

THE FRENCH INDIA AND FIRST WORLD WAR

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Introduction

In 1914, the French India was an old colony. It consisted of five settlements - Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe, Yanam and Chandernagore. These were located in different parts in India. Pondicherry or Puducherry in Tamil is on the Coromandel Coast, Karaikal is an overgrown village in north of the Kaveri Delta, Mahe is a little settlement on the Malabar Coast and Yanam is the last vestige of the Deccan and Chandernagore on the district outskirts of Kolkata.¹ These five colonies were geographically detached territories. When the First World War broke out in Europe, the French settlements were in support to the French. The French soldiers of Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe, Yanam and Chandernagore set off to battle for France. Their family life was lost during the First World War. The French India, specifically, Pondicherry organizes Centenary ceremonies in the month of November this year in memory of soldiers in the participation of the Great War.

Third Republic in France

The establishment of the Third Republic (1871-1914) in France followed more vigorous policy for the French colonial possessions in India. The French India colonies were linked with the metropolitan France. The democratic institutions and political parties were established in these settlements. In course of time, the democratic rights were denied by the French. This situation was suddenly changed in French India after the outbreak of revolutionary terrorism in Bengal and Madras Presidency. The British Government did not care in Chandernagore and Pondicherry. It was an internal problem of the French settlements. Chandernagore was centre of revolutionary. The British government was worried about the dangerous activities near Calcutta against anti-British. The French administration in Chandernagore was not taken any step against them. Similarly, Pondicherry was also the centre of Political asylum for Indian leaders. The young Bengal revolutionaries Aurobindo Ghosh made trip from the Tiny settlement of Chandernagore to Pondicherry.² Besides Aurobindo Ghosh, a number of leaders like Subramania Bharathi, and VVS Aiyar were already taking shelter in Pondicherry. These great leaders began an anti-British activity in Pondicherry. Hardinge, the Viceroy of British India, sought co-operation of the French Governor Alfred Martineau, to check the circulation of the seditious literature. The Pondicherry authorities responded it. It was a big headache to the British and the French authorities.³ They prevented the circulation of any publication that was published. The revolutionary activities were temporarily suspended after the outbreak of the First World War in July 1914. The Indian revolutionaries in Pondicherry decided to carry propaganda against the German.

Fund Mobilization

Alfred Martineau (1914-1918) was a notable historians and colonial Governor in the French India. He was remained in office during the days of the First World War. When the First World War broke out in July 1914, the French Governor Alfred Martineau left for France for consultation with French administration. The French India territories joined in the First World War for French support.⁴ The war propaganda was successful in French India inhuman aspects.

The French soldiers of Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe, Yanam and Chandernagore participated battle for France. Public funding for the war effort as multiplied donations was given to the Red Cross. Money was also donated to suffering of those who had left their families for the cause of fighting in the war. These contributions were patronized by Mrs. Lejeune, the Governor wife. She took charge of sending the soldiers. On 16th August 1914, the General Council dominated by Henri Galbele voted unanimously a donation of 206,000 gold-francs for national defence. In addition, he decided to donate 16,700 francs for the wounded in war. French India finally sent one thousand men mobilized and despatched into the 11th Regiment of colonial infantry of Saigon.

The state of war had repercussions on the economy of the colony. Right from August 1914, colonial products that could be useful for the war of fort from French India, 7000 tonnes of rice, 20000 tonnes of ground nuts and 2660 tonnes of castor oil were sent for the air force. From Chandernagore, jute bags and

cloths were supplied to the Government of France through the intermediary of the Anglo-Indian Administration. The French and the English were closer together after the outbreak of First World War.⁵

German Warship

On 22nd September, 1914 German Warship "Emden" attacked Madras on the evening. The Emden reached in Pondicherry from Madras. The interim French Governor Lejeune was given alerts by an English telegram and warned the population of Pondicherry. On 23rd September 1914. Public announcement for the defense of Pondicherry by the French Governor, the native European army was mobilized in Pondicherry. The Emden arrived at 6.00 in the morning in Pondicherry. We thought we were going to be attack. Nothing to be happened. The German Warship in Pondicherry the Emden inspection sailed away towards the South East.

Interwar Situation in French India

The establishment of the Third Republic in France a new idea grew among the enlightened Indians for equality with the French. There was agitation for equality in public premises like churches, theatres etc. Latour Sambrama, a veteran leader of Pondicherry ventured to pull down the walls that separated the cemetery among France citizens, caste and depressed class Christians during the First World War.⁶

In 1907, "Reveil Social" was started in Pondicherry for the Welfare of the depressed classes. Clairon brothers, Lazare, Francois Lesel, Horace and

M. Noel played a prominent role for the upliftment of the depressed community. "Reveil Social" became the centre for social reform movement.

La Jeunesse Republicaine (The young Republican) was another organization, and it was attached to "Reveil Social". It was established for the upliftment of backward class community. These organizations had provided higher studies and financial assistance to the young students.⁷

During the interwar period, the growth of the working class population of Pondicherry and Chandernagore was remarkable. Pondicherry had three textile mills, and Chandernagore had one jute mill. The conditions of the labourers and farmers were miserable. The Mill workers of the Pondicherry and Chandernagore lived in a very pathetic situation. They worked for duty 10 to 12 hours under inhuman conditions. Their wages were low. They had no right to form trade unions, and their grievances were unsolved. They enjoyed in the French labour code.⁸ The mill owners of Pondicherry and Chandernagore had extended those benefits to the working class people.

During the war period, there was a shortage of food grains in Pondicherry. The French India Administration of Pondicherry arranged for discussions with the Governor of Madras. The French had agreed to all the establishment of sea customs as proposed by the British Government. An agreement was reached in 1918 between the French and British Government regarding the abolition of customs in Yanam and also the removal all customs and barriers in Pondicherry and Karaikal.⁹ They established customs posts in the ports of Pondicherry and Karaikal and collected the customs duties. The total collection of customs duties was equally shared every year by the French and the British government. Those amounts were used for the First World War expensively by the French Governor in Pondicherry.

Barter plan

In February 1916, a Madras newspaper statesman carried a strong rumour in our city that Chandernagore, Yanam and Mahe have been ceded to England in exchange for Cuddalore and its dependencies. Alfred Martineau proposed in order to create a 'homogeneous area' that was economically autonomous around Pondicherry. The problems were raised by the scattered nature of the territories. In 1918, Chandernagore reacted to the plan. In April 1919, the population of Chandernagore was loyal to their motherland.¹¹

The War Mobilisation

The ministerial order of 9th February, 1910 fixing the condition of military service in the colonies ratified one year service outside the colony. An examination of the young racists by the Review Board of Cochin China. The existing rules were changed overnight. The population of Hindus and Renouces were exempted from Military service by Military Law of 1905. On 2nd August 1914, an official telegram was sent from France to Pondicherry for mobilization of military service. The French Indian Governor had publicly announced the defence of Pondicherry on 23rd September, 1914. The actual mobilization occurred only at the beginning of 1915 when the Ministry came up with a measure to bypass the Article 90 of the Military Law of 1905. It was meant only for Europeans and to decedents of Europeans. No law was revised and Indians were also recruited. There were rigorous medical tests under Marseille, and the mobilized was sent to Saigon in the

11th Regent of Colonial Infantry.¹¹ The Minister accepted that Indian renouces that had been incorporated into French army were authorized to come and fight in France. On 22 December, 1915, the Army Act would be applicable to all the renouces of India. And also on 30th December, 1915, a presidential decree allowed for the voluntary enlistment of non-renouces into the French army for the duration of the war under French soldiers, but in Karaikal and Pondicherry, the Hindus were relenting to join in the Military service.¹² Martineau, the French Governor, made a public notice on 29th January, 1916, and he suggested a bonus of 200 francs, a pension of 120 francs and allowances for the Hindu widows. The French government came forward to pay just like the metropolitan French and they were rewarded with a pension, and in case of death, the family was entitled for the same. On the day, the native Hindus, were to leave for Marseille. Between 1914 and 1918, 986 soldiers boarded from Pondicherry.¹³ The majority of men supplied by French India were descendents of Europeans, Topas of Indo-Portuguese ancestry, and Indian renouces. A good number of them spent the duration of the War in Indo-China. They were responsible for the Military Surveillance of Cochin-China in the 11th regiment of the colonial infantry of Saigon.¹⁴

Volunteers Service to the French Army

Chandernagore was a French enclave within British India situated on the bank of River Hoogly. Martineau, the French Governor came to Chandernagore on official tour during the First World War. The Governor made an appeal to the people of Chandernagore on 7th February 1916, that every Indian must support the First World War, and he also appealed for the recruitment of French Indian. A citizen committee headed by C. Vincent was formed the Administrator of Chandernagore to help in the recruitment of volunteers. Its main goal was to motivate the young people to join the army. Finally, 20 were selected. They were aged from 16 to 30 years. The first batch of volunteers would leave Chandernagore on 16th April to undergo training in Pondicherry. On that day, a grand farewell party for the volunteers was arranged by the citizens of Chandernagore. The volunteers marched under their provisional Commander Haradhan Baksi with the French tricolor Flag at their head singing Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's song Bande Mataram. Volunteers reached the Pondicherry railway station early in the morning on 19th April. They marched from the station to the residence of the Governor, and they were received by the French adjutant.¹⁵

In Pondicherry, they were re-examined by the Medical Officer at a local hospital and were found suitable for military service. The volunteers of Chandernagore along with the other volunteers of French India formed the

17th company of the Eleventh Colonial Infantry regiment commanded by Lieutenant Gillet. The volunteers did their training at Pondicherry. They served till the end of war in different places such Toulon, Verdun, Bizerte, Tripliton, Argonne, St. Mihiel etc. A few were posted in Indo-China.

The War Heroes

The war heroes, who participated in the First World War were particularly the Hindus, Tamil Christians, Christians and Muslims, and young students-Paul Louis Celoron Victor Simonel, Edouard Louis, Captain Marius Xavier, Govindarassou Moutousamy Pillai, Louis Roch Lesage, Abdou Soubahane Cader, Aroqianadane Sinna, Dijanarandjani, and Nadaponjana Das from Chandernagore.¹⁶ The World War came to an end after the signing of the Armistice on 14th November 1918, announcing the return of the mobilized to the French India with the real significance of the French Indian soldiers, participation in the Great War. The five French settlements were attached to the French in their undivided unity.¹⁷

Global Commorations

On 11 November, the First Ceremony took place which could be qualified as memorial to participation of French India and its inhabitants in the war after the inauguration of the monument to the Dead in Pondicherry as a kind of "Memorial Synthesis" that seemed to lead to the creation of a social group. The soldiers of 1914-18 during the centenary of the great war served to forge new links between the French of India and their Indian Motherland. The world leaders gathered in Paris on Sunday to Global Commorations making 100 years since the end lead of the First World War at a time of growing nationalism and diplomatic tensions. Around 70 leaders including US and Russian Presidents Donald Trump and Vladimirputtin marked the Centenary of the 1918 Armistice in the French capital Paris.

New Memorial Unveiled

Hon'ble Vice-President of India Mr. Venkaiah Naidu had, on 11th November 2018, unveiled the new memorial at Villers Guislain, France. It pays homage to the Indian cavaliers who returned to the war front in 1917 and stopped the German advance. While mobilization and loss at the French trading posts in India were lower than the rest of the Empire, Puducherry mobilized 800 men. Of them, 75 met their deaths. It

was important to remember these young soldiers from Puducherry, Karaikal, Mahe, Yanam and Chandernagore, who defended a homeland that belonged to them at the time, he said. Celebrations of the Armistice Day commenced at the French War Memorial on Saturday.

Paying Homage in Pondicherry

The Centenary celebrations of the Armistice Day at the French Government maintained War Memorial on Beach Road in Pondicherry on 11th November 2018, Ambassador of France to India Alexandre Ziegler, Chief Minister of Pondicherry Mr. V. Narayanasamy and Consul General of France in Puducherry Catherine Suard, Member of Parliament R. Radhakrishnan, General officer commanding Dakshin Bharat Area Major General K. Umamaheswar, Deputy Director General of the National Cadet Corps Directorate Commodore Vijesh K. Garg, Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany Karine Stoll, Consul General of the Russian Federation Oleg N. Avdeev, Consul General of the Republic of Singapore Roy Kho, Consul General of the Kingdom of Thailand Rakcharoen Krongkanit, Consul General of the United States of America Robert G. Burgess, Deputy Consul General of Australia Michael Costa, and Head of Consular Services of the British Deputy High Commission Beula Joseph placed wreaths and paid homage commemorating the Centenary of the Armistice of the First World War.¹⁸

Conclusion

The territories of French India joined the war effort without any pre-conditions. The First World War propaganda was successful in French India. The Indian revolutionaries carried propaganda against the German in Pondicherry. Pondicherry became a recruitment centre of the French colonial army. The Hindus and Renouces were recruited in the French colonial army along with European soldiers. These soldiers were served to the colonial army of Saigon. A good number of people were recruited and sent to the Indo-China also. It showed the equality between the French India and Europeans soldiers. Pondicherrians occupied important position in the colonial army. The Great War to be the 'last of the last', the world shall remember. This year 2018 in the Centenary year of the Armistice of 11th November 1918, to honour the memory of millions of soldiers who sacrificed their lives.

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