

Kovai Khaddar Ayyamuthu - A Proponent of Khaddar Movement in Tamil Nadu

P. Karthika^{1*} and R. Sneka²

¹Head & Assistant Professor in History, Vellalar College for Women, Erode – 638012, Tamil Nadu, India; karthika@vcw.ac.in

²Ph.D Research Scholar (JRF), Vellalar College for Women, Erode – 638012, Tamil Nadu, India; snekavarsha@gmail.com

Abstract

This research paper focuses on the intensive propagation carried out by Kovai Khaddar Ayyamuthu for the progress of the Khaddar movement in Tamil Nadu. As a proponent of Gandhian Constructive program, Spinning drew a tremendous amount of inspiration and brought a new commitment to his political action. The study intends to evaluate the nature and functioning of the All India Spinners Association (A.I.S.A), Tamil Nadu branch under the Secretaryship of Ayyamuthu during the year 1936-40. The data represents the interesting study of the highly commendable reformatory work executed ahead of its time in Khaddar production and sale in the region. The purpose of this research is to describe the endeavor of Kovai Khaddar Ayyamuthu who left no stone unturned by leading Tamil Nadu as a flag bearer of the nation in the Khaddar movement.

Keywords: All India Spinners Association (A.I.S.A), Khaddar Propagation

1. Introduction

Ayyamuthu (1898-1975), popularly referred to as Kovai Khaddar Ayyamuthu was a Khaddar propagandist, writer, independence activist in the Coimbatore district of the then Madras Presidency. As an ardent Gandhian, Ayyamuthu was instrumental in disseminating Gandhian principles through Khaddar propagation. Influenced by rationalist and egalitarian ideology of Periyar, he became a self-respect propagator throughout his life. He was well known among the Tamil Congress politicians for his oratorical skills. Mentored by Rajaji, Ayyamuthu rose in stature as a renowned member of the Coimbatore Congress Committee and came to prominence for his role as a Secretary of All India Spinners Association (A.I.S.A), Tamil Nadu branch. He infused a new spirit in the Khaddar movement by pioneering progressive reforms. Ayyamuthu along with his wife Govindammal risked imprisonment numerous times during the freedom struggle and devoted himself benevolently for the Khaddar propagation.

2. Methodology

The research work is descriptive and analytical in nature. It describes the nature and progress of the Khaddar movement in Tamil Nadu during 1936-40 using the Qualitative and Quantitative analysis. The source of information obtained for this study is based on Primary and literary works.

3. Discussion

3.1 Early Life

Ayyamuthu was born to Angannan and Marakkal in Paranjervazhi near Kangeyam in the year 1898. His grandfather Ayee Gounder relocated to Coimbatore and started a Cotton seed warehouse. Due to the untimely demise of his father, Ayyamuthu's mother shifted to

Uppiliyarpalayam, where he was educated at St. Anthony's and London Mission High School. Ayyamuthu

*Author for correspondence

tried to find ways to make a living by working as a Supervisor in Krishnamudaliar's Oil Mans store at Moor Market, Madras in 1915 for almost 6 months¹. Later, he found employment at Spencer and Co as a Sales person. In August 1918, Ayyamuthu got trained as an able clerk at overseas training School and posted as a Ward keeper at Baghdad for two years². After his return in 1921, Ayyamuthu established "Rover and Co"³ in which he sold Hats, Boots, Ties and Designer lays especially for British customers. Having first placed his career in dealing with foreign goods, Ayyamuthu later gave up the western influences to embrace the revival of the Swadeshi Cloth. Gandhi's alluring speech about Swaraj and Spinning wheel at Coronation Park (V.O.C. Park) in Coimbatore galvanized Ayyamuthu and ignited the spirit of freedom in him to shut down his shop. In May 1921, he married Govindammal who had also plunged heart and soul in the independence struggle. Ayyamuthu toiled as a typist at Douglas and Grant at Rangoon for a brief period and returned back to India as a khadi clad man in 1923⁴. All these circumstances gave him a unique vantage point into the freedom movement to become a devout Khaddar propagator.

3.2 Political Advocacy

Early on his life, Ayyamuthu was fascinated by Gandhian ideas, especially his Constructive Socio-economic program. In the year 1923, Ayyamuthu and Govindammal enrolled themselves in the Coimbatore District Congress Committee⁵ and took to spinning. As a proponent of Gandhian Constructive program, Spinning drew a tremendous amount of inspiration and brought a new commitment to his political action. The couple got admitted in the Tiruppur Congress Khaddar Board with a subscription by spinning thousand yards of yarn every month. Ayyamuthu took Khaddar from Tiruppur board and sold it house to house spreading the use of Khadi. In 1924, Ayyamuthu was imprisoned for one month along with a fine of rupees fifteen for law infringement in connection with the participation in Vaikom Satyagraha, forming close ties with Periyar⁷.

P. K. Ratnasabapathy Gounder, Mittadar of Pudupalayam near Tiruchengode and a devotee of Rajaji, found a young zeal in Ayyamuthu when he launched a shrill campaign about the Vaikom status at Rasipuram Conference⁸. As an ideal Congressman, he demanded Ayyamuthu to stay along with him in the works of Gandhi

Ashram started by Rajaji for which he donated four acres of land in 1925⁹. Obligated to his call, Ayyamuthu and Govindammal looked after the spinning activities of the ashram and stayed there for six months. Since that time, Ayyamuthu considered Rajaji, an exemplary Congressman as his Political mentor and a father figure. He remained as a No-changer in the troop of Rajaji after the withdrawal of the Non-cooperation movement and propagated the constructive ideology of Mahatma Gandhi.

3.3 An Accomplished Writer

Espousing the ideals of Gandhism, Ayyamuthu's writings were aimed at encouraging Spinning and Khaddar propagation. During his early years, he was the editor of Tamil part of the bilingual magazine "Mahajana Nesan" ran by Vincent brothers¹⁰ of Coimbatore. He shifted to Madras for a brief period from 1929-30, where he was associated with the Editorship of "Kudi Arasu"¹¹, a Tamil weekly magazine founded by Periyar. Ayyamuthu wrote and sold 10,000 pamphlets for ¼ annas each, titled "Gramavashikum Desathondanukum Idaiyae Naduantha Sambasanai"¹² (A Colloquy between a villager and a Patriot) to address the sceptical eye raised by the public about his attire. His writings reflected his all-pervasive intellectual prowess and personal distinction. Due to his affinity with Tamil National leaders, he penned books namely Nan Kanda Periyar (The Periyar I Knew), Rajaji Enathu Thanthai¹³ (Rajaji My Father) on Periyar and Rajaji respectively. In 1937, Ayyamuthu registered himself as the author of Kudi Nool¹⁴ to propagate the ideology and progressive nature of Khaddar movement. He had direct correspondence with Gandhiji multiple times in regard to the Khaddar affair and had written a book titled "Gandhi Darishanam"¹⁵ (Gandhi Darshan). As an ablest critic and a serious observer, Ayyamuthu authored "Mayo Kootru Maiya Poiya" (Mayo theory truth or false), "Chennai Sarkar in Khaddar Thittam Vetri Peruma?" (Will Chennai Government's Khaddar Scheme succeed) and "Sudanthirathirku Munbum Pinbum" (Before and After Independence), Panjama Pathagankal, Ramasamyum Khaddarum, Theindha Ladam, Socialism, Swatantra Katchi Yen? (Why Swatantra Party?)¹⁶. He had finally scribed his Autobiography "Ennathu Ninaivugal" (My memories) in 1973 a magnum opus which gave deep insight about the Khaddar movement and the contemporary politics in pre-independent Tamil region.

3.4 Ayyamuthu and the Khaddar Camaraderie

In pursuit of a self-imposed mission, Ayyamuthu and his family settled at Singarampalayam in Coimbatore and took spinning as a full-fledged activity. In 1926, S. Ramanathan, Secretary of All India Spinners Association (A.I.S.A) (Tamil Nadu-Kerala branch) got enthralled by the spinning potentiality of Ayyamuthu and appointed him as the Chief Inspector for evaluating and examining the spinning activity in the villages with a salary of Thirty rupees per month¹⁷. Soon he was assigned a task to set-out a new Khaddar Vastralayam at Ernakulum. Recognising the alacrity of Ayyamuthu, he was elevated as a branch manager of A.I.S.A manufacturing unit at Kannur which was later shifted to Punjai Puliyampatti¹⁸.

To enhance the value of regionally spinned Khaddar cloths, Ayyamuthu introduced novel steps to spin double twisted yarn for high durable lungi, printed the tag indication mentioning the manufacturing units Name, Variety, Length and Price. This holistic approach was a path breaking step that had been instrumental in propelling the level of sales outcome. Stretching beyond, he exterminated the practice of sizing starch on weaved cloth by weavers to inflate the weight, which adversely affected the treasury of the Vastralayam. Thereby demand for Punjabi Puliyampatti's Khaddar cloth increased and orders poured in.

In 1933, N. S. Varadachariya, Secretary of All India Spinners Association (A.I.S.A) (Tamil Nadu) requested Ayyamuthu to oversee the Tiruppur A.I.S.A¹⁹ which remained as the central hub for Khaddar manufacturing in the state. The Khaddar clothes and spun yarn from all over the Tamil Nadu arrived at Tiruppur through train for washing and dyeing and were sent back to the retail sales depot.

The Political scenario of the Nation commensurately determined the parameter of the Khaddar movement. When the Political freedom got kindled, Khaddar sale had increased substantially but when there was a recession, Khaddar sale also reduced nominally. Tamil Nadu All India Spinners Association (A.I.S.A) faced a loss of about thirteen Lakh rupees²⁰ during (1929-1934). Despite all the hardships, Ayyamuthu undertook sweeping progressive reforms to reorganize the Association in accordance with the need of the hour.

3.5 An Eminent Secretary

In the year 1936, Ayyamuthu was promoted as the Secretary of the All India Spinners Association (A.I.S.A), Tamil Nadu. Ayyamuthu capitalized his reputation as an efficient Secretary by initiating a rigorous program with the ultimate aim of building a modern and progressive Association. The Khaddar spinners who had distinguished experience in the art of spinning were posted as instructors in the volunteer training programs. The Yarn agents in the villages who acted as middlemen between the spinners and the A.I.S.A were identified and annihilated. The active yarn agents among them were given permanent jobs, thereby aggregating all the spinners directly under the control of the association.²¹

To reflect the core ideology of Khaddar, Ayyamuthu preferred hand ginning using "Paruthi Manai" made out of *Albizia amara*²² (Oonjamaram in Tamil) over machine ginned cotton. Thus in the 1937-38, the use of hand-ginned cotton by spinners had numerically increased from 10,244 to 27,555²³. He conceptualised mass spinning demonstrations to infuriate the zest of clothing Khaddar among the masses. During his tenure in 1939, monthly spinning competitions were conducted, where 680 spinners participated in 47 competitions held at various centres²⁴. Wage determination was one of the key issues flagged by the spinners because the spinners wage was fixed in correspondence with the weight of the yarn. In order to resolve this contention, Ayyamuthu devised a rotating tool for measuring the yarn length which aided the Association in fixing the spinners wage in accordance with the length. This breakthrough technology was a new inventory in the technical virtuosity of the Spinners association.

In 1936, the Spinners wage was increased under the minimum living wages scheme to enhance their standard of living. In connection with this, A.I.S.A Tamil Nadu paid 1,13,174 as spinning wages during the half year of 1936²⁵. The increase in spinning wages had resulted also in more women registering themselves as spinners. By the year 1938, the yarn deposit had certainly increased to 31% in comparison with 13% deposit of total production in 1936. To its effect, 150 looms were engaged in weaving the spinners own yarn in Tamil Nadu²⁶. In 1923, Tamil Nadu produced Khadi worth less than 5 lakhs, but by 1938, Tamil Nadu stood as a biggest producer of Khaddar

among all the provinces. Ayyamuthu also paid attention to raise awareness about the potentialities of the takli, for spinners who want to ply during leisure hours. He firmly believed that, "Takli alone was the handiest spinning implement that can be used on a mass scale at a short notice"²⁷.

Modernization was an important dimension in Ayyamuthu's drive to reform the existing system. As an originator of sweeping reforms, he provided impetus in the field of technological advancement by integrating a slender pulley in the charka thereby augmenting its momentum. After a lot of groundwork and experimentation, Ayyamuthu instigated a key wheel in the Charkha which doubled the speed and power of the spindle, intensifying the durability of the yarn. He also instituted an exclusive unit for manufacturing the key wheel at Tiruppur. In a militarily manner, Ayyamuthu arduously fitted a total of 4,481 speed wheels in every villages with the service of young trained volunteers²⁸. He raised the bar on innovation and addressed the emerging needs of the spinner. In the year 1937, Rajaji, the then premier of Madras sanctioned one lakh rupees as a subsidy²⁹ for this wise innovation.

He served as a Secretary of the A.I.S.A Tamil Nadu till 1940 and also officiated as an Honorary Khadi advisor of Madras Government from 1950-56. Ayyamuthu showed his mettle not only as a quintessential Congressman but also a great Secretary. During his tenure, he implemented a number of initiatives aimed at promoting the expansion of Khaddar in the state. He has to be exemplarily credited as a victorious Secretary, who cemented A.I.S.A Tamil Nadu as a leading Khaddar hub in the country.

4. Conclusion

Ayyamuthu, a leader with astounding grit and commitment gave the benefit of his own knowledge and experience towards Khaddar propagation in the Tamil land. He has to be celebrated as a greatest asset among the Khaddar propagators of Tamil Nadu. Though Political

Opportunism stuck on his course, when he was on the gleamed height, he overturned and rendered in the service of the Nation. One of the earliest political lieutenants of Rajaji, he in his later life joined the Swatantra party

and worked unequivocally from 1960-67. He breathed his last in 1975 leaving behind an immense legacy and a deep effect of thought and vision to the Khaddar Capital.

5. References

1. Kovai A. Ayyamuthu., *Ennathu Ninaivugal.*, pp.159-160.
2. *Ibid.*, p.97.
3. *Ibid.*, pp.180-182.
4. *Ibid.*, p.203.
5. *Ibid.*, p.206.
6. *Ibid.*, p.207.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 217-218.
8. *Ibid.*, p.223.
9. Gandhi AshramSouvenir, Tiruchengodu,1975.
10. Kovai A. Ayyamuthu., *Op. cit.*, pp.209-210.
11. *Ibid.*, p.257.
12. *Ibid.*, pp.210-211.
13. *Ibid.*, pp.819-820.
14. *Ibid.*, p.338.
15. *Ibid.*, p.812.
16. T. Stalin Gunasekaran., *Viduthalai Velviyil Tamizhagam -Vol.2.*, pp.19-20.
17. Kovai A. Ayyamuthu., *Op.cit.*, p.243.
18. *Ibid.*, p.248.
19. *Ibid.*, p.306.
20. *Ibid.*, p.315.
21. *Ibid.*, p.317.
22. It is a drought resistance tree growing mainly in the Anamalai, Palaniand Cardamom hills of Westernghats.
23. *Harijan.*, "Khadi work done in Tamil Nadu in 1938 and 1937", 18th March 1939, Journal Volume No. 7, Issue 6, p.59.
24. *Harijan.*, "TamilNaduKhadi report", 2nd September 1939, Journal Volume No.7, Issue 30, p.259.
25. *Harijan.*, "Khadi progress in Tamil Nadu", 26th September 1936, Journal Volume No. 4, Issue 33, p.264.
26. *Harijan.*, "Effect of increase in Spinners wages", 11th July 1936, Journal Volume No.4, Issue 22, p.174.
27. *Harijan.*, "Charkhav. Takli", 25th May 1940, Journal Volume No.8, Issue 15, p.138.
28. *Op.cit.*, 2nd September 1939, Journal Volume No.7, Issue 30, p.259.
29. Kovai A. Ayyamuthu., *Op.cit.*, p.321.