



The Role of the Press in the Salt Satyagraha Movement: Nationalist Mobilization and Colonial Censorship in Tamil Nadu (1930)

¹Mrs. S. Sharmila, ²Dr. D. Ebi James, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

¹Ph.D., Research Scholar, Department of History, PG Department & Research Centre in History, Rajapalayam Rajus' College, Rajapalayam, Madurai Kamaraj University

²Assistant Professor of History, PG Department & Research Centre in History, Rajapalayam Rajus' College, Rajapalayam, Madurai Kamaraj University

Abstract: This article examines the role of the press in the Salt Satyagraha and Civil Disobedience Movement in Tamil Nadu in 1930. It analyses how nationalist newspapers and journals such as **The Hindu, Swadesamitran, Tamil Nadu, Navasakti, Swarajya, Sudandira Sangu and Sukhodayam** disseminated Gandhian ideas of Satyagraha, non-violence, Swadeshi and Purna Swaraj and mobilised public opinion against the salt tax and colonial rule. Particular attention is given to press coverage of the Salt Satyagraha in Madras and the Vedaranyam Salt March led by C. Rajagopalachari, which helped connect local acts of resistance with the wider national movement. The article also examines reports of arrests, police repression, restrictions and prosecutions, highlighting the press's role in exposing colonial authority and encouraging popular participation. At the same time, the British government sought to curb nationalist journalism through Press Ordinances, censorship, security demands, confiscation of publications and the closure of newspapers and printing presses. The study argues that, despite these restrictions, the nationalist press remained an important instrument of political education, public mobilisation and resistance during the Salt Satyagraha in Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Salt Satyagraha, Civil Disobedience Movement, Press, Tamil Nadu, Press Ordinances, Censorship, Mahatma Gandhi, C. Rajagopalachari, Salt tax, etc.,

Introduction

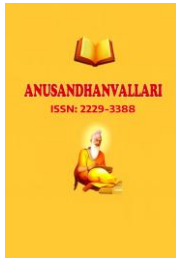
The press played an important role in the Salt Satyagraha and Civil Disobedience Movement in Tamil Nadu. Salt is an essential ingredient of food, and next to air and water, is most important for life's sustenance, especially for the poor man, but the nature of his food is the greatest consumer of salt. It is one of the most subtle forms of taxing the poor, which is nothing but virtual extortion from even the poorest of the poor, for in this way, the millions of semi-starved poor are made to pay for the so-called benefits of 'peace and good Government' they enjoy under a benign British rule. It is one of the basest tricks of financial exploitation that finds in the necessity of the poor a fruitful source of revenue. The burden of the salt tax, therefore, falls most heavily on him. Such an iniquitous tax must forthwith be abolished, for no mere tampering will do"¹. Newspapers and journals disseminated Gandhian ideas of Satyagraha, non-violence, Swadeshi and Purna Swaraj. They helped explain the significance of the Salt Satyagraha to the people of Tamil Nadu.

Role of the Press in the Salt Satyagraha in Tamil Nadu

Civil Disobedience Movement

Tamil newspapers and journals were particularly significant because they communicated nationalist messages in a language accessible to ordinary people. They helped bridge the gap between political leadership and the wider population.

¹ *The Swarajya*, Madras, 13th March, 1930.



The **Hindu** in its issue dated 17th February, 1930, stated that the Congress Working Committee, which met at Allahabad, passed a resolution launching the Civil Disobedience Movement².

The **Swadesamitran** in its issue dated 17th February, 1930, stated that the Civil Disobedience Movement cannot but clash with the Government, however modestly it may be conducted; it is only after anticipating this in a way that the Working Committee has decided that all Congressmen, whatever may be their status, should participate in the movement if such a contingency should arise³.

The **Tamil Nadu of Madras**, dated 18th February, 1930, stated, “No one can deny that the Indian War of Independence has been started in accordance with the principle of non-violence enunciated by Mahatma Gandhi. We admit that the place where Gandhi is a field of national warfare. His patriotism, valour and rectitude are far more potent than the strength of the Government or the country”. The paper openly calls on everyone to admit that the war he started will augment India's national strength⁴.

The **Navasakti** of Madras, dated 19th February, 1930, reported on the preparatory measures for war. The paper wrote that “Gandhi has set out to wage the righteous war of civil disobedience on his own responsibility in pursuance of the mandate of the Congress. The civil disobedience movement will start first in connection with the salt tax. Several people characterise this as unnecessary and unjust. Whether a large number of people join Gandhi's war or not, it will certainly lead to good results. The paper strongly believed that, when the Government resorts to repression, without bestowing serious thought on it, the spirit of non-co-operation among the Indians will be displayed openly”⁵.

Press on Salt Tax

The **Swarajya** writes, “In their memorandum to the Tariff Board, the Indian Merchants Chamber of Bombay would appear to have put forward a strong plea for the reduction of the salt tax to four annas a maund. With a view to such consummation in the near future, they suggest increasing the production of salt in the country, in every possible way, as they are convinced that it is quite feasible to manufacture in India the necessary quantity of quality salt, to completely replace the at present imported commodity. The Chamber also say that the present railway freight on salt is many times higher than on coal and urges that a considerable reduction should be made”⁶.

The **Swarajya**, in its issue dated 13th March, 1930, publishes the statement of Gandhi that ‘I do not know outside India anyone who pays to the State Rs. 3 per year, if he earns Rs. 360 during the period,’ says Mahatma Gandhi. That sums up the case for the total abolition of this non-moral tax. Look at it from any point, and the salt tax is most objectionable⁷.

The **Tamil Nadu** dated 8th March, 1930, in its article wrote that the Satyagraha to be started against the salt tax and the Salt Act will have the support of the Country. Though, looking at it superficially, the salt tax selected by

² *The Hindu*, Madras, 17th February, 1930.

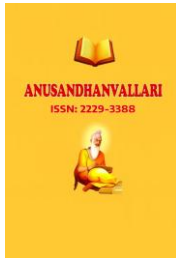
³ *The Swadesmitran*, Madras, 17th February, 1930.

⁴ *The Tamil Nadu*, Madras, 18th February, 1930.

⁵ *The Navasakti*, Madras, 19th February, 1930.

⁶ *The Swarajya*, Madras, 13th March, 1930.

⁷ *The Swarajya*, Madras, 13th March, 1930.



Gandhi for purposes of civil disobedience may appear a trifle, it is such as to bring discredit to the British Government. Salt is as indispensable to the life of man as water or air⁸.

But the injustice of imposing a duty of Rs. 1-4-0 on salt worth 2½ annas is nowhere else to be found than in India. The British rule is conducted here in such an unfortunate manner that India has to import salt from England, in spite of it having ample facilities to manufacture salt in enormous quantities and supply it to the world. If there is a refusal to pay the salt tax and Gandhi, who is adored by the world, is arrested here for it, the nature of the British will surely be exposed to the whole world⁹.

Press on Dandi March

The **Madras Mail** on 6th March, 1930, commented on the words of Gandhi that, if his letter makes no appeal to the Viceroy's heart, he will, on 11th March, proceed to disregard the provisions of the salt laws. The letter contained eleven demands¹⁰.

The **Malayala Manorama** writes about Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience struggle, commencing with his march with volunteers on the salt satyagraha on the 12th March, 1930. Almost all Malayalam papers publish long leading articles dilating on its ominous import. Many of the papers argue that this will open a new chapter in the history of India and the world. Some of them pointed out that the whole of India, the whole civilised world, is viewing the struggle with great concern¹¹.

The **Congress** remarks, Gandhi started from the Sabarmati Ashram at 6.50 a.m. on the 12th March, 1930 with the determination that he should have **swaraj** if he should survive or Valhalla if he should die in order to release from bondage the India sea-god who are mining under foreign domination, is in such a wretched condition as not to be able to make a gift of a small quantity of salt to his countrymen¹².

The **Navasakti** observes that it is significant that the bureaucracy has started its opposition even before Gandhi commenced his war. The bureaucracy's repression has done the preliminary propaganda work that Sirdar Patel proposed doing very quickly. Hereafter, it is not necessary to carry out propaganda work in Gujarat¹³.

The **Tamil Nadu** writes, Indians who are unarmed and are suffering in a helpless condition, cannot help but resort to the weapon of civil disobedience or non-payment of taxes, for acquiring even the political privileges enjoyed by the colonies. Though we know what the outcome of the satyagraha launched by Gandhi against the Salt tax will be, it is the duty of patriots to support a movement that can oppose the Government and foster national valour in the minds of the people. So, we wish the Government to note that, if they resort to repression to an undue extent, the Tamilians in South India also will come forward to oppose the same. It is indeed a fact known to the Government that there are thousands of patriots in the country who have the courage to lose even their lives¹⁴.

⁸ *The Tamil Nadu*, Madras, 8th March, 1930.

⁹ *The Tamil Nadu*, Madras, 8th March, 1930.

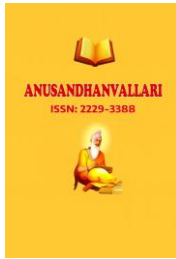
¹⁰ *The Madras Mail*, Madras, 6th March, 1930.

¹¹ *The Malayala Manorama*, Kottayam, 10th March, 1930.

¹² *The Congress*, Sitanagaram, 18th and 25th March, 1930.

¹³ *The Navasakti*, Madras, 12th March, 1930.

¹⁴ *The Tamil Nadu*, Madras, 11th, 13th and 16th March, 1930.



Censorship and Government Control of Films

The **Swarajya** observes that, regarding the Government of Bombay's prohibition on the exhibition of the film depicting the departure of Gandhi from the Sabarmati Ashram, the paper writes that there is a separate Board appointed to examine cinema films. The reason for the prohibition is nothing but the fear that, if the people see the film, their enthusiasm for independence and readiness to engage in the struggle with zeal will increase¹⁵.

Sudandira Sangu writes that, though we know the outcome of the satyagraha launched by Gandhi against the Salt Tax, it is the duty of patriots to support any movement that can oppose the Government and foster national valour in the minds of the people. So we wish the Government to note that, if they resort to repression to an undue extent, the Tamilians in South India also will come forward to oppose the same. It is indeed a fact known to the Government that there are thousands of patriots in the country who have the courage to lose even their lives¹⁶.

The **Hindu** writes, "While Gandhi's plans are more or less publicly known and announced, it is not yet clear what the exact plans are by which the government proposes to meet the situation." Neither Gandhi nor any of his followers will complain that the Government have put the penal provisions of the salt tax in force against them so long as they have administered that law and so long as they proceed to enforce its provisions in the manner which Gandhi himself has commended¹⁷.

Press on Madras Salt Satyagraha

The press encouraged people to participate in salt-making, boycott of foreign goods, picketing of shops and public meetings. Reports about the activities of national leaders inspired wider participation.

The **Swarajya** writes, "There is no day more sacred in the political history of India than the 13th of April, the day on which a decade back the world witnessed the tragedy of Jallianwala Bagh". This year, the day brings added significance to us in Madras, for it signals the active participation of City volunteers in the brave struggle which Gandhi has started for the country's freedom¹⁸.

The **Andhra Pathrika** writes, we must rejoice that the salt satyagraha was successfully and peacefully carried out in Madras on the sanctified Jallianwalla Bagh Day under the leadership of T. Prakasam and K. Nageswara Rao. It has become clear that the Madras has not shown proper enthusiasm towards satyagraha merely on account of the indifference on the part of the leaders and not for want of patriotic fervour among them¹⁹.

The **Swarajya** writes, "It is not easy to recall a day in the history of Madras presidency which carries with it greater political significance than the memorable event which took place on 13th April 1930. It is no small compliment that the City Police arrested the leader of the movement, T. Prakasam, under the Salt Act²⁰. The **Sudandira Sangu** observes that the honour and prestige of Madras have been maintained. The Sun of Satyagraha has dawned in the City on Sunday. It is Prakasam's valour and unparalleled courage that have roused the city, which had been slumbering²¹.

¹⁵ *The Swarajya*, Madras, 29th March, 1930.

¹⁶ *The Sudandira Sangu*, 17th March, 1930.

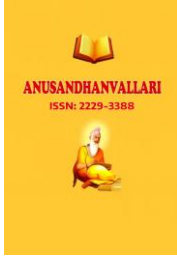
¹⁷ *The Hindu*, Madras, 7th April, 1930.

¹⁸ *The Swarajya*, Madras, 12th April, 1930.

¹⁹ *The Andhra Pathrika*, Madras, 14th April, 1930.

²⁰ *The Swarajya*, Madras, 14th April, 1930.

²¹ *The Sudandira Sangu*, Madras, 16th April, 1930.



Press on Vedaranyam Satyagraha

Newspapers gave considerable attention to C. Rajagopalachari's Vedaranyam Salt Satyagraha. News about the march, the volunteers and their activities helped transform Vedaranyam into an important centre of the Civil Disobedience Movement.

The **Ten Nadu** writes, "C. Rajagopalachari has been vested with dictatorial powers to carry on Gandhi's struggle in the Tamil land." It should be said that Tamil heroes came forward to discharge their duty and maintained the honour of the Tamil land in the struggle for liberty. The hero of such districts as Madurai, Ramnad and North Arcot alone should come forward in this behalf. There is no greater shame than that it should be said of us that we hid ourselves when the war for the liberation of the country was going on²².

The **Sukhodayam** writes: C. Rajagopalachari has undertaken a great responsibility which cannot be undertaken by others in the present situation, has decided to launch a struggle against the Government in the Tamil Land on the 15th proximo, and has appealed to the people to contribute to the satyagraha fund. We too make an earnest appeal to the Tamilians to contribute liberally, encourage the leaders and help to achieve victory. How are we to oppose, without funds, a government that collects crores of rupees by way of taxes and exercises sway over us, holding us under subjection²³?

The **Sudandira Sangu** publishes an article by C. Rajagopalachari stating that a tax on salt is levied and collected indirectly. It is only this salt tax that is heavier than all the other taxes. The Government itself manufactures salt in some places, while in others, those who have taken out licenses manufacture it. The two kinds of extra cost are added to the salt, and the sale price is set at 17 times the cost of production. The poorest of the poor cannot escape this burden²⁴.

The **Sukhodayam** writes, the satyagrahi corps of C. Rajagopalachari will not be boiled by the hot water of Mr Thorne. C. Rajagopalachari, who is well versed in the strategy of war, knows how to make a fool of the Collector. But what power has this collector to dictate to the people that support should be extended to the patriots on their route? Though the heroes under C. Rajagopalachari is ready to die without food and lie down in the open air. It is the religious duty of the Mirasidars of Tanjore to curb the arrogance of this foreign bureaucratic deity, which has issued orders that guests should not be welcomed. We mightily glad that a real struggle for swaraj has been started in the Tamil land even before the salt satyagraha²⁵.

The **Swarajya** writes, the annual revenue of Rs. 7 crores from salt, as Sri C. Rajagopalachari points out, like the annual revenue of Rs. 25 crores from intoxicating drinks and drugs, is an item which the Government would not contemplate using with any equanimity of mind. On the other hand, as the civil disobedience movement is based on genuine grievances of the masses, once the people recognise the essential injustice of the salt tax, they are unlikely to rest content until the inequitable salt law is fully abolished²⁶.

²² *The Ten Nadu*, Madras, 9th March, 1930.

²³ *The Sukhodayam*, Arni, 25th March 1930.

²⁴ *The Sudandira Sangu*, Madras, 2nd April, 1930.

²⁵ *The Sukhodayam*, Arni, 12th April, 1930.

²⁶ *The Swarajya*, Madras, 6th April, 1930.



The **Desabandhu** writes that the District Magistrate of Tanjore is said to have issued orders under Section 157 of the Indian Penal Code prohibiting the villagers from entertaining the satyagrahis, under the pain of imprisonment and fine²⁷.

The **Tamil Nadu** observes, it is indeed surprising that the official in Tanjore should persuade the people to boycott a satyagrahi and that some people should be afraid of their threats. Why should the Collector not take action against the satyagrahis if they are members of an unlawful assembly? We hope that the people of Tanjore will show their great patriotism and prove that the order passed by the Collector is a mere scrap of paper²⁸.

The **Andhra Patrika** writes, If the Satyagraha movement is feeble in Tamil Nadu, the notification of the Collector will serve to strengthen it and keep Tamil Nadu on a par with the other Provinces. It is needless to discuss whether the Collector's opinion is just or not. As none of the accused will put up a defence in the law courts, this matter will never come to test. It will not be strange if Section 157 of the Indian Penal Code, too, is applied against those who assist satyagrahis. The Collectors of other districts also may follow the course adopted by the Collector of Tanjore²⁹.

The press reported arrests, police actions, restrictions, prosecutions and the use of laws such as Section 144 against nationalist activists. Such reports exposed the repressive character of colonial rule.

Encouragement to local participation

Reports of salt-making and Satyagraha activities in places such as coastal and non-coastal areas encouraged people outside the major centres to join the movement. The press connected local events in Tamil Nadu with the wider All-India Civil Disobedience Movement. It helped people understand that resistance to the salt laws was part of the larger struggle for Indian independence.

Press Ordinance

The British government recognised the influence of the nationalist press and attempted to restrict it through press ordinances, censorship, warnings, confiscation of publications and prosecution of editors and journalists. This itself demonstrates the importance of the press in sustaining the movement.

To prevent movement, obtain momentum by taking initial action against leaders, organisations, property, and funds, and to stop unlawful activities by prompt action against individuals under the ordinary law and the ordinances. The Government of India decided to combat political anarchy by promulgating seven new ordinances between 19th April and 7th July 1930. Two out of these ordinances were related to the Indian Press³⁰.

The Governor-General promulgated three Ordinances, namely the Press Ordinance, the Prevention of Intimidation Ordinance and the Unlawful Instigation Ordinance, the first of which has killed free and independent nationalist journalism and the last two have made it criminal to organize the peaceful picketing of liquor and foreign cloth shops, the social boycott of Government officers participating in various kinds of excesses and to carry on propaganda for non-payment of taxes not voted by the representatives of the people. And whereas the statements issued by the Governor-General justifying these Ordinances contain allegations contrary to the facts, showing that

²⁷ *The Desabandhu*, Nellore, 14th April 1930.

²⁸ *The Tamil Nadu*, Madras, 16th April, 1930.

²⁹ *The Andhra Patrika*, Madras, 11th April, 1930.

³⁰ Motilal Bhargava, *Role of Press in the National Movement*, New Delhi, pp. 111-114.



the Governor-General is either kept in complete ignorance of the actual happenings in the country or is intentionally ignoring them³¹.

Therefore, the Congress Working Committee calls upon the country to meet the situation thus created by publicly disobeying the three Ordinances aforesaid with calm and unflinching courage and strict observance of non-violence under the gravest provocation as heretofore, and carry out fearlessly all the resolutions of the Congress, the A. I. C. C. and the Working Committee, regardless of the said Ordinances³².

Working of the Press Ordinance of 1930

The launching of the mass Civil Disobedience in 1930 attracted international attention towards India. Irked by this, the Government applied the Press Ordinances of 1930, which took away the fundamental liberties so far enjoyed by the Indian Press. Gandhi described the press ordinances as a “Varied form of martial law”³³.

Since, the promulgation of the Press Ordinance, security has been demanded under the ordinance from one vernacular press “**Satyagrahi**” by District Magistrate and security has demand under the ordinance from nine newspapers like “**Tamil Nadu**”, “**Swadesamitran**”, “**Sukhodayam**”, “**Krishna Patrika**”, “**Kalinga**”, “**Simhapuri**”, “**Darbar**”, “**Desabakthan**” by the local Government³⁴.

The Government of India desired that the ordinance should continue to be administered so as to prevent the encouragement of seditious and revolutionary activities and of the civil disobedience movement.

The action taken in the Madras Presidency under the Ordinance is analysed below. The Government and District Magistrates have demanded security from 20 Papers and 31 presses. 13 papers and 15 presses have closed down following the demand. The amounts of security demanded are as follows:

	Rs. 2,500	Rs.2,000	Rs.1,500	Rs.1,000	Rs.500
Papers	3	1	1	14	1
Presses	5	3	2	18	3

It is seen that in 60 per cent of the cases, only Rs. 1000 security has been demanded³⁵. It was suggested that the publisher of a newspaper and the keeper of the press where it is printed is one and the same person; certain facts had been taken into consideration when fixing the amount of security. For two papers, “**Congress**” and

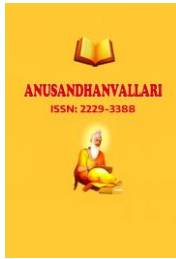
³¹ *The Young India*, 19th June, 1930.

³² *The Young India*, 19th June, 1930.

³³ *The Hindu*, Madras, 13th June, 1930.

³⁴ Telegram to the Home Department No. 1567-S dated, 16th May 1930.

³⁵ Press Ordinance - Home Department letter, dated 8th July, 1930 or U.S.S.File, 663, Strictly Confidential, 7th May 1930.



“Swadesmitran”, less security was required because the man was both the publisher and the printer of the Press. The Only demi-official action has been taken in regard to the “Hindu” which was warned³⁶.

Press Ordinance No. II of 1930

Under this ordinance, security provisions were invoked against 154 presses, and as a result, 76 presses ceased publication from 27th April to 30th June 1930³⁷.

Working of the Ordinance X of 1930

In the Madras Presidency, security was demanded from 43 newspapers and 40 presses³⁸. From the **Dravidan Press** and the **Dravidan Newspaper**, a security of Rs. 500 from each was demanded under section 3(3) and 7(4) of this Ordinance for printing and publishing articles of the nature described in section 4(1) of the Ordinance. As a result, the press was seized publication on 24th February 1931³⁹.

A security of Rs. 2500 was demanded from the printing press, the **Swarajya Printing and Publishing Company**, under section 3(3), and a sum of Rs. 2000 was demanded from the paper, **The Swarajya**, under section 8(3) of this Ordinance⁴⁰.

The Andhra Patrika paid the security amount of Rs. 2000/- on 12th April, 1931 and continued publication⁴¹. Section 4(1) was applied to some Tamil leaflets entitled **Police Adikalai Samalipaku Epadi** (How to Meet the Police Lathi Charge), **Chennai Polisarukku Oru Vendukol** (An Appeal to the Madras Police) and **Chennai Makkal: Police Arajagams** (Citizens of Madras, police atrocities). All the leaflets vehemently attacked the atrocities done by the policemen on the **Satyagrahis** of Marina beach salt satyagraha on 22nd April 1930 were declared forfeited. Serious action was taken against the number printing presses and newspapers that supported the civil disobedience movement in the Madras Presidency⁴².

Sjt. S. Ganeshan of the **Current Thought** Press has been asked to deposit a security of Rs. 1,000. The **Swadesmitran** has been ordered to deposit two securities of Rs. 2,500 each. The **Andhra Patrika** and the **Swarajya** have been served notices regarding fresh declarations. The **Tamil Nadu** has been asked to furnish a security of Rs 2,000. The **Satyagrahi** has suspended publication. A security of Rs 2,000 was demanded from it. The **Krishna Patrika** of Masulipatam has been asked to deposit a security of Rs 1,000 under the Press Ordinance⁴³. Following this Press declared a Hartal on the 20th and 21st May, 1930⁴⁴.

Conclusion

Though one or two newspapers have changed their policy as a result of the promulgation of the Press Ordinance, the nationalist papers in general have not abandoned their original policy. The reasons for this are only that those

³⁶ U.S.S.F. 633, Strictly Confidential, 7th May 1930.

³⁷ U.S.S.F. 716, Strictly Confidential, 5th November 1930.

³⁸ Public Department, G.O.No.584, (Confidential), 21st April, 1930.

³⁹ Public Department G.O. No. 425 (Confidential), 24th April, 1931.

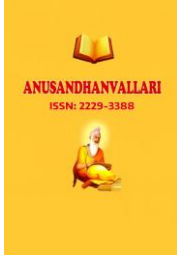
⁴⁰ Public General, G.O. No. 366 (Confidential), 15th April, 1930.

⁴¹ Public General, G.O. No. 425 (Confidential), 24th April, 1930.

⁴² V. Venkataraman, *Proscribed Press and Political Literature Under British Raj*, 1910–1935, pp. 39–42.

⁴³ *The Young India*, 22nd May, 1930.

⁴⁴ U.S.S.File, 683 (C) 2nd July, 1930, Strictly Confidential, 22nd May, 1930.



who are conducting the newspapers are educated persons and that newspapers are conducted with a definite policy in view⁴⁵. The steps taken by the Government to combat civil disobedience, which they consider the cause of the present critical situation, are not commendable. The power given by the Government to the authorities through these ordinances is being used arbitrarily⁴⁶. Commenting on all the ordinances in general, the effective maintenance of law and order depends mostly on popular consent and cooperation and in the absence of these two, any number of Ordinances will not ensure the said effective maintenance. It was observed that the only method of conciliating India is to withdraw the Ordinances, give up repression and release political prisoners⁴⁷. Thus, the press functioned as an important instrument of political mobilisation, nationalist propaganda and public education during the Salt Satyagraha in Tamil Nadu. By publicising the Vedaranyam March, local acts of salt-law violation and colonial repression, the press helped create public sympathy and participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement. At the same time, government censorship and restrictions reveal how seriously the colonial authorities viewed the power of nationalist journalism.

⁴⁵ *The Tamil Nadu*, Madras, 21st October, 1930.

⁴⁶ *The Desabandhu*, Nellore, 20th October, 1930.

⁴⁷ *The Andhra Patrika*, Madras, 24th October 1931.