



# THE IMPACT OF FRENCH COLONIAL POLICY ON CASTE AND RELIGION IN THE FRENCH POSSESSION IN INDIAN WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PONDICHERRY

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## ABSTRACT

The impact of the French colonial policy in French settlements in general and Pondicherry in particular was mostly felt in the spheres of political development, administration, trade and religion. In other fields like agriculture and land settlement, industry, culture and literature the impact was only marginal. While the influence of French colonial policy helped the spread of Christianity in the region, there was very little impact in respect of culture and literature as the French colonists did not seem to have had any definite or active policy in these two spheres. The French colonists followed an active policy in respect of the propagation of Christian religion but it cannot be said that they ever followed a bigoted and aggressive policy of forcible mass conversion of natives into Christianity<sup>1</sup>. As the Census Report of Pondicherry of 1961 says, "except for a few excesses of religious zeal they have invariably respected the manner and civilization of the people who were entrusted to their care". In this respect they differed very much from the Portuguese who persecuted the natives and followed a policy of forcible conversions.

**Key Words:** colonial policy, marginal, propagation, zeal, forcible conversions.

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## Caste and Religion

Francois Martin (1681 A.D.), the founder and architect of the French colony at Pondicherry, felt the need for Christian religion at Pondicherry to buttress the French settlement and invited the French clergy of the capuchins to cater to the spiritual needs of the Europeans and the Creoles who were born of the French and the Indians. There was already an active colony of Christians in San Thome at Madras in the early Seventeenth century. There was a Bishop in San Thome who had the spiritual jurisdiction over Pondicherry also. The Jesuits who were expelled from Siam settled in Pondicherry in 1689, and they were permitted by Louis XIV to propagate and establish Roman Catholic religion in all the French settlements.

There is no evidence of mass conversions of natives on a large scale during the French rule. However, the very fact of the French settlement and Missionary authority under the protection of French rule induced and to practice their religion without hindrance. Most of the local converts to Catholics who are mostly migrants and settlers from Tamil Nadu to migrate and settle in Pondicherry in order to earn their livelihood and to practice their religion without hindrance. Most of the local converts to Catholic religion must have been from the depressed classes but there was a section of high caste Catholics who were mostly migrants and settlers from Tamil Nadu. It is from this section that the chief Dubash of French regime Kanagaraya Mudaliar hailed. He was the principal functionary of the French Government between 1716 and 1746 and was the chief Dubash of the French. He was succeeded after his death by the famous Diarist Ananda Ranga Pillai whose Diary is an indispensable source of history for understanding the French colonial police in Pondicherry region. Francois Martin was not a diehard Catholic and he recommended a policy religious harmony as a measure of expediency to attract the settlement of Hindus in Pondicherry for the prosperity of the colony. Except for the French Governor named Herbert (1708 to 1718), most of the governors were not in favor of following an aggressive policy in the matter of propagation of the religion or intolerance of other faiths. The missionaries. Especially the Jesuits are following an aggressive policy against Hindu worship and practices. They were all for destroying the idols and temples and removing paganism from the French town of Pondicherry. The plea of Francois Martin for moderation fell on deaf ears of missionaries. The Hindus were prevented from taking out religious processions and conducting openly religious ceremonies, there was a mass evacuation of Hindus in the beginning of the eighteenth century due to such restrictions on the Hindus<sup>2</sup>. The intolerance of the Jesuit culminated in the desecration of the Vedapureeswarar temple on 8th September, 1748, taking advantage of the siege of Pondicherry by the English army. They could not tolerate the existence of the temples on the same street where the Catholic Church stood. The temple was destroyed and the idols were broken, for this purpose the depressed class Christians and the African Coffers were used by the French. But when Dupleix ordered the Mohammedan Mosque standing opposite to Capuchin's church should also be pulled down Abdul Rahim the leader of the Mohammedan sepoys protested and the attempt was abandoned. Even though Ananda Ranga Pillai was the chief Dubash and acted almost like a Dewan to Dupleix, he did not make even a feeble protest when the Hindu temple was destroyed but he lamented about the incident so much in his Diary.

Although Ananda Ranga Pillai occupied the topmost post of chief Dubash from 1747 to 1754, the missionaries were not in favored of appointing a non – Christian to the post. They were opposed to the appointment of Ananda Ranga Pillai as chief Dubash. Madame Dupleix was also fanatic in the matter of religion, which never trusted Ananda Ranga Pillai and tried to put him down<sup>3</sup>. One of Ananda Ranga Pillai's nephews Guruvappa who went to Paris to plead the case of injustice done to his father Nainiappa Pillai, the chief native agent was lured to embrace the catholic religion at the age of 20 with a handsome promise of his appointments as the Trading Agent at Pondicherry. The Regent of France, the Duke of Orleans himself stood God – father to him. The conversion was done perhaps to make Christianity look respectable in the eyes of the people belonging to the majority community. He was honored with the distinction of Chevalier of St. Michael and made Head of the French Indians at Pondicherry. This was one of the few cases of forcible conversions made by the French. The celebration of Hindu festivals and taking out of processions were prohibited on Sundays and on days of principal Christian feasts. Even Dupleix at the height of his power had to fear the Superior of St. Paul's Church in Pondicherry, and he wanted Ananda Ranga Pillai to placate the Superior of getting his appointments as chief Dubash. One of the extreme cases of religious intolerance was the forcible baptism of a servant of the Governor's household by Madame Dupleix<sup>4</sup>. The servant was

baptized in an unconscious state in his death – bed in spite of protests from his relatives and the refusal of Christian priests and native Christians in Pondicherry to cooperate in such an unworthy act.

At present Indian Christians, mostly Catholics. Form a sizeable section of the population of Pondicherry. They are mostly concentrated in Pondicherry and Karaikal towns<sup>5</sup>. According to 1961 census they were 11, 758 as against 36,039 Hindus and 3,660 Muslims. In the year 1703 the total population of Pondicherry was only 30,000 out of which there were only 2,000 Christians and their number rose to only 3,000 in the year 1923. Conversions were not many but migration increased the population of the Christians. In the year 1924-25 only about 600 Christians were newly baptized.

It is pertinent to examine here the policy of the missionaries who propagated Catholic religion in the then Madras Presidency during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There were two schools of thought among the missionaries with regard to the policy of conversion of natives. One school of thought advocated conversions along with the westemisation of the natives in the matter of culture, manners etc. the other school of thought felt that there should be no interference of the native Christians in following their Indian customs and manners. The earlier Jesuit Missionaries were in favor of following the latter policy<sup>6</sup>. Robert De Nobili, John Britto and the famous Tamil savant Joseph Constantine Beschi following the latter policy in such an active manner that they were accused of Inquisition of Christianity in Rome. In fact, De Nobili concentrated on converting Brahmins, while the others converted mainly the high castes. The controversy was raging till recently among the clergy. One of the active advocates of the policy of retaining the Indianness of Indian converts was the late Rev. Father Heras, one of the distinguished historians of India. This far-sighted policy was recently endorsed by the second Vatican Council. The pendulum has now swung to the other extreme limit. An influential section of the Catholics advocated a policy of Indianization almost with a vengeance. The early missionaries might have followed a policy of retaining Indianness of the native converts as a matter of expediency with the aim of converting mainly caste Hindus. The conversion of caste Hindus was done in order to give respectability to a foreign religion like Christianity. It must be admitted that such a policy had paid dividends as today Christianity is more respected in the South than in the North and it is not looked down upon as the low caste religion or foreigners' religion. Among certain higher castes in Tamil Nadu, they have no compunction to inter-marry with a Christian family so long as the purity of the caste is rigidly adhered to. It is a sad fact that inspire of Christianity being a Western religion and a progressive religion, it succumbed to the caste orthodoxy of the hidebound society of those times. One cannot say the same thing in respect of the spread of Islam. The Protestants were always more liberal in the observance of caste distinctions. Ananda Ranga Pillai in his Diary has stated how the Catholics had kept all the caste distinctions of the Hindus and how the scheduled castes were segregated in the churches. The segregation existed in the churches till recently. They were not allowed to sit along with high caste Christians. Even Europeans and Eurasians were allowed to sit with them but not scheduled caste Catholics. Ananda Ranga Pillai noted in his Diary how the attempt of a priest to put down segregation of scheduled castes in the church was frustrated by the caste Christians<sup>7</sup>. In the year 1745, a European priest from Karaikal, instigated the low caste Christians to rebel against their segregation in the house of God. The senior priest of the Church had the barrier wall in the church demolished but the caste Christians objected to this new development and refused to attend the religious services and boycotted the church. The priests were forced to go and appeal to the French Governor to make the caste Christian' enter the church by compulsion. The caste Christians attended the church a few days later after its barrier of chairs was put up in the place of the wall. This caste segregation persisted not merely in the church but even in the graveyards. There was an instance when even a church was closed indefinitely due to a dispute over the segregation of pariah Christians<sup>8</sup>. A contemporary French writer had accused that even the European Jesuit priests treated the low caste no better than the caste Christians. They did not allow low caste Christian's entrance into their houses. They did not condescend to go to their dwellings to administer the last sacraments, and low caste Christians had to be brought to the streets and the priests were careful never to touch them when they administered the last sacraments. The Jesuit priests had to observe untouchability in order that they may not lose their own caste with caste Christians. The Christian community was not rich compared to the Hindus. The French do not seem to have helped them economically. It was in the latter half of the eighteenth century and early in the nineteenth century that many Christians got educated in French and they got some preferential treatment in respect of Government employment. When Ananda Ranga Pillai was asked to convert some of the Hindus,

he gave a blunt reply “only of late year, a few Christians have been able to build brick houses and to save a few hundred rupees. This is not so in the case with Hindus. They are the Company’s merchants. All the renters of the outside villages are Hindus Christians hold no such posts. But since do, how can you suppose that I could convert them? Ananda Ranga Pillai felt that Christianity for Hindus was not respectable since the native Christians were not well – to – do people. The European contact with Christians was looked down upon by some sections of the Hindus. Mgr. Champenois, a contemporary Missionary wrote, “For nearly twenty years in the districts the relationship with the Europeans had lowered the faith much more than they had enhanced.... The Christians have suffered much from the military expeditions and from their connection with Europeans”. It must be mentioned to the credit of the later missionaries that it was due to them that the scheduled caste Christians are now much better off economically than their counterparts among the Hindus in the town of Pondicherry<sup>9</sup>.

During the latter part of the French rule, the scheduled caste Christians had many opportunities of employment in the French military and other occupations. They had become more prosperous. However, it is still a fact that scheduled caste Catholics are not ordained as priests and cannot enter the convents as nuns in the south. It is only in Pondicherry we see the first convents established exclusively for scheduled caste nuns and it is only in the Diocese of Pondicherry we can see a few priests belonging to scheduled cast Christian community. The position has not changed even now in other parts of South India. The French did not encourage the settlements of Protestants and other denominations of Christians in Pondicherry. The Superior of St. Paul’s Church wanted the French Governor to evict the Protestants not merely from Pondicherry villages but even from certain planes in the Arcot Kingdom. Even Ananda Ranga Pillai had to agree to check the spread of Protestantism.

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