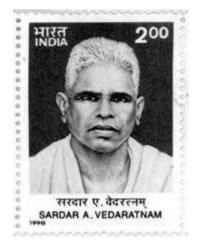
Indian Freedom Fighter





Sardar A.Vedaratnam Pillai of Vedaraniam, Tamil Nadu Presented by VTS @ Indian Azadi Divas (Independence Day Celebrations) August 19, 2006, 4:00-6:00 PM, Heritage Hall, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL 32399

The freedom fighter I choose to speak about today is none other than my great grand father Sardar Vedaratnam Pillai of Vedaraniam, Tamil Nadu. Vedaratnam Pillai was born on 25th February 1897 in Vedaraniam to salt merchants Appakutty Pillai and Thangam Aachi. He was younger of the two children for his parents. He belonged to the *Saiva* (vegetarian) Pillai community that had a long tradition both of composing Tamil poetry about Lord Shiva and serving and managing Shiva temples in Tamil Nadu.

As a young man growing up in a pious and a patriotic family, Vedaratnam Pillai was deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel, and Rajaji. He liked their ideas and joined India's Freedom Struggle as a teenager. He followed the teachings of Gandhiji and made cotton clothes for himself and requested that everyone in his family wear only *Khadi* (pure cotton). He eagerly participated in the boycott of foreign cloth, called *Swadehsi* (from ones own nation) movement (supporting materials made locally as opposed to made abroad). With the blessings and help from his older brother, young Vedaratnam devoted a lot of time in the Freedom Struggle, was arrested several times and spent several months in prison. In 1930 when Gandhiji started his now famous salt *Satyagraha* (non-violent; strong belief in truth) March to Dandi in Gujarat, Vedaratnam Pillai and Rajaji carried out the march in Vedaraniam, first of its kind in South India putting himself and his family at risk. Because of this Vedaratnam Pillai had to face the anger of the British Government which made him pay triple the damages: a fine, time in jail, and confiscated his land and property.

In 1931, he attended the meeting of the agriculturists in Tamil Nadu where he was given the title of Sardar (a commander) in recognition of his participation in the freedom struggle, particularly the Salt Satyagraha. In 1942, when Rajaji and other freedom fighters were arrested by the British, Mr. Vedaratnam Pillai made sure Gandiji's teachings and programs were kept alive and well. Following the death of Kasthurba Gandhi (wife of Mahatma Gandhi) in 1944, he went around and requested funds for several Women's and Children's Welfare Centers. In 1946, he founded the Kasthurba Gandhi Kanya Gurukulam in Vedaraniam, a residential school with free boarding and lodging for poor girls. For his service in the field of untouchable's (Harijhan) welfare, he was awarded a gold medal by the Madras (now Tamil Nadu) Government. He was elected three times as a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) of Madras State (now Tamil Nadu). He donated all his MLA salary to Shri Ramakrishna Mission. He passed away on August 24, 1961 due to an heart ailment while still attending the Madras Assembly. The Gurukulam which he founded for the purpose of women's betterment carries on its mission of educating young and unprivileged girls even today. He was a nationalist and was opposed regionalism, and advocated the study of Hindi as the unifying language, despite the fact that he was fond of Tamil. The Indian Department of Posts issued a special commemorative postage stamp, which you can see here, in the memory of him to mark his 101st birth day.

I am very proud to tell you about him and thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today.

Thank you.

Resources:

1) Family members: Shri A.S. Thayumanasamy Pillai, Mr. A. Vedaratnam, Jr. & Dr. Thayumanasamy Somasundaram.

2) IndiaPost

3) <u>FreeIndia</u>

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