

Pondicherry in the French Revolution Era 1785–1793: Part 1: Reasons and Beginnings 1785–1791



Michal Wanner

The French Revolution is one of the most popular topics in the world's historiography, so are issues concerning responses that the Revolution generated in colonies. However, research into this field suffers relative non-uniformity. While questions such as abolishment or re-establishment of slavery in Caribbean colonies and the history of suppressing slave revolt on Haiti have been given considerable attention,¹ the development in French colonies in the Indian Ocean has been analysed less frequently so far. The development in Pondicherry (today's Puducherry), the centre of the French settlements in India — the author's study subject, has been grounded on two earlier studies by Marguerite V. Labernadie from the 1930s,² and a relevant chapters from the history of French activities in India from Siba Pada Sen's pen dating back to the 1950s.³

Anyhow they are valuable works a few facts decrease their importance: The work by Labernadie reduces events of the Revolution to only be a confusing and simple battle for the power among individuals, it neglects the role of Indians and foreigners they played during those events; it views them as mere evidence of a power fight.

-
- 1 Let's remember just a few titles from the past two decades C. WANQUET, *La France et la première abolition de l'esclavage, 1794–1802: Le cas des colonies orientales, Ile de France (Maurice) et la Réunion*, Karthala 1998; P. DELISLE, *Catholicisme, esclavage et acculturation dans la Caraïbe francophone et en Guyane au XIXe siècle*, Matoury 2006; O. PÉTRÉ-GRENOUILLEAU (Ed.), *Abolir l'esclavage: Un réformisme à l'épreuve (France, Portugal, Suisse, XVIIIe–XIXe siècles)*, Rennes 2008; J. EHRARD, *Lumières et esclavage: L'esclavage colonial et l'opinion publique en France au XVIIIe siècle*, Bruxelles 2008; F. LAPEYRE, *Quand les voyageuses découvraient l'esclavage*, Paris 2009; F. BLANCPAIN, *Étienne de Polverel: Libérateur des esclaves de Saint-Domingue*, Bécherel 2010; C. OUDIN-BASTIDE, *L'effroi et la terreur: Esclavage, poison et sorcellerie aux Antilles*, Paris 2013; C. CHIVALLON, *L'esclavage, du souvenir à la mémoire: Contribution à une anthropologie de la Caraïbe*, Paris 2013; O. GRENOUILLEAU, *Qu'est-ce que l'esclavage?: Une histoire globale*, Paris 2014; S. LARCHER, *L'autre citoyen: L'idéal républicain et les Antilles après l'esclavage*, Paris 2014.
 - 2 M. V. LABERNADIE, *La révolution et les établissements français dans l'Inde, 1790–1793*, Paris — Pondichéry 1930; M. V. LABERNADIE, *Le vieux Pondichéry 1673–1875*, Paris — Pondichéry 1936.
 - 3 S. P. SEN, *The French in India (1765–1816)*, Calcutta 1958.



Labernadie without a doubt feels no sympathy for revolutionary elements that she presents as rebels whose agitation all “honest people”⁴ avoid, and which does not contain a sort of general idea background. Siba Pada Sen enriched the study subject by comprehensive approach; he had taken into an account the development in Chandernagore (today’ Chandannagar) and other colonies. In general, he had sympathy towards democratizing tendencies brought about by the Revolution; nevertheless he despised radicals, and was not reluctant to critically comment on most French revolutionaries’ inflexible attitudes towards races. He was one of those who had devoted rather insufficient attention to activities of Indian population.⁵

A change in this respect was only brought about by numerous studies examining a social development and interracial relationships, namely the 1960s legal and historical studies by Pierre Lampué⁶ and Roger Glachant⁷. The thing that had enormous importance for research into impacts of the French Revolution in India were studies from the late 1980s and the early 1990s linked with activities of the International Historical Association for the Indian Ocean. The thing that represented the turning point in the research were colloquiums held in Delphi in February-March 1989, which would produce a valuable study from Claude Wanquet’s pen;⁸ the outcomes of the international conference held in Saint-Denis de la Reunion in 1986 tracing relationships between France and Indian emperors from the 17th century onwards,⁹ but primarily a colloquium held in October 1990 in Saint-Pierre de la Réunion whose results would be published in a collection edited by Claude Wanquet and Benoît Jullien in Paris in 1996.¹⁰

The studies can be grouped into a few fields by their objectives. Some of the authors depict revolutionary events in the French colonies. This stream primarily focuses on issues of interracial and social relationships in colonies on the Coromandel Coast,¹¹ and is dominated by beneficial studies by M. Gobalakichenane devoted to a Tamil manuscript known as the *Journal de Viranaicker* depicting events in Pondicherry in 1778–1792,¹² as well his study about Tamils’ activities in the French colonies in the Revolution era.¹³

4 LABERNADIE, *La Révolution*, p. 205.

5 SEN, *The French*, pp. 438–439, 535.

6 P. LAMPUÉ, *Le régime constitutionnel des colonies françaises*, in: *Annales du droit et des sciences sociales*, Vol. 4, 1934, pp. 233–244.

7 R. GLACHANT, *Histoire de l’Inde des français*, Paris 1965.

8 C. WANQUET, *Révolution française et identité reunionaise*, in: *Revue française d’histoire d’outre mer*, 1er et 2er trim, 1989, pp. 35–74.

9 *Les relations historiques et culturelles entre la France et l’Inde: XVIIe-XXe siècles = Historical and cultural relations between France and India: XVIIIth-XXth centuries*, Saint-Denis de la Reunion 1987.

10 C. WANQUET — B. JULLIAN (Eds.), *Révolution Française et Océan Indien: Prémices, héritages et déviances*, Paris 1996.

11 TAFFIN, *Citoyens*, pp. 235–248.

12 M. GOBALAKICHENANE, *La révolution de Pondichéry d’après Viranaicker II*; TAFFIN, *Citoyens*, pp. 221–234.

13 M. GOBALAKICHENANE, *La Revolution Française des Tamouls de Pondichery (1790–1793)*, Chennai 2014.

This study aims to synthetically contain all outcomes and to consider interrelation of the development in Pondicherry and other colonies, mostly on the Mascarene Islands and Chandernagore. According to this study's author, the development in one colony impacted the development in other colonies in many situations.



FRENCH POLICY IN INDIA AFTER THE AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY WAR

Pondicherry, the centre of French colonies in India, was placed in a difficult situation after The Revolutionary War.¹⁴ Although the English handed the town back to the French on 1st January 1785, yet it had to face economic problems and political uncertainty. Generally, there was a widespread feeling of desperation and frustration among inhabitants.¹⁵

Hopes for re-gaining Pondicherry political stature faded owing to policy adopted by the French government after 1783. The War had completely wrecked its finances, so the government teetered on the verge of bankruptcy. For that reason it had little tolerance for colonial expansion and only concentrated on finances consolidation. As State Secretary of the Navy, Eugène Gabriel de La Croix, Marquis de Castries wrote in 1787, the King's intention was "to try to preserve peace among princes until we are able to help them, and up to the time we are able to join the forces of Holland. We must wait before the right disposition arises, so we could ask this power for a few bases".¹⁶

The French had depended upon the use of the Netherlands' navy and navy bases against the English in case of war, which they would partially do during the Revolutionary War and the Napoleonic Wars. However, the help they received from the Netherlanders was nowhere near as huge as the English navy, and only provided a little compensation for the necessity to protect Dutch dependencies, Marquis de Castries, even issued orders to evacuate Pondicherry in case of war with England, and to transport all troops and munitions to Trincomalee on Sri Lanka, whose harbour the French party in Holland had promised to give to France.¹⁷

The issue had gone so far as to a deputation sent to France by the key ally of France, Mysore Tipu Sultan, would receive nothing more there but a courteous reception, since the financial situation of France did not allow the fight to be re-started. Therefore the English were able to attack lonely Mysore and to force the city to surrender half of the territory and most of its treasures. *The French* prestige adequately lowered due to that.¹⁸

14 The vast implications of the American War of Independence over the situation in India have been summed up in the study 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.

15 GOBALAKICHENANE, *La Révolution*, pp. 221–234.

16 H. H. DODWELL, *The Exclusion of French, 1784–1815*, in: H. H. DODWELL (Ed.), *The Cambridge History of India: British India 1497–1757*, Vol. 5, Cambridge 1929, p. 325.

17 J. MURAY (Ed.), *Correspondence of Charles, First Marquis Cornwallis*, Harvard 1859, Vol. 1, p. 337; M. WILKS, *Historical Sketches of the South of India, in an Attempt to Trace the History of Mysoor: From the Origin of the Hindoo Government of that State, to the Extinction of the Mohammedan Dynasty in 1799*, Vol. 2, London 1817, p. 124.

18 DODWELL, pp. 325–326.



The government would decline requests for building up an army in India. All European troops and munitions had been withdrawn from Indian colonies, so what only remained on the site were not too many sipahis. All French dependencies in the East became subordinate to the Governor-General of Île de France in 1785,¹⁹ since in Paris, the Mascarene Islands had been believed to be “*the key to Indian seas*”, *Gibraltar of the East*”, and “*the boulevard of French dependencies in Asia*”;²⁰ Port Louis on Mauritius had been considered to be a store of soldiers and a base of corsairs due to a rather exaggerated idea about the possibilities to launch a large naval expedition to India from those islands. One advantage was a moment of surprise. The Mascarene Islands were far enough to avoid the direct attention of the English but close enough to allow an expedition to be mounted to India from there.

“*Lying at the one-month-journey distance from the shores of India, Île de France could have served as armoury provided it had been equipped with all required material, and if soldiers and sailors had been sent there at peace not at the moment of war declaration.*”²¹ Nevertheless, experience would show that the Islands had been suffering disadvantages, since French admirals were forced to leave Indian waters no later but at an initial failure or when worries about possible defeat appeared.

Due to that administrative reform Pondicherry had lost its grand status as the centre of the French dependencies in India and became a subordinate settlement. The French government’s post-1783 policy was to maintain settlements in India as trading stations. It was in a glaring contradiction with policy followed in the preceding half of the century. The transfer of the main centre from Pondicherry to Port Louis assumed enormous symbolic importance since it indicated that France had definitely resigned from its ambitions in India. It was not possible to cultivate close diplomatic relations with Indian princes or to plan military intervention from the distant Île de France. The capital city transfer inevitably resulted in another transfer, now the remaining military forces to Port Louis. Pondicherry became an indenfensible city.²²

Those matters made that policy extremely unpopular among Pondicherry dwellers likewise they did among residents of some other settlements that had blamed the local government for betrayal of the national interests. The thing that was seen as an act of treachery was leaving the French settlements in India at the mercy of the English. Those feelings would play an important role during the Revolution outbreak five years later.²³

What is more, the relation between the management on the Mascarene Islands and the Pondicherry colony was complicated by that administrative reform despite the existence of numerous ethnic and family ties and key economic relationships among residents of both centres resulting from migration. Most of the Governors

19 SEN, *The French*, pp. 426–427.

20 S. E. LE DUC, *Île de France: Documents pour son histoire civile et militaire*, Port Louis 1925, p. 9.

21 H. PRENTOUT, *L’Île de France, sous Decaen 1803–1810*, Paris 1901, Prefase, p. ix.

22 SEN, *The French*, p. 430.

23 C. WANQUET, *Pondichéry et/ou Port Louis, ou les incertitudes de la stratégie française dans l’océan Indien à la fin du XVIIIe siècle*, in: *Les relations historiques et culturelles entre la France et l’Inde, XVIIIe–XXe siècle*, Actes de la Conférence de l’Association historique internationale de l’océan Indien, Saint-Denis, Tom. 1, 1986, pp. 343–362.



had been gradually on duty in the majority of colonies in the Indian Ocean. “*L’Inde en Inde*” trade had been gradually making both of the colonies rich. Vitaly important foodstuff, ebony, spices (mostly clove), slaves, fabrics for their blue clothes or furniture from Pondicherry workshops had been flowing from India to Île de France and Île de Bourbon. Flowing in opposite direction was sugar, oil, rice and grain crops.²⁴ The years 1795–1796 showed that the Mascarene Islands could only exist in isolation with no contact with India and colonies in the Indian Ocean at the cost of drastic reduction of rationing to “*four to six ounce of bad bread for each of the dwellers per a day*”.²⁵ The mutual dependence existed also in the sphere of defence. As Abbé Raynal rightly stated: “*The link between Île de France and Pondicherry is important to that degree that both dependencies are mutually dependent since no defence of settlements in India would exist if it were not Île de France, and Île de France would be exposed to the English invasion from both Asia and Europe if it were not Pondicherry.*”²⁶

In addition to losing the French Indian colony another considerable loss occurred in the economic sphere. Trade during the War had ceased, and Pondicherry dwellers hoped that the economic situation would improve after the War. On that account they became disenchanted with the establishment of a new company holding monopoly on eastern trade. After sixteen years when all French traders had been allowed to take part in exchange of goods between France and countries east of the Cape of Good Hope, the monopoly was re-gained by the Company for Indies and China (*Compagnie des Indes et la Chine*). The call for a new company having monopoly on trade with East Indies apparently occurred as the result of the weakness that the French had towards the British in India.²⁷

The Company was established practically in secrecy by the Royal State Council Decree of 3 June 1785. The Company consisted of a diverse group of traders and financiers from Paris, Lorient, Grenoble, Switzerland and Scotland. It was established after negotiations with the British, who had backed the establishment of that new French company as a tool for supporting trade of their East India Corporation. The Company had 20 million livres in capital available, and enjoyed the privilege certified by the Council’s Resolution of 21 September 1786 that granted the monopoly trade to the east of the Cape of Good Hope including “*export of pepper, sandalwood, cardamom, fabrics and all products from those countries, and import of goods from Europe*”. The monopoly did not apply to the Mascarene Islands that means, the harbours on Île de France (Mauritius) and Île de Bourbon (Reunion). They remained accessible to all French ships.²⁸

24 C. WANQUET, *Les Iles Mascareignes, l’Inde et les Indiens pendant la révolution française*, in: *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer*, Vol. 78, No. 290, 1991, pp. 29–57.

25 C. WANQUET, *Histoire d’une Révolution. La Réunion 1789–1803*, Marseille 1980, Vol. 2, p. 126.

26 G.-T.-F. RAYNAL, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*, Vol. 2, London 1798, p. 423.

27 T. CLAEYS — G. LE BOUËDEC, *Commerce Libre et Compagnie de Calonne*, in: R. ESTIENE (Ed.), *Les Compagnies des Indes*, Paris 2013, p. 79.

28 LABERNADIE, *La révolution*, p. 15; J. TARRADE, *Le maréchal de Castries et la politique française dans l’Océan Indien à la fin de l’ancien régime*, in: C. WANQUET — B. JULLIAN (Eds.), *Révolution Française et Océan Indien: Prémices, héritages et déviances*, Paris 1996, pp. 39–48;



The Company had its central office in the Hôtel de Massiac in Place des Victoires in Paris; its home harbour became Lorient in Bretagne. The Company took over buildings, shops and workshops of the erstwhile Perpetual Company of Indies (*Compagnie Perpétuelle des Indes*) in Lorient and Marseille,²⁹ and opened factories in Canton, Pondicherry, Bengal, on the Coromandel Coast, the Malabar Coast, in Mocca and on Île de France.³⁰

The Company had been rapidly expanding. Profits enabled 18 per cent dividends to be paid in 1788 and 16 per cent dividends to be paid in 1789. The Company sent goods to India amounting to 36.17 million livres during its short existence; however, it mostly exported silver. Goods imported into Europe mostly consisted of textile manufactured in Chandernagore in Bengal, Pondicherry, Yanam, and Karaikal on the Coromandel Coast. One agreement entered into in 1787 granted the French the right to sell 200,000 maunds of salt to English factories every year, and to buy 18,000 maunds³¹ of saltpeter and 300 cases of opium from them every year. However, due to the establishment of the Company the inland trade was the only one that had been left open for private traders from Pondicherry, which would not be yielding too much owing to the political situation in the country, and would be limited to sending salt to Bengal according to the 1787 Agreement.³²

GOVERNORS CHANGING

The years between 1785 and 1790 saw rapid changing of governors in Pondicherry: six in mere five years. None of them served there as governor long enough to become involved in the colony reconstruction and development. What is more, changing aroused the feeling of political doubts, since each of the governors worried about the loss of their popularity so tried to pass unpopular solutions resulting from reforms required by Paris on their successors. Subsequent to Marquis Bussy's unexpected

P. HAUDRÈRE, *Quelques aspects du commerce entre la France et l'Asie à la fin du XVIIIe siècle 1765-1793*, in: C. WANQUET — B. JULLIAN (Eds.), *Révolution Française et Océan Indien: Prémices, héritages et déviances*, Paris 1996, p. 35.

²⁹ Perpetual Company of Indies, which preceded this company, lost the monopoly by a government decree of 8 August 1769. The shareholders then handed over all the property of the company to the state and by an edict from January 1770 they received compensation for these assets. M. MORINEAU, *Les Grandes Compagnies des Indes orientales*, Paris 1999, p. 85.

³⁰ CLAEYS — LE BOUËDEC, *Commerce Libre*, pp. 79–80.

³¹ Maund — anglicized expression for a unit of weight used in India, Afghanistan, Persia and Arabia. The size varies greatly by territory. Maund was equivalent to 25 pounds (11 pounds) and 160 pounds (72.5 pounds). In Bengal, the rate was standardized in 1833 according to local habits at 82.28 pounds (36 kg). A *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, Oxford 1908, p. 250; J. PRINSEP, *Useful Tables, Forming an Appendix to the Journal of the Asiatic Society: Part the First, Coins, Weights, and Measures of British India*, 2nd Ed., Calcutta 1840, pp. 84–90.

³² O. PRAKASH, *The New Cambridge History of India II/5: European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India*, Cambridge 1998, p. 309.

death in 1785 powers were taken by his deputy, Coutenceau. Nevertheless, he would run the office no more but few months, and would only manage to seize the occupied French dependencies in India from the English hands and gain them back. Prior to Bussy's death, in reaction to his request for going back to France, the Ministry had already decided to appoint Souillac, Governor of Île de France, to be Bussy's successor.³³ Having arrived from Île de France in May 1785, Souillac would stay in Pondicherry no longer but four and a half months. He went back in October to assume the office as the Governor-General of all French colonies in the East in accord with the administrative reorganization announced by the French government in May 1785. Souillac only brought to Pondicherry the French government's instructions relating to economical measures, but would have no time to implement them. He appointed his successor in Pondicherry — Charpentier de Cossigny, who had commanded a French contingent in Mysore Tipu Sultan's army in 1783. Cossigny had been holding the office for nearly two years but proceeded highly slowly to avoid unpopular measures when accomplishing state aims. In September 1787, he took over the office as the Governor of Île de Bourbon.³⁴

Cossigny's post as the Governor of Pondicherry was taken by Count Thomas Conway who had commanded French forces on the Cape of Good Hope during the preceding war. Holding the office for two years he became extremely unpopular due to his effort to push through administrative and economic reforms proposed by the Ministry. His Irish roots were the cause of town dwellers' irritation and mistrust towards him as they kept remembering another Irishman, Lally-Tollendalan's debacle on the seven-year-war Indian battlefield, and who they had seen as a traitor.³⁵ His low popularity is documented by a respectable citizen and rich trader from Pondicherry, Burry de St. Fulgence's note: "*This man is insofar as anxious, violent and awful, inasmuch as our General has never been the right one to run the colony. [...] The hope is that another heart failure will free us from that man.*"³⁶

Conway left for Île de France in October 1789 to be appointed Governor-General; he would appoint de Fresne as Governor. He entrusted him with a task to execute the government's instructions, first of all to send the remaining European units to Île de France and leave Pondicherry unarmed.³⁷

Leading to identical consequences, analogous replacements of single colonies' heads could be seen elsewhere too. To give an example, Chandernagore and five subordinate colonies in Patna, Cossimbazar (also Kasimbazar or Kasim Bazar), Dhaka, Jougdie and Balasore had been restored in 1785. The man who became the head of the colony was Dangererux conferred a precedent title "Commandant". He was replaced by Motten in October 1787, who would hold the position until his replacement in 1788 with foregoing Montigny.³⁸

33 SEN, *The French*, pp. 427–428.

34 LABERNADIE, *La Révolution*, pp. 12–13.

35 M. WANNER, *Sedmiletá válka v Orientu*, Praha 2001, pp. 149–181.

36 LABERNADIE, *La Révolution*, p. 18.

37 SEN, *The French*, p. 429.

38 *Ibidem*, pp. 452–453.



ADMINISTRATIVE REORGANIZATION AND ECONOMIC MEASURES

Prior to the French Revolution outbreak, the French colonies in Asia had been a hive of reform activities for five years, whose impact would assume considerable significance for the character of the Revolution in each of the colonies. The first administrative measure had been intended to establish a new High Council in Pondicherry and was declared by the Royal Edict of August 1784 dissolving so the earlier Council established in February 1776. The new Council consisted of a governor, an intendant, a senior officer and a few traders or respectable citizens nominated by the Governor. The council had both civil and criminal powers, and worked as an Appeal Court for cases that had appeared before the court in other settlements. The thing that caused a grave problem about the new Council's work was that the members had not been paid a salary, so it was extraordinarily difficult to get experienced citizens who would have accepted that office of honour. The economic reality proved essential, so it was inevitable to establish other paid functions for those who had been nominated to the Council.³⁹

Conway set up the Administrative Committee shortly after he had taken the office in 1787, whose task was to help the Governor administrate settlements in India. He also re-established the Consultative Chamber consisting of Indian worthies in December 1787. Governed by the Highest Council's decree this body had been already formed in January 1778.⁴⁰

The fundamental reorganization concerned the foregoing unification of the French colonies situated east of the Cape of Good Hope under one government. The Governor-General's residence was Port Louis on Île de France. He had two subordinate governors; one of them resided on Île de Bourbon (Réunion), another in Pondicherry. The Governor of Pondicherry was in charge of administration of other settlements in India, however, their attitude to authorities in Pondicherry and on Île de France was not clear. The French colonies in India were subordinate to Pondicherry in matters of general administration, but the Governor of Chandernagore enjoyed the right to turn directly to the government in Port Louis. Pondicherry did not have any control over Chandernagore, and the Commandant of Chandernagore was directly dependent on the French Governor-General on Île de France. Such powers allocation led to chaos, and would be one of the causes of disorders in Chandernagore in 1790.⁴¹

Each of the Governors had been making efforts to impose cutbacks and to cheapen the administration, for that reason they made redundancies or salary cuts. The number of clerks was reduced to eight; the quantity of translators fell to two. As a detailed account on monthly expenses written by Intendant Moracine in September 1786 shows, the French government earmarked for Pondicherry the amount of 228,000 livres in total. A larger portion of that amount went to civil expenses. Pondicherry had lost its political importance; no troops were based there. Merely sipahis serving rather police than defence functions were supposed to stay in the town. However,

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 429.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, pp. 429–430.

⁴¹ LABERNADIE, *La Révolution*, pp. 191–199.

the strength of the troops there was limited to only 1,200 men and seven European officers.⁴²

Nevertheless, the withdrawal of European troops from Île de France proved difficult, so about 300 European soldiers would not leave Pondicherry until 1790 when the ship *Bienvenue* would bring Conway's instructions about how to completely empty Pondicherry. The command was ignored owing to citizen's political opposition and de Fresne's political forethought.⁴³

Castries indicated the French government's intentions as to the question of Indian settlements in one important political report written to Souillac on 14 February 1787. The King should have remained responsibility for the administration of Pondicherry, Mahé, Karaikal, Yanam and Chandernagore, other settlements and colonies should have become subordinate to the new Company for Indies and China. Since no reason to restore fortification in Pondicherry existed, the town should have only been protected by a moat, possibly by clay mounds. That Castries's directive ceased reconstruction of Pondicherry designed by an engineer La Lustière in September 1785. According to de Castries's second instruction of June 1787 the town had been planned to be environed by a slope earth mound "*just to prevent desertion and maintain order*".⁴⁴

Far stricter instructions aiming to introduce savings in the administration were sent from Île de France in April 1789. The expenses of all French settlements in India had been fixed to 700,000 livres in total; the troops of sipahis should have been reduced to one 500-men battalion. Conway received those instructions on the way to Île de France in October 1789, and would entrust his successor de Fresne with carrying those instructions out. Conway's instructions to his successor show that the issue should have been transferred to Governors of each of the settlements. They themselves were supposed to deal with the trade development, serve justice and raise tax collection.⁴⁵

It is worth noting that interests and intentions of the state did not correspond with those of the Companies for Indies and China, as indicates the letter from Intendant Moracin addressed to the Company's management in Paris, dated on 10 September 1789. The reason for composing the letter was the Company's intention to take the administration of Indian settlements over from the government. Moracin had perfectly analysed the economic situation in the French settlements, and pointed out it was not hopeless. He rejected reduction in military units in India, and protested against leaving the settlements with no protection against attacks from exterior or internal civil disorders. He argued in favour of preserving about 500 European soldiers including 100 artillerymen and 1,200 sipahis, and indicated how to achieve that aim within the budget of the French dependencies in India. The annual tax yield from each of the settlements produced 1,200,000 livres in total. As he saw that it was the amount which would have covered both military and civil expenses provided the profit from selling opium, salt and saltpeter had not been spent on charity. Since the local government

42 SEN, *The French*, pp. 430–431.

43 Ibidem, p. 432.

44 Ibidem.

45 Ibidem.



had set expenses at 700,000 livres in total, some 500,000 livres would have been left and used for constructing fortification in Pondicherry.⁴⁶

THE OUTBREAK OF THE REVOLUTION

Subsequent to the Estates-General assembly, news on events in France from English sources began arriving in the French settlements in India at the beginning of 1790. The ship *Bienvenue* from Île de France arrived on 22 February 1790 bringing Conway's orders to finish the European troops and munitions withdrawal from Pondicherry, authentic news about the Revolution in France, the National Assembly formation and the Fall of the Bastille.⁴⁷

The news about the Revolution aroused the locals' anger but pleased those citizens who had attributed their misery starting in 1785 to the old-regime Ministry's lack of interest and incompetence. The thing that made them even furious was the withdrawal of the last 260 European soldiers and 30 artillerymen so they would have been defenceless in case of war between Tipu Sultan and the English. Taking cue from Paris residents, the irritated citizens called a general assembly to be held in front of the government offices on 25 February in order to express their resolution to resist the Ministry's instructions about the withdrawal of troops. They insisted on forming militia and hand arsenal and powder mill on to their hands.⁴⁸

Residents re-gathered on 26 February and decided for sending a deputation to the Governor to submit their requests. The deputation consisted of six persons; the requests submitted to the Governor had been signed by 83 citizens. That initiative was promoted by a rather small portion of citizens with European roots. No Indians were among them as they had been excluded from that movement. De Fresne acted coolly and prudently in a new situation, and reassured the delegation about his sympathy and support, so would avoid a potential conflict with revolutionary elements.⁴⁹

Twenty-eight anonymous posters nailed on the gate of the Notre Dame des Anges church invited all citizens to meet in the house of a leading trader, Bury de St. Fulgence. That matter received enthusiastic welcome. On 1 March, Pondicherry's white dwellers formed the General Assembly led by Moracin, the administrator of the Companies for Indies and China, which was to present Frenchmen's problems in India to the General Assembly in Paris. "A parallel meeting of Catholic Tamils wanted the Governor to ally them with the white's fate" was held that day too.⁵⁰

De Fresne coped with the situation with dignity and took an oath of loyalty to "the nation of His Majesty and his laws"⁵¹ before the General Assembly members at the formal ceremony held in the government's office on 2 March. It was primarily due to

46 E. GAUDART, *Correspondence des Agents à Pondichéry de la nouvelle Compagnie des Indes avec les Administrations à Paris, 1788-1803*, Pondichéry — Paris 1931, pp. 33-49.

47 LABERNADIE, *La révolution*, p. 22.

48 SEN, *The French*, pp. 435-436.

49 *Ibidem*, p. 436.

50 Viranaicker's diary, in: GOBALAKICHENANE, *Le révolution*, p. 223.

51 LABERNADIE, *La révolution*, p. 27.



his tact and coolness that Pondicherry would avoid political excesses. Shortly after the ceremony the General Assembly began to vote for a permanent committee consisting of 65 members who would serve on the Committee for 18 months. Moracin was elected the President of the Nation, three men: Beylié, Delarche and de Kerjean became the heads of the Committee. The Committee existed from March to September 1790 and was in charge of presenting requests and problems of French population in India to the National Assembly in Paris. The Committee held talks according to the Assembly's decree inviting the citizens of all colonies to express their attitudes towards the system of administration that would have been the best for backing their wealth and prosperity. Three wealthy representatives of Topasses, Joseph Alfonço, Thomas Flory and Charles Nicolas but no Indians went to that session.⁵²

Taking two hours the gathering finished by Moracin's declaration. When he was leaving the venue he met the present Catholic Tamils, most of them belonged to the higher French administration. Responding to their requests he said: "*Tamils, we consider you to be our people*" and welcomed their disposition to share public affairs. However, it would be postponed until next session.⁵³

Nevertheless, inhabitants of Pondicherry were neither particularly enthusiastic about adhering to the revolutionary principles of "equality" and "brotherhood", nor were about Indians' membership in the General Assembly. The movement in India was limited to only French people, possibly to Topasses from the beginning to the end of the Revolution; Indians, who viewed it as a peculiar performance, were not involved. Therefore, "*the representatives of the Malabar citizens' assembly*" addressed a memorandum to the General Assembly in Paris on 11 March 1790 expressing interests of all citizens of French India, and asking with discretion but skilfully for integration into the local political structures.⁵⁴

Numerous rapturous gatherings and celebrations were held in the town to tribute revolutionary events after the General Assembly formation. Some of the greatest were the festive *Te Deum* in the cathedral, or cannon fire. All citizens began wearing "*national tricolour*" cockades according to the instructions brought by the ship *Caesar* from Île de France on 29 March.⁵⁵

The Committee began working on 14 March and would write six memorandums in the form of fascicles for the National Assembly. The first one related to the situation of French people in India prior to the ship *Bienvenue* arrival; the second required the possibility to send two deputies from India to the National Assembly; the third was giving an interpretation of possible trade with India; the fourth asked for free trade; the fifth dealt with a necessity of French political and military influence in India as a precondition of trade, and insisted on the liberation of Pondicherry from subordination to Île de France, and on remaining the town as a strong and well-fortified site. Discussed as the last question was building up alliance with some Indian princes. Keryean, Delach and Beylié with memorandums sailed on the

52 TAFFIN, *Citoyens*, p. 241.

53 Viranaicker's diary, in: GOBALAKICHENANE, *Le révolution*, p. 224.

54 Document is quoted by M. POULIQUEN (ed.), *Doléances des peuples coloniaux à l'Assemblée nationale constituante 1789-1790*, Paris 1989, pp. 142-146.

55 GOBALAKICHENANE, *Le révolution*, p. 224.



Royal Elisabeth to France at the end of March where they would accomplish their mission.⁵⁶

THE REVOLUTION FROM APRIL 1790 TO JUNE 1791

Following the delegates' departure for France was a four-month period of relative peace. The Committee of Representatives worked in accord with the Governor. Some measures were adopted permitting to form militia.⁵⁷ Some more troops amounting to 150 men were sent to Pondicherry from Île de France in May, therefore the number of garrison increased to 400 men.⁵⁸ Both steps were a sort of satisfaction for the members of the Revolutionary Committee, however did not solve anything of cardinal importance.

The development in Pondicherry had been void of any excesses so far, yet disputes erupted among revolutionists; a few extremists hungering for power appeared on the site. In June, the Committee of Representatives complained to de Fresne about those problematic elements and asked for their deportation. The relations sharpened in August when the Committee held talks about establishing the town self-government. Disagreements existed over the questions whether to accept or not to accept Indians in the Town Council. The extremists were completely eliminated due to President Count de Civrac's energetic interference at a stormy meeting of the Committee held on 20 August.⁵⁹

During that and next sessions, eight of them, De Culan, Hervé, Pillavoine, Durand, Laboulaye, Lamorandière, Petit, and Ducluseau were accused of dangerous agitation and conspiracy against Moracin and de Fresne with the aim to kill them, and attempt to loot the locals' houses. Supposedly, Marquis de Culan had been trying to take up the post of Governor. Rebels were put on the board of the ship *Bienvenue* and taken to France. Those men would present their causes to the National Assembly in Paris, and in March 1792 they would receive decree acquitting them and allowing them to go back to Pondicherry. The same session decided not to allow Indian population to be in the Council and ordered to spy 14 Tamil leaders. One day later they were reprovved and excluded from the session.⁶⁰

Those times the Revolution broke out in Chandernagore whose course would have considerable impact on the development of the Revolution in Pondicherry. Governors in Chandernagore were rapidly being replaced like they had been in other colonies during the pre-revolutionary period. Benoît Mottet de La Fontaine substituted Dangereux on the post of the Commandant of Chandernagore in November 1786; next at the end of 1788 it was François Emmanuel Dehaies, known as Montigny, a previous French resident on the court of Nawaabs in Pune. De Montigny intended to restore French trade in Bengal, but also to increase tax collection and administrative reforms.

⁵⁶ LABERNADIE, *La révolution*, pp. 28–29.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 46.

⁵⁹ SEN, *The French*, pp. 438–439; TAFFIN, *Citoyens*, p. 242.

⁶⁰ Viranaicker's diary, in: GOBALAKICHENANE, *Le révolution*, pp. 224–225.



Anyhow he was honest and energetic man, his approach would arouse the locals' hostility. It regarded, e.g., personnel replacements on numerous posts, or declaration on the trade in opium and salt to be the object of French state monopoly.⁶¹

The Revolution in Chandernagore broke out at 4 p.m. on 3 September 1790. Revolutionary rebels besieged Colonel de Montigny's residence in Goréty,⁶² and took him and other higher-ranking officials captive. They formed the General Assembly of Citizens and the National Committee charged of checking Commandant's job "as the long stay at the Court of Marathas has taught him a lesson in all manners of rude politics" and "who believed he could act like when administrating Chandernagore".⁶³ The rebels asked the High Council in Pondicherry for additional approval of those steps. They stated intention to "transfer from Chinsura French noblemen who have received asylum there with the use of violence". For that reason the Commander of that Dutch Bengal colony, Isaac Titsingh, immediately asked the English for help. The British did not hesitate and provided him with help in the form of three battalions of sipahis. However, the rebels only negotiated not to risk the life of hostages.⁶⁴

The Revolution in Chandernagore underwent a complicated development from September to October 1790, whose outcome would be the colony's gradual alienation from its superiors in Pondicherry. When information about that Count de Conway had unseated de Montigny and replaced him in his function with Mottet arrived in October 1790: "Some of the Chandernagore citizens expressing opposition to those taking a legal commander, Colonel de Montigny's side put some prisoners captured in Goréty on the board of a small vessel to send them to Île de France." The rebels, however, did not suppose the British had started to run a check on all vessels sailing the Hooghly River. A small French schooner called *Patriote* with refugees had to surrender to the Governor of the Diamond Harbour (also Hajipur) on the east shore of the River Hooghly. The British passed on the information about that affair to Governor Conwey.⁶⁵

The Committee of Representatives in Pondicherry denounced the illegal actions in Chandernagore. However, such an approach to the events in Bengal brought

61 SEN, *The French*, pp. 455–456.

62 Goretty (also Ghyretty) — a small town in Bengal lying on the bank of the Hooghly River, the road from Serampore to Chandernagore. There was the country residence of Governor Chandernagore, also known as the "French Garden". W. HAMILTON, *The East Indian Gazetteer: Containing Particular Descriptions of the Empires, Kingdoms, Principalities, Provinces, Cities, Towns, Districts, Fortresses, Harbours, Rivers, Lakes, &c. of Hindostan, and the Adjacent Countries, India beyond the Ganges, and the Eastern Archipelago; Together with Sketches of the Manners, Customs, Institutions, Agriculture, Commerce, Manufactures, Revenues, Population, Castes, Religion, History, &c. of Their Various Inhabitants*, Vol. 1, London 1828, p. 578.

63 Quoted from a citizens' complaint written by the Revolutionaries in Chandernagore on June 19, 1790, SEN, *The French*, p. 455.

64 SEN, *The French*, p. 456.

65 V. J. TARAPOVERALA (Ed.), *Fort William-India House Correspondence and Other Contemporary Papers Relating Thereto (Foreign, Political and Secret): 1792–1795*, Vol. XVII, Delhi 1955, Foreign Letter to Court, 17 November 1790, par. 2–22, pp. 328–331; More detail on development in Chandernagore: M. WANNER, *Britsko-francouzské vztahy v Indii 1787–1794 v zrcadle pramenů úřadu generálních guvernérů britské Indie*, in: *Studia Historica Brunensia*, Vol. 63, No. 2, 2016, pp. 5–22.



Pondicherry residents into conflict with the Revolutionary Committee on Île de France. More radical forces had gained control over the revolutionary process even there. The Assembly of Citizens had seized all powers, the administrative system had collapsed, and chaos reigned. The Commander of the French squadron in the East, Count MacNamara, was killed by furious crowds in November 1790. Governor-General Conway feeling disgusted escaped to France and left Conssigny as his deputy on the site. Soon he would also grow sick and tired of the problems on the islands, so would insist on being withdrawn. However, it would not happen until June 1792.⁶⁶

The General Assembly of Citizens in Pondicherry met again on 21 October 1790 due to some complaints about the Assembly's decisions and a call for waiting for instructions until they arrive from Paris. The thing that was discussed too was complaint of Topasses, that is Eurasians living by the French right of gathering. Referring to the egalitarian principles of the Revolution, they insisted on access to political might, which would be accepted.⁶⁷

The majority votes at the session went in favour of establishing an urban commune in Pondicherry, so was agreed by 158 to 60 votes. The local government was formed on 22 October; Coulon was elected as Mayor; elected that day was the 19-member Town Council. Additionally, police forces were assembled, as well as a new permanent 27-member committee chaired by Moracin was set up, where 9 members representing other French colonies in India would be invited for the first time.⁶⁸

A list of Topasses who would be subject to the French law was compiled in October 1790.⁶⁹ It was sent to the National Assembly in Paris along with a request for access to decide about political matters on the basis of the revolutionary principle of equality, since as they had been reasoning "*the colour of Topasses must not exclude them from the class of active citizens*".⁷⁰

Those measures would restore peace in Pondicherry for several months. The Governor and the Town Council worked in accord. However, on 13 February 1791 the rejected leaders of Catholic Tamils led by Velvendirapillaie knick-named "*the chief of Malabars*" re-gathered and asked the Governor to include them into democratic processes. Nevertheless, Governor de Fresne rejected them. In reaction to that event, there was "*The Gathering of Malabars*" called on 6 March on the "*place de la Porte Villianalloour*" (known also as Place d'Odiensalai). Governor de Fresne got all town gates closed, soldiers stationed along buildings, and declared that no gatherings were permitted unless allowed by the government. He termed that mass meeting as provocation aiming to "*gain new nominations*".⁷¹

In March 1791, the elective representatives of Pondicherry received a letter from the National Assembly in Paris stating that two representatives from India had been

66 SEN, *The French*, p. 535.

67 TAFFIN, *Citoyens*, p. 235.

68 Viranaicker's diary, in: GOBALAKICHENANE, *La révolution*, p. 225.

69 According to the Census in Pondicherry in 1791, about 1,000 topases and about 500 mes-tices lived in the city. These rights, however, did not apply to the baptized Indians, who were around 6,000 in the city and its surroundings. TAFFIN, *Citoyens*, pp. 237, 239.

70 Quoted *ibidem*, p. 235.

71 Viranaicker's diary, in: GOBALAKICHENANE, *Le révolution*, pp. 226–227.

admitted. The report also informed about that on 3 April 1790 the National Assembly had decided about “*that the Indian trade conducted beyond the Cape of Good Hope is free of charge for all French people*” so the monopoly of the Company would break up.⁷²

That appreciation from the National Assembly and acceptance of Pondicherry citizens’ principal requirements particularly encouraged the twenty-seven-member Revolutionary Committee. The members believed they had grown in importance, but would soon conflict with the Governor and the Town Council. The town could have been jeopardised by chaos; nevertheless the situation got stabilized when the third General Assembly was called in June 1791 that would deprive the Committee of the rights.⁷³

THE END

The French Revolution in the French colonies in the Indian Ocean assumed a distinctive character. It reacted to an unsatisfactory political and economic position of those colonies resulting from the policy of the old regime in that region in the preceding period, likewise from unpopular reforms in numerous spheres. The news about the Revolution in France led to creating representative bodies that would not solve the same problems like the French National Assembly. Also the following course of the Revolution in that region was dynamized by primary milestones of the development in France whose impact in each of the colonies was different; information and different progress in single colonies played larger role.

The development in Pondicherry was relatively calm, partly due to Governor de Fresné’s flexible and intelligent policy, partly because of the absence of dependence of the colony’s economic structure on slavery, unlike, e.g., the Mascarene Islands. Therefore, 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 important role they had been occupying in the economic life of the colony. The key requests of the Revolution formulated in that colony in February 1790 would be accepted by the National Assembly due to a quiet and democratic character of the Revolution in Pondicherry, and trouble free character of the locals’ requests for the centre in Paris.

PONDICHERRY IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION ERA 1785–1793: REASONS AND BEGINNINGS 1785–1791

ABSTRACT

The study is devoted to the development of Pondicherry during the French Revolution, specifically in the years 1785–1791. The author in the introduction the author recapitulates historiography devoted to the impacts that the French Revolution had in the French territorial possessions in India. He explains, why the French Revolution in the French colonies in India had a specific character. It was due to reaction to the unsatisfactory policy of the old regime in the preceding period, likewise

72 P. HAUDRÉRE — G. LE BOUËDEC, *Les Compagnies des Indes*, Rennes 1999, p. 139.

73 SEN, *The French*, p. 440



from unsatisfactory and unpopular reforms in numerous spheres. The news about the Revolution in France led to creating representative bodies that would not solve the same problems like the French National Assembly. The following course of the Revolution in Indian colonies was dynamized by primary milestones of the development in France whose impact in each of the colonies was different. The development in Pondicherry was relatively calm. 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. The key revolutionary requests formulated in that colony in February 1790 would be accepted by the National Assembly due to a trouble free character for the centre in Paris.

KEYWORDS

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

Michal Wanner | Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic — Department of Archives Administration and Records Management, Milady Horákové 133, 166 21, Praha 6, Czech Republic, michal.wanner@mvcr.cz