



# ARRIVAL OF THE FRENCH AND ITS SOCIAL IMPACTS ON SOCIETY IN THANJAVUR REGION

<sup>1</sup>**A.LEEMA ROSE**

Part-Time Research scholar  
PG and Research Department of History  
A.V.V. M Sri Pushpam College (Autonomous)  
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University), Poondi-613503  
Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India

<sup>2</sup>**Dr. V. RAVICHANDRAN**

Associate Professor of History and Research supervisor  
A.V.V.M Sri Pushpam College (Autonomous)  
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University), Poondi-613503  
Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India

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## INTRODUCTION

Franco-Pondicherrians refer to themselves as Creoles, a population mostly born to French and Tamil parents or their descendants. Now form only a small minority, mainly due to Indians from other parts of the country settling in Pondicherry in large numbers and emigration of Franco-Pondicherrains outside India. A sizeable Pondichérien diaspora now lives in France and former French colonies, significantly in Réunion and Seychelles in the Indian Ocean, the French West Indies islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe and French Guiana in South America. The Creole families living in Pondichery maintain camaraderie through their association Societe Mutuelle des Creoles (Mutual Society of Creoles) on Rue Bazard Saint Laurent.

European trade with Indian port towns brought about a numeral changes in the medieval Indian society. It pays attention

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to the concentration of economic historians to write more about the socio-economic situation of the people in diverse parts of India. The French trade in Pondicherry opened up avenues of commerce for the artisans and merchants it provided an occasion to participate a significant function in the commercial sector. Thus, the social and economic life of the people undergoes some chief changes in the Thanjavur region owing to the enlargement of trade and commerce under the active patronage of the French. Therefore against this background an attempt is made in this paper to analyse the social life, status and position of a variety of classes of people in this region.

The town of Pondicherry was separated into two parts, namely, White Town or (Ville de Blanc) and Black Town (Ville de Noire). In the white town only the Europeans had their settlements and their houses were built in Roman Style with

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terraces<sup>i</sup> and it was located closer to the seashore. A fort was constructed in this town. On the eastern side of this fort a shelter was formed with a roof made out of coconut palms to avoid rain for the employees and for storing the goods<sup>ii</sup> St.Louis chapel was built inside the fort area for the purpose of the Europeans who were the employees of the company like Governor, councillors, dubash, interpreters, packers, and some officers. It is said that nearly 1000 or 1200 Europeans lived inside the fort area.<sup>iii</sup>

The black town was located just west of the White Town and was occupied by Tamilians. In this town a big bazaar was recognized for local people. Inside the bazaar a Chavadi (an open hall) alike to caravan sarai was constructed in 1729 at the cost of 152 pagodas on a plan drawn by Fr Louis<sup>iv</sup> was in this Chavadi that the French rendered justice to the native criminals. In this bazaar, besides the natives, the Europeans were also found buying commodities for their daily needs.

By combining both White and Black towns together in one, the ramparts were made and a canal was dug by the French round the city in order to safeguard the people from the attacks made by the European and Indian enemies.

#### **URBAN SOCIETY**

The urban Society of Thanjavur region in which the people lived in both White and Black towns, was a mixed Category of nationalities and professionals such as Europeans and Indian nobles, merchant princes and other artisans.

#### **FOREIGN NOBILITY**

The European nobles in Pondicherry included the French Governors, the member of the Superior Council and the Jesuits. They belonged to aristocratic families and led a luxurious life. There were admirals, vice-admirals and controllers in the company's service who were Europeans whose duty was to cater the cargo of the ship. Among them, the Governor was the initial and primary person in every facet of social, political and commercial relationships. He took serious steps for developing and beautifying the town. Labemadie points out that during the

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period of Dupleix mud houses were detached and new houses were reconstructed with bricks resembling marbles. For the development of trade, the French Governor undertook more than a few measures and brought merchants, weavers and other artisans to Pondicherry from various parts of the country. When Francois Martin, the first French Governor, came to Pondicherry, he brought Tanappamudali, a renowned merchant, from Poonamalle, a suburb of Madras, to encourage company's trade. It is also pointed out that, in 1746 Madras fell in the hands of the French, Dupleix tried to bring the merchants from there. But he could not succeed in his effort fully. Only Armenian who lived in Madras had come down and ended their life in Pondicherry.

In addition to this, the Governors constructed not only houses, but also shops and markets for the local population. They had great political power with local chieftains as well. It is said that, at one time when Dupleix had written letters to palayakkarars, kallars, and Rajas of Tanjore and Mysore not to help Muhamad Ali who ran away to Trichy, they did accordingly. The Governor had acquired necessary privileges from the local rulers. In 1746, Dumas, the French Governor, obtained permission granted by the Nawab of Arcot, Dost Ali Khan, to coin money for the French at Pondicherry<sup>v</sup>.

Initially the French were in favour of converting the Hindus into Christianity and opposed the Hindus to celebrate their festivals in the town. In 1701 Francois Martin forbidden all spiritual Festivals of non-Christian on Easter and every Sunday.<sup>vi</sup> A similar incident took place in the later period as well. When Dulivier became the Governor, because of the pronouncement made by the superior council and approved by the king in 1711, he forbade the Hindu ceremonies and processions with music on Sundays and Catholic holidays Particularly refused to give permission for the performance of the Amavasya (New Moon Day rites) ceremonies which happened to fall on Sunday February 3 1715.<sup>vii</sup> The result was that the People revolted openly against the French and

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abandoned the town which remained empty for some days. As the Governor and the Superior Council had given Guarantee to the traitor for the free exercise of their religion in order to return to their homes.<sup>viii</sup> This situation was changed in the succeeding periods.

The Governor not only celebrated but also participated in such festivals. A special feature of the celebration of such festivals in the town was marked by the visit of the Governor, Councillors, Jesuits and other Europeans to the church<sup>ix</sup>. On each occasion of the celebration of such festivals the Governor used to go to Church to have a mass and received honour from the public. Each year when the Governor marched towards the church on the occasion of the feast of the Holy Sacrament, the French soldiers stood in two rows by forming a line and tambour was beaten. Again, when he left the Church after attending the holy mass, the soldiers bowed their heads with their hats and flags and beat tambour.<sup>x</sup>

The feast of the Nativity of St. John was celebrated by the Europeans in a great splendour in the town. They used to set fire to the faggots which were built round the palmyra fixed on the ground south of the fort. The custom was that, at first the Governor and Jesuit priests set fire to the faggots before setting fire, the Governor, councillors, priests and the parade marched in order, towards that and tambour was beaten and three salutes of twenty one guns. Each were fired from the fort and ships.<sup>xi</sup> When the troops dispersed, they fired one gun after another. After that, they returned to their homes and enjoyed the feast.

The Governor celebrated the King's feast day in honour of Louis XV. On this occasion he wore the cross of St.Louis, opened the big half and eastern side of the hall in his residence and invited the visitors to dine with him and those who met him paid their respects.<sup>xii</sup> The traditional custom of the French was followed in this town on the occasion of the European festival days, salutes of firing of twenty one guns, to the Governor was a significant aspect of the French culture.

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When the Governor marched towards the Church to assist at the holy mass on the occasion of his feast day, salutes were given to him. After retiring from the church he invited Indian nobles and had entertainments with them.<sup>xiii</sup> The King also expressed his deep mourning against the dead. It is reported that on the Occasion of all Souls' day, the Governor used to wear black and went to the Church to participate in a holy mass in memory of the dead Europeans<sup>xiv</sup> February was celebration Season for the Europeans living in Pondicherry. This festival lasted for many days as this period was known as carnival season. The Governor celebrated the carnival festival with European music, songs and dance with great pomp and invited the local chieftains and nobles for the entertainment. It was during the period of Dupleix that during the carnival festival the Europeans danced at a mosque throughout the night, Dupleix invited Muhammad Tavakkal and Ananda Ranga Pillai for the entertainment who attended it and listened to European songs and music.<sup>xv</sup>

The Governor was accountable in each aspect of the company's commerce and local administration. He had to appoint the chief dubash and merchants for the company according to his will. When Dupleix became the Governor, he had great confidence and faith in Ananda Ranga pillai. So he rejected the petition given by the Jesuits against him and appointed him as a courtier or Dubash of the Company. He also participated in various ceremonies such as marriages of the Indian nobles and wealthy merchants in the town.<sup>xvi</sup>

Next to the Governor the members of the superior council held higher posts in the town. It is said that the Sovereign council or superior council was shifted from Surat to Pondicherry in 1701.<sup>xvii</sup> The members of this council remained greatly attached to it in every aspect of the city administration and development of a company's trade. It was headed by the Director General of the French East India Company from Paris.

The French missionaries could be measured the members of religious nobility and they were mainly accountable for the

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development of French colonies in the East. The capuchin priests came from Madras, in progress their mission in pondicherry in 1686 and they undertook the religious services in the city as they were invited by Francois art in.<sup>xviii</sup> They learned the Tamil language and began to help the native Christians. When Pondicherry was captured by the Dutch, these priests were ill treated and imprisoned. The Jesuit fathers came in 1675 and later the fathers of Foreign Mission too arrived at Pondicherry, from France in 1699 and started their religious work. Both these missionaries played a vital role in the religious matter.

The Capuchin priests rendered their service for the religious needs of the Europeans, while the Jesuits took to evangelical work among the natives. The first chapel was constructed outside the fort under the efforts of the Capuchin priests and it was dedicated to St.Peter which was known as St.Lazar Church. The Jesuits also built a Church and Consecrated to our Lady of Immaculate Conception. After getting the permission from King Louis XV in France the Jesuits established some schools and started to educate the French. Thus, they opened a college and taught Latin, and theology. Students from Madras, Bengal, Philippines Surat, Ispahan and even from Paris and London came and studied in this college. Through this educational institution they spread the religion and western culture. It brought a number of natives to get intermarriages and conversions.<sup>xix</sup>

The Jesuit received full support from the company and wielded great influence with the Governor and council and their proposals were accepted by the council. They supported the local Catholics, even in getting Jagirs. It is evident that when **Leyrit** became the Governor the Jesuits forced him to rent out some villages in favour of Catholics<sup>xx</sup>.

They spread Christianity and were the main supporters of the local Christians and not Hindus. They had considerable influence in the affairs of the Company and even controlled the appointment of chief dubash by the Governor and council. Source materials show that the Jesuits sent a petition to the

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royal court at Versailles to remove a non-Christian from the Post of courtier and suggested to appoint a Christian in that place. The result was that Nainiyapa who was a courtier was given six months time to convert himself into Christianity when he did not become a Christian he was removed from his service<sup>xxi</sup>. This policy was changed in the latter period.

The Jesuits did not enter into the houses of paraiahs and never condescended to go to their houses to perform even the last Sacraments. So the pariah had separate priests to attend to their spiritual needs. Thus, they opposed the superior Council against the stamping of pagodas on one side of the gold coins as the pagodas signified the Hindu temple. They converted many people into Christianity. Their policy against caste Hindus caused the people to desert the town for some days.

#### **NOTABLE FRENCH PEOPLE IN PONDI UNION TERRITORY**

- ✓ Abhishiktananda (born Henri Le Saux) - French Benedictine monk
- ✓ Mirra Alfassa - also known as "The Mother"; spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo
- ✓ Yvonne Artaud - French educator, ethnologist, psychologist and artist
- ✓ Andre Beteille (born 1934) - Indian sociologist
- ✓ Pierre Ceyrac - French Jesuit priest, engaged in charitable work
- ✓ Christabel Chamarette - Senator for Western Australia (born in India and of French Huguenot descent)
- ✓ Alain Daniélou - French historian, intellectual, musicologist and Indologist
- ✓ François Gautier - writer and journalist based in India
- ✓ Catherine Grand - wife of Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, the first Prime Minister of France
- ✓ Māina Katakī - founder of the charity Samarpan Ashram
- ✓ Kalki Koechlin - Indian actress

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- ✓ Jules Monchanin (known as Swami Paramarubyananda) - French Catholic priest, monk and hermit
- ✓ Pavitra - early disciple of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother
- ✓ Satprem - author
- ✓ Jenny Shircore - British make-up artist
- ✓ J. R. D. Tata - pioneer aviator and businessman, former CEO of Tata Sons (1938-1991)
- ✓ Simone Tata - chairperson of the Trent Limited; of Swiss French origin

#### INDIAN NOBILITY:

As far as the Indian nobles in Pondicherry were concerned some of the resourceful and influential merchants and their families belonged to this group. They had a luxurious life in Pondicherry and held an important position in the company's service like chief dubash. Because of the financial position and status in the society the French appointed some of these merchant princes for the post of chief dubash or aristocrat of the company. These imaginative merchants came from different places like Madras, Permabur and settled enduringly in Pondicherry. The mention may be made here that Tanappa mudali a Hindu merchant from Poonamalle, accompanied Francois Martin to Pondicherry for trade<sup>xxii</sup> and Tiruvengadam Pillai, a merchant from Perambur came with some wealthy merchant families and settled down in Pondicherry<sup>xxiii</sup>. They became chief dubash of the company.

These merchant princes performed a number of functions not only in the development of company's commerce but also in the society. The merchant princes like Tanappa mudali helped the French Governor Francois Martin not only in procuring commodities from various places for the company's commerce but also in getting merchants and artisans from different parts to settle down in Pondicherry in order to boost the company trade. For their devoted service they were appointed in the higher posts. It is important to note that Tanappa mudali, who became the chief of the Tamils was appointed as a courtier or chief Dubash to the company  
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by Francois Martin, because of his constant service.<sup>xxiv</sup> They also helped the Governor in the construction of shops, godowns and warehouses.<sup>xxv</sup>

In fact, they were the chief intermediaries in all commercial transactions of the company between the company and local merchants. The chief dubash became the chief advisor to the Governor to solve the local problems. This situation worsened under Leyritwho ignored the advice of the chief dubash and did not maintain even a surveillance of the company's activities. This chief dubash left correspondence with the native rulers, on behalf of the Governor and company and had great political influence in the court of the local chieftains. They rendered services in the development of the French boundaries. It is said that Nainiappa Pillai succeeded in his efforts through a Brahmin in getting them villages of Murungapakkam, Olandai, Pakkamudaiampet, and Karuvadikuppam .

When the merchants and artisans deserted the town, because of the siege of Pondicherry by the Dutch, Muthappa Mudali, a courtier of the company, succeeded in negotiating and convincing them to return to Pondicherry. The dubash had the right to do justice to the local criminals and also to deal with civil cases in the Chavadi according to the customs prevailed in the society.<sup>xxvi</sup>

They also used to call on the Governor in his residence on the occasion of European festivals, offered valuable gifts, took part in the entertainment and received some gifts from him.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The Indian Dubash travelled pompously in a palanquin and were carried by four or eight men on their shoulders to call on the Governor in the fort. And they were also allowed to travel in a palanquin by the Governor with white umbrella and torches. Because of the wealth and influence they possessed in the society they lived a luxurious life and were held in great esteem by the French. It is worth mentioning that when Kanakaraya mudali was chief dubash of the Governor, Ananda Ranga Pillai enjoyed three times as much power as Kanakaraya mudali



enjoyed and possessed a palanquin and torches. Those who did not have such wealth and influence as mentioned above in the Society were not allowed to travel in a palanquin. It is evident that when Vinayakam Pillai started to come into the fort in a palanquin his journey was banned. Similarly, when the Governor Leyrit came to know about the arrival of Gountur Bali chetti from Sardrasapattanam in a palanquin he did not permit him to come inside the town in a palanquin.<sup>xxviii</sup> When these nobles or merchant princes happened to go outside the town they used to travel on horseback.<sup>xxix</sup> They also obtained Jagirs from the company, the lands of which were rented out by the ryots. It appears that Ananda Ranga Pillai had a number of Jagirs such as Pillaithottam and Villianur which made him further rich, Thus they carried on trade privately.

## MERCHANTS

So far as the mercantile group in south India was concerned Chettis Komatty, Berichetty, Vyaperichetty Kasukarachettis, Kaverichetty, Nagarathuchetty, and Nattukkottai chetty were traders by profession. But we also find members of other community and religion, such as **Idaiyan**, Reddy, **Vellalar**, Armenians and Marakkayars in the trading occupation. They played a vital role in the commercial sector and performed a number of functions in the trading activities of the company. As mentioned earlier, these merchants came from different places and settled down in at Pondicherry to trade with a company. They carried on their commerce in varied manner. They acted as wholesalers, retailers, shopkeepers, **peddlers** and also brokers and financiers<sup>xxx</sup>.

The wholesale merchants had established various godowns for paddy, indigo, arecanut, tobacco and so on where they appointed their agents to look after the business transaction on behalf of them.<sup>xxxi</sup> Some of them worked for the company while others conducted their trade privately. Every year, the company merchants made an agreement with the company for the supply of textiles and for buying imported goods

from the company. They also executed bonds to the company for the annual agreement. For instance, in 1736 Sunguvar Seshachala Chetti, Lakshnipatichetti, Chidarnbaram Chetti and Adivaraha chetti made annual business contracts with the company for supplying 1471 bales of textiles of third class which amounted to 1204012 pagodas.<sup>xxxii</sup> They invested large amount of capital in their wholesale trade which covered a wide range of commodities.

They procured various sorts of textiles through their own agents directly from the producers, stored them in their godowns and supplied them to the company to be exported to Europe. They supplied textiles not only against direct Payment but also on credit basis to the French private merchants and collected money with interest in due course. In the credit system, in fact some time they had to face the loss of their entire property on the occasion of insolvency of the borrower or on his death. It is said that Ananda Ranga Pillai some bales of textiles on credit basis to Francisco pereia who owed 700 pagodas with interest of **400** pagodas totalling **1100** pagodas to Ananda Ranga Pillai. When he died without repaying the amount Ananda Ranga pillai lost the entire amount<sup>xxxiii</sup>.

A few merchants were wholesalers of imported coral from the company. Porazhakkara Uttirapattu Chetti was a wholesale dealer and took an entire quantity of coral from the company that was imported into Pondicherry<sup>xxxiv</sup>. He sold this item to the retail traders. The sale of tobacco and arecanut was the company's monopoly. A very few merchants who desired to have trade in tobacco and arecanut, received a licence from the company and conducted trade in these commodities<sup>xxxv</sup>.

These merchants sometimes received money from the company as an advance and invested a large sum of money in their trade. On the surety given by the Chief Dubash, sometimes they obtained a heavy loan from the company as well as imported commodities on credit basis.<sup>xxxvi</sup> A few merchants were involved in minting silver coins in the Pondicherry mint and took certain



amount for the same purpose. It is said that Seshachala chetti, Tiruviti Balu chetti, Gunturi Venkanna chetti including a goldsmith who were appointed as merchants in the mint, coined silver into rupees and took Rs 16 for every 1000 tupees.<sup>xxxvii</sup> A few of them were appointed as chief dubashes Of the Governor and company by the Governor because of their tremendous wealth influence and status in the society. '

In addition to this, the merchants were involved in the tax farming. Some of them took certain villages based on lease from the company and collected taxes from the cultivators. Guntur Venkatachala chetti, for instance, took villianur village on lease from the company and collected revenue from the ryots. Some wealthy merchants had their own ships and involved in the coastal and overseas trade. Hasan Marakkayan of Porto Novo is said to have conducted coastal trade and his ship plied between Porto Novo and Marakkanam carrying cargo of salt frequently touching Pondicherry. Annanda Ranga Pillai had his own ship by name Adnanda Puravi and traded between Pondicherry and South East Asian countries and Colombo carrying arecanut and textiles. He was also one of the partners with Dupleix in the trade with Mocha. A notable wealthy merchant Sungurama Owned a ship through which he exported textiles to Manila for trading. His ship was named after him as Soucourama.

As the trade flourished in the course of time, Sher Khan Lodi, the Governor of Valikondapuram, Imam shahib, the Governor of Alampanra, and others participated in the trading activities and carried on their trade through their own agents privately.

#### CONCLUSION

The retail traders made a small scale investment in their trade. Because of the insufficient capital they were in a position to depend on wealthy merchants for their investment in trade. Their trade covered only a particular commodity. During the period under review Jayanthi Raman Kesava mudali and Ranganatha mudali are said to have conducted their business in grain. They

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supplied the goods to the wealthy merchants. They also had their own shops in the bazaar of Pondichery and other places and sold sundry goods. For example, Nallathambi Arunachala chetti sold sundry goods from his shop which he had in the bazaar of Pondicherry. The peddlers used to attend the weekly markets and fairs. They sold sundry goods in retail price. It is said that they had sold vegetables, yellow watermelon, huge bundles of betel leaves and arecanut and a variety of spices in a number of small dishes in the weekly markets and temple fairs.

In the social custom of Pondicherry every year on the New Year's day and some other festive occasions the merchants usually went to meet the Governor in his house and offered him some valuable gifts such as gold chain, a ring with diamond, gold coins in return they received from him broadcloth, velvet, and other articles. The wealthy merchants conducted the marriage ceremonies of their daughters and sons within great pomp. The couples were carried in a palanquin around the street with pipe, tambour and music for which they had to get permission from the Governor. They invited the Governor and his wife usually to attend the marriage function and gave presents to them by with sprinkling rose water and giving pansubari. It is worth mentioning that when Seshachala chetti conducted his daughter's marriage, the couple were scaterel accompanied by in a palanquin pipe, music and tambour, the Governor Dupleix and his wife attended the marriage function. Seshachala chetti presented Rs.1000 to Dupleix and Rs.100 to his wife and gave them pansubari with sprinkling rose water. At that time the Governor gave the presents of dhoti, sari and Jacket to the couples in honour of their marriage.

<sup>i</sup> . B.N.N.A. 9354, fols.76.

<sup>ii</sup> . M.V.Labernadie, *Le Vieux Pondichery* 1673-1876 (Henceforth will be as Labernadie) Pondicherry, 1936, pp.83, 99,101

<sup>iii</sup> . *Ibid.*, pp.331-335.

<sup>iv</sup> . *Ibid.*, p.129.



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