

# D. Nainiappa Pillai: A Salt Satyagraha Pioneer and His Remarkable Journey

A.Sakthivel<sup>1</sup>, Dr. R.Panneerselvam<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of History, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Chidambaram.

<sup>2</sup>Research Supervisor, Associate Professor, PG & Research Department of History, Government Arts College (A) Salem-7

This article delves into the pivotal role and extraordinary journey of Nainiappa Pillai, an unsung freedom fighter from Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, during the historic Salt Satyagraha. Taking place within the larger context of the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Salt Satyagraha aimed to challenge the unjust British salt laws and played a crucial role in India's struggle for independence. This article sheds light on the extraordinary journey of Nainiappa Pillai, emphasizing his selfless dedication to nonviolent protest. It explores the hardships endured by Nainiappa Pillai and his fellow satyagrahis, who bravely faced police repression, arrests, and even violence. Despite these challenges, Pillai's unwavering determination and unwavering resolve to fight for justice remained unshakable. Through an examination of Nainiappa Pillai's role in the Salt Satyagraha, this article aims to honor his legacy and shed light on his significant contributions to the freedom struggle. It seeks to inspire readers with the spirit of selfless sacrifice, resilience, and determination, urging them to recognize and commemorate the unsung heroes who played vital roles in India's journey towards independence.

**Keywords:** Nainiappa Pillai, Freedom Fighter, Chidambaram, Salt Satyagraha, Civil Disobedience Movement,

## 1. Introduction

The struggle for Indian independence bore witness to countless acts of heroism and sacrifice across the length and breadth of the country. Tamil Nadu, a state steeped in a rich cultural and historical heritage, played a crucial role in shaping the course of this remarkable journey towards freedom. Throughout history, the tales of great leaders and iconic figures have often taken center stage, leaving behind the stories of countless unsung heroes who played vital roles in shaping the course of events. In the context of India's struggle for independence, these unsung heroes form an integral part of the narrative, representing the collective spirit of resistance and sacrifice that fueled the movement. These unsung heroes, often overshadowed by more prominent figures, played crucial roles in mobilizing communities, organizing

protests, and spreading awareness about the injustices perpetrated under British rule. Among them stands Nainiappa Pillai, an unsung hero whose participation in the historic Salt Satyagraha exemplifies the courage and dedication exhibited by countless individuals during this pivotal period. Nainiappa Pillai's story epitomizes the spirit of these unsung heroes.

## **2. Birth and Early Life**

Nainiappa Pillai, born in 1896 in Chidambaram, Cuddalore district, was the eldest son of Deivanayagam Pillai and Puranaampal. His father was a merchant who owned a cloth shop on West Car Street in Chidambaram. Nainiappa had two younger brothers, Balu Pillai and Thiruchitrampalam, as well as a sister named Meenakshi Ammal. His grandparents were Sivachidambaram and Sornaampal. At the age of seven, Nainiappa Pillai began his formal education at Chettiar School in Chidambaram. He was known for his dynamic and engaging presence in the classroom and actively participated in various school activities and programs. The pedagogical approach at Chettiar School played a significant role in shaping Pillai's perspectives, particularly instilling a strong sense of nationalism. He successfully completed eighth grade in 1910. In 1918, Nainiappa Pillai married Kunjammal. Their union blessed them with a daughter and a son. Sadly, their youngest son, Jayaraman, passed away due to a brain-related health condition. After this tragic event, Saroja became their only daughter. In 1916, Nainiappa Pillai began working as a vaccinator under the Madras Presidency, serving the government. This marked the beginning of his professional career, where he dedicated himself to public service.

## **3. Freedom Struggle Journey**

In 1919, Nainiappa Pillai made a momentous decision to relinquish his official position and wholeheartedly join the Gandhian struggle for India's independence. Driven by an indomitable spirit and a vision for a liberated nation, he redirected his focus towards the emancipation of his motherland. His selfless commitment arose not only from a sense of national duty but also from a desire to protect his family from the clutches of poverty. Nainiappa Pillai's journey epitomized the convergence of personal sacrifice and national fervor, establishing him as a stalwart in India's quest for freedom. He actively participated in significant events of the freedom struggle, including Non-Cooperation Movement (1920), Neill Statue Satyagraha (1927-28), Purna Swaraj Day Celebrations, Chidambaram (26 January 1930), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930), Quit India Movement (1942).

## **4. Civil Disobedience Movement (1930)**

After the Purna Swaraj Celebrations on 26 January, 1930, the Congress Working Committee which met at Ahmedabad on 7 February, 1930 authorized Gandhi to launch a mass based civil resistance. Gandhi also decided to begin the Civil Disobedience Movement with a violation of the intolerable salt laws under which the Government had banned the private manufacture of salt from sea-water and had also doubled the tax on salt. Since salt was an item of daily necessity, the new salt laws caused hardship to the poorest people. In addition, popularizing of Swadeshi, temperance, boycott, no tax campaign and other anti - British programmes were suggested by the Congress to proceed with the Civil Disobedience Movement during 1930 - 34.

## **5. Salt Satyagraha.**

The Dandi March, also known as the Salt March or Dandi Satyagraha, was a pivotal event in the nonviolent Civil Disobedience Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. On March 12, 1930, Gandhi embarked on this historic journey from his Sabarmati Ashram in Gujarat, accompanied by 78 selected followers, towards the coastal town of Dandi on the Arabian Sea. The goal of the Dandi March was to protest against the British monopoly on salt production and distribution, which imposed heavy taxes and restrictions on Indians. Gandhi and his followers intended to challenge this unjust law and demonstrate their commitment to nonviolent resistance. They planned to manufacture salt from seawater, openly defying the British authorities. On April 5, 1930, after walking for over 240 miles, Gandhi reached Dandi and symbolically broke the salt law by picking up a lump of salt. This act marked a powerful defiance of British authority and a call to the Indian people to join in the manufacture of salt illegally.

In Tamil Nadu, C. Rajagopalachari, known as Rajaji, was deeply inspired by Gandhi's Dandi March and sought to replicate its impact. On April 30, 1930, Rajaji violated the Salt Law at Agasthiampalli, near Vedaranyam in Tamil Nadu. He broke the historical Salt Law, following in the footsteps of Gandhi, and initiated a local movement in the region. Rajaji's act of civil disobedience in Tamil Nadu further energized the Civil Disobedience Movement and inspired many others to join the cause. The violation of the Salt Law in Tamil Nadu served as a powerful symbol of resistance against British oppression and united the people in their fight for independence.

## **6. Role of Nainiappa pillai in Salt Satyagraha.**

### **Killai Salt Satyagraha**

Killai is a village near Chidambaram in the Cuddalore district. It is located at the mouth of the Vellar River, on the south bank across from Parangipettai. In April 1930, local leaders Nainiappa Pillai and Sudarsana Naidu were inspired by Gandhi's Dandi March and decided to start a salt satyagraha in their district. They met with C. Rajagopalachari, the President of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee, who accepted their proposal and gave Nainiappa Pillai the authority to initiate the satyagrahas in Killai and Devanampattinam. Nainiappa Pillai again discussed with the local leaders all over the district and then he finalised to start the Killai Salt Satyagraha on 11 April, 1930. Thereafter, the local lenders took much concern in mobilising mass support to the proposed malt Satyagraha. As proposed on 11 April, Nainiappa Pillai and Uppu Bhuvaramoorthy along with five volunteers named Srinivasa Ragava Iyengar, Raju Iyer, Murugan and Krishnamoorthy Rao, natives of Chidambaram and Tailor Balaraman, from Vriddhachalam a temporary resident in Chidambaram, started their march towards Killai by 5:00 am. from the residence of Nainiappa Pillai with shouting anti-British slogans.

After an hours' walk the satyagrahis reached the shore. They collecting seawater and setting up ovens to boil it. However, their attempt was thwarted by a salt peon from the public department. Undeterred, they returned to Chidambaram, determined to resume their satyagraha the next day. The second march on April 12 faced a similar outcome, but the spirit of the satyagrahis remained strong. On April 13, they made their third attempt and

successfully prepared salt despite the interference of the salt peon. They celebrated their victory and auctioned the salt for Rs. 3 and 14 annas. The success of the salt satyagraha inspired Congress members in the district, particularly in Chidambaram.

### **Devanampattinam Salt Satyagraha:**

Devanampattinam is a village by the coast in Cuddalore. The Devanampattinam satyagraha, which was instructed by Rajaji, started on April 16, 1930. Nainiappa Pillai and his group focused on conducting a salt satyagraha in Devanampattinam. On April 14, Nainiappa Pillai and twenty volunteers, including Vadivelu Pathar, Raju Iyer, Balaram of Vridhachalam, and Krishnamoorthy, set off from Chidambaram towards Devanampattinam, covering a distance of fifty kilometers through Bhuvanagiri, Kothatai, and Pachaiyankuppam. On April 15, Nainiappa Pillai sent Srinivasaraghava Iyengar, one of the volunteers, ahead to inform the District Magistrate of Cuddalore that salt would be manufactured on April 16.

They traveled about sixteen kilometers per day and arrived in Cuddalore on the morning of April 16, where local congress leaders Sudarsanam Naidu and Kumarasamy Pillai warmly welcomed them. The satyagrahis from South Arcot, along with local congressmen, held a procession and marched from Cuddalore to Devanampattinam. Anjalai Ammal, an interested and sympathetic spectator, watched the procession. Upon reaching the shore, the volunteers collected seawater, firewood, and set up ovens using clay blocks to prepare salt. However, their first attempt was thwarted by salt peons from the public department who poured seawater on the ovens.

In frustration, the satyagrahis returned to Cuddalore. The leaders then held a meeting at the river Gadilam sands to discuss the next course of action. For over three months since April 16, under the guidance of Nainiappa Pillai, Sudarsana Naidu, and Kumarasami Pillai, the salt satyagrahis tried to manufacture salt almost every day but were persistently harassed by the police. Local landlords and wealthy businessmen took responsibility for providing food, accommodation, and other necessities to the volunteers from the South Arcot district. Nainiappa Pillai also used his own money to support the volunteers. During this time, the satyagrahis would boil seawater in the morning, followed by a small lecture on the seashore, and hold meetings in the evening on the banks of the river Gadilam.

On the morning of April 17, Nainiappa Pillai, Sudarasanam Naidu, Kumarasamy Pillai, and a group of volunteers gathered at the seashore to attempt the preparation of salt as part of the satyagraha. However, the salt peons arrived in time and extinguished the fire in the ovens, thwarting their efforts. In the evening, a meeting was held at the river Gadilam Sand bed, where Nainiappa Pillai addressed the attendees. He expressed that the Englishmen were sticking to India like leeches and compared the remedy of salt satyagraha to removing leeches by applying salt. He believed that salt satyagraha was the only way to compel the Englishmen to leave India.

On April 18, the satyagrahis continued their salt preparation. As per the plan agreed upon with V. Ramachandra Iyer, the District Superintendent of Police, Cuddalore, the salt peons allowed the satyagrahis to prepare salt and then confiscated the contraband salt from their

closed fists. During the meeting that day, Nainiappa Pillai likened the government to a temple car burdened with taxes. He emphasized that by removing the four wheels of this car, namely land tax, income tax, foreign cloth, and liquor, through satyagraha, the government's functioning would come to a halt.

Despite government suppression, the salt satyagraha persisted on April 19. The three leaders, along with volunteers, went to the nearby village of Kandakadu, located two kilometers away from Devanampattinam. They encouraged the villagers, including the fisherfolk, not to fear the government but to join the salt satyagraha in larger numbers. The fisherfolk responded positively, showing their hospitality and respect by providing food, refreshments, and tender coconuts to the satyagrahis. In the evening, a meeting took place in Cuddalore Old Town where Sudarsanam Naidu, Kumarasamy Pillai, Nainiappa Pillai, Singamani Raju (an ex-sepoy), Muthurama Pillai (a native doctor), Adinarayana Ayya from Bangalore, and others gave speeches.

During his address, Nainiappa Pillai highlighted that India was the largest market for the British and if they were driven out, they would have to rely on begging. He also emphasized that the British treated Indians as slaves while maintaining an expensive army. Towards the end of the meeting, Nainiappa Pillai advised the audience that if they were unable to participate as volunteers in the salt satyagraha at Devanampattinam, they could at least take a potful of water from the sea and boil it in their own homes. The audience responded with enthusiasm, and three individuals enlisted themselves as salt satyagraha volunteers at the conclusion of the meeting.

In late April 1930, the salt satyagraha gained significant momentum. On April 22, groups of satyagrahis went to the shore in different batches. The first batch, led by Nainiappa Pillai, consisted mostly of fisher boys. They tried to boil brine in broken pieces of mud pots, but they were stopped by the salt peons. Another batch, led by Tailor Balaraman from Vridhachalam, also attempted to boil brine. In the evening, a meeting took place on the Gadilam river bed, where Nainiappa Pillai spoke proudly of South Arcot district being the first in the Presidency to start the salt satyagraha. People from all walks of life participated in the salt satyagraha. On the morning of April 23, Sudarsanam Naidu led a group of satyagrahis in attempting to boil brine at two different locations on the seashore. Volunteers like R. Manickam Chetti, a ruby merchant from Bhuvanagiri, and Srinivasaragavan led other groups. A third group, consisting of fisher boys and a few students, managed to successfully prepare salt by setting fire to rubbish. One of the volunteers from the third group, Venugopal Naidu, a student from Pudupalayam, rushed to the leaders declaring their success in making salt. He showed them a broken piece of pot with some salt as proof. Nainiappa Pillai announced that salt had been produced and took charge of it, stating that he would auction it on April 27, 1930. Sudarsanam Naidu and others distributed pots to the fisher boys, encouraging them to continue making salt with courage on the seashore.

During this time, two salt peons on patrol approached the satyagrahis and tried to stop them from manufacturing salt. However, the crowd turned hostile, assaulting and verbally abusing the peons. They threatened to pull off their uniforms and destroy the salt pans. Angered by

the clash, Thatthachari, an Honorary Magistrate and the agent of "The Hindu," expressed his disapproval of the crowd's behavior towards the salt peons. Nainiappa Pillai ignored his words and condemned such acts of hooliganism. The satyagraha wasn't limited to salt production alone; regular propaganda meetings were also conducted. On the evening of the same day, a meeting was held at the river Gadilam bed. Approximately 230 people attended, including volunteers from the Cuddalore region. Nainiappa Pillai addressed the gathering, announcing that his wife would join the salt preparation activities that week. He also acknowledged the leadership of Swaminatha Pillai from Sirkali and N. Annamalai Pillai from Thiruvannamalai in the salt agitation in the district. An official report dated May 6, 1930, stated that "the Salt Law was completely broken in South Arcot district by the end of April 1930."

The government responded with stringent measures to suppress the protests. The District Superintendent of Police requested the District Magistrate of Cuddalore to obtain government orders for taking action against Nainiappa Pillai and others. The District Magistrate fully agreed and wrote to the Secretary to the Government of Madras, seeking permission to arrest the prime political suspects in the South Arcot region. The Magistrate also decreed that for the next two months, no political demonstrations should take place in Cuddalore taluk. Police patrols were organized, and forces were stationed in "dangerous" areas of Cuddalore. The police's treatment of the satyagrahis and the public became increasingly callous and repressive. The volunteers faced lathi charges, and the police even raided the houses of local politicians and members of the public. In response to the severe government suppression in Cuddalore, Nainiappa Pillai returned to Chidambaram and focused on reviving the Killai salt satyagraha. The police feared that the resumption of the salt satyagraha in Killai would further complicate the political situation. They conducted raids on the houses of local politicians and resorted to lathi charges against the public.

## **7. Arrest and Raid**

On the midnight of May 3, 1930, Nainiappa Pillai was apprehended at his residence in Chidambaram and subsequently transported to Cuddalore. By 10:00 am, he was presented before the Sub-Divisional Magistrate, who convicted him under Section 143 of the Criminal Procedure Code and Section 74 of the Salt Act of Madras, sentencing him to one year of rigorous imprisonment. Around 11:00 am, he was conveyed to the District Jail in Cuddalore via a motor car. The arrest of Nainiappa Pillai had a profound impact on the people of the district, leaving them deeply disheartened. Throughout the region, Nainiappa Pillai had gained immense popularity due to his unwavering and brave participation in the Congress struggle, earning him the epithet "Thennarkkadu Gandhi" (Gandhi of South Arcot).

Following the arrest, the police conducted a raid on Nainiappa's house and seized several of his personal documents. Despite pleas from his mother and wife, who highlighted the importance of these documents as they included land settlement records and school certificates, their requests went unanswered. The raid sparked widespread condemnation from the people across the district. In Chidambaram, demonstrations erupted in protest against the raid, with even the Bar Association of Chidambaram leading a separate demonstration. They vehemently criticized the unjust nature of Nainiappa Pillai's midnight



arrest. The arrest of Nainiappa Pillai dealt a blow to the momentum of the salt satyagraha activities, resulting in a temporary decline in their intensity.

## **8. Conclusion**

Nainiappa Pillai's life and political journey serve as a testament to the unwavering spirit and sacrifice of individuals who dedicated themselves to the cause of India's freedom. From his humble beginnings in Chidambaram to his active participation in the Gandhian struggle, Pillai's story embodies the convergence of personal commitment and national fervor. His decision to relinquish his official position and join the freedom movement demonstrated his selflessness and determination to contribute to the emancipation of his motherland. Throughout his involvement in events like the Non-Cooperation Movement, Neill Statue Satyagraha, Purna Swaraj Day Celebrations, and the Civil Disobedience Movement, Nainiappa Pillai fervently fought against British colonial rule. His actions, driven by a deep sense of national duty, played a significant role in shaping the course of India's struggle for independence. His death in 1959 marked the end of a remarkable journey, leaving an indelible mark on the collective memory of the people.

Nainiappa Pillai's legacy serves as an inspiration for future generations, reminding us of the power of individual conviction and sacrifice in the pursuit of a just and liberated society. His story stands as a testament to the indomitable spirit of the Indian people and their unwavering determination to achieve freedom and self-determination. As we reflect on the life and contributions of Nainiappa Pillai, let us remember the sacrifices made by countless individuals in the fight for independence and strive to uphold the values of freedom, justice, and equality that they fought so hard to attain. May their legacy continue to inspire us to work towards a better and more inclusive future for all.

## **Reference**

### **Primary Sources**

1. Under Secretary Secret Safe File No: 699 (F), 1930.
2. History of Freedom Movement Bundle No: 66.
3. Letter from District Superintendent of Police to District Magistrate South Arcot dated on 22.04.1930.
4. Letter from Nainiappa Pillai to Harijan Welfare Department, Government of Tamil Nadu dated on 18.12.1958
5. Report on Freedom Fighters, Government of Tamil Nadu dated on 28.08.1966.

### **Secondary Sources**

1. Ananda Raj, *Mahatma Gandhi and Salt Satyagraha* New Delhi: Swastik Publications, 2009.
2. Baliga, B.S. (ed.) *Madras District Gazetteers: South Arcot District*, Madras: Government of Madras, 1962.
3. Bakshi, S.R. *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience Movement*, New Delhi: Gitanjali Publishing House, 1985.
4. Francis, W. *Madras District Gazetteers: South Arcot District*, Madras: Government of Madras, 1906.
5. Garstin, J.H. *Manual of the south Arcot District*, Madras: Government of Madras, 1878.
6. Ghazi, H.K (ed.), *Who's who of Freedom Fighters of Tamil Nadu*, Vol. II, Madras: Government of Madras, 1973.

7. Gandhi, Rajmohan. *Rajaji: A Life*. India: Penguin Books Limited, 2010.
6. Sankari, K. *History of Indian National Movement in South Arcot District of the Madras Presidency*, New Delhi: Indian Publishers and Distributors, 2007.
7. Sivagnanam, Ma. Po. *Viduthalai Pooril Thamizhagam, Vol.II*, Madras: Poongodi Pathigam, 1982. (Tamil)
8. Sinha, Sarojini. *A Pinch of Salt Rocks an Empire*. New Delhi: Children's Book Trust, 1985.