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Impact of the French commercial activity over the Indian natives: Their challenge and response

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Abstract

India had excited European interest from time immemorial. In 1600s, the Portuguese, British and French established toe holds in India. A long struggle between the British and French for domination of the Indian subcontinent eventually was won by the British. In the beginning of the nineteenth century the area known as 'French India' was largely a mosaic of geographically separated territories. Trade and commerce conducted by the European Trading Companies in India had great impact on the urban growth, monetization of economy and commercialization of Agriculture. The pre-colonial trade both external and internal had brought about a number of changes in the socioeconomic set up of the Indian sub-continent. The conduct of cloth trade by Europeans since 17th century brought about occupational change among the inhabitants of especially in the higher strata of society. The French administration brought in some changes and improvement measures in the agricultural sector. The native's economic diversity arose in the colonial period. Most of the converted Christians were servants and coolies. The Trade of India in India gave Pondicherry the political status of the Peninsula. The development of commercial relations between France and India developed rapidly, as the taste for Indian goods spread among the French. As the French claimed the monopoly of all commercial relations with the colony, commerce was concentrated largely in the hands of French merchants and little in the hands of native merchants. As such, the French invited the local merchant community from Madras, Porto Novo and other places, to migrate and settle in their territories. For most of the eighteenth and some of the nineteenth centuries the foreign trade of French India was legally monopolized by French men, but their Indian agents were often shrewd and skillful in exploiting their opportunities within the colonial commerce.

Keywords: French commercial, Indian natives, Christians, administration

Introduction

The story of the "French India" is a fascinating subject of study. Even though there were relations between India and the countries of Europe from times immemorial, the discovery of a sea-route to India by Vasco da Gama of Portugal in 1496 A.D. carved out a distinct niche in the annals of the history of India. It was a rare event in history because it paved the way for the advent of the European sea-powers into India. The 'economic colony of the Europeans'. It led to far-reaching consequences in the history of mankind and brought India into world politics and thus paved the way for the rise of European imperialism and the economic exploitation of the flourishing nations of the Orient.

Of the four great European nations - the Portuguese, the Dutch, the English and the French - the French came last to establish their trade relations with the East in general and India in particular, Gradually the French became the first colonial power in India and their establishments in India were Pondicherry, Karikal, Mahe, Yanam and Chandernagore. The first four establishments were situated near the sea-shore while the last one was situated in the interior.

The problem of French India has not received proper attention of the historians in India to the extent it deserves. Col. G.B. Malleon was the first historian who rendered in English the fascinating story of the French enterprise in India., Later on others like Martineau, S.P. Sen etc. depicted the story of the French in India to a certain extent, It may be noted that among the different European powers, the French were the last to terminate their political connections with India. Only in 1963 A.D, the 'de jure' transfer of powers took place and a new chapter opened in the relations between India and France. It is to be noted here that in spite of many vicissitudes in their fortunes; the France-India relations lasted for not less than three centuries. The centuries of French administration and intercourse with India contributed an enduring French impact on their Indian settlements in the political social, economic, religious and educational spheres.

The rule of the French made the people in their settlements the citizens of France. The story of the French exploits in India reads almost like a romance. But such a romantic story is little known. While much has been written and studied about their counterparts like the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English, the history of the French has been neglected because the history of the French Company was a "Chaine, composed Pulsieurs Anneaux" (a chain composed of several links).

The present study deals with the political, economic, social and educational impact of the French in Coastal Andhra. An attempt has been made to explain in these pages the coming of the French into India in general and Coastal Andhra in particular.

Impact of the French Commercial Activity over the Indian natives

The indigenous merchants had to pay numerous tolls and customs duties and were placed in a disadvantageous position. They strove hard to overcome it by purchasing duty-free passes from the British Company^[1]. The arrival of the Europeans in India and in the Pacific raised the problems of bases, fuelling stations and repair facilities. The monopoly of trade by the Europeans drained the wealth of India to the advantage of the countries of the West^[2]. The abuse of the right of freedom of trade caused heavy losses to the state revenues. The French trade was so profitable that it not only became a target of the pirates but could also meet the losses the French it become evident that all the native army put together could not stand before a small French army^[3].

The living conditions were good in coastal Andhra and all the luxuries of life were easily available^[4]. However, there were occasional threats to the safety of the travelers and merchants by robbers who infested the roads. Oppressive taxation crushed commerce and the traffic began to decline^[5]. Later, it was appreciated that the foreign rule was a divine deliverance from the TV channels of Muslim rule. There was no protest anywhere to the French rule in the Coastal Andhra^[6]. The incident of racial arrogance here and there, ranked with utter helplessness and antagonism in the minds of all Indians and they were deprived of their legitimate share in the political power by the French authorities and their servants resulting in the ruin of flourishing Indian trade and industry.

Oppressive land rent and the harsh method of extracting it, in addition to the huge drain of wealth from India impoverished the country more and more^[7]. The heavy taxation fell upon the poorer class while free trade between India and Europe drained the resources. Because of the increased demand for export, caste limitations were dwindled, and weaving and spinning became the profession any castes. Thus the guild system came into existence in each craft which controlled and regulated Indian industry^[8]. Revival in the Hindu society was affected through the influence of European contacts. The Hindu society reacted at first to the alien rule and its influence^[9]. All kinds of restrictions were placed on the flow of Indian goods within the country whereas foreign goods enjoyed free entry. The establishment of an alien rule made the Indians follow European fashions. With the abolition of the court of the Nawabs, handicrafts and arts began to decline^[10]. When the kings were subjugated one after another, the merit and fame

of the exceptionally skilled craftsmen also faded. The production of the highest class of goods was stopped as there was no royal patronage. European travelers demoralized the native craftsmen by inducing them to adopt adulteration of materials which deplorably lowered the standards. Unemployment increased on prodigious scale which had a catastrophic effect on the economy of India as a whole. With it grew the poverty of the country and the misery was unparalleled in the history of commerce^[11].

Since India failed to produce silk goods suitable to the demands of other countries, she opened her own markets to foreign competitions and this had disastrous effect on the local handloom workers and indirectly weakened the power of the guilds and such other bodies. Weavers could not compete with Manchester machine-made goods and abandoned their looms and took up the plough. There was also a change of taste and fashion among the Andhras. Communication facilities increased. Though transport facilities were not largely extended, there was a considerable growth of urbanisation causing a deathblow to rural and agricultural economy. Insanitary conditions and bad housing accommodation caused epidemics and death to many. Upto the 18th century A.D. the economic condition of India was relatively advanced but towards the end of the same century, the economic sphere began to retart. It was said that India had lost her ancient industries and that her people had been relegated to the contemptible status of 'hewers of wood and drawers of water'^[12]. Freight rates increased rapidly and exports decreased gradually. Local people of the port towns prepared goods according to the tastes of the foreigners and sold them. They were employed as porters, cooks, washer men, gardeners, soldiers, peons, writers and clerks. The agricultural labor began to move to coastal towns in quest of livelihood.

Most of the industries and trades languished because of foreign competitions from organized industry^[13]. The Indo-French commerce had a tendency to smother the Indian hold on trade and shipping. The coastal and foreign trade of India gradually slipped away from the hands of the India causing a heavy loss. The stringent measures which were deliberately adopted to monopolies important merchandise resulted in the positive discouragement of the Indians from every lucrative branch of the foreign trade to the country^[14]. Political conditions of the countries with which India had commercial relations had undergone a radical change resulting in national spirit. There was a rapid and thorough scientific and technological development in the European countries while India still clung to traditional methods. High tariff was imposed on Indian goods in other countries while European goods enjoyed free trade in India. There came a time when the Asian countries were desirous of importing European goods. Using foreign commodities and wearing foreign dress was considered to be a mark of civilization. Telugu language had been greatly modified by the introduction of French elements^[15]. Force and power could not have approached the shores of India without meeting with resistance^[16].

The immediate effect of teaching Bible and European language was that the Indians began to question the validity of their own sacred books and political policies. They did not at first accept a new and Christian framework of life. Indians began to discuss the reform of Hinduism.

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