

Pondicherry in the Era of the French Revolution 1785–1793 Part 2: The Heights and the Fall 1791–1793



Michal Wanner¹

ABSTRACT

The study is a continuation of the same author's contribution published on the pages of this periodical. It is devoted to the development of Pondicherry during the French Revolution, in the years 1791–1793. The course of the Revolution in French Indian colonies was dynamized by primary milestones of the development in France whose impact in each of the colonies was different in dependence on social composition and the character of economy. The development in Pondicherry was relatively calm, but was in substantial way influenced by conflicts with other factories, especially Chandernagore in Bengal and headquarters of all French colonies in Indian Ocean on the Mascarene Islands. It was concentrated on satisfying the requirements of democratization, and was free of revolutionary excesses. In principle, the loyalty towards the King, and the law and authorities in Paris remained. The main point of disputes was the question of involving classes of Indians and Eurasians into political process. While requests of the half-breeds had been accepted, crowds of Indian citizens remained beyond the politic structure despite the role they had in the economic life of the colony. But the local French elites were aware the value of this population for France, therefore attempted to find a sort of *modus vivendi*. The indigenous population was perceived as the population of another country and another culture, could not become French nationals, but its interests had to be taken into account. Nevertheless this concept did not get a chance to develop as a result of British action against the French colonies. Pondicherry remained virtually abandoned in this fight by Paris as well as its superiors from Port Louis. This fact after the surrender lead inevitably to an anti-revolutionary reaction among the inhabitants. The fall of Pondicherry did not result from the consequences of the French Revolution, but from the presumed British worries over the French re-expansion in India. The framework of the British action should be retrieved therefore in previous development. As a result of this operation Pondicherry definitely lost its importance.

KEYWORDS

History of India; the French Revolution in Colonies; History of East India Companies; British-French Struggle for India; French Colonial Imperium in Asia

1 Michal Wanner, Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, Department of Archives Administration and Records Management, Nad Štolou 3, 170 34, Praha 7, Czech Republic, michal.wanner@mvcr.cz



This study follows the article by the same author, which has appeared in this journal;² to place that in a broader perspective, it relates to his studies authored in periodicals published by Brno and Olomouc universities.³ It covers the course of the French Revolution in Pondicherry — the centre of French colonies⁴ in India (fr. Pondichéry, today's Puducherry). The earlier study reported the source bases, and appraised the basic directions of the existing researches and their outcomes. It analysed the colony condition after the American Revolutionary War; the failed effort of old-regime clerks in the field of economics and administration; the establishment of a new monopoly company — the Company for Indies and China (*Compagnie des Indes et la Chine*); the Company's impact on the trade between France and India; the outbreak of the Revolution associated with the formation of revolutionary bodies; and a gradual escalation of conflicts among Europeans, some indigenous population, and Eurasians. As to the time span, the previous study covered the period up to the adoption of key requirements of the Revolution defined in the colony in February 1790 by the National Assembly in Paris, and the formation of the third General Assembly in this factory in June 1791.

Another part of the study describes further stages of the revolutionary events in Pondicherry and other colonies, primarily in Chandernagore (fr. Chandernagor, today's Chandannagar). It deals with the outset of the Colonial Assembly of French Factories in Pondicherry; the introduction of the Constitution adopted in the French colonies in India; the development of complex relationships among revolutionaries in Pondicherry, Chandernagore and on the Mascarene Islands. The relationships between French settlers and the indigenous population are given in basic outlines, since they have been already looked at in one in-depth study by Orsay M. Gobalakichenane.⁵ This study ends with the eruption of the French-British conflict and the capture of Pondicherry by the troops of the English East India Company, which means the step that once radically changed the French factories position in India.

2 M. WANNER, *Pondicherry in The French Revolution Era 1785–1793: Part 1: Reasons and Beginnings 1785–1791*, in: *Prague Papers on the History of International Relations*, No. 1, 2017, pp. 51–66.

3 M. WANNER, *Zápas evropských mocností v Indickém oceánu v době války o nezávislost USA 1778–1783*, in: *Historica Olomucensia*, Vol. 48, 2015, pp. 69–97; M. WANNER, *Britsko-francouzské vztahy v Indii 1787–1794 v zrcadle pramenů úřadu generálních guvernérů britské Indie — Anglo-French Relations in India 1787–1794 in the Mirror of Governor-Generals of British India Sources*, in: *Studia Historica Brunensia*, Vol. 63, Is. 2, 2016, pp. 5–22.

4 The author uses the term colony in the sense it is commonly understood in Central Europe, i.e. as a general denomination of the overseas settlement, as a synonym of a more precise term of a factory or a trading station, a territory in the general sense dependent on the metropolis.

5 M. GOBALAKICHENANE, *La révolution française des Tamouls de Pondichéry (1790–1793)*, Palaniappa 2014. The author's thanks for suggestive comments and commentaries that contributed to the completion of this part of the study belong to Mr. Gobalakichenane.

THE CONSTITUTION OF JULY 1791 AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE COLONIAL ASSEMBLY



The third General Assembly of the Pondicherry Residents called in June 1791 had at first to settle disputes between the Revolutionary Committee, the Governor and the Town Council. The thing that stabilized the situation was the abolishment of the Revolutionary Committee's rights. Impending chaos was averted, which made it possible to continue work on the Revolution's outcomes codification.⁶

The Assembly concentrated on a new way of organization of all French settlements in India. The project aimed "to form the Colonial Assembly of representatives of French colonies in India"⁷ was adopted at one session held in the Capuchin Church on 5 June 1791. The Assembly was designed to have 21 members consisting of: fifteen representatives from Pondicherry, three from Chandernagore, one from Yanam (fr. Yanaon), one from Karaikal (also Karikal or Karaikkal) and one from Mahe (fr. Mahé). The office term was set for ten years.⁸ Additionally, one independent General Assembly would have arisen in each of the factories consisting of all French citizens aged 25 and above who had lived in India minimum two years. That Assembly was supposed to elect one representative for the Colonial Assembly. The session also agreed provisions applying to additional members from each of the settlements to substitute a respective representative during their temporary absence. One-half members of the Colonial Assembly were due to be elected every year. Since opposition coming from some of the colonies against joining the new body was expected, the Constitution should have included the time limit for that entrance. Provided no representative had been elected in due time by the General Assembly, the Colonial Assembly would have had to add the Assembly to by respective representatives from Pondicherry. The Colonial Assembly constituted in that way was entrusted with legislative powers delegated to each of the colonies according to a decree issued by the General Assembly on 7 March and 8 March 1790. The executive power was granted to a governor, the juridical power remained unchanged. What was also clearly declared was that no new taxes could be levied unless approved by the Colonial Assembly.⁹

The meeting of the Colonial Assembly was held on 6 July 1791. However, only representatives from Pondicherry arrived. Therefore, other colonies were asked in letters sent on 11 July to send their delegates as well. Nevertheless, no answers but from Jamal and Karaikal arrived. Mahe sent no delegates, Chandernagore had completely refused to respect the authority of this body.

6 S. P. SEN, *The French in India (1765–1816)*, Calcutta 1958, p. 439.

7 Quoted by GOBALAKICHENANE M, p. 54.

8 M. V. LABERNADIE, *La révolution et les établissements français dans l'Inde, 1790–1793*, Paris — Pondichéry 1930, pp. 79–80.

9 SEN, p. 440.



THE CONFLICT WITH CHANDERNAGORE AND ÎLE DE FRANCE

It was consequence that resulted from events occurring in that colony, which had not been developing favourably for their superiors in Pondicherry.¹⁰ Governor Mottet sent from Pondicherry arrived at the site on 5 November 1790, but would not receive friendly welcome. As he penned to the Governor of Pondicherry, de Fresne, he had had to appear before the Revolutionary Committee as if he had “*practically been a criminal*”, and had undergone a few-day interrogation concerning objectives of his mission. Finally, the Committee agreed upon his appointment as the executive head, but with powers limited to minimum. According to the new Constitution written for this colony and supported by the General Assembly from Île de France, all matters of financial, police and judicial character were subjected to the Committee’s approval.

Mottet was not allowed to be in touch with the Governors of Danish or Dutch colonies in Bengal, but was required to only demand compensation for the *Chandernagore* ship. He was allowed to exchange correspondence with the Governor of Pondicherry otherwise to enforce the Revolutionary Committee’s laws. Pretending to obey, under the pretence of holding talks about salt and opium with the British, Mottet left for Calcutta (today’s Kolkata) where he settled down and would be sending detailed information on the situation to de Fresne. He was allowed to stay there as long as the French king would decide on how to solve problems in the colony.¹¹

In January 1791, disputes erupted among the Revolutionary Committee’s members in Chandernagore. Some of them revolted against Chairperson Richemont’s tyranny. They were accused of conspiracy against the regime and sentenced to prison. However the majority of them managed to escape. Mottet believed that the law could not be enforced otherwise but with the use of violence, and vainly asked Governor-General Cornwallis to grant a permit allowing French troops to cross the British territory to get to Chandernagore.¹²

On 12 February 1791, Mottet was replaced by Colonel de Canaple, a new “*Commander of the French Nation’s Matters*” in Chandernagore. However this French agent would not even dare to enter the town. He stayed in Calcutta, where he was acknowledged by the establishment of the Presidency. De Canaple devoted himself to questions that related to salt and opium, and kept on dealing in the spirit of the French Revolution’s legal achievements. One French ship with 30 slaves on board was seized on the Hughli River in the Diamond Harbour at the beginning of April 1791. Colonel de Canaple was asked to set them free. He accommodated that request. Mr. George Wheatley even received 1,200 rupees in compensation for discovery and liberation of those slaves in accordance with the Proclamation of 22 July 1789.¹³

After Colonel Canaple died from heart attack on 5 August 1791, English officers were sent to accompany him on his last journey in tribute. Contrary to that, while he

10 WANNER, *Pondicherry*, pp. 62–63.

11 SEN, pp. 465–466.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 466.

13 S. H. ASKARI (Ed.), *Fort William-India House Correspondence and Other Contemporary Papers Relating Thereto (Foreign, Secret and Political)*, further only FWIHC, Vol. XVI, Delhi 1976, Foreign Letter to Court, 17 March 1791, pp. 367–369, par. 2, 6, 10.

had been dying, the Chandernagore's Committee had sent a deputation led by Longchamp and Ricard to Île de France to complain about his manners.¹⁴

As the Revolutionary Committee in Chandernagore refused to respect the Colonial Assembly authority, a heated dispute erupted even between Pondicherry and Île de France. The Colonial Assembly in Pondicherry protested against the intervention from Île de France in the Chandernagore's matters, and refused to subordinate to the Île de France Government claiming that Pondicherry itself possessed the authority over all French settlements in India. On the other hand, the Chandernagore Committee called upon the Pondicherry garrison to revolt against Governor de Fresne's reactionary government. It was scornfully declined.¹⁵

After Canaple's death, de Cossigny, the Governor of French settlements easterly of the Cape of Good Hope, appointed Mr Gautier and Mr Yvon to posts of the French King's Commissioners charged with the settlement of issues in Chandernagore.

They were recognized as Commissioners even by the British East India Company. Reluctantly accepting the information about that appointment, Governor de Fresne expressed his indignation. He presented his in-depth report on the situation in Chandernagore and the correspondence with Governor-General de Cossigny as to those matters to the General Assembly. The Pondicherry Assembly issued a resolution on 7 August 1792 protesting against interventions from Île de France in its authorities. The Assembly argued that the National Assembly in Paris had recognized representatives of factories to be representatives of French India, and that the settlement would not recognize the sovereignty of Île de France over that colony any more. To the contrary, they declared absolute control over all Indian settlements. Deputed by the Assembly, de Fresne sent Chairperson Fumeron to Bengal to act as "*an agent who had been entrusted with supervising the national interests*", but not to hold his post as Commandant there. His task was to make the Chandernagore Committee see reason and to elect representatives to the Colonial Assembly.¹⁶

As soon as all of the Commissioners charged with the task to settle down the situation in Chandernagore had arrived in Bengal in mid-September, a dispute as to the powers instantly erupted among Fumeron, Gautier and Yvon. In addition, all of whom demanded 300 crates of opium from the British, which constituted a yearly share of French company in Bengal. The Bengal Council was caught in a tricky situation. Following slight hesitation, the Council decided in favour of communication with Fumeron on 5 October, since Mr. de Fresne "*had recognized Mr. Charpentier to be his superior, but it was his own decision in this case since Mr. Charpentier's task is to supervise transaction accounts in all French settlements in India*". Thus the crates with opium along with Colonel de Canaple's property were handed over to Fumeron.¹⁷ It constituted a considerable achievement for both Fumeron and de Fresne with whom the British would remain in contact through letters. Vice versa de Fresne informed

14 SEN, p. 468.

15 Ibidem, pp. 440–441.

16 Ibidem, pp. 468–469.

17 FWIHC, Vol. XVI, Foreign Letter to Court, 17 March 1791, p. 404, par. 29; FWIHC, Vol. XVI, Foreign Letter to Court, 25 November 1791, pp. 408–410, par. 14–27.



them in letter of 20 August 1791 about the replacement of the French flag, and wanted them to disseminate this information in the local British press.¹⁸

Chandernagore lost its primary source of income, yet the residents were persuaded to hold on. The General Assembly in Chandernagore enacted the Constitution on 6 November 1792, which declared the colony's independence from Pondicherry in addition to other things, however, formally referred to the authority of the French King (who had been already deposed those times). Although it was the King's representative who was supposed to be the head of the factory, the real power was held by the General Assembly.

The meetings of the Assembly were due once a year. However, it was the Administrative Assembly (*Assemblée Administrative*) called every three months that ruled in the meanwhile; the routine duties during the intermediate times were performed by the Directorate (*Directorie*). The Constitution had also instituted two Courts, one for the French another for the natives. Both of them were to be presided over by a Frenchman, associate judges at the Court for the natives were supposed to be elected by Indian residents of the colony.

Commissioner Gautier returned to Île de France in December and left Yvone in Chandernagore to be the Commandant there. Richemont was dispatched to Île de France by the General Assembly to report on the terror from Pondicherry side. Governor Cossigny sent a formal command to de Fresne to dismiss Fumeron. His departure, however, delayed due to Yvon's death and changes in posts of Governor-General. Cossigny was replaced by Malartic, who confirmed Fumeron's dismissal and appointed Gautier as the new Commandant of Chandernagore. Fumeron left Bengal in October 1792, and went back to Pondicherry, where he re-assumed the position of the President of the Colonial Assembly. Also Gautier was in the town that time, and would never leave the colony due to the British siege. Thus the constant chaos reigned in Chandernagore.¹⁹

THE SITUATION IN PONDICHERRY

The Colonial Assembly in Pondicherry had mostly worked in accord with the Governor; basically, peace had been prevailing in the town. What we know from sources is that the unveiling of a statue to the arrival of Jesuits at the town took place on 20 June 1791. Prominent Tamil families would have grandiose wedding celebrations; the one held on 10 July 1791 was attended by Madam de Fresne, who acting as a proxy for the Governor danced there to "tones of violins". Celebrations of de Fresne's children christening were held on 14 July 1791 and were accompanied by cannon salvos and a ceremonial *Te Deum*.²⁰ The same day the Pondicherry residents celebrated the 2nd anni-

18 Ibidem, p. 409, par. 21.

19 V. J. TARAPOVERALA, *Fort William-India House Correspondence and Other Contemporary Papers Relating Thereto (Foreign, Political and Secret)*, Vol. XVII (further only FWIHC, Vol. XVII), 1792-1795, Delhi 1955, Foreign Letters to Court, 25. January 1792, p. 149, par. 2; 8 April 1792, p. 152, par. 11 and 12 December 1792, p. 156, par. 10.

20 GOBALAKICHENANE, p. 55.



versary of the Fall of the Bastille and the French nation's resurrection. They swore an oath of loyalty towards the Constitution, next there was a military parade, and a great patriotic celebration with dinner for 1,000 boarders was held on Place des Armes. One meticulous Tamil chronicler also penned: "that 1,500 bottles of wine were uncorked".²¹

The new French Tricolour flag was ceremonially hoisted on 4 August. Soldiers chanted "Vive la Nation! Vice le Loi! Vive le Roi!"²² The ceremonial *Te Deum* accompanied celebrations to mark the new Constitution on 9 April 1792 as well as the revived civic oath vowing "faithfulness to the nation, to the law, to the King" on 14 July 1792. The latter was accompanied by cannon salvos and a "general and patriotic banquet".²³

Yet the period was affected by a few disquieting events and phenomena. First and foremost, it was a remaining awkward economic situation, a shortage of foods occurred in the town, and the situation tended to worsen.²⁴

Sepoys began to publicly express their discontent on 5 April 1791. Soldiers were not satisfied with Duplessis, their new Commander, and would complain about too hard drill, undeserved punishments and no mercenary pays.²⁵ They would cast aside weapons, leave the barracks and stroll around the town. De Fresne was bound to demonstrate his skills in art of persuasion. He explained them the reasons for the replacement of troops' Commander as otherwise it would have had to come from France, so that it had not been too clever to commit a serious mistake of dropping their guns. The dispute was settled to all of the parties' satisfaction.²⁶

It was also escalating tension between the white population and Tamils that was growing. The detained Tamil notables were gradually released between 9 March and 16 April 1792 some of them due to illness, others upon paying a 100-pagod fine. They restored their petition activity on 6 July demanding the entrance into the public authorities. Actively campaigning against Governor de Fresne, they exerted to win the locals over and would achieve apparent success.²⁷ However, as early as on 13 July they were accused of "not respecting customs" by Mayor Coulon, who began to call them the extreme left or right wings. Outbreaks of public disorders began to occur on streets on 22 August caused by fights between the white population and Tamils, which de Fresne would tackle with firing into the air and closing gates. That affair was followed by investigation, some of the Tamil leaders were arrested, and martial law was declared in French and Tamil languages on 31 August.²⁸

The Colonial Assembly, which entirely comprised "people wearing hats", that means the white, held the first meeting on 31 August under armed guard. The first step taken

21 Ibidem, p. 145.

22 Veranaicker's Diary, in: M. GOBALAKICHENANE, *La révolution de Pondichéry d'après Veranaicker II.*, in: C. WANQUET — B. JULLIAN (Eds.), *Révolution Française et Océan Indien: prémices, héritages et déviances*, Paris 1996, p. 227.

23 Quoted by GOBALAKICHENANE, *La révolution française*, p. 61.

24 Ibidem, p. 58.

25 LABERNADIE, p. 71.

26 GOBALAKICHENANE, *La révolution française*, p. 52.

27 D. TAFFIN, *Citoyens et Malabars à Pondichéry pendant la révolution française (1750–1793)*, in: C. WANQUET — B. JULLIAN (eds.), *Révolution Française et Océan Indien: prémices, héritages et déviances*. Paris 1996, pp. 242–243.

28 Veranaicker's Diary, in: GOBALAKICHENANE, *La révolution de Pondichéry*, pp. 227–228.



by the Assembly was 29 articles specified on 3 August 1791, which would constitute the basis for a new constitution for French settlements in India. The Constitution was practically identical to that issued by the General Assembly on 5 July. One interesting item was increase in the Colonial Assembly by four representatives of Indian population provided a matter relating to them had been expected to be raised. They were not elected but appointed by the Tamil leaders. In this regard, the Assembly regressed more or less to the old regime practice, which had concentrated on the control of town residents on one hand, and on the preservation of the local customs on the other hand.²⁹ All-member Assembly elections were due once in two years and sessions once a week, on Thursday, and were to be open for the public.³⁰

One of the reasons behind those minor concessions to the indigenous population was the economic situation. De Fresne had no option but to resuscitate the trade in foods by the tax abolishment. At one and the same time, he addressed the Tamil leaders in the name of all residents and explaining that Malabars³¹ “*are gaining advantages from the new Constitution and are given preferential treatment due to the French flag*” he asked them for financial aid. The castes’ leaders would hand in 8,000 rupees by December 1791, which would constitute about a half of the expected amount.³²

The Colonial Assembly made attempt to introduce the civil constitution for the Church in September 1792. However, it was adopted by not more than two Capuchins and two Jesuits. The rest of the clergy left for Madras.³³ Another mission pursued to re-organize the Town Council. Popular Count de Civrac was elected Mayor on 3 September 1791.

The representatives were reduced to four at the same time. In addition, the Council had been dealing with a request for establishing a new National Guard. Some clashes between the Guard and a group of Topasses erupted on 20 September. On 15 October, residents presented a petition that demanded the Guard consisting of Europeans and European parents’ children, which led to angry protests by Topasses.³⁴ Consequently, Civrac halted the establishment of the National Guard until “*the National Assembly decides on ranks for the members of single classes that compose residents of this town*”.³⁵ The Assembly elected two representatives from India to a new legislative assembly in Paris. The persons picked to execute this mission were Moracin and a trader from Bordeaux named Corbin who had adopt the lead role in agitation for ending the monopoly of the Company for Indies and China.³⁶

29 GOBALAKICHENANE, *La revolution française*, p. 59.

30 TAFFIN, p. 243.

31 The Tamil people were commonly called Malabars in the 17th and 18th centuries. It was on the basis of the linguistic ties of the Dravidian languages occurring on both coasts of South India.

32 GOBALAKICHENANE, *La revolution française*, p. 58.

33 SEN, p. 442,

34 LABERNADIE, p. 96.

35 Quoted *ibidem*, p. 243.

36 GOBALAKICHENANE, *La revolution française*, p. 60.

THE ARRIVAL OF CIVIL COMMISSIONERS FROM FRANCE



Meanwhile in France, the revolution aroused new interest in colonies. In October 1791, the National Assembly issued the decision to send 600 infantrymen and 140 artillerymen to Pondicherry to extend the garrison in the town to 1,000 European soldiers; 1,000 sepoy corps; and two companies of artillerymen. Soldiers in the town amounted to not more than 400 until the units' arrival in September 1792. Also Engineer de Phélines, who had been entrusted with building fortification, arrived with the troops.³⁷

What is more, in January 1792, the National Assembly decided to send four Civil Commissioners — Boucher, Tirol, Lescallier and Dumourier to supervise the new organization in eastern colonies. They set out on journey to Île de France in February 1792. The two of them, Lescallier and Dumourier, were supposed to continue from the Mascarene Islands to “*Indian peninsula and to Bengal*”.³⁸ They arrived in Port Louis in July 1792.³⁹ News about the arrival of two Civil Commissioners was greeted with enthusiasm by the Pondicherry residents and the Colonial Assembly. The residents were looking forward to presenting their outcomes as to the re-organization of the French settlements in India. They were proud of the solid legal grounds the reforms had been given when approved by the National Assembly. Lescallier arrived in Pondicherry on 30 September 1792. Dumourier stayed on Île de France several months to finish his task.⁴⁰

Lescallier received a warm welcome in Pondicherry, however, took a conservative attitude towards the enthusiasm of the locals. He had already had direct experience of the colonial administration as he had worked as an officer on St. Domingo Island in the Caribbean. The first thing he pushed through was the method of electing a new Colonial Assembly according to the law and the French Constitution of 1791. The new Assembly was created to have 12 members, and the equal number of substitutes only voted by the active residents. Electees had to be French-born or become a French national in accord with the French Constitution of 1791, aged 25 or above, to have property worth 500 rupees, reside in the colony minimum one year or pay a month's rent, which was 5 rupees for minimum two-year residence. The list of active residents was compiled in November 1792 and comprised 214 names. Yet the committee of representatives mentioned the discrimination against “*diverse classes of people*”⁴¹ in the letter to the National Assembly, and later on, the list of active residents was added to by 14 names of Topasses who had gained a voting right (suffrage) subjected to these requirements: They had to be born in a legitimate marriage of freeborn parents, to own the property worth minimum 500 rupees or pay month's rent of minimum 5 rupees, they had to be reasonable good at speaking and reading French. Other Pondicherry residents were not considered to be the King's subjects but “*ones located under the French flag protection*”.⁴²

³⁷ SEN, p. 442.

³⁸ Quoted by GOBALAKICHENANE, *La révolution de Pondichéry*, p. 230.

³⁹ SEN, p. 443.

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁴¹ Quoted by TAFFIN, p. 244.

⁴² Quoted ibidem, p. 245.



His Majesty's oath sworn to the National Assembly, which regarded also the "amnesty for all matters that relate to the Revolution", was publicly read on 20 April 1792. The amnesty was granted for all deeds committed by Chandernagore residents, the arrested Tamils had been excluded as they had not committed them in the Revolution context.⁴³

The new Colonial Assembly was elected on the basis of these requirements in December 1792. Lescallier deputed the Assembly to devise a scheme for the re-organization of all French settlements in India, and started to push through numerous reforms in military, economic and religious spheres. Key measures included the abolition of slave trade in accord with the King's instruction to the Civil Commissioners of 22 February 1792. The original town wall ruins were demolished with Engineer de Phélines's assistance, the construction of a channel running through the town went on. The list of villages that pertained to Pondicherry was updated, and lodges for the untouchable were built.⁴⁴

In consequence of assuming nearly all duties of the government office by Lescallier, Governor de Fresne was pushed into the background. He was annoyed by his decreased importance in the colony, where he had been the guarantor of peace and quiet. He had eyesight problems and was tired of heated correspondence with Governors General Conway, Cossigny and Malartic concerning the situation in Chandernagore. Finally, "feeling offended after thirty-six years of service" he left for France in late January 1793.⁴⁵ He delegated his authorities to Touffreville, the Commander in Karaikal. Appointed by Malartic, Chermont as Governor arrived in the site in February. Dumourier, another Civil Commissioner for India, arrived as well. Relationships between the commissioners would be soon full of conflicts. Dumourier was blamed by his mate for being passive.⁴⁶

"A theft of the state flag had happened in the night of 5th-6th February (1793), and a killed black man and a piece of white linen about three cubits in length were found by two soldiers while lining up in the morning around 6 o'clock". The case was investigated but no culprit was discovered. This incident would negatively affect the atmosphere and inter-race relationships in the factory.⁴⁷

Another shock for the Pondicherry residents came in late March when, to their astonishment, they received information about the development in France, the King's treachery, his dethronement, the proclamation declaring the Republic, which sparked the wave of patriotic and revolutionary euphoria. They celebrated the dawn of the new era on 1 and 2 April, planted a tree of victory, arranged fireworks show and celebration where they chanted mottos such as "Vive la Nation", "Vive la République".⁴⁸ As soon as Pondicherry had turned 1793 to start the second year of the Republic, all of the old forms and customs were abolished. They adopted a new revolutionary calendar, and even a revolutionary greeting — a hand put on the heart. The Colonial Assembly ordered to establish the National Guard on 21 May 1793.

43 Quoted by GOBALAKICHENANE, *La révolution française*, p. 61.

44 SEN, p. 444.

45 Quoted by GOBALAKICHENANE, *La révolution de Pondichéry*, p. 230.

46 SEN, pp. 444-445.

47 Quoted by GOBALAKICHENANE, *La révolution française*, p. 59.

48 Quoted by SEN, p. 445.



Continuing discussions on the organization revealed that Indian population had not had any will to join the civil structures. Officers refused to submit to the people “*with blood so much lower (than theirs)*”.⁴⁹ The class of “*colour*” population as they had been called, which had included the most assimilated natives, was again excluded and the Indian representation in the constitution of Pondicherry was not mentioned any more.⁵⁰

The revolutionary enthusiasm suffered a cruel blow at the end of May when the news about the outbreak of a war between England and France began to spread to Pondicherry. Everybody knew that Pondicherry was impossible to defend. The Colonial Assembly decided to postpone all subjects at the session on 26 May, and to predominantly concentrate on measures to repel and a direct attack.

THE SIEGE OF PONDICHERRY AND THE SURRENDER

The war that France had declared against the United Kingdom and the Netherlands began on 1 January 1793; the information about the War flowed to India through Baldwin, the British Consul in Alexandria, on 1 June 1793. Although nobody received any official notification, the British Council in Fort William in Bengal decided to issue “*commands, which would be immediately obeyed, to seize Chandernagore in Bengal and some French colonies in the country*”. The enemy was caught by surprise. Chandernagore in Bengal surrendered without a struggle as early as on 11 June to a battalion of sepoys from Barrackpore (also Barrackpur) commanded by Major Duncan.⁵¹ Concurrently, the government in Madras dispatched the frigate *Minerva* that would enforce a naval blockade against Pondicherry along with the armed merchant ships *Royal Charlotte*, *Warley* and *Triton*. A regiment commanded by Colonel John Floyd was dispatched at the same time to head to the centre of French dependencies.⁵²

At the beginning of June, Chermont got the definite information about that the English had been busy with preparations for a military campaign against Pondicherry. On 7 June, he called the War Council consisting of both of the Civil Commissioners, two representatives of the Colonial Assembly, ordnance officer, Mayor and the Commander of the National Guard. Immediately, preparations began to improve the town defensiveness, and to deliver foods due to siege. However, withstanding a resolute attack was mission impossible. The town walls had been in ruins and no plan to reconstruct them had been implemented until 1785. All that Engineer de Phélines could do in one and half months was to fill gaps in few points. The garrison had consisted of 490 men from the Pondicherry regiment, 80 artillerymen, and 400 sepoys. They were reinforced by 150 men from the National Guard whose vigorous patriotism could not even up a complete lack of martial experience; a 25-draagoon company, who had been newly included to scout; a 50-man artillery company comprised of recruited Topasses; and 450 newly-paid sepoys. The artillery contained 140 cannons of different calibres but only 11 of them had a longer range of fire. There

49 Quoted by TAFFIN, p. 243.

50 Ibidem.

51 FWIHC vol. XVII, Political Letters to Court, 13. August 1793, p. 294, par. 101.

52 FWIHC, Vol. XVII, Political Letter to Court, 1 August 1793, p. 274, par 5–9.



was a large powder-magazine, however, the powder had been stored in such a way that in the case of bombing it would have presented danger for the town. Ammunition sent from Île de France was not always right, and the calibre of most of the artillery bombshells differed from cannons they had.⁵³

There were supplies that would hold out three months in the town, but the financial resources in the treasury were barely sufficient for a month. Desperate attempts had been made to get some money. The patriotic enthusiasm of residents made it possible to raise a considerable sum by a voluntary fund-raising campaign; likewise many Indian farmers provided money for the defence.⁵⁴ Women and children were sent to a safe Danish factory in Tranquebar (today's Tharangambadi). Most of the indigenous population left the town to hide in neighbourhood. Aiming to recruit all available persons, the Town Self-Government practically suspended all functions, and the Colonial Assembly delegated its authorities to the temporary Triumvirate. On 20 June, the Colonial Assembly having worries over treachery issued a decree on the ban on surrender unless expressly agreed by the Governor.⁵⁵

The British troops drew near within sight and camped on mound Perimbé on 12 July. The foregoing British ships were laid at anchor in front of the town and closed the blockade around on 15 July.⁵⁶ Besiegers were commanded by the executive commander of the Madras army, General John Braithwaite. He had 24,000 soldiers at his disposal including 6,000 Europeans and heavy artillery. He could have easily seized Pondicherry provided he had launched one brave attack, however, the memory of heroic residents defending their town several times in the past made the British cautious. Therefore they preferred siege.⁵⁷

On the same day when the British army encamped on Perimbé, Chermont issued a declaration stating that Pondicherry had come under siege. Nobody was optimistic about the situation, nevertheless, the residents' patriotic spirit and enthusiasm got encouraged by the news about the winning Battle of Valmy, which indicated that it was possible to win even in such a situation. Hope for Indian Princes' help was vain. Chermont sending desperate requests to Mysore Tipu Sultan and Nizam Ali Khan for intervention received no answers. Neither Tipu, who had not been provided aid in his long-lasting fight with the English, nor Nizam Ali wanted to be involved in the war with the English for the sake of the power which had abandoned all power ambitions in India, and was highly likely to disappear. Desperate letters to de Vigie and Raymond, who had been commanding European contingents in Mysore and Hyderabad, asking them to move their masters to intervene in favour of the town were equally hopeless.⁵⁸ It was a logical consequence of policy followed by the French government against French dependencies adopted after the Paris Peace Treaty in 1783. Following the siege laid to the town, Tipu only communicated with the French on Île de France and in the Near East.⁵⁹

53 SEN, p. 446.

54 GOBALAKICHENANE, *La révolution française*, p. 67.

55 SEN, p. 446.

56 FWIHC, Vol. XVII, Political Letters to Court, 1 August 1793, p. 274, par 5–9.

57 SEN, p. 447.

58 Ibidem.

59 GOBALAKICHENANE, *La révolution de Pondichéry*, p. 230.



Last hope for assistance from outside wrecked on 27 July 1793 when Chermont read before the War Council letters from Governor General Malartic and Vice-Admiral de Saint-Felix, which had been brought on the frigate *Cybèle* to India. The ship, however, only arrived in Tranquebar, where the letters were sent by land to Pondicherry. What the Pondicherry residents only got instead of expected news about reinforcement was a questionnaire concerning the ability of the British in India to dispatch an expedition to Île de France. The War Council's members became disillusioned by the slightest interest taken by their homeland, and the indifferent attitude of their superiors in Port Louis.⁶⁰

What deserves mention is that it was not until 14 August when the Colonial Assembly on the island gained information about the siege of Pondicherry, announced the motto "*The homeland is in danger in the Indian seas*" and deputed "*the executive power to arm four frigates to sail there to fight*". In addition to the armaments replenishment they should have been added by "*another ten equipped trade vessels that lay at anchor in roadstead*". Admiral de Saint-Felix, who had had been in command of a French fleet, asked the Minister of Navy for instructions while expressing contempt for the instructions issued "*in the name of people from Île de France*".⁶¹ Whereas the Governor-General and the revolutionary bodies in Port Louis had intervened in events in Indian dependencies in previous years, now they preferred a restrained attitude like the navy due to worries over their own safety, and because they wanted to maintain their own, rather deformed model of the revolutionary development based on keeping slavery.⁶²

Despite the wrecked last hope for help from outside, the War Council had no doubt that the site had to be defended until the end. This attitude nowise deceived the English who had heard about the frigate *Cybèle* mission. Both of the commanders, General Braithwaithe being in command of the English army, and Cornwallis commanding the fleet, suggested Pondicherry's surrender. Chermont heroically and respectably expressed in answer his determination to persist. His answer was read at the Colonial Assembly session on 3 August and received support. The Pondicherry residents declared their resolution to defend Pondicherry for all costs. Following the rejected surrender, the British began to shell the town and were advancing. The shelling soon caused havoc to the town, eliminated all long-range cannons and destroyed many houses. First, de Phélines suggested raid, however when facing the enemy's predominance the suggestion was rejected.⁶³

The British had been leading attacks by shooting cannons and spreading propaganda by throwing leaflets with a portrait of Louis XVI captioned with inscription

60 SEN, p. 448.

61 C. WANQUET, *Les Îles Mascareignes, L'Inde et les indiens pendant La révolution française*, in: *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, Année 1991, Vol. 78, No. 290, pp. 29–57, quotation p. 29.

62 The letter written after the surrender of the Pondicherry to the President of the Temporary Committee of Three, to which the Colonial Assembly handed over its authority, seemed to leave the Pondicherry to his fate entirely on the shoulders of the revolutionary government in Paris and not on the Ile de France commanders. SEN, p. 448.

63 Ibidem.



"I have died innocent".⁶⁴ French newspapers that reported on the King's execution, D'Armauriez's disloyalty, and the Civil War in the south and the west of France had been flowing to the town. The enemy propaganda achieved bigger impact than the military situation, which made further defence senseless. On 20 August, Chermont called the War Council and suggested instant surrender to prevent another destruction of the town. The Colonial Assembly and the Town Council adopted the same attitude two days later and entrusted Chermont with entering into negotiations with the British. He delegated Touffreville to conduct them. A short discussion held just a few hours ended with the terms of surrender signed on 23 August 1793.⁶⁵ The terms were fairly favourable for the French. The British promised to respect the residents' individual freedom, their rights and property. Soldiers had to yield weapons and flags and were escorted to Madras and sent back to Europe.⁶⁶ According to witnesses, some of them were crying "*Vive le Roi! Vive les Anglais*" while leaving the Madras gate.⁶⁷

POST-SURRENDER PONDICHERRY

The course of events had been so swift that the Triumvirate authorized by the Colonial Assembly to draft a new constitution of the French colonies in India's completely ignored the capitulation. The members were peacefully discussing single provisions of the constitution and were only woken up to the reality when the British troops arrived in the town. The Pondicherry residents' mentalities were badly affected by the surrender and the failure of Paris and Port Louis. Many officers and residents snatched off tricolour cockades and were in mourning for the dead King. The British allowed all French residents to leave the town and go where they wanted. But only few took advantage of that permission and left for Île de France. Most of them stayed there despite the uncertain political situation in France. The population census carried out by the English in 1796 reported 823 Europeans including women and children living in the town.⁶⁸

Lescallier, one Civil Commissioner, exploited that British permit and left the town in November 1793. He sailed to Île de France, where he sent detailed information to the National Assembly of France on 14 October 1794 about the events in Pondicherry resulting in the surrender, and about measures to be imposed in France to destroy the British power in India in co-operation with some local powers. He literary penned: "*France is still able to resuscitate its powers and influence. [...] France adheres to principles of justice and freedom, whereas the aim of the British policy is dominance and invasion.*"⁶⁹ His report emphasised that all powers in India had unified with the British,

64 Quoted by GOBALAKICHENANE, *La révolution française*, p. 68.

65 FWIHC, Vol. XVII, Political Letter to Court, 28. October 1793, p. 296, par. 6–9.

66 To the conditions of surrender in detail LABERNADIE, pp. 160–162.

67 Quoted by GOBALAKICHENANE, *La révolution française*, p. 69.

68 M. V. LABERNADIE, *Le Vieux Pondichéry (1674–1815)*, Pondichéry 1936, p. 408.

69 Quoted by V. Y. PALLI, *The French Revolution and the late 18th century Colonial South India*, in: C. WANQUET — B. JULIEN (Eds.), *Révolution française et Océan indien: Prémices, paroxysmes, héritages et déviances*, in: Actes du colloque de Saint-Pierre de la Reunion organisé

but provided a possibility to break away had existed they would have unified with the French. However, his views would not find response in the Paris government.⁷⁰

Chermont lived in Pondicherry until 1798 when he died. He wrote a long and detailed memorandum on the siege to town and its fall to purge himself of the suspicion about his cowardice which resulted in his willingness to agree with the surrender. According to him, the fall of Pondicherry had been caused by absence of the fortification and lack of troops in addition to no discipline of the disobedient army ruled by revolutionary enthusiasm; next by conflicts between the civil and the military authorities caused by the arrival of two Civil Commissioners. According to his view, which he had communicated to the Minister of Navy, it was not possible to protect Pondicherry in the case of war. In his personal opinion the troops and ammunition should have been evacuated, however, the position of population encouraged by rumours about revolutionary victories in Europe had been completely contradictory. He claimed that he had retreated in favour of the residents' wishes, as they were determined to defend Pondicherry, and he hoped they would change their opinions and allow him to finish that senseless resistance.⁷¹

Pondicherry was successively administrated by General Braithwaite, Colonel McLeod, and except for a few new things, such as accommodating officers in local flats and ostentatious arrest of suspects, nothing disturbed the routine life of the town. The most sensational event happened in 1799 when all private houses were subjected to a thorough inspection due to some residents suspected that they had wanted to join Tipu Sultan who had been in war with the British, and many Frenchmen, including prominent ones were arrested and imprisoned.⁷²

CONCLUSION

The course of the Revolution in French colonies in India suggests that their population experienced the Revolution with extraordinary effort, however, concentrated primarily on the internal policy issues and did not attempt to restore French power in India, to which for that matter did not have any means at their disposal. The news about the Revolution in France resulted in the establishment of democratic representative bodies, which did not deal with the same problems like the French National Assembly. Also further course of the Revolution in that area was dynamized by the basic milestones of the development in France; their impact in single colonies was different.

There was rivalry among single governors that reflected diverse interests, unsuccessful reforms and latent disputes, which had erupted in the pre-revolutionary period, as well as a specific course of the Revolution in single colonies given by their different social composition and the character of economy.

par l'Association historique internationale de l'Océan Indien, Octobre 1990, Paris 1996, pp. 249–257, link p. 250.

⁷⁰ SEN, p. 552.

⁷¹ Ibidem, p. 450.

⁷² Ibidem, p. 409.



The development in Pondicherry was relatively calm; Governor de Fresne managed to flexibly apply the outcomes of the first stage of the Revolution despite ongoing economic crisis, but also due to the fact that Pondicherry was not dependent on slavery work, like e.g. the Mascarene Islands. The development in Pondicherry was mostly about satisfying the requirements of democratization, and was free of revolutionary excesses. In principle, the loyalty towards the King, and the law and authorities in Paris remained with exception of the unpopular Company for Indies and China (*Compagnie des Indes et la Chine*).

The disillusionment with the Paris Government's attitude and the French administration on Île de France during the siege together with the information about the King's arrest and his execution accepted with certain confusion resulted in the adoption of anti-revolutionary attitude after the surrender. Only attempts of Pondicherry administration to re-establish the privileged position of the colony met with resistance among the settlements in India. It sparked outrage in other factories ranging from the passive resistance to the heated opposition in Chandernagore, therefore, it could not be crowned with success.

In principle, the crowds of Indian population, even the indigenous population in French colonies, remained beyond the events. Ideas of the French Revolution only affected a relatively closely-defined educated class, language-wise and partially culturally and economically related to the French administration. The masses of the local craftsmen living in the town and its surroundings remained unaffected by that process. On the whole, the French colonial administration flexibly managed to incorporate Topasses into the new regime, but encountered unsolvable limits in the case of Tamil notables undoubtedly not only due to race prejudices.

Accepting them as residents constituted a sign of potential recognition of all indigenous population in the factory to be citizens of French colonies. Such a solution could have completely changed the character of existing orders. This fact resulted in an extremely cautious, ambivalent and rather negative attitude of the colony administration towards the Tamil requirements, and seemingly conservative adherence to the principles of the old regime in the local environment. French India simply could not halt being French. On the other hand, the local French elites knew the value of this population for France, therefore, minimum individuals attempted to find a sort of conciliatory *modus vivendi* taking into account the needs of the indigenous population under "*the French flag protection*". For that reason, they were perceived as the population of another country and another culture. They could not become French nationals, however, their interests had to be taken into account due to the important position in the French factory, at least when something regarded directly themselves.

Indian Princes held revolutionary ideas, as expected, completely strange and incomprehensible.⁷³ The only thing they awaited from the French was military assistance against the British or the local enemies; however, they would be never lent a hand those times. The presence of French adventurers in their service could change hardly anything. France was deeply immersed in its own inside problems and so was not able to clearly formulate the foreign policy towards the Asian powers. Its attitude

73 PALLI, p. 256.

towards India nowise dramatically differed from that of the old regime in the form that had stabilized after the Carnatic Wars.

So the fall of Pondicherry did not result from the consequences of the French Revolution, but from the presumed worries over the French re-expansion in India and the peril of British concerns in that area. Therefore, the roots of the British action should be retrieved in the geopolitical contexts of the previous development. In fact, the British were aware of the French weakness. As Governor General Mornington had stated as early as in June 1794 “*French influence in India, thank God, is nearly eliminated!*”⁷⁴ But it had caused no change in his policy using the French Revolution as pretence for eliminating the remains of French influence and his own enemies in the subcontinent. So the French Revolution indirectly helped the British expansion in India.⁷⁵

The only man who had indicated effort to constitute the long-term expansion policy of France in India in that revolutionary era was Napoleon Bonaparte. His effort might be best documented by his response to Tipu Sultan dating from, perhaps, 29 January 1799: “*You have already been informed about my arrival in the shores of the Red Sea with the numerous and unbeatable army with the aim to liberate you from the iron yoke of England. I eagerly accept this opportunity to tell you my intention, when I heard about your political situation on my journey across Muscat and Mokka. I even wish you could send me to Suez or Cairo an intelligent person who is having your trust I would be able to talk with.*”⁷⁶ Nevertheless, he had no concrete plan either. Only when he rose to power a sort of friendship would be re-established, which would partially restore the awareness of French people in the Indian subcontinent at the end of the 18th century in addition to the policy of French adventurers in Indian courts, and would restore the local political development of thought of both enemy sides of the Napoleonic Wars.

The surrender of Pondicherry in August of 1793 finished a long chapter of Anglo-French contest in India that had started in the era of Joseph François Dupleix a half century earlier. The capital city of French India remained occupied for another 23 years, and when it was given back in December 1816, the French return to the completely different environment. France definitely recognized the British sovereignty in India by agreements dating from 1814 and 1815, and took back its dependencies on the basis of the clear affirmation that no fortification would be built and would not keep any military troops. So Pondicherry definitely lost its importance in the world history.

74 M. MONTGOMERY (Ed), *The Despatches, Minutes and Correspondence of the Marquess Wellesley*, Vol. II, London 1836, pp. 1836–1837.

75 M. RAPPORT, *The International Repercussions of the French Revolution*, in: P. MCPHEE, *A Companion of the French Revolution*, Chichester 2013, pp. 381–394, link p. 394.

76 The letter was never delivered to Tipu because the British captured it in Aden. R. B. MOWAT, *The Diplomacy of Napoleon*, London 1924, p. 58, details in M. SHAMA RAD, *Modern Mysore (from the beginning to 1868)*, Bangalore 1936, pp. 178–180; H. H. DODWELL, *The Cambridge History of India*, Vol. V, New Delhi 1929, pp. 327–328.