V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, 90 years on – the Swadeshi helmsman

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Why in news: 18 November 2026 marks 90 years since the death of V.O. Chidambaram Pillai (1872–1936), who challenged British shipping with the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company and paid for it with years in jail – including the oil press at Coimbatore Central Prison.

Key points

- Life: born on 5 September 1872 at Ottapidaram (then Tirunelveli district, now Thoothukudi district); a lawyer by profession. He died at Thoothukudi on 18 November 1936.
- Swadeshi shipping: in October 1906, during the Swadeshi movement, he registered the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company at Tuticorin to run Indian-owned ships to Colombo against the British India Steam Navigation Company's monopoly.
- 1908 – strike and arrest: he backed the Coral Mills workers' strike at Tuticorin (February–March 1908). On 12 March 1908 he and Subramania Siva were arrested; the arrest set off violent protests in Tirunelveli. Convicted of sedition, he was first sentenced to two life terms (40 years); on appeal this was reduced.
- Prison: at Coimbatore Central Prison (July 1908 – December 1910) he was treated as an ordinary convict and made to pull the oil press (chekku) – hence 'Chekkizhuththa Chemmal'. He was released on 12 December 1912.
- Scholar and legacy: he published commentaries on the Thirukkural and an edition of the Tolkappiyam with Ilampooranar's commentary, and wrote an autobiography. Tuticorin port is now the V.O. Chidambaranar Port Authority; he is honoured as 'Kappalottiya Thamizhan'.

In the exam: TNPSC – Swadeshi movement in Tamil Nadu (SSNC 1906, Coral Mills strike and Tirunelveli uprising 1908, VOC–Subramania Siva–Bharathiyar), freedom fighters of Tamil Nadu, Tamil scholarship (Thirukkural, Tolkappiyam editions). UPSC Prelims – Swadeshi movement and economic nationalism; Mains GS-I (regional dimensions of the freedom struggle, role of labour).

Questions

1. On 12 March 1908 V.O. Chidambaram Pillai was arrested at Tirunelveli along with which fellow Swadeshi leader?

A. Subramania Bharati
B. Subramania Siva
C. V.V.S. Aiyar
D. Vanchinathan

2. V.O. Chidambaram Pillai published an edition, with the commentary of Ilampooranar, of which Tamil grammatical work?

A. Nannool
B. Yapperungalam
C. Tolkappiyam
D. Veerasoliyam

Answers with explanations

1. **B) Subramania Siva** – VOC and Subramania Siva, who had addressed Swadeshi meetings and backed the Coral Mills strike at Tuticorin, were arrested on 12 March 1908; the arrest set off violent protests in Tirunelveli. Bharathiyar was then in Madras and moved to Puducherry in 1908.

2. **C) Tolkappiyam** – VOC edited the Tolkappiyam with Ilampooranar's commentary (Ilampooranar is the earliest known commentator on the Tolkappiyam) and wrote a commentary on the Thirukkural. Nannool is by Pavanandhi Munivar, Yapperungalam by Amitasagarar and Veerasoliyam by Buddhamitra.

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