

## Nationalism in French India

The role played by Pondicherry in the freedom struggle of India does not find mention in the colossal documentation that speaks of the actual struggle on the road to freedom on mainstream India from the colonial yoke. To the credit of Pondicherry though, writers like A. Ramasamy and others have taken pains to record the contribution of Pondicherrians inside and outside Pondicherry. What emerges is the fact that being in the immediate and convenient vicinity outside British India, Pondicherry developed an identity as an asylum/ safe haven for revolutionaries hunted out of British India, a spring-board for national sentiments of those who took abode therein, and a launching pad for the publication of magazines with nationalistic writings like the Tamil Weekly, India, under editorship of the famous poet Subramnia Bharathi.

Even the revolutionary Shri Aurobindo Ghosh originally arrived in Pondicherry from Bengal in 1910, to be out of reach of the British Government, Bharathi, Aurobindo Ghosh and V.V.S. Iyer, all three who were outsiders to Pondicherry combined together with some other locally, based patriots to form a society of intellectuals to discuss topics on the theme of ways and means to achieve Indian independence.

Other revolutionary names like that of Neelakanta Brahamchari, the editor of vernacular paper Suryodayam, Subramani Siva, Vanchinathan, Madasamy, Deivasigamani Naicker, Bharathidasan, Saigon Chinnaiya, Jaganatha Giramani etc. among others, do find mention for their active sentiments towards the Indian freedom struggle. Others who contributed no less were people like the Gandhi of French India, Rangasamy Naicker and Joseph Xavery Pillai, both of Karaikal, who are also listed for their associations with the then congress

leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, and their practice of the Gandhian principles, as also their participation in the Indian Freedom struggle.

### **Merger movements**

There is a lot of controversy prevailing amongst scholars in so far as the role of Pondicherrians in the freedom struggles within Pondicherry to free themselves from French rule. There is also an opinion that there was no freedom struggle at all on the part of pondicherrians towards this end. Pondicherry which saw the French settle here in 1674 had come under permanent French rule only after the Treaty of Paris in 1814 when it was returned by the British after they had occupied it three times and once by the Dutch in the interregnum. There were many parleys then for the exchange of various colonial holdings between French and England which however did not materialize, but Pondicherry did come under serious threat of another occupation by the British when France surrendered to Germany during the II world war. This was avoided by rallying to the Free France Movement operating from London. British used this opportunity to effect an economic merger by imposing a Customs Union, shifting its customs office from its own boundaries with Pondicherry, to the seashore.

Retired justice David Annousamy and A. Ramachandran in their papers on Merger of French India read at the Seminar organized by Pondicherry University last September, have listed the chronology of events that diversely influenced the behaviour of Pondicherryians during the Merger moves and counter moves, that would determine their own fragile future. Most Pondicherrians, especially those of the elite class, had enjoyed and preferred the benefits of the French rule. Till the independence of India there was

actually no movement against the French in Pondicherry. The nationalists in Pondicherry worked for the liberation for India from British rule and the Indian leaders had also advised them not to antagonize the French who provided shelter to Indian patriots taking refuge in Pondicherry. Things changed when immediately after independence, the Indian Government made it clear that it would not recognise the right of France on their establishments in India, The great urge to secure self rule in colonies emerging everywhere, compelled the French government also to take a realistic view of the situation, making France declare Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam in November 1947 as free towns having full administrative powers independently of each other, placing them under the common authority of a commissioner of the Republic in Pondicherry, The only other French establishment in India, Chandranagore, in the meantime, attained a separate status in June 1947 in terms of a declaration made in the French National Assembly to allow people of the establishments the right of self determination after a referendum, and confirming the same to the Government of India. Chandranagore, the first to organize the referendum, merged with west Bengal in June 1949.

Pro-merger sentiment in Pondicherry, though real, was less unanimous than in the far-off outpost chandranagore. One bone of contention was the question of popular consultation. French contended that per Article 27 of her constitution, a referendum had to be held before any cession of territory could be made. Though the date was fixed for referendum in Pondicherry, the General Assembly of Municipal Councillors of all four establishments for whom merger with India by then was a foregone conclusion, got pre-occupied with the modalities of merger. The elite who had French education was interested in safeguarding the Special interests of the people of Pondicherry and demanded a transition period of 25 to 30 years. Though the reaction of both the French and

Indian Government to this was lukewarm initially, the French veered themselves to preferring the transition period demand to extend their presence. India in the meantime put an end to the customs agreement of 1941 thinking that it will cause inconvenience to the population and compel it to opt for India, this however proved to be an error since the Pondicherry based merchants found in it a golden opportunity for smuggling huge quantities of gold and diamonds. This unexpected windfall naturally turned the tide in favour of continuance of the French presence, prompting Jawaharlal Nehru to refuse the referendum on ground that the local political climate was not conducive to a free vote and that pressures by French administration and elements would skew the results against merger. The Government of India thus realizing the possibility of the referendum going against its interests, went back on the principle agreed to in 1948, declaring that the only possible solution to be retrocession pure and simple to the Indian Union.

The Indian Government then brought in sanctions by sealing the frontiers of French establishments with barbed wire fencing, stoppage of electricity supply and payment of huge tax for export of Pondicherry sugarcane into India. The economic blockade by India, compelled the French to spend huge amounts of money to maintain normalcy of life within their establishments, making it eventually clear in early 1954 that merger with India was inevitable.

Increasing pressure from India, internal pressure from pro-mergerites, and the election of Socialist leader Pierre Mendes in France all coincided to bring about France's capitulation to India's demands for merger, without referendum. For the sake of form though, France did succeed in gaining a vote on the question of sovereignty by the elected members like municipal councilors, mayors and deputies of French India. This "Popular consultation" referendum on

October 18, 1954 through representatives took place at Kizhore (Kijeour), a village on the Franco- Indian boundary in one of the outlying communes of Pondicherry. It remains a fact though that although all members of the Kishoor assembly had previously been elected on pro-French (that is anti-merger) platforms, by the time of the vote most had publicly taken pro-merger stands. Their verdict was for merger, with a vote of 170 out of 178 in favour. The de facto transfer was signed on 21.10.1954, with the actual protocol signed at Government House on 1<sup>st</sup> November by Kewal Singh, the Indian representative and Pierre Landy, the special envoy of France. While the Treaty of Cession of the French establishments of Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam was signed on May 28, 1956, concerns with the constitutionality of such transfer of French sovereignty, delayed ratification for an additional six years- the main objections being that the French Indians were not given the opportunity directly by vote. Only on August 16, 1962 did the de jure transfer formally come into effect.

While this briefly could be summed up as the story of diplomatic parleys, arm-twisting, and intriguing economic self interest that prompted pro and counter moves that finally compelled the merger of French India, it would be unfair not to recognize and give due credit to personalities who indeed were involved in professing national sentiments and in pressuring through activities prejudicial to the French interest towards a final decision for the merger of French territories into the Indian Union.

While it will not be possible to cover everyone in a short presentation like this, mention of a few would be appropriate. Heading the list of such leader of the freedom movement in Pondicherry, one reads the name of communist leader V.Subbair. Then the French Indian National Congress formed at Pondicherry in

June 1947, which played a prominent role throughout, had Savarinathan, Sethurama Chettiar, Ambadi Narayanan, Govinda Pathar and Annamalai as its conveners. The French Administration took repressive measures following the activities and hartals organized by the French India National Congress. A large number of students and leaders including Perumal - President of the Student Congress, Anthony Mariadoss, etc. were arrested. The French Government initially supported the Communist Party, later shifting its support to the Congress party, while the work for the freedom struggle officially was attributed to the socialist's party led by Edward Goubert. Leading personalities like Sellane Naicker, Balasubramanian, Danaraja, Joseph Montburn and Edward Goubert sorted their differences and came under one political umbrella in Pondicherry, while Packiresamy Pillai and Savarinatha Pillai played a dominant role in mobilizing public support for the national Front in Karaikal. Similarly, I.K.Kumaran of Mahe and members of his Mahajana Sabha fought for the freedom struggle in the Kerala region while Dadela Ramannaya in Yanam, Spearheaded the movements.

Journals like the Kalki, Dinasari, Tamil Murasu, Dinamani, the Hindu, Pudukkottai Murasu, Karai Mail and the India Express followed up and supported the freedom struggle moves in Pondicherry. In the earlier phase, parties like the socialist Party, the Communist party of French India, the Democratic and progressive Party in favour of French Union, were actually anti merger parties, and it is a fact that there were anti merger movements also in this region. But later on all Political parties, including the French Indian Congress, the Congress socialist Party, the French India National Congress, the All French Indian Congress, the congress Socialist Party, the French India Independent Party, the French Indian Communist Party, The Youth Congress Communist Party, the

Dravidar Kazhagam and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, without exception, unanimously supported the idea of Independence.

On this score, a notice circulated by Sellane Naicker in early 1954 as a request from the Merger Committee to the People of French India to agitate along lines of Gandhiji's Ahimsa principles, I would consider relevant and reflective of the strong nationalistic wind that had by then started blowing across Pondicherry. His plea read-

"We, a handful of Indians living in the four French enclaves, constitute a gross anomaly, a political monstrosity.

In these days of self-determination of people, of universal revolt against political slavery and economic subjugation, the fact that France has exercised her sovereignty for some time over these enclaves does neither confer any right in her favour nor stand against our inalienable right to our freedom and self-determination.

We are Indians first, and it is our duty and privilege to get ourselves immediately re-united with our Indian brethren, from whom we are separated by theoretical conventions, and political subjugation.

Therefore, I earnestly appeal to the people of France, their parliament and to the Govt. to realize the above said anomaly, and impossibility of maintaining their domination and take into account the difficulties and suffering, which the inhabitants of the French Indian enclaves are undergoing.

The only remedy for the present evil is an amicable handing over of those enclaves to the Indian Republic. Through this noble gesture, France, like Great Britain, will be entitled to the friendship of the Indian people, and at the same

time, it will put an end to the miseries and sufferings of Indians living in these pockets. It will give the world a tangible proof of French political wisdom and sagacity, and will be a pointer to the good faith and desire of France to promote the ideals of democracy.

I appeal to my fellow countrymen of the French settlements to collaborate with us for the merger of our four enclaves with our motherland India through constitutional methods. Let us ever remember the ideals of justice, truth and peace preached by our revered Mahatmaji and let us live up to them."

### **50 years since' 47**

One would need now to comment on the self-rule enjoyed by us these past 50 years. On the evolution of India that has taken place over the period, and recall moments in history that have scarred or exemplified us. How can one not remember the horrors and the trauma of the partition, the struggle for the establishment of a democratic socialist polity, the formative years propelled by the idealism and dynamism of giants who actually secured independence for us? The ups and downs, state policies adopted - later regretted, mistakes made and repeated again and again, \_\_\_ the Kashmir problem, wars with Pakistan, the green revaluation attaining self sufficiency in food grain, --- the white revolution, the coming of age of Indian industry, the set backs due to terrorism, militancy and secessionist activities- of the naxalites in Telengana, insurgency in the North-east, the people's war group, and the Pak induced terrorism in Punjab and Kashmir. It is a miracle that through it all, India has survived its stability without fragmenting.

A lot has been written about this in the past months - of our achievements and our failures. But while achievements are good to build on, it is the failures and mistakes that we should worry about. On this score, what really do we see in these 50 years of independence? We have witnessed the transition from the then existing ICS over -Lordship to the current Administrative pseudo-Lordship, from the idealism of political masters dedicated to service- to a political order vitiated by opportunism and lack of values, from a bureaucracy in its multi- coloured splendour to an emaciated form with no content, from honesty being the rule in general to honesty being a rule by exception, and from a healthy and exhilarating environment to a debased and polluted order. Considerations other than proven merit select our people's representatives to parliament and Assemblies, their lack of administrative experience and knowledge of the basic of economy and development reflecting in the functioning Of their governments. While every action of Government these days is announced in the name of a Chief Minister or a Prime Minister and not of the Government, publicity is used to over deficiencies in administration. Political neutrality or the services and objectivity in administrative decisions are becoming things of the past. Transfers to lucrative stations and promotions are on political considerations, if not along caste considerations. The Government is by the Party and for the Party in power. Criminalization of politics and Politicization of Criminals is the present trend. "Dadas" as ministers, or legislators, or in party cadres, have become indispensable to leaders. Politicians protect these dasas from the Police. A global survey of graft has given India a rank within the top ten. Corruption is eating into the vitals of the nation/ society, with corruption both within the government and in non governmental fields of activity. The System of redressal of grievance has become totally non-existent with the collapse on one side of the criminal justice administration system and on the other with long drawn and money consuming judicial

procedures in civil matters that are useful only to the affluent. Easy access to courts for obtaining stay and alleged lack of