

The French Settlement in India

Unlike the difficult and contested transfer of Portuguese enclaves (Goa, Daman, Diu, and DN&H), the settlement with the French was smoother, though not without its share of problems. As early as 28 August 1947, India and France issued a joint declaration to resolve the question of settlements, taking into account the 'aspirations and interests of the people. For India, it meant that they would eventually negotiate the peaceful transfer of the five settlements (*comptoirs*): Pondicherry, Chandernagore, Karikal, Mahe and Yaman covering a little over 200 square miles of territory with a population of less than three lakhs. .In popular Indian imagination the French Settlements had provided asylum to Indian revolutionaries and freedom fighters – from Aurobindo Ghosh to Subramanian Bharti.

Scattered along the Eastern coast, linguistically these settlements had much more in common with their British Indian neighbours than with each other; there was free movement of people from Chandernagore to Calcutta and Pondicherry, Karikal Mahe and Yaman to Madras for work and education. In fact, 'the geographical marginality of these enclaves made them invisible in Indian historiography' but from the point of France, their future was linked to their colonial possessions elsewhere, especially Indochina.

With the advent of freedom on 15th August, the popular mood in the French territories was overwhelming in favour of a merger. The ferment was strongest in Chandernagore (August 1947/March 1948) and Mahe (October 48) where popular demonstrations gave way to

full-fledged rebellions. As the situation in Chandernagore was going out of their hands, the French Government held a plebiscite in Chandernagore June 1948 in which 97% of the electors opted to join India. However Mahatma Gandhi, the Constituent Assembly and the Government of India were all convinced that the process of transfer should be a negotiated settlement under the auspices of the Government of India – for there was a genuine fear that such movements could be driven by the Communists or other fissiparous parties.

The suspicions of the Government of India with regard to the Communists and a section of the Socialists was not unfounded because a section of the politically conscious electors in the enclaves saw in the Fourth French Republic , established in 1946 after WWII , the possibility of achieving greater autonomy besides higher representation in the French Senate and Assembly. This brought all the local political parties, the Communists, Nationalists and Socialists together under the banner of the National Democratic Front, which won all the thirty four seats. These included the Communist leaders Subbiah and Socialist leaders like Sarvanae .However, after Independence, the NDF faced a fierce ideological contest, with the Communists coming out in favour of an immediate merger with India, but Sarvanae and Goubert, a French Indian lawyer sought autonomy within the French Union. The Communist support for the merger was also not unconditional - for while they were all for liquidation of the French Imperialism , they were also struggling against the collaborationist Indian Union government , and working for the establishment of a people. Meanwhile, the Muslim League of French India sought a separate electorate for Muslims in the referendum on the future of these settlements, claiming that their population was at least one third, and that Muslims had fled Chandernagore for

Pondicherry after its merger with India. The Indian Consul General in Pondicherry mentioned in his reports that most Muslims in French India harboured 'pro –Pakistani 'sympathies', which were being exploited by the French for anti-merger purposes. Last, but not the least, there was the very strong Dravidian movement in the South India, and two newspapers, Velli in Tamil and Republique française in French strongly advocated French India as an integral part of the proposed Dravidistan.

As Akhila Yechury put it : *'in a period when the integration of princely states was not yet complete, and the problem of Kashmir loomed large , India's uncertain future found a reflection in French India'*.

However, all this convinced Indian officials that going in for a plebiscite would be akin to opening a Pandora's Box, because the possibility of an autonomous region within the French Union was also a distinct possibility. However with the rout of the French at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 –the first time a major colonial power was defeated in open warfare - the French lost their nerve, and the most vocal supporters of autonomy within France realized that the future was with the India. In a clearly opportunistic move, the Socialist party's vocal leader Goubert decided to cast his lot with India. Therefore, on 18th October, 1954, of 178 delegates of French India, 170 voted in favour of the merger. On November 1, Pondicherry, Yanam, Mahe, and Karikal were *de facto* transferred to the Indian Union, and became the **Union Territory of Pondicherry** and administered under the Foreign Jurisdiction Act of 1947. The *de jure* union of French India with India took place in 1962 after the ratification of the French Parliament.

Incidentally, the Foreign Jurisdiction Act was repealed only five years ago, on May 13, 2015, when the Indian Parliament was officially

informed that from 1962, no territory of India was under the control of any colonial power.