



The French Acquisitions on the Coromandel Coast, with special reference to Karaikal in the Eighteenth Century

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Abstract

Karaikal is a town of the Indian Union Territory of Puducherry a small coastal enclave that was formerly part of French India. Together with the other former French territories of Pondicherry, Yanam, and Mahé, it forms the Union Territory of Puducherry. Karaikal is bounded on the North and South by the Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu state, on the west by the Tiruvarur district and on the East by the Bay of Bengal. Karaikal was sold to the French by the Rajah of Thanjavur and became a French Colony in 1739. The French held control, with occasional interruptions from the British, until 1954, when it was de facto incorporated into the Republic of India (de jure in 1962), along with Mahé, Yanaon, and Pondichéry. The origin of the word Karaikal is uncertain. The Imperial Gazetteer of British India gives its meaning as 'fish pass'. Both the words 'Karai' and 'Kal' have several meanings, of which the more acceptable ones are 'lime mix' and 'canal' respectively. Hence it has been suggested that the name may mean a canal built of the lime mix, however, no trace of such a canal is evident.

Introduction

India has been a major trading destination for many European countries in the Ancient and Medieval Era. Even before the beginning of the formal rule of British in India, there was prevalence of trade between India and European countries. India and Europe had trade relations via land route through Syria, Egypt and also Oxus valley. The age of 15th century in Europe was an era of geographical discoveries of land and sea routes. In 1492, the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus discovered America in 1492 and Vasco da Gama of Portugal discovered a new sea route from Europe to India in 1498. After this discovery, many trading companies from all across Europe came to India and established their centers. The Europeans came to India in phases. The first to come to India as traders were the Portuguese followed by, the British, the Dutch, the Danes and the French, who subsequently developed designs to be the political masters of India.

Advent of French in India:

France was the last of the European maritime powers to engage in the East India trade in the 17th century. Six decades after the establishment of the English and Dutch

East India companies (in 1600 and 1602, respectively), and at a time when both companies were multiplying factories (trading posts) on India's shores, the French still lacked a viable trading company or a single permanent establishment in the East. The French East India Company was a colonial commercial venture that was established on September 1, 1664, to compete with the English (later British) and Dutch trade firms in the East Indies. The company's interest in the Mughal Empire would not be much simpler to come by. On September 4, 1666, the French obtained a royal mandate from Emperor Aurangzeb allowing them to trade via the port of Surat. Sher Khan Lodi, the ruler of Valikandapuram (under the Bijapur Sultan), awarded Francois Martin, the director of the Masulipatnam factory, a colony site in 1673. Pondicherry was established in 1674. Francois Martin took over as French governor the next year, succeeding Caron. The French corporation also constructed plants in various sections of India, notably around the coast. The French East India Company had key commercial centers at Mahe, Karaikal, Balasore, and Qasim Bazar.

Coromandal and its importance:

The Coromandel Coast continued to become an important commercial center since the ancient period. It became more prominent with the coming of Europeans, where textiles played a major role in the maritime trade. The trade of Coromandel was carried out from a number of ports along the coast. The major ports of outlet for trade from the north-south direction were: Masulipatnam, Petapuli (Nazampatnam), Kistnapatnam, Armagoan, Pulicat, Madras, San Thome, Pondicherry, Devanampatnam (Tegenapatnam), Cuddalore, Porto Novo, Tranquebar, Karikal, and Nagapatnam. Each of these ports had weaving villages in its hinterland and this export of textiles alone was enough to sustain the trade. The markets for Coromandel textiles spread over a wide region of Asia: Burmese and Thai kingdoms, the Sultanate of the Malay Archipelago, north and east of Sumatra, Java, Moluccas, the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula. Besides, the oceanic trade, there was considerable coastal trade northwards up to Orrisa and Bengal, southwards to Sri Lanka and westwards to Malabar and Gujarat. The Indian merchants had been trading the Coromandel textiles into Southeast Asian markets. The textile also came from Gujarat and Bengal but those of Coromandel were generally the most desired in the Southeast markets. The color, prints, and design had been adapted to suit the tastes of these markets, and even their names signify the geographical areas to which they were directed. The other export items from the Coromandel were rice to Acheen and Malacca, and sometimes to Makassar. These items came from the Godavari delta and from Tanjore, the two Coromandel regions where surplus rice was produced. Iron and steel were also exported from the northern and central regions to both the island and mainland Southeast Asia. Tobacco, grown in different parts of Coromandel, was exported to Acheen, but the largest quantities were sent to Burma and Siam. Indigo was exported to both an island and mainland Southeast Asia, and diamonds from the Golconda mines were also exported. The imported items into the Coromandel took a greater variety. Spices from the Moluccas: nutmeg, cloves, and mace were imported. Pepper also came from Acheen, where it was cheap and abundant but again not in great quality for Coromandel as it was generally

supplied both by sea and by land from Malabar. Tin was the main imported commodity and came from all over the Southeast Asian regions from Acheen, Sumatra, Bantam, Java, Johore, Perak, Kedah, Burma, and Siam, and even from China. Another bulk commodity that was traded with great profit was the elephant. Elephants were bought from Acheen, Bantam, Johore, Perak, Kedah, Tenasserim, Syriam, Pegu, and Arakan, where it was available in abundance and cheap. Over the years, Coromandel shippers had developed special expertise in loading and unloading to take care of these elephants on the long voyage. It appears that the major market for elephants was Bengal, but the rulers of Golconda, Bijapur, and Tanjore emerge in the seventeenth century as the main buyers of these animals. Horses were also imported from Pegu but considered inferior, still, then there were regular ships carrying horses. Among the imported items, the most valuable was bullion, gold, and silver, mainly in the form of specie and gold dust. Most of these Southeast Asian coins of silver and gold were transported to Coromandel to be coined for larger uses.

Acquisition of karaikal by French east India Company:

Karaikal and its surrounding areas formed part of the Mayuran Subha of Thanjavur under the first Maratha ruler Ekoji in 1675. But soon after the arrival of the French in Pondicherry, Francois Martin is known to have sent an envoy to the King of Thanjavur, seeking permission to set up an establishment in his Kingdom. This as well as the mission sent in 1688 did not bring success. In 1738, again Dumas negotiated with Sahuji of Thanjavur for Karaikal, the fortress of Karakalacherry, and five villages on payment of 40,000 chakras. The Council Superior met on 10th July 1738 and approved the treaty. Even before the French could take possession of the town and villages, Sahuji backed out of his promise on the convenient pretext of Dutch objection. Chanda Sahib ruling Pondicherry then, in an attempt to demonstrate his allegiance to the French, offered to march his own troops to Karaikal. The troops led by Francisco Pereira, a Spaniard in the service of Chanda Sahib, with French interest at heart, took the town and the fort in no time. Karaikal, the fort of 'Karakalacherry' and the adjacent territory were made over to the French. On

14th February 1739, Gratien Folard took possession of Karaikal town, the fort of Karakalacherry and dependent villages. Although Chanda Sahib's Thanjavur expedition did not achieve its purpose, he wished to confirm the grant of Karaikal to the French. This was enough for the king of Thanjavur who raised the price of Karaikal town and the fort of Karakalacherry to 50,000 chakras. He also demanded a loan of 1, 50,000 chakras without interest, repayable in three years against the hypothecation of Mayuram lands and an annual rent of 4,000 pagodas for five villages. The Council Superior agreed to all the terms except for the repayment of 1, 50,000 chakras which were reduced to 10,000 chakras while the annual rent was reduced to two or three thousand chakras. The villages so received were Keezhaiyur, Melayur, Puduthurai, KOilpathu, and Thirumalair ayanpattinam. The farmana of Chanda Sahib dated 1st July 1739 ceded to Dumas the two villages of Neravy and 'Conde' situated south of Karaikal. Troubles started again in the Kingdom of Thanjavur, and Sahuji lost his throne in a domestic revolution. Pratap Singh who succeeded to the throne renewed the demand for a loan of 1, 00,000 chakras. On receipt of the first installment of 40, 000 chakras, he assigned eight more villages to the French, viz. Codal) 1gue (Kodangai), Vanjiur, Arinullimangalam, Neravy, Dharmapuram, Ozhipathu, Mattakudy (probably Mattalangudy), and Polagam. On 5th January 1740, the village of Ariamangalam was exchanged for Courtallam (Kurtallam). On 12th February 1740 Pratap Singh sold these eight villages for 50,000 chakras which he had assigned only the previous year for a sum of 40,000 chakras. The same year he pledged Thirunallar for a sum of 55,350 chakras (equivalent to Rs. 82,000). He also pledged 33 villages for a sum of 60,000 chakras. In July 1741 a parwana (Farmana-Urdu) was received from the Mughal Emperor, confirming the right to the French over Karaikal and the five villages. 'Relations with the Thanjavur Court, however, became strained shortly. Nevertheless, Febrier, successor to Gratien Golard, managed to exchange Codague. Then Courtralam and Mattakudi for Koilpathu, Vadamaranam, Keezhakasakudy, and Thalatheru which increased the number of villages, sold from eight to nine. By a treaty signed on 12th

January 1759, Pratap Singh ceded 81 villages around Karaikal to the French and canceled the annual rent of 2,000 pagodas (Rs. 7,000) payable to the villages. This was the territory, the French possessed in the Thanjavur country when they surrendered to the British in 1761. The territory then passed twice to British control in 1783 and 1797 after which it was finally restored by John Thackeray, the controller of Thanjavur to Comte Beranger on 14th January 1817. The French held it until they left the colony in October 1954.

In 1787 and 1791, farmers of Karaikal agitated against the heavy land tax imposed by the French. The rebellion of 1857 had an effect on the French settlements but it did not attract the attention of the rulers. Student protests in 1927 and 1930 expressed their desire for an end to French oversight. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak visited Pondicherry and its other enclaves and addressed the meetings. In 1934, Swatantram, a monthly, was started by veteran independence activist and trade union leader V. Subbiah for the cause of workers and the country.

Police control, which warranted trade union unrest, further increased civilian agitation against the colonial government. In late 1930, grassroots organizations known as mahajana sabhas were started in Pondicherry and Karaikal. These groups, along with trade unions, organized the Non-Cooperation Movement. During the Second World War, Puducherry supported France with men and materiel. Deaths among French-Indian soldiers caused unrest in the enclaves. In 1946, the French India Congress was formed with the objective of integrating French possessions with India. Later the following year, the French India Students Congress adopted a resolution on the merger. In January 1948, the French People's Convention passed a resolution expressing its determination to merge French possessions with India. The Communist Party asked the people to accept only the merger.

The post-independence government under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was anxious to integrate the French and Indian territories with the country. Fr. Jerome D'Souza - a member of the Constituent Assembly of India - was appointed by the Government of India to negotiate with the French authorities in Pondicherry. India

signed an agreement with France in June 1948 which gave power to the people to determine the political status of their land. Accordingly, municipal elections in Pondicherry, Karaikal and Yanam were held in October 1948. All municipalities accept one elected representatives of the French India Socialist Party, a pro-French group. The new councilors at a meeting accepted the autonomy offered by the French Government. The Indian Government continued to press for unification, pledging a distinct status and help for Puducherry after its merger with India.

As the unification movement gathered momentum under Subbiah, the pro-French leader Eduard Goubert switched his loyalty to the pro-merger camp. This movement was coordinated by many leaders like D.K. Ramanujam and Mr Chandrasekara Reddiar. A momentous event in the freedom movement of Puducherry occurred on 18 March 1954, when the members of the executive council and mayors of Pondicherry and seven adjoining communes proclaimed their decision to merge with India without a referendum. All the communes in Karaikal also followed suit. This decision was to be confirmed by the Representative Assembly. When the Socialist Party was preparing to move the merger resolution, the French governor scuttled it by postponing the session. Provoked by this, the Socialists planned to capture the outlying communes one by one and move to Pondicherry. The Communist Party was also ready to launch a campaign of direct action to merge Pondicherry with India. Accordingly, the leaders of the Socialist Party hoisted the Indian national flag atop the Nettapakkam police station on the last day of March in 1954. Subsequently, many villages in Mannadipet and Bahour communes came under the sway of the pro-merger forces. In the Karaikal region, all the communes and Karaikal municipality passed a resolution in favour of the merger. The National Youth Congress began a Satyagraha. An independence activists' procession was charged by police using lathi and the flags carried by the processionists were seized and torn by the French Indian Police. Mr. Chandrasekara Reddiar and D.K. Ramanujam were arrested.

India and France, following talks, issued a joint statement on 13 October 1954 announcing a procedure for deciding the

status of the French settlements. Five days later, on 18 October 1954, the elected members of the Representative Assembly and the municipal councilors of Pondicherry and Karaikal took part in a referendum at Kizhur. Of the 178 members voting, an overwhelming majority of 170 members favored the merger of French Indian territories with the Republic of India. Three days later, an agreement on the de facto transfer of the French territories to India was signed in New Delhi between the two countries. A treaty of cession was signed by the two countries in May 1956. It was ratified by the French parliament in May 1962. On 16 August 1962 India and France exchanged the instruments of ratification under which France ceded to India full sovereignty over the territories it held. The de-jure transfer took place on 16th August, 1962. Pondicherry and the other enclaves of Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam came to be administered as the Union Territory of Pondicherry on 1 July 1963.

Conclusion

The French presence in the former French territories of India has produced a new and unexpected reality given the initial circumstances. This makes the city of Karaikal unique and different from other parts of Tamil Nadu. The territory formally took the name Puducherry in 2006. On the day of 16th August Puducherry government has been celebrating "De Jure Transfer Day and the 1st of November is celebrated as Liberation day throughout Puducherry state.

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