

The Cultural Impact of The Colonial French Empire in Puducherry: A Select Reading

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Abstract

Colonization has brought many cultural changes among the colonized. The colonized glorified the colonizers as master of 'civilization' and 'cultured' lifestyle. This made the colonized to copy the trends of the colonizers more enthusiastically by demeaning the colonized culture. After the emergence of postcolonial thinking, the colonized are trying to set back their route to their own culture and values. Though they aspired or not the colonizer's culture became part of the colonized too as they lived together for some centuries. The paper, therefore, focuses on how the natives of Puducherry got along with the colonizers. It also attempts to study the dual mindset of the colonized on accepting and rejecting the colonial culture; whereas the byproduct might be the mixture of Indo-French culture in Puducherry. The study uses both fiction and non-fiction of Puducherry writers, which include Ananda Ranga Pillai's *The Private Diaries of Ananda Ranga Pillai*, Prapanchan's *Beyond the Sky*, P. Raja's short story collections, *Blood and Other Stories* and *My Father's Bicycle* and Imayam's *Arumugam*.

Keywords: Colonization, Culture, Puducherry, French History, Diary

Colonization has brought many cultural changes among the colonized. The colonized glorified the colonizers as master of 'civilization' and 'cultured' lifestyle. This made the colonized to copy the trends of the colonizers more enthusiastically by demeaning the colonized culture. Puducherry, before becoming a colonial State, was then ruled by smaller kingdoms along with Tamil Nadu. During colonization, it was ruled by the Dutch, the British and the French. Earlier to its Independence, Puducherry was lastly colonized by the French East India Company. It remained as a good trading centre; it had good trade relations with the Romans, and it became one of the main reasons for the colonizers to focus on Puducherry. Firstly, in 1693, the Dutch captured Puducherry and then surrendered it to the French East India Company in 1699. Several wars and treaties of the wars were made between the colonizers of the French and the British to rule over Puducherry and finally in 1814, Puducherry was overtaken by the French government. At last, in 1962 it was officially declared as a 'free' Union Territory of the Indian government.

Literature Review

Literary works, on the one hand serves its function as the literary genre do and on the other hand it serves as the historical record of the period. Though there have been many controversial opinions on claiming that literary texts should not be considered as historical sources, it has been

proved that literature is the different style of narrating history. For instance, the general description of the society, family, relationship, public and acquaintances with cultural and traditional incidents or rituals, the body of literature could be considered as prime source of socio-history of the period. And at the same time, the drawbacks of reading history from the literary text have to be observed. Literature has no reliability and without reliability, a text cannot be counted for its historical proof. If the creative writer has to write only the facts, then it turns out to be a complete historical text but not a literary text. In such case, literature turns out to be a text of lies. Instead of calling the body of literature as texts of lies, one could say that the facts are narrated with the imagination of the creative writer.

Similarly, there is an argument from the New Historicist's point of view that historical texts too are not reliable. Only by citing historical texts, one cannot say that the research is worthy, because even the historical texts are sometimes filled with non-factual content, similar to the literary texts. The researcher has to hunt after evidences and proofs and one cannot completely depend upon the historical text. There is a difference between the historical text and the literary text: the historical text says that it is authentic but the literary text fails to do so. Therefore, it is more interesting to cull out history from the literary text than from the historical text.

The French History of Pondicherry (the name Puducherry used during the French rule) has an authentic version of a Pondicherry diarist, Ananda Ranga Pillai. Ananda Ranga Pillai, a merchant, who was good in dealing with Europeans recorded the fateful history of Pondicherry in his diary as he encountered in his social life during the French settlement (Srinivasachari 1139) as he served as the Dubash in the service of the French government. The period of historical record ran from 1736 to 1761 in his diary is a very important document to know the historical events of Pondicherry. The diary was later transcribed and translated from Tamil and later published in French, English and in other languages in 12 volumes. Prapanjan, a renowned Tamil writer of Puducherry won Sahitya Akademi award for his historical novel *Vaanam Vasapadum* (Beyond the Sky) in 1995, which was actually inspired by the diaries of Ananda Ranga Pillai (Ramakrishnan). Hence, the primary text selected for the paper is to study the personal record of Ananda Ranga Pillai through the novel of Prapanchan, *Beyond the Sky* (*Vaanam Vasapadum*). The personal diaries of Ananda Ranga Pillai are used as a reference text along with the literary text. Anyhow, the literary piece, *Beyond the Sky* uses the personal diaries of Ananda Ranga Pillai in the form of fiction, which includes the writer's imagination, though the characters are real, the incidents are facts, yet there are some minor incidents and dialogues which deviate away from the historical text.

The history of the common man has been less discussed in the diaries of Ananda Ranga Pillai, as the history of common man is ignored usually. The histories available are double conscious nowadays to depict the 'real' history from the multiple voices, as "dialogism" or "heteroglossia" as Michael Bakhtin calls them. The histories have to retell from the neglected subalterns' points of view. Bhabha's "Of Mimicry and Man" could be used to study the postcolonial setting of the then French State during Dupleix and Ananda Ranga Pillai. The colonizers use some of the colonized to rule upon the colonized or to imitate the role of the colonizers in their absence. For instance, some of the natives are used by the colonizers to rule upon the other colonizers. These very few colonized, then become the supervisors or the "duplicate colonizers" and imitate the actual colonizers. Though they are not real colonizers, they enact or imitate as if they are real ones. The cunning nature of the colonizers is to utilize the colonized to dominate against their own men, and retain authority over the colonizers. They have less man power, yet this technique has helped them to rule over the colonized with minimal man power.

Methodology

As Puducherry had been colonized by the French for a few centuries, the impact of French culture is predominant than the other culture of the colonizers. The natives of Puducherry got along with the colonizers who have accepted the colonial mindset of the colonized and yet, sometimes, they contradict with the

colonized by rejecting the colonial culture; whereas the byproduct might be the mixture of Indo-French culture in Puducherry. The paper attempts to read historical and cultural impacts of the French colonization in Puducherry through literature. Least literature is available to represent the impact of French East India Company in Puducherry. The personal diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai is one of the greatest resources of a non-fiction literary fiction available for the purpose; and there are other literary texts of Prapanchan, P. Raja and Imayam which talk about the French culture in Puducherry. Therefore, the study uses both fiction and non-fiction of Puducherry writers, which include Ananda Ranga Pillai's *The Private Diaries of Ananda Ranga Pillai*, Prapanchan's *Beyond the Sky*, P. Raja's short story collections, *Blood and Other Stories* and *My Father's Bicycle* and Imayam's *Arumugam*. The paper, therefore, focuses on how the natives of Puducherry got along with the colonizers.

Analysis

There are various factors of colonization found in the select novels. The natives are happy to accept some traits from the colonizers and at the same time, they are revoked when their culture is disturbed at the root level. The psychological distress could be observed in Puducherry through the writings of Ananda Ranga Pillai. For instance, the incidents related to conversion of the Hindus into the Christianity, is the ideology followed by the French during Ananda Ranga Pillai period. Ananda Ranga Pillai did not want to convert his religion, yet those who had converted into Christianity were given higher authority. This was told by Anand Ranga Pillai, when he discussed about the power structure. After the governor the second ring of power went to the Chief Dubash Kanakaraya Mudaliyar (Srinivasachari 1151) and Ananda Ranga Pillai fell into the third ring of power structure. The people who converted into Christianity were given more importance than the Hindus during the French rule. The demolition of Vedapureeswarar temple and the incident of rebuilding the temple is also registered. There is a record of slave trade in Puducherry during Ananda Ranga Pillai. There are agents who hunted for slaves to be sent to Mauritius and the government very well supported the system. The vagabonds are kidnapped and sent to Mauritius through an agency and they are sold as slaves to work in Mauritius. These are some negative remarks on the French government. The same power politics could be read through the diaries of Ananda Ranga Pillai. He has mentioned that Kanakaraya Mudaliyar wants to occupy the position of authority, the Dubash. Ananda Ranga Pillai readily competes with him and wins authority by the title of Dubash to the French government. Moreover, corruption and bribery existed in the then French government.

Prapanchan's *Beyond the Sky*, depicts the cruelty of the French Governor, who is ready to snatch both the movable and immovable properties of the residents whenever he gets a chance. This is criticized through the voice of Ananda Rangapillai as: "...the governor has become deaf because of the haughtiness of the power and greed for money. The governor taking money from the tart Rangammal put you into lot of difficulties, didn't he?" (206) Many such incidents in the novel show, the negligence of French government to take of the residents of Puducherry, instead the French government abducts the wealth of the citizens and at same it has shown least concern over them.

The residents of Puducherry when they worked for the French government, they were cautious about their political position and felt highly powerful and influential. Even the protagonist of Prapanchan, Pillai is cautious about what he does and he advices the same when his brother becomes the Dubash of Chennai Pattinam. He instructs his brother to be careful and also reminds his that the post is offered to them because the family since his father's period has served the French government sincerely. (Prapanchan 279). This makes it clear that the Dubash enjoys the power though he remains as one of the subjects of French government. These servants of the French government always think that the French administrators are great and they have felt proud of being such servants, "Always think that the government that we are serving should prosper" (280), which again shows that such people are least bothered about the welfare of the public but concerned about the prosperity of the government, which is run by a foreigner.

There is also a mention of violence with regard to religious belief between the colonizer and the colonized. The Hindu temples are destructed in the town and the intention of the French government is to make the residents of Puducherry to accept Christianity as a common religion. Even while selecting a resident for a higher post in the government offices, the French authorities are very strict that the conversion of religion has to happen. While appointing an officer to spy the enemy camp, a Brahmin is appointed with a condition that he needs to convert into Christianity. The conversation between the wife of the authority and a resident of Puducherry who seeks the job reveals this:

“What have I achieved by being a Brahmin. If Madame desires, I will convert to the Christian religion.”

“Very good! That is the right spirit,” Madame Jeanne agreed very happily. “If you really want, I will talk to the bishop and fix a day soon,” added Madame Jeanne. (Prapanjan 404)

Thus, the authorities are ready to arrange the conversion ceremony too before giving an appointment order for the post. The colonial mindset of the colonizers is revealed in another such incident when the arrival of Pillai’s new baby is shared, it is enjoyed in the other way, ““Master to take on your name and to work as your slave, yesterday a male child was born.” The governor enjoyed the statement and laughed.” (440). These incidents show the cruel-nature of the colonizers. Other than that, when they are very strict in collecting tax from the farmers and while disrespecting the cultural beliefs of the Hindus, they become more atrocious. Yet the natives of Puducherry treat them as gods and feel happy and proud to serve them tirelessly.

The current writings of Puducherry are the samples, which depict the impact of French culture in Puducherry. P. Raja’s short story “My Father’s Bicycle” is one of the finest examples to comprehend the concept. In this story, the father is shown as a servant under French government. He has got a new bicycle manufactured from France. His son is so much attracted to the cycle. The father maintains the bicycle in such a way that he does not even allow his son to touch the bicycle at least for cleaning it. The mannerism that the father follows to ride the bicycle and to clean it, have tempted the boy further and he becomes desperate to touch the bicycle without his father’s knowledge. Finally, he has a secret ride in the bicycle and is finally thrashed by his father when he comes to know about it. The French cycle is the highlight here; since the author narrates how the people had the craze over the French products and fancied them in those days.

The same is depicted in another story of P. Raja, “Pencil”, where the father is using a blade to sharpen the pencil and it is proudly mentioned by the school-going boy that his father uses French blade to sharpen the pencil. Generally, the citizens of Puducherry are fond of using the import products of France and they strongly believed that those products were good in quality than the available products. The same attitude could be noted even now among the majority of the public. Not only the Puducherry citizens are fond of using the French products, but they were too proud to work under the French government. Even today, many feel proud to claim the French lineage in Puducherry.

Yet in another novel by Imaiyam, Arumugam, the same atrocities of the foreigners is noted down by the protagonist Arumugam. The writer has discussed the Auroville settlement (which claims to be a universal town where people of all countries of any creed and community are treated as the same and can lead a peaceful life), which is located nearby Puducherry and attracts international tourists too. In the story of Imaiyam, Arumugam is the son of Dhanabakiam, whose native place is in Poothurai. After his father’s death, his mother has to work for the Aurovillians in the construction site. The novel depicts how the poverty-struck situation has led the families to readily support the French construction sites. The novel also depicts how the cultural influence of the French has diverted the people to leave their menial jobs and to join any organization that is run by French people. It is very well observed that the people show a great respect to the French tradition and tries to imitate the same. The poverty struck Dhanabakiam settles in the town of Puducherry in an area named Chekkumedu and serves as a prostitute for her survival. Earlier she has remained one of the victims of a French engineer who makes use of her poor economic background and exploits her body. Even today, the areas Chekkumedu and Poothurai traces back such licentious historical touches which is narrated by Imaiyam.

After the emergence of the postcolonial thinkers, the colonized are trying to set back their route to their own culture and values. Though they aspired or not the colonizer's culture became part of the colonized too as they lived together for some centuries. Frantz Fanon's "Black Skin White Masks", is the psychological term used by Fanon which depicts the psychological displacement in the minds of the colonized. The colonized have forgotten their individuality by getting unfamiliarised their culture and tried to imitate the culture and language of the colonizers thinking that theirs is the best one. Speaking in the colonizers language promotes one into an intelligent person. Adopting the culture of the colonizers presents a colonizer as 'a cultured man'. The journey towards such a drastic change has made the colonizer to torn in between two different cultures and that is how the term is used "black Skin white masks". The colonized try to imitate the masters and finally they want to become one. The French citizens of Puducherry thus enjoy their dual citizenship and always claim it as a proud moment for being once colonized by the French.

Conclusion

The writings from Puducherry have various themes but the historical reading of Puducherry thrusts more upon the French-culture of Puducherry, which is otherwise called as 'window of French culture" and Puducherry has been specially named as "Paris of India" as the people of Puducherry proudly accepts their past as part of their culture and heritage. The interior town of Puducherry, with the interest of the Puducherry government and the public, is being reconstructed by following the old heritage of French architecture in most of the buildings and monuments. More than being having an aversion over the colonized culture, the ambience of Puducherry shows the love towards culture and heritage of the colonized. The present government has taken initiatives to record the colonial history of the French through monuments and old buildings built and used by the French government. The colonizers, the mimetic and the colonized have played reverent roles on such construction of French city, Puducherry.

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