

Chelvanayakam Satyagraha — 1961

The 1961 non-violent satyagraha against the Official Language Act, led by S.J.V. Chelvanayakam and the Federal Party in Jaffna and the Eastern Province.

From February to April 1961, the Federal Party under S.J.V. Chelvanayakam led a sustained non-violent satyagraha at kachcheri (district secretariat) buildings across the Northern and Eastern Provinces, refusing entry until Tamil-language administration was restored. The campaign was eventually broken by military deployment and emergency regulations. It is one of the largest Gandhian-method civil-disobedience actions in post-independence South Asia.

§1 The action

Federal Party volunteers blockaded kachcheri entrances in Jaffna, Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Mannar from late February 1961. Civil administration in the Tamil-majority districts effectively ceased. The Sirimavo Bandaranaike government declared a state of emergency, deployed the army into the Northern Province for the first time since independence, and arrested the entire Federal Party leadership including Chelvanayakam.

The satyagraha ended in April 1961. No language concession was offered. The army remained in the Jaffna peninsula under emergency powers for the following months — establishing the first post-independence pattern of military deployment into Tamil civilian space.

§2 Why it sits on the narrowing

The 1961 satyagraha is the moment at which the post-1956 'parliamentary federalism' route was exhausted as a viable channel for redress. The Federal Party had won large mandates in 1956 and 1960 and exhausted petition, debate, and the abrogated Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact. The satyagraha was the constitutional opposition's last non-violent escalation before the 1965 Dudley-Chelvanayakam Pact (also abrogated) and the post-1972 collapse of constitutional remedy.

Sources

- wilson-1988
- devotta-blowback-2004
- tambiah-1986

What this is not

- This page does not glorify any subsequent armed turn — the satyagraha itself was strictly non-violent and was broken by the state.
- This page does not name individual volunteers or families.