he asked the police to charge the people. He was not afraid and continued the slogan "Vande Mathram". Along with his followers, he continued the strike before the toddy shops from morning 8 o'clock to evening 7 o'clock. Several meetings were conducted, stressing on the evil effects of drinking<sup>14</sup>.

In 1931 the youth throughout India were astonished on hearing the death sentence of Baghat Singh, Rajguru and Sugadev. The incident upset the masses and freedom

fight got boosted and intensified. The Congress freedom fighters arranged Navajan Bharath Sabha meeting headed by Subhash Chandra Bose regarding the death sentence awarded to them. M. A. Eswaran and Keshavalal Kalidas Seth (a native of Gujarat had settled in Erode) attended the Congress meeting. M. A. Eswaran was much interested to conduct the Tamil Nadu Navajavan meeting at Erode. He made contact with Subhash Chandra Bose, an Indian nationalist and requested him to conduct the meeting at Erode. Bose too accepted his request and the conference were convened from 11 to 13 October, 1931. But Subhash Chandra Bose was not able to attend the meeting. With the support of Keshavalal Kalidas Seth and other members M. A. Eswaran made this event successful one<sup>15</sup>.

Civil Disobedience Movement was vigorously launched in Erode, in which M. A. Eswaran robustly participated and was imprisoned for one year and six weeks from 1932-1933 under section 188 I.P.C and kept in the Central jail of Coimbatore. Again from 1933-1934 he was sentenced for six months and fined rupees two hundred under Section 17(1) Criminal Law Amendment Act, as he did not pay the fine, he was kept in the jail. Mahatma Gandhiji made his journey from December 20, 1933 to February 28, 1934 to both Tamil Nadu and Kerala. He reached Tirupur on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1934. M. A. Eswaran too arrived there and welcomed Mahatma to Kodumudi. During the time of Delhi Assembly election, he worked untiringly for the success of the Congress leaders<sup>16</sup>.

In order to collect fund for Bihar earthquake victims, Dr. Rajendra Prasad arrived to the Madras Presidency. When he reached Erode, M. A. Eswaran decided to accord him a rousing reception. He met the local leaders as well as each individual Congressman to assemble at Erode Railway station for welcoming Rajendra Prasad with huge donations. Thus M. A. Eswaran gave a lump sum of amount to Rajendra Prasad. To impart nationalism among the youngsters he established "Youth Sanmarga Sangam" in Erode and from 15 to 18 years old youngsters were admitted into the organization. He was elected as Vice-Chairman of Erode Municipal Council in 1938 but he resigned the post in 1941 when the Congress ordered the Municipal Chairman and members to resign their post<sup>17</sup>.

On September 1st, 1939 the Second World war commenced. Without consulting the Indian leaders, the British included India in the war. In Erode district M. A. Eswaran was the first satyagrahi to fight against the war and he was imprisoned for four months. After his release, he was once again arrested as a precautionary measure and sent to Vellore jail. The call of Gandhiji for individual Satyagraha was responded with sincerity by the Congressmen of Erode. M. A. Eswaran, Dr. L. K. Muthusamy, C. Subramaniam and others were some of the satyagrahis who got the permission from Mahatma to do the individual Satyagraha struggle. The followers canvassed against war and they printed and published handbills. British government took severe action against this and M. A. Eswaran was given four months imprisonment<sup>18</sup>.

Quit India Resolution was passed on 7th and 8th August, 1942 by the All India Congress Committee. The struggle in Erode was far more stunning and violent. On 12th August 1942 the socialists asked M. A. Eswaran to conduct struggle. Soon he arranged a secret meeting among the Congress members of Erode. In that meeting, M. A. Eswaran delivered a vigorous and emotional speech. He conveyed the secret plan to the Congress Working Committee. He read: "We should make the government to struggle in all ways. Without losing any of them the railway track should be turned upside down. All the bridges should be destroyed. All the trees should be cut down, so as to disrupt the transport. Post office should be burn". These were the contents of the pact read by M. A. Eswaran<sup>19</sup>. The whole mass divided into a few groups and each group was allotted specific duty. The next morning M. A. Eswaran was arrested and sentenced to 1 year under Defense of India Rules and kept in Alipuram jail in Bellary. But the motive of the liberation people was unknown to the police. So the plans of the pact were implemented successfully. Even after his release, he partook in anti government activities and so again he was arrested in 1943-44 and kept in Vellore and special jail in Tanjore<sup>20</sup>. At last due to the true effort of the Indians, India won independence on August 15, 1947 and M. A. Eswaran's dream became true. He celebrated the victory along with the people in slums.

M. A. Eswaran was unanimously elected for Erode area in the Madras Provincial Assembly in 1946. Apart

from the contribution to freedom struggle, he worked for the implementation of Lower Bhavani Project. This was another achievement of M. A. Eswaran. Until his death in 1978, he sacrificed his entire life for the welfare of the people.

## 4. Conclusion

India had struggled nearly two hundred years to achieve her independence. These years had rendered a number of great leaders to the country like M. A. Eswaran. He also played a part to bring the freedom struggle in Erode district to the national level. He remained a bachelor throughout his life and conducted many agitations of the freedom struggle till independence. He underwent several struggles at the hands of British like lathi charge, assault, locked up, torture, confinement and death sentences in many occasions. He had never been self biased and his whole life was dedicated for social service. His devotion not for power or patronage even after India's independence and this showed his dedicated and selfless service to the nation.

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