



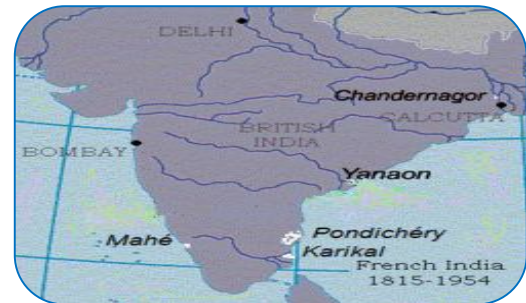
SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SETTING IN FRENCH POSSESSIONS IN COROMANDEL COAST

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ABSTRACT :

On the permission given by the vassal of the Bijapur Sultan, Sher Khan Lodi, the French established themselves at Pondicherry in the Tamil Country, on the Coromandel Coast in 1673-74. In 1701, Pondicherry became the headquarters or the capital of the French possessions in India, displacing Surat, established earlier on the western coast. Possessing Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe, Yanam and Chandernagore as the French settlements in their custody, the French took measures to negotiate social economic and political conditions in the French Settlements. Francois Martin was appointed the first President of the Sovereign Council and Director-General of French affairs in India. The Sovereign Council decided the administrative and judicial setup. It rendered justice in civil and criminal issues in the French settlements in India. Agriculture was the main occupation of the people and the growth of economy of French India was determined by the rainfall. Irrigation was done based on rainfall. People of French Settlements followed all the religions. The missionaries highlighted the ills in Hinduism



KEYWORDS : French, Pondicherry, Surat, Karaikal, Mahe, Yanam, Governor, Sovereign Council, Agriculture, Trade, Dupleix, Ananda Ranga Pillai, Sri Aurobindo, Christianity, Hinduism.

INTRODUCTION :

The French established their first 'loges' at Surat in 1666; naturally it became the headquarters of the future French settlements in India. Two years later, in 1668, Surat became the seat of the office of the Director-General of the French Company. In 1671, Sovereign Council was established at Surat. When the French had set up their factory at Pondicherry in 1673, Bellanger de Lespinay was appointed as its first Director. In 1701, Pondicherry was raised as the seat of the Director-General or Governor with supreme authorities over the French factories in India, including Surat. A sovereign Council was also set up at Pondicherry by a Royal Edict of February 1701.¹ Francois Martin was appointed the first President of the Sovereign Council and Director-General of French affairs in India. Flacourt, Chalonge, and Harden Court were appointed as the members of the Sovereign Council. The first meeting of the Sovereign Council was held on 25th September 1702.² The Sovereign Council was both an administrative as well as a judicial body. It was entrusted with the duty of rendering justice both in civil and criminal matters to all those who lived in any of the French settlements in India. The Council was headed by the Governor, who was appointed by the king but was responsible to the French East India Company for the conduct of affairs in India. The Council had a Procurer General who had the duty of safeguarding the interests of the Company. Chandernagore was given the privilege to form a local council headed by the Commandant.

The Chiefs of the settlements at Karaikal, Mahe, Yanam, etc. were appointed as members of the Sovereign Council. The executive power was divided into two hands, the Governor and the Intendment, each supreme in his own sphere and not dependent on the other. Foucault was appointed the first Intendment and Ordonnateur. On 5th July 1791, a Colonial Assembly consisting of 21 members - 15 for Pondicherry, 3 for Chandernagore and one each for Karaikal, Mahe, and Yanam was constituted by the General Assembly of Pondicherry. In each settlement all the French inhabitants, not below the age of 25, and having lived in India for at least two years were to constitute a General Assembly to elect representatives for the Colonial Assembly. The French citizens of Chandernagore drew up a separate constitution for them in November, 1791. In September, 1792, the Civil Commissioner, appointed by the National Assembly of Paris, to supervise the new organization of the Eastern colonies, reached Pondicherry. By the Decree of 14th April 1829, the administrative council was replaced by a Privy Council. In 1847, the French Government appointed a Commissioner of French India in place of the Governor and a Council of Government in place of the Privy Council.

A municipality was set up at Pondicherry by the General Assembly in September 1790. The Assembly elected a Mayor and five members to the municipality. In April 1791, a municipality was set up at Mahe; In May 1791, the citizens of Karaikal set up a municipality, By the Decree of 25th January 1879, local councils were set up at Pondicherry, Karaikal, Chandernagore, Mahe and Yanam. On 12th March 1880, the French Government enacted a Decree by which all the five settlements were divided into ten communes.³ Pondicherry was divided into Pondicherry, Ozhugarai, Villianur and Bahour, and Karaikal into Karaikal, Grand Aldee and Nedungadu. The other three establishments of Chandernagore, Mahe and Yanam were set up as the three independent communes. The Decree of 12th February 1908 divided the ten communes into seventeen to give more, proper and an equitable representation to the people in their administration. At the time of the merger, the four settlements were divided into sixteen communes - eight in Pondicherry, six in Karaikal and one each in Mahe and Yanam. The Mayor functioned as the executive head of the commune.⁴

From 1701 to 1773, the Sovereign Council functioned both as an administrative as well as a judicial body. In 1776, the Sovereign Council was abolished and in its place, a new council known as Superior Council was set up. It consisted of the following members; the Governor, the intendant or the Ordonnateur, or in his place the senior most administrative officer, seven councilors, one Procurer-General, one greffier, two assessors, one substitute of the Procurer-General, and one commisgreffier (court clerk). A bench of five judges was required to decide civil disputes and one of seven judges to adjudicate criminal matters. and prohibited from indulging in administrative matters. By a Royal Edict of August 1784, the old Council founded in 1776, was abolished and a new Council Superior was set up which consisted of the Governor, businessmen, and notables. By a decree of 7th September 1881, the administrative tribunals were introduced in the French settlements in India, to decide disputes between public authorities and private Individuals.⁵ In 1728, a Tribunal of the Choultry was established at Pondicherry to render justice to the native population. It consisted of a civil lieutenant, two assessors, two registrars, one European and the other Indian, a native bailiff, and four interpreters. It was authorized to adjudge disputes between Indians or between Indians and Europeans or Franco-Indians. The Royal Ordinance of 23rd December 1827 abolished the Tribunal of Choultry and set up a Tribunal of First Instance to which the cases pending before the Choultry were transferred. The ordinance also provided for consultation by the Tribunals with the Consultative Committee of Indian Jurisprudence on matters of Indian Law.⁶

As agriculture continued to be the chief occupation of the people, the general economy of French India was determined by the occurrence or absence of rainfall, which was the main source of irrigation. The famous diarist Ananda Ranga Pillai notes no less than three tornadoes which burst in quick succession over Pondicherry in November, 1745, laying low all avenues, orchards and gardens and which washed away several houses, drowned many men and cattle, killed even birds and flooded waist deep several parts of the town. The cyclones which hit Pondicherry in 1916 and 1943 also caused heavy damage to life and property. The Government of France granted a sum of 5,00,000 *francs* towards relief for the damage caused by floods in November - December, 1884.⁷ The French administration allotted a sum of Rs.90,000 towards the repairs

of the damages caused by the cyclone in 1916.⁸ A severe famine attacked Pondicherry in 1689, driving away a large number of people to the neighbouring districts. Francois Martin, the then Chief of Pondicherry, took several steps to fight the famine. The famine of 1877 was also a severe one and France granted a sum of Rs.1, 00,000 towards assistance to the victims of the famine.

Even before the arrival of the French, Pondicherry was a famous cloth centre. The French procured chiefly the cotton and silk clothes of different varieties from Pondicherry, opium and saltpetre from Chandernagore, pepper and tea from Mahe and rice from other intoxicating drinks, iron goods, and glasses. From 1725 to 1759, the French East India Company spent 27,44,26,392 *livres* for the purchase of goods in India which it sold in France for 53,20,00,000 *livres* with a net profit of 25,30,69,631 *livres*.⁹ A spinning mill was established by Saravana in 1879, another at Kosapalayam by Messrs A. Paget and Company in 1864, a third one at Mudaliarpet called Gaebele Mill in 1892 and a fourth called Rodier or Anglo-French Textiles in 1898. Another textile mill of Ouppalam was opened in 1830 on the northern bank of Ouppar. A number of Commerce consisting of 9 permanent and 9 temporary members was established on 13th February 1849 with two functions. The central Bazaar at Pondicherry was established in 1826 and the small Gazaar in 1886. In the beginning, the rupee currency of Pondicherry was minted in the Arcot Mint. In 1700, Francois Martin obtained permission from the Nawab of Arcot to mint silver coins of half *panam*, *panams*, and double *panams*. In 1706, the French minted 10,000 *pagodas* in gold at Pondicherry. During the time of Dupleix, the *pagodas* minted at Pondicherry were made legal tender in Carnatic, Masulipatam and Golconda.

The French also minted coins of smaller denominations like '*Cache*' and '*Doddou*'. In addition to this a token coin was also in circulation namely the '*Cauri*'. The Pondicherry mint also produced coins needed for other French settlements. In 1738, Dupleix obtained permission to mint coins in Chandernagore. The French National Currency in Pondicherry disappeared by 1890 and the British currency took its place.¹⁰ A bank known as 'Indo-China Bank' was established on 21st January 1875, and this resulted in the withdrawal of the existing English Bank, 'The Oriental'. The land tax constituted the chief source of revenue, the others being betel, tobacco, alcohol, salt, opium, saltpeter, and customs both by and sea.

A total revolution took place in the field of education under the French rule. Education which was hitherto confined to Brahmins and the rich, was now opened to all. France, a country which held aloft the banner of liberty, equality and fraternity, could do nothing but open education to all in her colonies. Moreover, the French needed a host of men, who could speak and write their language, with fluency, to run the administration of the settlements, hence the French administrators of the Indian settlements considered education as their chief concern and opened it to all. Besides a number of elementary and secondary schools, colleges were also started. On 26th October 1826 a college known as 'Royal College' was opened and its name was changed to 'Colonial College' towards the end of 1848. The Calve Soubbaraya Chettiar College was established on 2nd May 1877. Later, College Mahe de la Bourdannis was started in Mahe and College Dupleix in Chandernagore. Professional Colleges for the study of law and medicine were also set up. But the law college and medical college students had to round off their education in the respective professional colleges in France. Teachers' training schools and arts and crafts schools were also started.

Women's education was encouraged. Separate schools for girls were also started. The first girls' school was started on 12th February 1827. There was a separate Girls' Central School in Pondicherry, and also one each in Karaikal, Mahe, Chandernagore and Yanam. Each commune had an 'Ecole Central'. Above the 'Ecoles Centrales' was the secondary school and at the apex was the college. French was the medium of instruction right from the primary school. The curricula and syllabi were largely those followed in France. The students had to follow the text books printed and published in France and they had to learn history and geography which were all about France and little about India.

The study of the Indian languages was not neglected and they formed the second language from the very beginning. In 1877 Calve Soubbaraya Chettiar founded the Calve College at Pondicherry. The institution, which was started as a secondary school, prepared the students for Brevert Francois, Brevert Tamil and Matriculation. The English section of the institution was affiliated to the Madras University. The College

Mahe de La Bourdonnais in Mahe and College Duplex in Chandernagore, which were also started exclusively for the study of English, were affiliated to Madras University and Calcutta University respectively.¹¹

Hinduism continued to be the major religion and its two main branches, Saivism and Vaishnavism, continued to flourish. Both Saivites and Vaishnavites went to the temples of Siva and Vishnu without any differences among them. The Vedhabhuriswarar temple, the Kateswaran temple, the Perumal temple and the Manakula Vinayagar temple were some of the important temples at the time of the arrival of the French at Pondicherry.¹² The diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai lists a number of Hindu religious festivals.¹³ He himself had built the Kennath temple at Kuyavar Palayama.¹⁴ Islam came to India both by land and sea. With the establishment of the Muslim power at Gingee, Islam began to spread in Pondicherry. During the rule of Duplex, when Pondicherry was visited by Muzaffar Jung, the Nizam of Hyderabad and Chandra Sahib, the Nawab of Arcot, there was an increase in the number of Muslim population. And thereafter a large number of Muslims settled in Pondicherry. Mosques were built. The French came to India not only to gain commercial profits and, if possible, political supremacy, but also to propagate their religion - Christianity. Colbert formed the French East India Company in 1664. In 1664 was the establishment of the Roman Catholic Church in all its territories. The Capucin fathers visited Surat in 1639. And they established themselves in Madras, in 1642.¹⁵ The Jesuits came to Pondicherry and established themselves firmly therein 1684.

The missionaries started their attack on Hinduism. The Capucins had built four Churches of Notre Dame Des Anges, one after another.¹⁶ The Cathedral, the Sacred Heart Church, which is noted for its Gothic architecture, and the Church of Notre Dame De Lourdes, at Villianur, which is perhaps the only Catholic Church in India with a temple tank.

At the end of the first decade of the Twentieth Century, there came a 'Super Man' to Pondicherry to establish a new religious order. His name was Sri Aurobindo Ghosh. Sri Aurobindo contributed a series of articles, under the title 'New Lamps for Old', to a Poona weekly, *Indu Prakash*. Around the year 1900, he became a member of the secret society, which was formed to organize a revolution to get the independence of India. In 1902, he attended the Congress session, held at Ahmedabad and 1903 he wrote a booklet entitled 'No Compromise'. In the Congress session held at Bombay in 1904 he expressed himself for complete freedom. He also attended the Congress session held at Benares in 1905.

He also wrote several articles in support of the nationalistic movement in the Bengali weekly, *Jugantar* (change of age). In August, 1906 he joined the National College at Calcutta as its first Principal. He also served as the editor of *Bande Mataram* which was started by Bipin Chandra Pal on 6th August 1906. He attended the Congress session, held in 1906, at Calcutta, in which a resolution was passed for the first time in the history of the Congress demanding Swaraj. To Sri Aurobindo, the Swaraj of India was not a game of politics but was the first step for establishing God's kingdom on earth. He advocated Swaraj both in its political and spiritual senses. On 29th March 1914, Mira Richard, a young French woman, later the Mother of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, met him for the first time. Born in Paris on 21st February 1878, the Mother, even as a young woman, evinced keen interest in spiritual life. In her very first meeting with Sri Aurobindo, the Mother recognized him as the Being, who had been guiding her in her *Sadhana* and whom she used to call Krishna. On 15th August 1914, Sri Aurobindo started a journal in English, *Arya* in collaboration with The Mother.

Arya serialized a number of articles written by Sri Aurobindo, such as 'The Life Divine', 'The Synthesis of Yoga', 'The Secret of the Veda', 'The Essays on the Gita', 'The Foundations of Indian Culture' and 'The Future Poetry'. Sri Aurobindo passed away on 5th December 1950. Since 1920, Sri Aurobindo Ashram has grown steadily and The Mother took charge of it from 24th November 1926. The Mother says, 'To work for the Divine is to pray with body'. In 1952, The Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education was established. "The Ashram has been founded and is meant to be the cradle of the new world".¹⁷

The French rule over Pondicherry and other settlements in India had brought about drastic changes in the political and economic life of the people. But even the French, who had proclaimed the three cardinal principles of liberty, equality and fraternity and extended the citizenship of France to all the inhabitants of

their settlements, were not able to affect a significant change in the caste-ridden society. The Brahmins, who were the main beneficiaries of the caste system, continued to be on top in the society. Next to the Brahmins were the caste-Hindus in the hierarchy of society. They formed the major section of the society and were divided into many castes and sub-castes. Besides the Tamil caste-Hindus, there were the Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam speaking caste-Hindus. They were mostly traders, land-holders, warriors and industrial workers. Ananda Ranga Pillai uses the word 'Tamizhar' to denote the caste-Hindus only.

An important feature of the society was the existence of the right-hand and left-hand division, i.e., the Valangai and Idangai castes. Agricultural and cultivating classes formed the right hand division, while the left hand division consisted of artisans like goldsmith, the blacksmith etc., The scheduled castes, who were the down-trodden and oppressed for many centuries, were at the bottom of the society. The Scheduled castes were mostly agricultural labourers and they worked as menials also. The French took several steps to improve their condition. Besides the Government, reformists like Bharathi Dasan and Magazines like *Puduvai Murasu* took up the cause of the down-trodden and worked for their uplift.¹⁸ There was a considerable Muslim population in the French settlements. There were divisions among the Muslims also like the Labbais, the Pathans and the Sonakas.

There was little improvement in the condition of women in the Eighteenth Century. The institution of Devadasis continued in Pondicherry and Karaikal. The western contact and western education produced a great change in the life style of the Indians, who began to copy their dress, manners, behaviors, speech and living. The western political thoughts also began to mingle with the Indian philosophy. Still the Indian conservatism is dominating the society. There is a curious mixture of western and eastern cultures and in fact Pondicherry served and even now serves, as a connecting link between these two different cultures.

The western contact helped a lot to the growth of art and literature. Like the British India, the French India also benefited in this way. In 1706, Francois Martin built the Fort St.Louis, around which the Pondicherry town steadily grew. In 1738, Dumas, the then governor laid the foundation for a new Governor's palace. The stately and magnificent building was completed by Dupleix at a cost of Rs.42,000.¹⁹ After the capture of Gingee, Dupleix brought from there some of the magnificent pillars with brilliant sculptures, and installed them at the entrance of the fort and in the government garden. When the British captured Pondicherry in 1761, Muhammad Ali removed most of the artistic articles and materials in the Governor's Palace to his palace at Chepauk in Madras.²⁰

The Cathedral, the Sacred Heart Church, the Church of Notre Dame Des Anges, and the Church of Notre Dame Des Lourdes are the standing examples of the excellence of the western architecture. The light House, the pier in the harbour, the railway station and the Government Hospital buildings were other important works carried out by the French. The Kuyavar Palayam near Pondicherry was famous in those days as at present in the production of colourful dolls. The arts of dance and music flourished under the Devadasi system which was patronized by the rich in the society.

The first printing press in the French language was established in 1817 by the French Government, and, the first printing press in Tamil was established by a private person in 1838.²¹ Ananda Ranga Pillai wrote his famous Diary, which is notable not only for its historical content but also for its moving description of the contemporary events. He was also a great patron of art and letters. C.Subramaniya Bharathi, a great national poet, wrote poems to kindle the spirit of nationalism in the hearts of the people. The epics, *Kuyil Pattu*, *Kannan Pattu*, and *Panchali Sabatham* and several poems like 'Suthanthira Perurnai', 'Suthanthira Deviyin Duthi', and 'Suthathira Pallu' were also written by him. He wrote verses in praise of 'Sidhananthasamy Thirukoil' and 'Mana Kula Vinayagar Thirukoil' in Pondicherry. Journals and magazines also contributed to the growth of literature. Magazines came out both in Tamil and French languages. *Puduvai Mithran*, the first Tamil magazine was published in 1900 at Pondicherry and it was closed down in 1904. *French Nesan*, a Tamil Weekly came out in 1913, on every Wednesday. *Karpagam*, a high class Tamil monthly was published between 1915- 1925. C.Subramania Bharathi's *India*, Saigon Chinniah's *Desa Sevakan*, Rangasamy Naicker's *Kudiyarasu*, R. Desigam Pillai's *Aayareru* and *Gokula Mithran* and Bharathi Desan's *Subramania Bharathiar Kavitha Mandalam* were some of the notable magazines. The French scholars evinced keen interest in the

study of Tamil and Sanskrit Languages. In 1822, the Societe Asiatique was founded in Paris. A French India Historical Society was formed on 1st May 1911, with the Governor Martineau as President.²²

Not only the French had made a significant contribution to the growth of art and letters and the other conditions but also the very name Pondicherry was given to the place by them. Rightly, as Jawaharlal Nehru says, 'the learning of French will continue in Pondicherry and make Pondicherry a centre in India of the French language, and a window of French culture, which is a great culture of the Western world'. Having Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe, Yanam and Chandernagore as the French settlements in their custody, it had become the responsibility of the French to govern and administer them in order to serve their colonial needs and necessities. As, a result, they created the world around them according to their own visions and values, to which they were accustomed in their homelands in France. The Union Territory of Pondicherry constituted out of the four French establishments of Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam has the epoch of history of three hundred and fifty years.²³

To conclude, the French were able to establish their power in the East Coast of India. They established their settlements in Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam. Pondicherry became the political headquarters of the French in India. The French Governors encouraged both agriculture and trade. The down-trodden and oppressed people served as the agricultural labourers and they also were menials. The French took several steps to improve their condition. Christianity was given importance in the French territories in India. The missionaries involved in spreading Christian faith and in conversion activities. All the religious people had a peaceful life. The society was graded one. The upper caste people influenced the political trends and held high positions in the French administrative setup. Anand Ranga Pillai recorded the minute details of the political, social and economic conditions of the people who lived in the French territory in India.

END NOTES

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