

## **Educational Development under the French Regime in Pondicherry: A Historical Analysis**

Shyma V A<sup>1</sup>, Dr. P. Jeyabalakrishnan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Research Scholar, Department of History, CMJ University, Meghalaya, India.*

<sup>2</sup>*Associate Professor, Department of History, Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu, India*

### **I. Introduction**

During the period of French colonial rule in Pondicherry (1674-1954), education underwent significant developments shaped by French policies and cultural influences. This paper details the educational system prevailed during the French regime. It also analyses the role of different religious congregations, that played a vital role for educational developments among the Pondicherry people. The French and the missionaries tried a variety of approaches to teach the natives about India's dominant political and cultural ethos. Foreign missionaries soon realised that they needed to convert the locals in addition to conducting business with them. When the French government were entirely occupied with trade and the strengthening of their dominance in the region, it was these missionaries who showed an interest in education. However, the widespread caste prejudice and discrimination within Indian societies prevented them from following liberal values. Despite this, they were more successful in the realm of education because they established a solid educational foundation overall.

Local traders possess expertise in both domestic and international trade. Along the coastal areas, a blend of Portuguese, Arabic, Tamil, and Telugu languages was commonly spoken among residents. This linguistic fusion evolved since the arrival of the first Portuguese explorers on the Tamil coast in 1507. Arab traders, particularly the Marakkayars, dominated coastal trade alongside native chetties. Dubashs, or interpreters, played a crucial role in facilitating communication. Given the political instability of the region during this period, education did not receive significant attention until later stages. Missionaries were primarily responsible for supporting educational initiatives until then.

Catholic missionaries extended their efforts along Tamil Nadu's East Coast, spanning from San Thome in the north to Kanyakumari in the south, even after the departure of the Portuguese from India. Dutch missionaries, proficient in Tamil, taught in the local language, reserving English instruction for those involved in training institutions and seminaries. They also translated the Bible into Tamil and Telugu for the benefit of the local population. During this period, alongside European missionary activities aimed at converting locals to Christianity, French settlements in India began to take shape. The French made initial but limited efforts to promote children's education. Despite their modest achievements in education during this period, they laid the groundwork for a system that would later evolve with the establishment of educational institutions by the government, Christian missionaries, and private organizations.

### **II. Missionary Activities in the Education Sector**

Missionary activities in India commenced earlier compared to Pondicherry, with the Portuguese taking the lead. Upon their arrival, Christian missions in southern India began almost immediately. Therefore, the missionary efforts under the French were essentially a continuation of the groundwork laid by the Portuguese and continued for nearly a century by the Dutch and English. Their missionary endeavors went beyond mere conversions; they included the establishment of schools, particularly aimed at educating the children of newly converted indigenous people in Christian prayers and doctrine. While their primary focus was on converting locals, they also engaged in educational initiatives that benefited non-converts as well. They expanded the reach of their schools well beyond the boundaries of their settlements, often with financial support from their respective organizations. These schools catered not only to Christian children but also to non-Christian children from nearby villages, providing education along with essentials such as food, clothing, books, and slates.

The missionaries faced significant challenges in education due to caste-related issues, which must be viewed in the historical context where education was primarily accessible to Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaisyas. Sudras were excluded from this privileged sphere. Local communities held strong caste-based beliefs, leading

parents to refuse sending their children to schools attended by those of different castes.

The missionaries had to navigate these entrenched customs and beliefs. While some missionaries accepted these traditional practices, others did not, resulting in conflicts among missionaries of the same faith and occasionally between different denominations and nationalities of Christians. Despite these challenges, Jesuit missionaries succeeded in converting some members of the upper classes to Christianity. The Jesuits initiated the establishment of schools for children from the European colonies as early as 1703. Within a few years, one of these schools became renowned and enrolled thirty pupils, including two Europeans—one from Paris and another from London. The student body also included the son of the governor of Cuddalore, five students from Africa, one from Spain, and others from distant places such as Pegou, Bengal, Madras, Porto Novo, Surat, and Isphan. These institutions catered to the educational needs of both Indian and European settlers across various locations in India and abroad. During this period, there was even consideration by the Superior Council to send students to France for further education. Mgr. Champenois succeeded Mgr. Brigot as the mission's superior and established a college in Pondicherry along with a seminary next to the cathedral, aiming to educate local boys and those aspiring to priesthood.

However, the Jesuit-founded college in Pondicherry faced closure and was only reopened on May 31, 1787, under the administration of the priests of the Foreign Missions, who had taken over from the Jesuits in 1776. Despite permission to operate from the French Indian Administration, no financial support was provided to the priests for managing the institution. Father Magny, a former Jesuit who joined the Foreign Mission, oversaw the college from 1778 to 1781, during which it had a significant student population. Unfortunately, due to the impact of the French Revolution, the college ceased operations in 1781. After Fr. Magny returned to Tarangampadi with some of his students, the college ceased to exist. In addition to the Jesuit-founded college, Pondicherry housed two other notable educational institutions. The earliest was the *Seminaire General* of Virampattinam, established in 1771 under Mgr. Piègeau de Behaine. This seminary admitted Chinese and Annamite students alongside others. Another institution, *College Malabar*, catered specifically to Indian students who were hesitant to enroll in other colleges due to caste considerations. The active involvement of missionaries in education was crucial and required strategic adaptation. Each congregation had to tailor their methods to accommodate the diverse needs of native groups, particularly within India's caste-based society, which governed through deeply entrenched customs and practices.

The foundations of modern education in Pondicherry, characterized by separate classes, standardized syllabi, examinations, timetables, and disciplinary measures like promotions and detentions, can be traced back to the early efforts of French missionaries in the 18th century. Their initiatives were instrumental in shaping educational norms and practices that endured and evolved over time.

### **III. The Role of Different Congregations on Education**

In 1632, a group of businessmen and French Capuchins briefly visited Pondicherry, but it was Francois Martin who settled there permanently in 1674 and established French India. He brought the French Capuchins from Madras to Pondicherry, where they had been residing since 1642, managing a small school for European children. In Pondicherry, their responsibilities included tending to French settlers, Portuguese, Eurasians, and overseeing the chapel within the small French fort. In the latter half of the 18th century, the *Société des Missions Étrangères* arrived in Pondicherry and founded a major seminary near the city. They also took charge of several schools in and around Pondicherry. By around 1775, plans were made to replace the Jesuits in Pondicherry and transfer control of the Carnatic Mission, later known as the *Mission de Malabar*, to the *Société des Missions Étrangères*. After the dissolution of the Society of Jesus in March 1776, the Carnatic Mission came under the administration of the *Société des Missions Étrangères*.

Governor Dumas invited the Ursuline congregation to visit Pondicherry, where the Ursuline Sisters were granted permission by the Superior Council of Pondicherry to operate a school on a tiny plot of land on December 15, 1738. Assisted by Fr. Norbert, a Capuchin, the Ursulines founded schools to provide education for girls. Pondicherry and other French colonies in India had a sizable Portuguese-speaking population, necessitating educational institutions for the children of the French and the mixed-race children of the Portuguese and French. The Ursuline Nuns of Vannes were specifically invited to Pondicherry in 1738 by "La Compagnie des Indes Orientales." The January 12, 1747 Ordinance provided encouragement for female education in French Pondicherry. By the end of the 18th century, the number of French people in India had grown significantly, with 500 French and 1,000 Portuguese descendants living in the French colonies. To further support children's education, the company invited the Beguine nuns from Flanders. The following were some of the important congregations during the French regime:

1. **The Sisters of St. Aloysius Gonzaga:** The Sisters of St. Aloysius Gonzaga played an indispensable role in education and social welfare. The St. Louis De Gonzaga orphanage, founded exclusively for low-caste and Harijan girls by Fr. Ansaldo S.J. along with Bon Secours in 1775, marked the beginning of their mission. By 1802, Pondicherry had two smaller convents for Harijan and caste girls, established with the aim of caring for orphans, educating them, and providing guidance for young women to lead moral lives. Education at Gonzaga focused on shaping girls with a vision of God's love for humanity, commitment to social justice, equality, fraternity, freedom, and the willingness to share the world's bounty. The fundamental goal was to respect, enhance, uphold, and help everyone realize their sense of human dignity. Counselling was a crucial component of their educational vision, providing guidance to help students understand their potential and direction. Students received both group and individual counselling to aid in personality development. Gonzaga Education sought to instill a spiritual worldview in the face of materialism, concern for the oppressed, simplicity in the face of consumerism, advocacy for the underprivileged, and environmental protection. In addition to their educational mission, the Sisters of St. Aloysius Gonzaga were involved in medical care, caring for elderly men and women separately, philanthropic activities, and social work both domestically and internationally. Their teaching congregation flourished with numerous schools across India, continuing their legacy of education and service.
2. **Our Lady of Bon Secours Sisters (FBS):** In 1775, Fr. Ansaldo S.J. founded the Gonzaga Orphanage and the Bon Secours Orphanage. Later, in 1802, Fr. Julien Charles Lehodey MEP established the diocesan congregation, which educated young girls from the refuge home and prepared them to make their vows on September 17, 1858. The nuns of Bon Secours managed a hospital and provided separate care for elderly men and women. Over time, they expanded their mission to include education while continuing their medical and humanitarian services. Their schools are widely dispersed throughout India and abroad. In 1894, the congregation moved to Chennai, where they thrived as a teaching congregation and through other initiatives. The Sisters of Bon Secours are well-known for their advocacy of girls' education rights in Tamil Nadu and other states in India.
3. **The Immaculate Heart of Mary Congregation (FIHM):** Fr. Dupuis had a strong desire to create a new congregation. On October 16, 1844, he founded the Convent of the Immaculate Heart of Mary as a religious society. The following day, the Immaculate Primary School was inaugurated in front of the Bishop's House. The school quickly attracted many more girls, and people from various families began to recognize the benefits of education. A second convent was opened in Karaikal, and according to Fr. Dupuis, "In 1846 and 1847 the convent has obtained fairly good results in the youth." Another school was established in Nellithope, near Pondicherry, in 1854. By 1861, the educational services extended from Pondicherry to other districts, with Fr. Fricaud opening a second location in the Oulgaret Parish. Between 1844 and 1861, five schools were entrusted to the Immaculate Heart of Mary congregation. Initially, the school was funded by the Diocese of Pondicherry, with additional financial assistance from the Paris Mission. To provide free education for girls, the founder donated all of his ancestral property to the congregation. The Immaculate Heart of Mary Congregation is renowned for providing high-quality education to thousands of underprivileged students. Today, it operates numerous colleges, medical schools in Africa and India, higher secondary schools, high schools, matriculation schools, middle schools, and primary schools, as well as boarding facilities, cottages, and orphanages in towns and villages. Immaculate is a leading congregation in the field of education.
4. **Education for boys following the Synod of 1844:** A conversation about girls' education within the Mission would be incomplete without also considering boys' education. Schools for both boys and girls were established wherever the Church had a presence. The mission's priests showed genuine interest in education, with significant contributions such as Fr. Barbe's work at Karaikal College. On July 28, 1855, French India issued a decree outlining the terms and conditions for school support, inspiring many to start new schools. The government made significant changes to its educational system in 1879, particularly for elementary schools. New leaders were appointed to prepare for these schools, and competent, recognized teachers were selected. Mgr. Laouenan insisted that his priests adhere to government regulations and utilize available resources. In the British Territory, the number of elementary schools increased from 27 in 1861 to 161 in 1892 due to Mgr. Laouenan's efforts. Despite official opposition, Fr. Pierre Escande oversaw the "Petit-Seminaire-College" in Pondicherry, which prospered remarkably. By 1925, about a thousand students were enrolled in the French, English, and Humanities sections. This school was open to children of all religions and nationalities. Three schools became prominent in the Pondicherry mission: College General, Calve College, Petite Seminaire School, Cuddalore St. Joseph's, and Karaikal. The selfless work of the M.E.P. Missionaries was crucial to the growth of education.

#### **IV. Impact of Missionary Education**

Before the arrival of missionaries in 1674, the lifestyles in Pondicherry were similar to those in other Indian states. However, the introduction of missionaries brought about significant changes. Rather than mere assimilation, a connection was formed between Western culture and the rigorous Indian culture and civilization, transforming the basic practices and modes of life in Pondicherry. The people of Pondicherry embraced several socioeconomic and cultural values:

1. The Dignity of Labour
2. Intercultural Assimilation
3. Interreligious Tolerance and Respect

These values fostered a give-and-take approach that included:

1. Improvement of social standing and proper respect for missionaries from other countries.
2. Recognition of education as a fundamental human right for every person.
3. Advocacy for the equality of all races within the human race, without distinction between genders.

The transformation in Pondicherry's living setup began in the early 18th century, setting the stage for the region's progression toward a civilized and modern society. This cultural renaissance preceded political changes, driven by advancements in education.

#### **V. Summary**

Human development and growth are profoundly influenced by education, which serves both as a catalyst and a result of social change. It works in harmony with society, culture, politics, and the economy to address the diverse needs of social transformation. Education fosters social awareness, self-sufficiency, and a sense of community, enabling individuals to contribute to human well-being and paving the way for social transformation. The paper concludes by highlighting the impact of the missionaries' educational efforts in Pondicherry. The significant changes in Pondicherry were due to the dedication of missionaries like the Capuchins, Society of Jesus, M.E.P. Fathers, Ursulines, and more recent congregations like Gonzaga, Bon Secours, and Immaculate. Pondicherry set an example for innovation, adaptation, and restoration, influencing other Indian states in various cultural and civilizational aspects. Now a Union Territory, Pondicherry's experience underscores the role of education in shaping future generations to meet life's challenges. In summary, education should help individuals adapt to life's challenges, emphasizing the importance of molding future generations according to specific standards of living. In a nutshell, during French rule, Pondicherry experienced significant educational advancements due to the combined efforts of missionaries and the colonial government. These efforts not only transformed the local educational landscape but also left a lasting legacy that continued to influence the region's cultural and social development.

#### **References**

- [1]. Ajit K. Neogy, *Decolonization of French India: Liberation Movement and Indo French Relations 1947-1954*. Pondicherry: Institut Francaise de Pondichery, 1997.
- [2]. Alagappan N., *Social Conditions in the Medieval Tamil Country*. Chidambaram: Thiruvurul Publications, 1998.
- [3]. Alalasundaram R., *The Colonial World of Ananda Ranga Pillai (1736-1761)*. Pondicherry: 1998.
- [4]. Anchukandam, T. *The First Synod of Pondicherry 1844: A Study based on Archival Sources*. Bangalore: Eighteenth Century, 1994.
- [5]. Aronowitz Stanlely and Giroux Henry A., *Education under Siege: Conservative, Liberal, and Radical Debate over Schooling*. South Hadly, Massachusetts: Bergin and Gravy, 1985.
- [6]. Bourdat Pierre, *Eighteenth Century Pondicherry*. Pondicherry: Directorate of Stationery and Printing, 1995.
- [7]. Deloche Jean, *Origins of the Urban Development of Pondicherry according to Seventeenth Century Dutch Plans*. Pondichery: Institut française de Pondichéry, 2004.
- [8]. Francis Cyril Antony, "Gazetteer of India", Union Territory of Pondicherry, the Government Press, Pondicherry, 1982.
- [9]. J. B P. More, "Hindu - Christian Interaction in Pondicherry, 1700-1900", *Contribution of India Sociology*, Vol: 32, 1998.
- [10]. Ramasamy A., *History of Pondicherry*. New Delhi: Sterling publishers, 1987.
- [11]. Sampath Kumar P.A. and Carof Andre mep, *History of Pondicherry Mission: An Outline*. Pondicherry: Mission Press, 1999.