



FRENCH ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS IN PONDICHERRY AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO INDIAN CULTURE

Dr. S. Babu

Associate Professor of History & Head, Kanchi Mamunivar Centre for P.G. Studies, Puducherry.

INTRODUCTION

France was the last European power to reach the shores of India for commercial contact. They colonised some enclaves on both the western and eastern coasts of India. When the British India gained independence from the British rule, the people of French India too clamoured for merger with 'Mother India'. The French were in no mood to leave the Indian soil due to the long historical and cultural ties and delayed the transfer of power with one pretext or the other. It resulted in a political deadlock between the natives and the French regime in India. The Government of India and France entered into parleys for peaceful transfer of power through diplomatic means. Ultimately the de facto merger of the French settlements with the Indian Union took place through the Indo-French agreement of 1954. The subsequent Treaty of Cession (1956) between Indian and the French Governments provided for the continuation and establishment of French institutions involved in research and academic activities - French Institute of Pondicherry, Ecole Francaise D'Extreme- Orient, French Lycee and Alliance Francaise. Though the French departed from the Indian soil with heavy heart, we can see that these institutions are still doing a yeomen service in Indian studies and in the continuation of teaching of French language in the Indian soil. This paper throws light on the significant contributions of these French institutions in the study of Indian languages, culture and dissemination of knowledge between the two in the globalised world.

COLONISATION AND MERGER

The success of other European powers induced the French to have a share in the profits of the eastern trade. The French East India Company was established in 1664 for commercial activities with India.¹ The French established their trading headquarters at Pondicherry with settlements at Karaikal, Chandernagore, Yanam, Mahe and few loges (warehouses) on the eastern and western coasts of India. The French colonial rule in India till 1815 survived under the shadow of the British imperialism.² After the Napoleonic wars, Pondicherry was restored to the French by the Treaty of Paris signed on November 20, 1815, under the conditions that the French Government should not raise any fortification in the establishments.³ The undisturbed French rule over the Indian settlements began from the end of 1816 and continued for another 138 years.⁴ There was a general belief that the granting of independence to India by the British would bring total independence to the whole of India including the French possessions. However, the French Government delayed the transfer of settlements considering the historical and cultural ties of more than three centuries. The French were pressurised to leave India as a result of the popular movement which was actively supported by the people and Government of India.⁵ Chandernagore was the first of the France's five Indian enclaves to break away by a referendum in 1949 and merged with the Indian Union in the state of West Bengal on 2 May, 1950.⁶ The agreement for the de facto transfer of the four remaining French establishments with the Indian Union was signed in New Delhi on October 21, 1954, which came into effect on November 1, 1954.⁷ A treaty for the de jure transfer was formally signed on May 28, 1956 (Treaty of Cession) and ratified by the French Parliament in July 1962 and came into effect on August 16, 1962.⁸

FRENCH INSTITUTIONS

The Preamble of the Treaty of Cession states that it was an earnest effort on the part of both countries to strengthen 'the bonds of friendship' established between them. Their intension of settling the problem of French settlements amicably in India manifested very clearly in the treaty. There were several articles, which aimed at safeguarding the economic and cultural interests of France. By Article 1 of the Treaty, France ceded to India in full sovereignty the French territories of Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam.¹⁰

By Article 24 of the Treaty of Cession the mission of the French Institute of Pondicherry is to function as an establishment for higher studies and research. The aim of the Institute is to deploy its resources for projects in South and South-East Asia.¹¹

By Article 23 it was resolved that the French Government or French recognised private organisations shall be allowed to maintain and establish institutions devoted to higher studies, diplomas of French language, culture and civilisation, scientific research, spreading of French language and culture in Science, Arts and Fine Arts. The Indian Government shall grant facilities in accordance with their laws and regulations for entry and residence in India to French scholars officially sent by the French Government for a period of study in India.¹²



Article 34 maintained that “the French language shall remain the official language of the Establishments so long as the elected representatives of the people shall not dispose otherwise”.¹³

In the spirit of Indo-French agreement and the subsequent Treaty of Cession, the following French organisations are doing commendable service in Indian studies and dissemination of Indian culture.

I) The Institut Francaise de Pondicherry or French Institute of Pondicherry is a research institution under the joint authority of the French Ministry of Foreign affairs (MAEE) and the French National Centre for Scientific Research. It is an integral part of the network of 27 research centres connected to this Ministry. It was the outcome of the initiative of Dr. K.M. Panikkar, a historian and Dr. Jean Filliozat, an Indologist. It took concrete shape under the terms of Treaty of Cession of French Territories in India and was inaugurated on March 21, 1955.¹⁴

It has three basic missions: research, expertise and training.¹⁵ It carries out research in collaboration with its partners in the fields of Indology, Ecology, Social Sciences and Geomatics. Its research interest covers South Asia and South East Asia. Now the IFP is an affiliated research Institute of the Pondicherry University.

a) The Department of Indology

The Department of Indology focuses its attention on the key features of classical India - its religions, literatures and languages (Tamil and Sanskrit). Research work is mainly centred on different branches of Indology such as the philosophy, the religious traditions and practices in India with focus on the Saiva Agamic religion. It is also engaged in collection, edition and interpretation of agamic and puranic texts. Studies undertaken by the Institute includes areas like Indian Iconography, Archaeology with importance on treatises of architecture and image-making; besides traditional grammar and poetry of Sanskrit and Tamil and Tamil lexicography.¹⁶ The Indological section is equipped with two Research Libraries, one located in the French Institute and another in the Ecole.

b) The Department of Ecology

In the 1960s, it was established to collect information and understand the dynamics and structures of vegetation, especially of the ecosystem and landscape. It mainly focuses on the Western Ghats, one of the world's 34 hotspots for biodiversity. It specialises in palynology (study of pollen), bioclimatology, and biogeography of plant communities in India and South East Asia. Their expertise has resulted in a detailed mapping of the natural vegetation of South India.¹⁷

In 1990 a permanent forest monitoring station was set up in the lowland moist evergreen forest at Uppangala in Western Ghats, with the cooperation of the Karnataka Forest Department, to promote a more intensive study of forest dynamics and response to environmental changes.¹⁸

Currently there are 4 main research Laboratories at the DoE¹⁹

1. Laboratory of forestry and botany
2. Laboratory of Palynology and Palaeoecology
3. Laboratory of Environmental Management
4. Methods for Ecology

The cartography wing is engaged in the preparation of vegetation maps based on the internationally accepted principles as propounded by Dr. Gaussen. These maps seek to synthesise the results obtained from these different laboratories. The bioclimatic and phyto-geographic maps prepared by this institution (International map of vegetation) cover the countries of the Indian Ocean and the adjacent tropical regions.

c) The Department of Social Sciences

It was started in 1988 to extend its interest to study the evolution and dynamics of Indian society.²⁰ The activities of the Department are conducted with an Indian and South Asian regional perspective. They are undertaken through scientific programmes submitted to Agencies (ANR, EU-PCRD) and foundations. The research programmes are conducted in cooperation with Indian partners. They are multidisciplinary, combining demography, anthropology, history, economics, law and geography. Most of the subjects have been enriched through new programmes and collaborations related to judicial practices, food, nutrition, and environmental issues. The current programmes are:²¹



Medicine, Environment and Societies Health (South Asia)
Food and Nutrition in Indian Contexts
Water and Territories
Labour, Finance and Social Dynamics

d) Geomatics

The development of research and the necessity to support it with modern methodologies and equipment led to the creation of a laboratory of Applied Informatics and Geomatics (LIAG) in the 1990s. The installation of the LAIG as a common tool greatly helped in identifying new areas for research. It works in the areas of digital mapping, utilization of satellite imagery, GIs and modelling etc.²²

Three tasks are assigned to the Geomatics and Applied Informatics Laboratory (LIAG):

- Support to scientific departments and project initiation: the (LIAG) puts forward its skills in Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and in Information Technology and Communication (IT&C);
- Active participation in the Institute policy regarding promotion of scientific heritage (digitising collections, maps databases, etc), publication (diffusion of knowledge through multi-media, book covers, exhibitions, etc) and communication (website, posters);
- Management of computer resources and means of electronic communication (internal network, Internet access).

GIS / Remote Sensing / Web Mapping

The Laboratory specializes in the acquisition, management, modelling and analysis of spatial information on the Indian sub-continent with the aim to address scientific queries raised by the research work undertaken at the Institute. The contribution of the laboratory to the research projects is based on expertise in the development of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and analysis of satellite images (remote sensing) and favours a multi-disciplinary and integrative approach²³

Computer: Applications Development and Resources for the Institute

The Laboratory is

- In charge of original applications development aiming at improving the access to new technologies, Computer-aided identification of tropical forest trees (BIOTIK)
- Responsible for the management of computer resources, network and e-communication facilities at the Institute as well as the development of databases and multimedia products for the Departments at the Institute.
- Responsible for the diffusion of scientific results through CD-ROMS and the development of web-browser based applications on the web.

The Institutes Documentary Heritage²⁴

In the 60 years of its history, the FIP has become an enormous reservoir of knowledge on Indian culture, society and environment and has gathered precious documents and research materials within its premises. They include:

- I. The manuscript collection has 8500 palm leaf bundles, 360 paper codices & 1144 recent paper transcripts. It is the largest collection in the world of manuscripts texts of the Saiva Siddhanta and has been deemed a "Memory of the World" collection by the UNESCO.
- II. The Photo Archives of 1,50,000 photographs are a unique resource for visual information about South India in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly its temple art.
- III. The Library Collection: The Library of the FIP is a multidisciplinary research library. Its collection consists of 65000 books, 360 theses, 1600 articles and 800 journals of which 200 are currently received, relating to the domains of Indology, Ecology and Social Sciences. The Indological collection is deemed to be one among the richest in South India. In addition, the Institutes staff, Doctoral students and interns have access to thousands of e-resources: journals, books, databases, indexes, etc. due to the FIP's affiliation to the CNRs and the Pondicherry University. This Centre holds specialized data of the research conducted at the IFP, which is augmented every year through a dynamic acquisition policy. The library is open to the public with a set of rules framed by the IFP. The catalogue of



the library which is available online is quite unique, since it enables search and display of Indian scripts and in Roman transliteration.

The library has also undertaken digitization of rare books in its collection, including completion of a project under the Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library. It is also a member of DELNET (Developing Library Network).

II) The Ecole francaise d'Extreme-Orient (EFEO) or The French School of Asian Studies

It is a public institution under the aegis of the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research. It was established on December 14, 1898 under the patronage of the 'Academic des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres' to supplement the College de France. It is dedicated to the study of Asian societies. In 1900 it came to be known as Ecole francaise d'Extreme -Orient' with its field of research covering the whole of Far East including India.²⁵ After the independence of Vietnam, its headquarters was shifted to Paris. Its main fields of research are archaeology, philology and study of classical civilisations of Asia through the humanities and social sciences.

A branch of Ecole francaise d'Extreme-Orient was established at Pondicherry in 1964.²⁶ EFEO members directed the Indology program of IFP. It is attached to the Indological section of FIP and both of them maintain permanent relations on an exchange basis not only with similar Indian Institutions, Research Centres and Universities but also with more than 150 scientific institutions in 83 countries around the globe.²⁷ The French publications help to spread the knowledge of Indian culture in the French knowing world. The Pondicherry centre has its own premises.

The institutions century long engagement in Asia has contributed decisively to fields such as history, archaeology, religion, iconography, linguistics (Tamil and Sanskrit) grammar and the study of inscriptions, manuscripts, art and architecture. In Indological studies the school and FIP jointly published a number of works on different aspects. At present the EFEO participates actively in the digital transformation of Asian studies, and occupies a central position in the network of high level academic partnership in Asia and Europe.²⁸

The EFEO has housed its own collections and has provided facilities for Indian scholars. The Centre has a Library of Indology (about 11,000 titles), and houses a collection of maps and drawings, as well as manuscript texts on palm leaves in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Manipravalam. The EFEO's permanent team comprises European and Indian scholars and technicians. Their work is regularly enhanced by contributions from visiting specialists and doctoral students. Research results of the EFEO Centre are published in the form of monographs and include critical editions of texts in Sanskrit and Tamil, and translations of essential texts. Publications also include in-depth studies in literature, archaeology, epigraphy and history -- classic and contemporary, in addition to anthropology. Many of these works are published in the prestigious Collection Indologie jointly edited by EFEO and IFP.²⁹ More than 100 titles have been published so far. The works of the EFEO researchers are also published in international and Indian journals.

III) The Alliance francaise (French Alliance)

It is an international organisation that aims to promote French language and culture around the world. It was created in Paris on July 21, 1883 by a group of eminent men, including the Scientist Louis Pasteur, the Diplomat Ferdinand de Lesspes, writers like Jules Verne and Ernest Renan and the Publisher Armand Colin. The Pondicherry branch of Alliance Francaise was started in 1889.³⁰ The institution arranges regular refresher as well as short term courses for the benefit of children and adults. The Alliance is a place for learning, sharing and conviviality among people. It is functioning under the Ministry of Culture, Government of France.

IV) Le Lycee Francais

Le Lycee Francais de Pondicherry at Pondicherry is one of the most important French high schools (lycee francais) outside France and the second largest in Asia after Hong Kong. It was established as the College Royal on October 26, 1826, by Eugene Panon, Comte Desbassayns de Richemont, then Governor General of Pondicherry in French India, during the Bourbon Restoration.³¹ At present classes is conducted from kindergarten level to Baccalaureat (Pre-University). English is taught here as second language and Tamil as an optional language. This College is affiliated to the University of Rennes in France. Today it has around 1,400 students from elementary school to baccalaureat (Pre-University) level. The students who pass out of this institution take up advanced studies in different subjects in French Universities. It is under the control of Ministry of Education, Government of France.³²



CONCLUSION

When India got independence from the British, the French Indian Government never expected that it would grant the merger of the French Indian settlements with Indian Union. They intended to stay back and had an idea to keep these territories as part of the overseas French empire. But the political developments in India and the international compulsions warranted the French Government to enter into parleys with the Indian Government for peaceful transfer of its Indian enclaves. Through the Indo-French Agreement of 1954 and the Treaty of Cession of 1956 the Indian sovereignty was recognised over these enclaves. In turn these treaties provided for the continuation and establishment of French institutions involved in research and academic activities such as the French Institute of Pondicherry, Ecole Francaise D'Extreme-Orient, French Lycee and Alliance Francaise. Though the French departed Indian soil unwillingly these institutions are still rendering a great service in Indian studies and in the continuation of teaching of French language in the Indian soil. The French publications help to spread the knowledge of Indian culture in the French knowing world. In Indological studies the school and FIP jointly published a number of works on different aspects. The Government of France has been spending its huge resources to fulfil its obligations under the treaties signed with the Indian Government. The French nation and its people feel proud in allocating a major budget in meeting the provisions of the agreements. Thus, these French institutions are immensely contributing for the study of Indian history, languages, culture and dissemination of knowledge between the two in the globalised world and making Pondicherry as the 'Window of French Culture' in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru.

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