

## THE GREAT MARCH TOWARDS NOVEMBER FIRST

by

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November 1, 1954 is quite special in the History of Pondicherry for it was on this day the government of India took over the administration of the former French India.

To go down history lane, the natives and the French received with great *éclat* the news of the decree issued on February 1, 1871 calling upon the French establishments in India to elect a representative to the French Parliament. The only Indian to contest the election was Santhu Udayar, a Professor of Tamil at French College. He lost the election in May 1871 to Panon Desbassyns de Richemont, son of the one-time Governor of Pondicherry, who initiated the Pondicherrians into letters and learning. His effort to champion the cause of Indians and to demand justice for them in public services and other walks of life did not lose its tempo. In fact, it was he who taught the natives to practise self-confidence and treat the aliens not as their superiors but as equals. Surely he was the forerunner of the freedom movement in French India.

During the period of Governor Laugier (February 1872 – April 1881) the most notable reform carried out was the introduction of local self-government. On May 30, 1880 Pondicherry witnessed the first Municipal elections. The first Mayor of Pondicherry was Leon Guerre. He had for his deputies Sabapathi Subbaraya Pillai and Pochont. It was during this period Monsieur Ponnu Thambi Pillai, a local advocate who was insulted in the court of law for entering the place with his shoes on fought tooth and nail with the French for the emancipation of natives from caste tyranny. And he won when he appealed to the higher ups in France. “The decree of September 21, 1881 offered all those above the age of twenty-one, irrespective of caste and religion, the option to renounce their personnel laws and to become *renonçants*. These *renonçants* and their descendants came to be governed by civil laws which were so far applicable only to French citizens.” Thanks to Pillai for opening the way for the assimilation of the natives with the French. It is no wonder that he took the symbolic name of ‘La Porte’ meaning the door. The door did open, of course.

Drouher (April 1881-September 1884) succeeded Laugier. With the establishments of Gaebele Mill in 1892 and the Rodier Mill in 1898 both at Mudaliarpeta, Pondicherry became a full-fledged industrial town, transforming many of its farmers into mill workers.

Something remarkable had taken place in 1908 when Mahakavi Subramania Bharathi, who through his fiery songs instigated the Tamils to overthrow the British, clandestinely reached Pondicherry to escape from the clutches of the British police. In Pondicherry Bharathi felt that he was no more in shackles and that his pen could flow freely. Every piece he wrote in his weekly *India* was satirical to the core. The British, the spineless moderates in politics and the self-centred Indians who still kept out of the freedom struggle were the targets of his attack. The weekly favoured nationalism, welfare of women and mass education. The British took several measures to stop the printing of the journal. But all such efforts publicised the journal all the more. The French Government in Pondicherry said ‘no’ to the request made by the British to ban the

journal. The British took the extreme step of closing the gates of Tamilnadu for *India* to gain entry. The circulation dwindled. And with the issue dated 12. 03. 1910, *India* that gave a clarion call to all devoted Indians to join hands in driving the British away brought down its shutters.

Sri Aurobindo, “the most dangerous man” as the British put it, seeking political asylum, arrived in Pondicherry on April 4, 1910. On August 15, 1914 Sri Aurobindo celebrated his forty-second birthday by giving the lovers of spiritual philosophy the first monthly issue of his *Arya*. Philosophy, literature, yoga, religion, national and international politics, history and sociology, art and literary criticism, ethics and culture are the several realms of knowledge on which Sri Aurobindo, its editor, poured his thoughts and gave them to his readers. The journal had six and a half years of uninterrupted publication on the fifteenth of every month, with one exception of a combined issue of Nov. and Dec. 1920.

The other revolutionaries, V.V.S. Aiyar and Va. Ra., soon followed suit to join the band of ‘Swadeshis’ in Pondicherry. The band had a tremendous effect on the local population pertaining to matters political and social.

Bharathidasan (1891-1964) an eminent writer of Pondicherry admired the poetry of Bharati, the self-exiled poet in Pondicherry. The fiery songs of his master against the alien rulers threw him into the Indian Nationalist Movement. Apart from fighting against the aliens and their rule, he fought for liberation of women advocating a good education and economic equality for them. As a firm believer in democracy, he sang incessantly for the upliftment of the working class.

Many were the journals that inspired the Pondicherrians to rise up against the alien rulers in their land. Those journals not only brought awareness into their lives, but also made them realize that they were slaves to none.

*Swadanthiram*, a monthly journal was started in June 1934 by a very popular Communist Party leader in Pondicherry, V.Subbiah. Ever since its inception the journal played the role of “agitator and organiser of the working class movement in Pondicherry”. The British Government got jittery about the anti-imperialist and advanced national sentiment that this monthly journal propagated among the Tamil people. Hence the government banned its entry into British India and its other Colonial possessions abroad. The circumstances were such that its editor was forced to stop publication of the monthly and convert it to a weekly from January 1935. Its circulation was confined to mainly Pondicherry carrying articles and reports on working class problems.

On August 15, 1947 the British at last broke the chains they had forged to hold Mother India in their grip and left India with a cunning smile on their faces. But the French, who had much love and reverence for this one time fishing village which they had transformed into an important port city and an industrial town, had their second thoughts about quitting the place. But the people of Pondicherry sought freedom from French rule in order to become an integral part of the Indian Nation.

The French, who were always on the alert, tried to curb their nationalist sentiments as and when they cropped up. But when the French authorities banned all public meetings, the people of Pondicherry did not hesitate to retaliate. All the organizations including Trade Unions joined hands. They showed their contempt for the French rule and the desire to reunite with the Motherland by hauling down the French flag in all Municipalities and hoisting their National flag. Tension mounted in

Pondicherry. The French police brought their iron hands on the liberators by throwing all decency and decorum to the winds. A complete *hartal* was observed in Pondicherry. It was only in June 1954, the government of France agreed to unite Pondicherry with India. Formal negotiations between France and India began.

An agreement between the government of India and the government of France for the settlement of the question of the future of the French establishments in India was signed on October 21, 1954. In virtue of that accord and the election at Kizhur situated in Nettapakkam commune near the border of Pondicherry region in which the Members of the Representative Assembly of the French settlements in India and all Municipal councillors of the settlements voted, the French handed over Pondicherry along with Karaikal, Mahe and Yenam to the government of India on November 1, 1954. This is known as *de facto* transfer. '*de facto*' is a Latin phrase meaning 'in fact, in reality, as a matter of fact'. Pierre Landy of France and Kewal Singh of India signed the Instrument of transfer. Like a whining schoolboy with his satchel, creeping like a snail unwillingly to school, the French left Pondicherry for France. Shrieks of joy and jubilation were heard throughout Pondicherry. Guns were fired to honour the Indian National flag that went up the government House. And the ceremony marked the end of the 280-year-old French rule.

This *de facto* transfer of power was confirmed on August 16, 1962 when a team of 39 administrators took charge of Pondicherry state. It was headed by Kewal Singh, who was nominated by the central government. Divided into 16 communes, Pondicherry was declared a Union Territory. This day is known *de jure* day, another Latin phrase meaning 'according to law, by rights; opposed to *de facto*').

Monsieur Tezenes du Montcel, Inspector General of French colonies, while addressing a merchants' delegation at Pondicherry, stated: "France will not give up her possessions in India under any circumstances."

Six decades after the French had left, we still see French pensioners popularly known as 'Soldats', French bar, French cuisine, and French books around. French language is still taught in many schools and colleges. French fashion in dress and hairdo are common here. The locals still use words from French and 'Monsieur' is so often used that the word has become a cliché. Montcel's words may not sound odd a hundred years hence.

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