

Renunciation: Making of a Counter-Culture and Conflicts in French India

A. SURESH

Assistant Professor

Department of History, Central University of Tamil Nadu, Thiruvarur (T.N.) India

ABSTRACT

The presence of the French on the Indian sub-continent was perhaps a unique factor in the colonial history of the modern world. The French trading posts in India (Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe, Yanam and Chandernagore), scattered around the edges of the subcontinent, were tossed for 50 years between Paris and London, after the crashing of Dupleix's dream and Treaty of Paris of 1763. The French presence in India was reduced to a rump of five *comptoirs* with few other vestiges of his first colonial empire when the French settlements were finally restored to France in 1814. Since then British supremacy in India compelled France to play a subsidiary role in India, and the settlements remained nothing more than mere trading posts. This precarious existence notwithstanding, the Indians in the *comptoirs* were subjected to the spirit of French colonialism. The present paper analyses the French colonial policy and attempt to study the impact of nearly three centuries of French presence (1664-1954) on the former French settlements in India.

Key Words : French Colonial History, French in India, French India, French Indian Society, Religion in French India, Caste in French India

INTRODUCTION

The presence of the French on the Indian sub-continent was perhaps a unique factor in the colonial history of the modern world. The French trading posts in India (Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe, Yanam and Chandernagore), scattered around the edges of the subcontinent, were tossed for 50 years between Paris and London, after the crashing of Dupleix's dream and Treaty of Paris of 1763. The French presence in India was reduced to a rump of five *comptoirs* with few other vestiges of his first colonial empire when the French settlements were finally restored to France in 1814. Since then British supremacy in India compelled France to play a subsidiary role in India and the settlements remained nothing more than mere trading posts. This precarious existence notwithstanding, the Indians in the *comptoirs* were subjected to the spirit of French colonialism. The present paper aims to study the socio-cultural and political

impact of nearly three centuries of French presence (1664-1954) on the former French settlements in India.

Introduction of Political assimilation: The Phase of Trial and Error:

Indeed, the concept which governed French colonial policy through the late nineteenth century was 'assimilation', a policy 'directed at removing all differences between colonies and the metropole by endowing them with the same administrative, fiscal, judicial, social and other institutions as the metropole and at giving their inhabitants full civic rights and obliging them to the same duties' as citizens in France itself¹ (rights, though perhaps not duties, applied only to Europeans and a few other French citizens in the colonies, not the indigenous masses). The policy aimed, in bureaucratic terms, at making colonies little overseas France and perhaps, in the fullness of time, to turn Africans, Asians and islanders into French men and women of a different

colour.

A decree was issued on 5th March 1848 permitting the French colonies to have their representatives in the national legislature. In the past the French had succeeded, better than any other nation, in earning the loyalty of Indians while still respecting their traditions. Their policy was to adopt as much as possible the customs of the natives and affirmed respect for the social *status quo* to gain their confidence. This is evident from their reliance on the leading dominant caste. Social peace prevailed since then in the entire colony. But the Second Republic imposed administrative and political assimilation on the colony before it gained cultural assimilation; France was, according to the conservatives, placing the cart before the horse.² Thus France departed from her secular policy of respect for the *mamool* and of the hierarchy of castes; France wanted to impose its institutions, and notably universal suffrage, thus placing the depressed on an equal footing with the high-castes. A war of castes would be the consequence of such an initiative.

Since the Second Republic insisted on equality among their subjects both in France and in the colonies, the depressed caste in Pondicherry claimed the same right to wear sandals as was enjoyed by the members of *Vellaja* community. This provoked violent reaction including the murder of some *Pariahs* and the burning down of ‘*paracherries*’ (*Pariah* villages). Consequently Governor Pujol ordered a return to the *status quo anté*. The *Pariahs* who wore sandals began to be fined. A proclamation posted everywhere in Pondicherry reminded the populace that the *mamool* and the privileges of the high castes could not be questioned.³ The Madras press seized this opportunity to denounce ironically the contradictions in the indigenous policy of French Republic on the title “Triumph of the *mamool* over Equality and Fraternity”:

“This is the doctrine which the chief of the Republican Government of Pondicherry preaches to a class of men who are now electors and of course citizens! He tells them that so far as they are concerned, the “*droit des citoyens*” do not include the right of wearing sandals”.⁴

After a particular crisis over caste-hierarchy, the *Tuluva Vellajas*⁵ intervened to suggest that all caste distinctions be abolished. The Governor said that 20,000 signatures were necessary for ‘fusion’ (two-thirds of the 30,000 adult male populations). The two sides,

traditionalists and fusionists, mounted a signature campaign with zest and the fusionists with more energy. They won, congratulated themselves and the Governor, but the traditionalist group remained hostile and appealed to Emperor Napoleon.⁶ The *Pariah*-Christians in Pondicherry twisted the arm of the French administration that had not supported their demand for a church for themselves, by resigning *en masse* from domestic service.⁷ Their demand was rejected because of strong protest from the ‘*Choutres*’ or high-caste Christians.

As universal suffrage recognised equality among its citizens and placed the low-caste people equal with the high-caste, the latter feared that the traditional order would collapse and place majority low-castes in hegemony. Electoral politics stimulated competition among rival groups in the colony. From the time of this first election, the high-castes understood that it was more profitable to make use of universal suffrage than to fight against it. The *Vellaja* caste chief, ‘*Nadou*’⁸ Sidambara Modeliar, had a secret alliance with Lecour and an open agreement with the high caste notables. Sure of his authority over all natives in Pondicherry, Sidambara had undertaken to send crowds of wretched, ignorant and obedient servants to vote massively for Lecour; in return Lecour was to exercise his mandate in French Parliament according to the dictates of the Pondicherry high-castes. These memories lingered among the ruling aristocracy and Shanmugam Vellayuda Modeliar, the son of Sidambara Modeliar, was inspired to utilise this practice, against the ‘French idea’ even more effectively than his father, in future elections for representative institutions.

Once again with the establishment of the Third Republic (on 4th September 1870), France which sought to take the country on the path of assimilation in line with “the traditional and constant policy of Republican France”, reiterated the slogan of “political assimilation of the colonies to the mother country”. Once again, between 1871 and 1881, the universal suffrage and democratic institutions were recognised, this time more effectively and permanently, in French India. Like the administrative machinery of the Republic, in French India, between 1871 and 1881, the colony was endowed with a Deputy and a Senator to French parliament. Towards local government reforms a *Conseil colonial* (later modified as *Conseil général*), *Conseils locaux* (one per establishments) and municipalities were established. Finally, as part of cultural assimilation, those Indians who so desired, were invited to renounce their personal status

and place themselves under the authority of the (French) Civil Code.

Two political parties were formed in the vicinity of the 1871 deputy elections. Emile Hécquet's 'Liberal Party' had for a long time demanded decentralisation of French Indian administration, possible establishment of *Conseil général* as in France and participation of Indians in it. Paradoxically, the party backed a conservative, Count Desbassayns de Richemont. The Gallios-Montbrun's 'Conservative Party' supported the candidature of Ristelhueber. This party stood for centralisation of administration, Governor as the head, and opposed parliamentary representation and participation of Indians which would threaten the hegemony of European and *Créole* population. In effect, both the parties had chosen their candidates with the willingness of high-castes, especially, Desbassayns managed to get support from the powerful notables of Pondicherry, viz., Ponnuthambi Pillai (a liberal and the leader of Indian Christian community) and 'Nadou' Shanmugam Vellayuda Mudaliar (a traditionalist and head of the Hindus). Poll was inaugurated on 28th May 1871. There were altogether 47,424 voters in the whole of the colony and the right of voting was restricted to only men above the age of 21 and who had the residential proof for one of the settlements. Among the registered 29,620 (62.45 %) votes Desbassayns got a majority of 13,597 votes and defeated the rival candidates.⁹

Opposition to Assimilation:

Soon after the deputy election was over, the debates over assimilation were echoed in the Royalists dominated *Assemblée Nationale* in France. When France was ready for granting more political assimilation to the colonies, possibly establishment of *Conseils municipaux* (municipal councils) and a *Conseil général* (a legislative body), the entire French India was divided in its opinion over the 'French idea' of assimilation.

The conservative elements among the 'White', who were more numerous, feared that the political assimilation might eventually give the Indians hegemony and insisted: "Do not consider Indian population as French", because "religious prejudices and the innumerable quantities of castes endlessly dividing the Indian populations make them absolutely unfit for assimilation and absorption into the European current".¹⁰ Moreover the conservative Montclar, who had supported the candidature of Sandouodéar and who mocked the liberals, headed by

Hécquet, with the incendiary articles which he published in the journal "*Le Courrier de l'Inde française*," beseeched the French Indian deputy in December 1871 to be so patriotic as to eliminate the Indian seat in French Parliament as her social, religious and political make up did not allow this innovation which would result in the progressive and final decline of French influence in these five dispersed enclaves, at considerable distance from one from another, surrounded by the British Indian Empire.¹¹ The line of conservatives' opposition ran as follows: first, Indians were not French; so they were not subject to French laws. To grant to these foreigners, though allowing them to elect a deputy, the right to vote laws to which they would not be subject, hence they would retain their customary law, would seriously infringe national sovereignty. Moreover, the conservatives added, the right to elect a representative had not been granted to the Muslims in Algeria though they were less refractory to French laws. According to the conservatives if an Indian, born on the French soil, was not *ipso facto* French, a *fortiori* an Indian from the British Indian territory had to be excluded from suffrage.¹² The conservatives argued that there were no elective councils in British India; universal suffrage was unknown in England and the same was the case in India.¹³

Governor Michaux had warned as early as in 1871, "the manifold division of castes in an insuperable impediment to any institution founded on elections. In practice, oppression of the lower castes by the higher caste would be reinforced in the most striking manner. Elections would end in reconstituting the Brahmanic social system and in giving it back its political influence that the European have reduced but not destroyed". According to the conservatives besides *Pariahs* and low-castes, Europeans and Catholic Indians would be the main victims of the assimilation policy: "Christian natives, because of their more cultured education, occupied nine out of every ten public jobs; since universal suffrage has been introduced they run the risk of losing these advantages," Michaux wrote. "First the Christians, then the Europeans would be excluded and the administration of the country would fall in *pagan* (master) hands; to achieve this goal, the heathens would only have to count themselves". According to the conservatives the majority of Indian population was ignorant; with very few exceptions, Indians did not speak French and knew nothing about France, its civilisation, and its institutions.¹⁴ By granting the Indians the right to vote before putting at their disposal all the

treasures of science and western culture, France had put the cart before the horse.

The Triumph of the Liberals:

Political life in French India until 1875 was centred on the interests of Europeans and *Créole* population. A paradigm shift occurred in 1876, when politics passed on to the hands of Indians. With the returning of Republicans in France in 1875, the expectation for more liberalisation of political institutions was high in French India, especially among the sections of Indian society under the stewardship of Ponnuthambi Pillai who was ready to collaborate with the French and subsequently earned the enmity of not only the European conservatives but also the Indian traditionalists. New conflicts began, this time, more precisely with in the Indian society.

As a barrister and a leader of Christian community and a high-caste *Vellaja* Ponnuthambi Pillai¹⁵ emerged as a well known personality of Pondicherry. Ponnuthambi began his crusade against *mamool* and caste in 1872. While he was a licensed advocate, he appeared in court dressed in hat and stockings, wearing European shoes, in the process scandalising everyone on the one hand, because his caste had the custom of wearing slippers and on the other, because the *Pariahs* had just been granted permission to wear European shoes. Article 188 of the order of 7th February 1842 with respect to the judicial organisation of the French Indian settlements in fact stipulated that Indian advocates should wear in court the costume appropriate to their caste.¹⁶ Ponnuthambi was censured and forbidden by Governor Faron from entering the court for ten days for having violated the *mamool*, threatened the social order and ignored the authority of the governor in matters of caste. The former appealed against this decision and was defended in France by Jules Godin who asked the *Cours de Cassation* to decide the following question namely whether an Indian wearing European shoes was committing an irreverent act in not taking off his shoes in front of the people to whom he owes reverence.¹⁷ The Court replied negatively; the judgement rendered in Pondicherry was nullified and Faron was criticised by the Minister, d'Hornoy, who, in his dispatch of 3rd June 1873; recommended a policy of progress in the matter of customary laws. According to him, the thinking of the French government had always been to respect the customs and beliefs of Indians and not to impose this respect if they would rather distance themselves from it. Consequently, he should have thought

of intervening only in a case where trespass committed by one caste against the prerogative of another, gave rise to complaints on the part of the latter. Other than these cases, the natural role of the government was abstention.¹⁸

Desirous of breaking away from morals and customs which were “outdated and no more in use”, Samymodéliar and Annasamy invoked the judgment of the *Cours de Cassation* in 1852 and the ministerial dispatch of 3rd June 1873, written to Faron by d'Hornoy the day after the publication of decree nullifying the judgement rendered in Pondicherry in the matter of the “stockings and shoes”. They reminded the *Conseil colonial* members, whom they were addressing, that “never has it entered the consciousness of the government to restrict them to vegetate in that from which they would like to come out”. It was high time “to let them quickly accomplish the moral revolution which had proceeded step by step for nearly a century”.¹⁹

The affair of ‘stockings and shoes’ or ‘slippers’ had in fact divided public opinion: all of French India took a position either for or against the wearing of footwear. The question of assimilation, which until now was of interest to Europeans and *Créoles*, henceforth began agitating Indians. Everyone had understood the significance of the incident of shoes, which was ridiculous only in appearance. There was henceforth in the colony, facing the majority of traditionalist Indians, a minority, small but undoubtedly very decisive were ambitious to substitute the French Code Civil for the laws of Manu. The emotion was still more significant when in 1873 Ponnuthambi, wished to overthrow ‘the colossus of the caste’ decided to take his place among the *Pariahs* at church and to invite some of these low-caste people to his table. “I have burnt my caste,” he was supposed to have declared at that time. “I have none. I am French. That is my caste and my title of glory.”²⁰

The victory brought two persons closer to Ponnuthambi, Godin the deputy in France and through his agency the colonial minister. These developments instigated Ponnuthambi to ask not only political and administrative assimilation but also cultural and moral. Indians should not be content with the institutions of metropolitan France and the latter must not have required their submission to the code civil as the distant outcome of their adherence to republican principles of government. For Ponnuthambi, France should have, at the same time that she granted French India parliamentary and local

representation, encouraged its inhabitants to renounce their personal laws. It was necessary, at least for Indian Christians, to emerge from the control of the clergy and to enter the common law of French citizens and to marry according to civil law. The Indian Christians who were the second privileged section next to Europeans thus would mingle with and claim certain equality with Europeans.²¹

Rupture in the Indian Camp:

Ponnuthambi's demand provoked some agitation not only among Europeans but also among *Choutres*, Muslims and Hindus. This also meant the definitive rupture with Shanmugam and the traditionalists. Shanmugam, who had long remained circumspect, was now ready to act. Belonging to high-caste *Vellaja*, Shanmugam had inherited the title of '*nadou*', or head of the upper castes from his father Sidambramodeliar, which conferred on him enormous prestige. In posing himself as the defender of the Hindu dharma and of the caste system, in his eyes Ponnuthambi and his friends were henceforth no more than *Pariahs*. He opposed the demand that civil marriage be made compulsory for Indian Christians.²²

When civil marriage for Indian Christians had come into question, in order to stave off the danger of 'absorption', thousands of Pondicherrians and Karaikalense had, on Shanmugam's order, signed a petition proclaiming that "one of the dearest prerogatives to an Indian, moor, or Malabar, is obviously his civil status...All that would tend to confuse it, would become hateful to him".²³ Civil marriage had never been imposed on Indians because of the impossibility for women to appear in public, and consequently to go to the town hall, before the birth of their first child. Brahmanical rites forbade young couples from leaving their houses before one had removed the *kappu*, the chord which was tied on their forearm on the eve of marriage. However, according to Samymodéliar and Annasamy, the fastening of the *kappu* was not the custom among Christians and their women went out freely to receive the nuptial benediction at the church and to attend the "many celebrations of the Catholic cult." There were, however, two customs that the two Indians were not yet prepared to "shake off": they favoured the continuance of the custom of co-sanguinary marriage between uncle and niece which the Church and the Code Civil condemned and authorised only under special dispensations. The belief that the mother was not of the family of the uncle was enough to remove any doubts: in

this case, the niece was in effect "a completely foreign object".²⁴ Another, the practice of child marriage, though the French recognised the age 16 for girls and 18 for boys as eligible age for marriage, respectively, the practice of under age marriages was common among the high-castes and rich people.²⁵ This practice came under heavy attack by the social reformers in India and by the missionaries however, this privilege of high-castes was threatened by the new innovation.

In Paris the symbolic and revolutionary gestures of Ponnuthambi and his friends was understood that certain Indians desired to assimilate and their expectations should not be disappointed. Trillard judged that France needed only to encourage the desire of these Indians to commit them to the path of progress. One would not be able to resist those who would like the right conferred by the *Cours de Cassation* to prevail and to submit oneself freely and voluntarily to French laws. The exercise of this right would, according to him, be true progress towards the assimilation of this nation to France and an important triumph of its immutable institutions.²⁶ In accordance with their wish, the decree of 25th January 1879, "useful to take a new step towards the reforms announced in 1871 and 1875", which would provide for civil registration of the natives.

In the vicinity of local elections, in order to avert the danger of assimilation and to protect Indian tradition from the danger of 'absorption', Shanmugam, thought that it was by taking over colonial institutions one could prevent the danger. He created an 'Indian Party' and managed to form an electoral alliance with the conservative 'Pondicherrian Committee' supported by the majority of the *Créoles* and *Choutres*, as well as by the Catholic Mission. This 'Clerico-Brahmanic' coalition created by Shanmugam was ready to contend for each seat against Ponnuthambi and Hécquet's '*Créole* committee'. Against the universal suffrage, representatives of the conservative Europeans and Indian traditionalists found in Shanmugam a spokesman who was as eloquent as he was decisive. He declared to the *Conseilgénéral* that the institution of municipalities would provoke a "commotion" among the people and would perturb the morals and society. The rivalries of caste would in no time override the public interest. Finally the *Pariahs*, profiting from the "advantages of universal suffrage" which they would be after, would not hesitate to question a hierarchy in place for centuries.

Governor Drouhet, who was very favorable towards

the cause of the liberals, observed that it was important to monitor agitations of this kind in a country where the experiment of these liberal institutions could be misunderstood and exploited to serve caste interests or cause unfortunate protests. He added that events had but justified these anxieties. Universal suffrage had become within the hands of Brahmanism an instrument of oppression and the spirit of our institutions found itself subordinated to a whole social system contradictory to that spirit.²⁷ Drouhet said that the supposed “superiority” of the European “civilizing element” had no corresponding reality in India. The European element was here as much an enemy of progress, as imbued with prejudices as the native element. For him the only way to prevent the restoration of Brahmanism was to remove the right to vote to Indians subject to their personal status.²⁸ Ponnuthambi shared this pessimism. Convinced that only a modification in the constitution could bring him back hegemony, he conceived a two-stage plan, First stage: to secure for the Indians the right of renouncing their personal status and placing themselves under the rule of French Civil Code. In this way certain Indians would become more French than others in the colony. Second stage: to obtain the right of vote only to Indians who renounced personnel status.²⁹

The election results in French India encouraged Ponnuthambi not only to enhance the fusion of castes but also to claim certain equality with Europeans. Having majority in local councils and having held his sway over the deputy in Paris he enlisted the support of the colonial minister. Ponnuthambi claimed more reforms for French India and more importantly cultural assimilation. The movement of renunciation was enthusiastically carried out in the colony. The liberals journal ‘*Le progrès*’ and the conservatives journal ‘*Le Courrier de l’Inde française*’ debated over the cultural assimilation. Putting his case for the right of renunciation, Ponnuthambi argued that France, which had emancipated slaves in 1848, granted collective naturalisation to Algerian Jews in 1870, as well as individual naturalisation to Annamites in 1881, and assimilated the ‘mullattos of India’ (the *Topas*) to whites, could not do less for those Indians wishing to draw closer to her. For him the only way of escaping the oppressive hierarchy of the caste system was to become a *renonçant*.³⁰ Slogans such as “live like Europeans”, “accept European institutions” were raised in the settlements.³¹

The noble gesture of liberals was accepted in

France. At the moment when the decree of renunciation was ready for the minister’s approval, Ponnuthambi’s friends came together at the residence of a wealthy *Vellaja* and the member of *Conseil général* named Louis Rassendiran, on the evening of 4th August 1881, to celebrate the decree. *Pariahs* were invited to share the food as a symbol of fraternity and elevation from the low status, in the words of *Le progrès*, “That night, the most difficult step was taken, the most important obstacles were overcome. The colossus of the caste was overthrown and broken. The *Pariah*, a reject of Hindu society, whose very breath infected the society, trampled on the fragments of the destroyed colossus and took their meal side by side with a member of the highest Indian aristocracy, Rassendiran, and with the aristocrat who had made of himself the representative of the democratic principle, Ponnoutamby.”³²

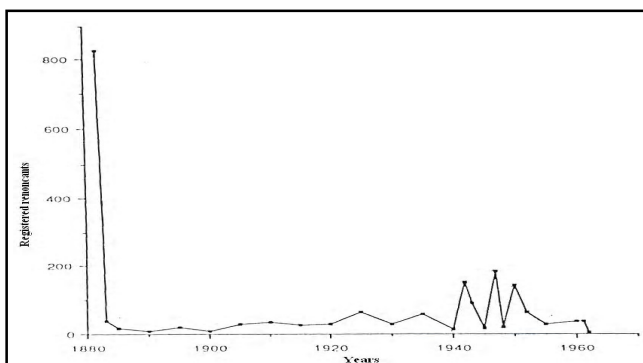
To the benevolence of French Indian society, the act of ‘*Renonçation au Statut Personnel*’ was passed on 21st September 1881. The process of renunciation enabled the inhabitants of French India to renounce their indigenous status and their personal law by adopting the French Civil Code applicable to French men and customs in all aspects and to become *renonçants*. According to its provisions, renunciation once declared in presence of a Registrar or a Judge of the Peace or a Commissioner of Police, was definitive and irrevocable for the *renonçant* himself as well as for his family and his descendants. In addition, it was compulsory for the *renonçant* to choose a new name as a symbol of his becoming subject to the French Civil Code and giving up their previous status. Ponnuthambi was henceforth known as ‘La Porte’.³³ The following are some of the names of *renonçants*:

Table 1 : Names of *renonçants*

Details	Original names	Adopted names
Abbreviation	Masillamany	Many
Choice of a Christian or ‘ <i>Français</i> ’ name	Virassamy	Mourice
Choice of a celebrity name	Rayalou	Turgot
Choice of a traditional Hindu name	Vadivelou	Ganeshar
Conservation of original name	Sanjivy	Sanjivy
Translation of Tamil name	Pushpanadin	Delaflore
Frenchification of Tamil name	Vasan	Vassin
Choice of names of planets, signs of zodiac, etc.	Jayaraj	Mars

The 1881 decree granted the French Indian subjects above 21 years, irrespective of their caste and religion, the right to renounce their personal status and opt for French citizenship and all those who did so were 'renonçants' and were governed by the political and civil laws, as applicable to the French citizens in the colony. A good number, mostly from the low-castes, conscious of their own degradation, willingly opted to become French *citoyens*, so as to attain equality, status and position. Thus was drawn a new kind of social group in the rank of colonial society, a group of willing collaborators prepared to assimilate French culture. They came to be considered as an elite group amongst the Indians. The movement for renunciation was so powerful at least in Pondicherry and Karaikal. It was under Governor Drouhet's administration that the 'renunciation' movement gained momentum. The initial success was achieved with the vigorous campaign of Ponnuthambi. A good number of 1,698, at the end of the year 1881, mostly from among the Indian Christians, willingly opted for the renunciation decree. Between 1881 and 1882 the number of *renonçants* increased to 4,402.

Fig. 1 shows that there was fluctuation in the registration and suggests that the initial enthusiasm of the population had slowly gone down. The probable reason for that the spirit of renunciation movement was largely concentrated among the Christian community and most of the native Christians in the settlement opted for renunciation. The municipal records suggested that in the Pondicherry commune in between 3rd January 1882 and 30th June 1884, 1,175 persons were registered of whom 908 were Catholic Christians and 267 were Hindus representing a proportion of 77% and 23%.³⁴ The author



Source: Pondicherry Municipal records, in the 19th and 20th century documents, N.A.I., Pondicherry

Fig. 1: Registered Renonçants in Pondicherry Municipality (1882-1962)

of a brochure called *Les Indigènes de l'Inde française et le suffrage universel*, Moracchini, explained the failure of this renunciation by the attachment of Hindus to the religion of their fathers and of the consequences of this act, which implied severing all social and economic ties with others in their milieu. Among the registered, majority of the *renonçants* were Pariahs who were converted just like to Christianity. If there were so few *renonçants* in the smaller settlements, this was because the class of *Pariahs* existed neither in Mahe nor in Chandernagor and that in the last two enclaves, as in Yanam, there hardly any Indian Christians.³⁵ However, in due course of time, attracted by the political, economic and social advantages, many Christians, Muslims and even a number of high-caste Hindus became *Renonçants*. Moracchini suggested that it was out of political ambition that some Indians of the high-castes had renounced. A few years later, a governor would corroborate this judgement and would add that the ambitions of the leaders of the *renonçants* had contributed to the failure of this attempt at assimilation: "by belittling this movement to make it a party instrument, they succeeded in aborting it".³⁶ The leaders of the *renonçants*, instead of combating the prejudices, which endured among their followers, endeavoured to convert the Brahmans by any means to their new religion. Moracchini asserted having seen some civil servants exercising pressure on certain natives in order to constrain them, "in the interests of a supposed progress, to eat beef, drink wine or "to abandon their very secular costume in order to don the costume of Europeans, appropriate at most for cold climates."³⁷ Though in theory, the *renonçants* were supposed to give up their way of life, etc., in practice it was very negligible. Caste differences did continue, both among the Christians and the Hindus. It was in the twentieth century that the *renonçants* were largely recognised in the colony. Due to the political and other benefits available to them there was a constant increase in their number. Many were recruited in the army and administrative positions. In June 1882, La Porte and his friends signed a petition to show the government and the public the patriotism of the *renonçants* provoking from the Brahmans a hostile reaction to military service. Calling itself the "Democratic Party", the clique of La Porte addressed itself to the minister by indicating that they would be happy to pay the tax of blood, but in other conditions than those under Duplex and La Bourdonnais, a period when the rigors of caste recognised under the

same flag two armies, an European army and a native army and from the latter the *Pariah* was excluded.³⁸ In the First World War over 1,000 *renonçants* served the French army and many took the colonial service in French colonies.

What was the goal of this renunciation movement? *Le Progrès*, the journal, of the *renonçants* preached their programme. They demanded 'serious' and 'sufficient' representation for *renonçants* in all assemblies, just distribution of taxes, and equal benefits from the budget. They insisted that 'our aspirations and claims have been... just and legitimate.'³⁹ If the Third Republic made it clear that it favoured the complete assimilation of this territory to metropolitan France, the *renonçants* demanded that these concepts be applied to French India in spirit and in letter. They asked for equal political rights with the French and equal education and opportunity. In short, the *renonçants* favoured total naturalisation, assimilation, and all other measures which would help to 'integrate' French Indian settlements with France. They made only one condition to France-which she should not ask them to give up their personal status as Indians. While, advocating secularism, tolerance and religious simplicity, the collaborators, as ardent Indians, refused naturalisation *en bloc* unless France waived the condition that they must give up Indian status. This condition, which appeared to them very simple, represented their symbol of nationalism. For, while demanding full political rights as French citizens, they wanted to maintain their full personal status as Indians. French legislators and policy makers understood this contradiction and refused to change their laws on this question. An interesting fact about the *renonçants* was their admission that colonisation had brought certain advantages to their country. Two or three decades later, this attitude was to be looked upon as anti-nationalist. But the collaborators, who were cut off from their past and ignorant of the history of French colonisation in India, followed the colonial argument that India, before French rule, was living in 'confusion' disorder and general anarchy'. They praised France for bringing security and tranquillity to India. Colonisation, they said, had social and economic advantages. According to this theory, Indians had caste hierarchy and customs barriers and the presence of the coloniser had transformed the Indian mentality and way of life. The collaborators, however, did not admit that colonisation had brought equality to India.⁴⁰

French education was at the top of the *renonçants*

demands from France. They rejected the colonial argument that Indians were uneducable and incorrigible. They regarded education as necessary and good, not only for the conqueror, but also for the conquered. They also denied as unfounded the assumption that the Indians were enemies of schools. They, moreover, argued that experience showed that there was no difference between Indians and French students in learning and intelligence.

In the same fashion, the *renonçants* called for reform in the conditions of the Indian caste system. They were struck by the fact that, because of the Indian caste system and exploitation by the high-castes, the low-castes remained not only ignorant of their past, but also of their poor condition. To most of them, the low-castes (*i.e. Pariahs*) were oppressed and their conditions were still as they had been before. In order to bring a remedy to this status of the low-castes, the collaborators made certain proposals. These included an increase of welfare societies, educational assistance, to renunciation of their personal status as French citizens and, above all, the elimination of the caste system, to which the low-castes were a victim, especially *Pariahs*.⁴¹

One of the proposals made by the collaborators to ameliorate the conditions of the Indians was to acquire French education, to facilitate government jobs and if possible emigration to France and French colonies. They justified their suggestion by arguing that participation in administration and emigration would have many advantages for Indians and for French as well. It would (1) enhance the moral conditions of Indians through contacts with other societies; (2) increase their imagination and experience, which they might find useful when they applied to their society; (3) improve their material situation, as well as that of their families, for salaries in France and French colonies were higher; and (4) provide the French economy with cheap labour and service.⁴²

In principle, the collaborators accepted naturalisation under French law. Religion which stood as an obstacle to this was regarded by them as a matter of conscience, rather than of the laws which regulate Indian life. But the views of Indian society on the question of naturalisation barred them from an unconditional acceptance of entry in French society. They called for a *rapprochement* and reconciliation between the two societies. To overcome prejudice, fanaticism, and walls of disagreement, they advocated marriage between the races and the adaptation by Indians of the French way of life. Meanwhile, they called the Indian conservatives

with all kinds of degrading names, from the *citadelle des préjugés* to ‘an arrogant bourgeoisie...whose members are merely ornaments of our promenades and our public places’.⁴³ Despite their secular attitude, their tolerance, and their revolt against fanaticism, the collaborators were accused by their adversaries of being ‘pan-Indians’, ‘renegades’, and exploiters of the traditional feelings of the Indian masses. They had to live like ‘*le refuge de la lie du peuple indien*’.⁴⁴ The main weakness of the collaborators was their lack of effective organisation and able leadership. Their programme, even though moderate and sometimes contradictory, was good enough to serve as a base for building a new Indian society.

Political Manoeuvres:

The renunciation decree generated lot of heat in the colony. The traditionalists blamed the French for implementing contradictory values in Indian society and condemned naturalisation as equivalent to giving up the Indian faith. They reminded the French that the Indian civilisation to which they belonged had a high respect for moral and human progress. They stood for the maintenance of the old social order. Those Indians who accepted naturalisation were called ‘renegades’ and were treated without respect. The conservatives felt that the liberals in French India with the aid of liberal institutions were moving too fast and too quick towards fusion of Indian society with the French. Their contention was that France tried to ‘escalate the *Pariahs* at the same time strive to mingle everything with *Pariahs*’.⁴⁵ As if in support of their thesis Governor Drouhet ordered the removal of the barrier in church which separated the low-caste and the *Choutres*. He granted permission to the low-castes to wear sandals, permitted *Pariahs* to construct *pandal* in front of municipality and in front of their house at time of marriage to conduct ceremonies and opened all the fountains which were reserved for high-castes for all with the slogan of ‘in front of egalitarian principles all are equal’.⁴⁶ These enthusiasms compelled liberals to ask for the suppression of voting rights of non-*renonçants*. La Porte pleaded his party’s case at Paris before the Ministers, and the President of the Republic. He argued that the ‘*mamoolists*’ were not French’, he added that the “Brahmans because of their predominant numbers, particularly the high-castes because of their supremacy, serve as obstacles to the progress of the low-castes and the universal suffrage would become an

oppressive instrument in their hands’.⁴⁷

At the end of October 1883, the *renonçants* won two triennial renewal elections, which gave them much to hope for. Fourteen of them had signed a petition in March 1883 claiming that they should be registered on the first list of electors as they deemed themselves on all accounts to be French citizens. Even the Topas were registered on the first list. The Topas claimed that they were not in way any lesser Frenchmen than the mixed population which was European only in name and which was of Indian origin like them. The *renonçants* argued that when the Republic had emancipated slaves and had made them French citizens, they were all subject to the same laws. Had it not registered them on the same lists as their former masters? They questioned. What would have been unreasonable was to put on different lists of Frenchmen who were governed by the same laws, under the pretext that some of them had a few drops of European blood flowing through their veins and that the others were Indians of pure blood.⁴⁸

The government in France found itself in an awkward position. The proposals were studied carefully. Although the creation of a single list seemed in the view of the concerned officials at the very least premature, they could not contemplate excluding the non-*renonçants* from the electoral institutions. Undoubtedly, there was “something abnormal and repugnant to the national sentiment in admitting that men who reject the benefit of our civilising laws and defend a social organisation which humiliated and insults humanity, can enjoy the same political rights as those who have complied with French laws.”⁴⁹ But, as Victor Schoelcher was to put it, “the Republic is like the God of St. Paul; it does not take back its gifts.”⁵⁰ To inscribe the *renonçants* on the first list, as La Porte was willing to accept since he had not obtained the exclusion of the ‘*mamoolists*’, was not more realistic. It would have spelled the end of European preponderance to the advantage of men whose sincerity was still regarded with a certain degree of doubt. On the other hand, to keep them on the second list where they would be lost in the crowd of the non-*renonçants* would amount to abandoning men who had the courage to break with Hinduism in order to draw closer to France.⁵¹ Finally, the *Conseil supérieur des colonies* (Supreme colonial council) were entrusted with the task of reforming the constitution of French India.

For Victor Schoelcher, member of the *Conseil supérieur des colonies*, the registration of the

renonçants on the first list was a mistake, but in wanting to avoid making this mistake, the government made an even greater mistake. By the creation of a unified list, it handed over French India to a ‘Clerico-Brahmainic’ coalition of people resistant to the moral emancipation of its inhabitants. The *Conseilsupérieur des colonies* adopted Schoelcher’s proposition that the setting up of three lists of electors, the first consisting of Europeans and their descendants, the second of the *renonçants* and the third of the non-*renonçants*.⁵²

The decree of 26th February 1884 authorised creation of three lists of voters in French India. The first list consisted of Europeans and their descendants 572 (0.8%) (according to the electoral statistics in 1883), the second list consisted of *renonçants* 1,434 (2%) and the third list composed of Hindus, Christians and Muslims 68,385 (97.2%). The following table shows the proportion of electors in French India by religious groups:

The decree (Article 1) also rearranged electoral councils in French India and fixed the equal number of seats for each lists in the local assemblies. The decree set 30 seats in *Conseilgénéral* and each list would elect 10 members each. *Conseilslocaux* included 12 in Pondicherry, 9 each in Karaikal and Chandernagor, 6

each in Mahe and Yanam. Each list would share equal number of seats in the assemblies. In the municipalities, each list would share one third of the seats and Pondicherry commune would elect 18 members, Karaikal 15 and other communes would elect 12 members each. However, in the municipalities the proportion of seats would be adjustable according to the situation.

The electoral reform, victory for republican principles, successful conversion by the French of the *Pariah* virtually made the *renonçants* an elite group among the Indians. On the other hand, universal suffrage whose aim was to assimilate India to France had produced the opposite result. It henceforth allowed the most traditionalists of Indians to consolidate the caste order and to combat French influence. Universal suffrage had the result of starting an unceasing struggle between French influence and ideas and the stratified Indian society. As the Indians were more numerous, and consequently, the masters of the electoral corps, it had given them a weapon through the vote to destroy everything that was French in the country. According to the French, it was out of line to think in fact of some day bringing together the two civilisations. The social condition of India was worse than slavery as “slaves can be freed

Table 2 : Proportion of Electors by Religious Groups in 1883

Communes	Population	Number of electors					General Total	
		1 st List	2 nd List					
			Christians	Muslims	Hindus	<i>Renonçants</i>		Total
Pondicherry								
Pondicherry		445 (3.1%)	1,230	833	10,736	892	13,691	14,136
Olgarat			354	53	12,367	404	13,178	13,178
Villianor			35	228	8,198	15	8,476	8,476
Bahor			15	23	7,125	10	7,173	7,173
Total	1,39,210	445 (1%)	1,634 (3.4%)	1,137 (2.6%)	38,426 (89.4%)	1,321 (3%)	42,518	42,963
Karaikal								
Karaikal		40	789	1,879	3,994	58	6,720	6,760
Grand-Aldeé			141	430	4,221	5	4,797	4,797
Nedungadu			938	476	5,810	48	7,272	7,272
Total	93,066	40 (0.2%)	1,868 (9.9%)	2,785 (15.2%)	14,025 (74.4%)	111 (0.5%)	18,789	18,829
Chandernagor	26,574	45 (0.8%)	5 (0.09%)	281 (5.4%)	4,794 (93.5%)	Nil	5,080	5,125
Mahe	8,166	34 (1.5%)	57 (2.6%)	516 (24%)	1,534 (71.5%)	2 (0.09%)	2,109	2,143
Yanam	4,552	8 (0.8%)	1 (0.07%)	39 (2.9%)	1,283 (96.3%)	Nil	1,323	1,331
General Total	2,71,568	572 (0.8%)	3,565 (5%)	4,758 (6.7%)	60,062 (85%)	1,434	69,819	70,391

Source: Emile Appavou, *Project de reforme électorale dans l'Inde française*, Pondichéry, 1934.

and the Indian, planted in his caste can never come out of it.”⁵³

Competition for Supremacy:

The period between 1884 and 1885 witnessed conflicts over absolute supremacy and renewed agitations, one between the Europeans and the Indians and the other amidst different social groups within the Indian society. In electoral politics at first the high-castes in alliance with Europeans succeeded in warding off the threat posed by the *renonçants*. But the well manoeuvred coalition between the *Créoles* and *renonçants* in course of time succeeded against the ‘Clerico-Brahmanic’ clique. At the same time the superiority of the Europeans did not allow them to allow the ‘Indian idea’ to win over the ‘French idea’.

The traditionalists wanted to ‘re-conquer their lost situation’. The opportunity to break the alliance between Europeans and *renonçants* and to re-conquer the local assemblies presented itself in 1890. Louis Rassendren, the leader of the *renonçants* and director of the journal ‘*Le Progrès*’ was imprisoned for abuse of confidence and forgery to the detriment of a widow Sengamalom, Rassendren sold her land illegally which she rented to him. Sengamalom confidently entrusted her case to Shanmugam. The latter took advantage of the influence he enjoyed both in the administration and in the judiciary. The prosecutor, Gaston Pierre, was notably beholden to him. At the opening of the trial on 28th September 1890, two assessors defaulted and had to be replaced. By an ironic twist of luck, Shanmugam himself was designated as a substitute. He thus became juror as well as an advocate. To the general surprise, the acquittal of Rassendren was expected. He was acquitted with a meagre fine of 300 rupees. *Le Progrès*, the journal of the *renonçants*, rejoiced over the outcome of what was called ‘the day of the dupes’.⁵⁴ A short while thereafter *Le Progrès* could not hide its surprise and embarrassment when Rassendren announced his alliance with Shanmugam. This was the price he had to pay for his acquittal.⁵⁵ This helped Shanmugam to crush completely the dominance of *renonçants* at the moment. The ‘unnatural alliance’ between the *renonçants* and the Brahmanic group gave majority to the ‘Indian Party’ as well to Shanmugam, the ‘king of French India’.

Deprivation of *Renonçants*:

An influential deputy did not suffice for the Indian

Party’s purpose. They also needed an understanding governor. This was to be Rodier, who arrived in Pondicherry on 5th February 1898. Rodier’s task consisted of discrediting the ‘French Party’ and the *renonçants*. Henrique-Duluc, the deputy of Shanmugam, argued in favour of a modification of the constitution of French India. His premier argument was based on the imperfection of the decree of 26th February 1884 and particularly the default proportional representation. In favour of his argument, the secretary of State, Emile Jamais found certain indifference in the electoral pattern in the colony; in Olgarat, four municipal members were elected by four voters of total seven votes, in Grand-Aldeé, six members represented thirteen voters, in Yanam, ten electors decided the situation of the council. On the contrary, as he put it, 57,825 electors in the third list competed with 538 electors in the first and 2,861 electors in the second list.⁵⁶ Duluc primarily questioned the sincerity of the renunciation. In his lengthy report, Rodier took the position that sincere renouncements were rare; most of the *renonçants* remained subject to the ‘*mamool*’ and to their castes.

Though the renunciation movement was largely concentrated in the urban communes rather than in rural communes (for example, large absence of *renonçants* in the Villianor and Bahor communes), in reality, according to Rodier, in the 17 years since the promulgation of the decree of renunciation, on 21st September 1881, the number of *renonçant* electors increased from 1,537 in 1884 to 2,861 in 1898.⁵⁷ Among the 2,861 electors of the second list, many were false *renonçants*, mostly *Pariahs*. Taking advantage of their ignorance, the political parties persuaded them to become *renonçants* in order to profit from their votes.⁵⁸

During the period between 1884 and 1898 in the commune of Olgarat, 1,088 *renonçante* electors were registered in the second list, representing 38% of the whole colony. The commission which revised the electoral lists in French India in 1897 found 490 false *renonçant* voters,⁵⁹ with false name, caste, succession etc. For Rodier, the civil registration committee of Olgarat commune was responsible for this large fraud. In the year 1895, In Ellapoulléchavady, a section of the commune, 84 or 88 persons, including some municipal employees, were forced to renounce without their knowledge. Rodier accused the Brahmanic group for being responsible for the conversion of 120 coolies, in the communes of Villianor, Bahor, Grand-Aldeé and

Nedungadu, from the third list. Among the 887 inscribed in the commune of Pondicherry, many were low-castes, domestic workers and gardeners, the political parties having persuaded them to renounce without their knowledge. In Karaikal a different tactic was used, renunciation was made from different castes and it was very difficult for the administration to find out false *renonçants*.⁶⁰

In Mahe, where there was no second list, certain Nunez arranged conversions of relations and friends, who regularly returned him to his seat in the *Conseil général* of French India. In Yanam, an educated *Pariah* fabricated a second list in the same fashion for his own personal benefit. Unfortunately, the high-caste Indians did not appreciate his initiative and forced a few dozen coolies to renounce in order to steal his seat. In Chandernagor among the 26 *renonçants*, 17 were included in the year 1893 and 1894, to capture the Mayor's seat. In such condition, Rodier concluded, "renunciation was no longer an institution, it was an electoral manoeuvre".⁶¹ The nail having been thus driven in by Rodier, Henric-Duluc and Jules Godin had no difficulty in 'circumventing' the Minister of colonies, Albert Decrais, who, without even consulting the Supreme Council of the Colonies, prepared a project of decree and it was signed by the President of the Republic, Emile Loubet, on 10th September 1899.

According to article one of the decree of 10th September 1899, applicable to French India, henceforth there were only two lists, that of the 'Europeans and the assimilated' and that of the 'native Indians' and according to article four of the decree, the 'assimilated' were *renonçants* who had adhered to the French civil code for at least fifteen years, and who fulfilled one of the following conditions:

- (i) To be the holder of a university diploma,
- (ii) To have carried out an administrative or judicial functions for five years,
- (iii) To have exercised an elective mandate for five years, or to have obtained a decoration or a medal of honour. The holders of a decoration had to prove a perfect command of the French language.

At the time of the promulgation of the decree only 70 assimilated⁶² could be found. High-caste by birth, *Vellaja* for the most part, these '*renonçants* from above' were close to Rassendrenand consequently to Shanmugam. The 'Machiavellian decree' thus introduced in the first list "a favourable element for the party of

forgers" in the indignant outcry of the 'French Party' and its allies. By contrast, the '*renonçants* from below', born of low-castes, were sacrificed, as they were relegated to the mass of 'native Indians'. The decree of 26th February 1884 had permitted some *Pariahs* and *Vannias*, elected from the second list, to sit in the elected assemblies. "This first step in the path of social equality caused great vexation to Shanmugam and his friends" wrote Ignace. "To see a *Pariah* seated alongside them in the elected assemblies, to be obliged to deal with them in terms of power, was intolerable for the *Tondamandalavellajas*".⁶³ In weakening the value of renunciation, Ignace concluded, Shanmugam deprived the lower castes of any possibility of social ascension and paralysed 'the movement of progresses' which the converts adopted in French India, like the *Parsis* and the *Brahmo-samajists* in British India.⁶⁴

With the abolition of least possibility of progress, the low-castes especially the *Pariahs* lost all hope of seeing the improvement of their fate. In 1897, according to Girod, the castes which had always dominated and whose authority was so carefully preserved in British India could at any time react against any movement in favour of the low-castes and could create great difficulties for the French. He wrote to the Minister of colonies that under the agitations and the electoral competition hid a more elevated question of general politics which it would be incumbent upon the minister to resolve namely if the French should conserve the secular supremacy of the castes as was done by their neighbours, the British or if, on the contrary, they should let power be transferred to inferior castes. He added that for whoever had lived in India, it was indisputable that there was a gulf between man of caste and a *Pariah*. Finally, Girod wrote that the future might tone down these divisions, which were at the same time both religious and social, but this future was perhaps too far off to have a significant influence on their manner of administering.⁶⁵

With the seizure of all the institutions of the colony, till 1906, the elected councils were effectively controlled by Shanmugam. Functionaries and magistrates trembled before him. The senator Godin and the deputy Henric obeyed him blindly, which permitted them to be re-elected without opposition, the first in 1900, and the second in 1902. The French parliament in Paris closed its eyes to these electoral escapades and the ministry of colonies readily fulfilled high-castes' desire.

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11. *Le Courrier de l'Inde française*, 1, December 1871.
12. Moracchini, *Les indigènes de l'Inde française et le suffrage universel*, Imprim. Ch. Blot, 1883.
13. In 1847, four of the seven members of the Calcutta municipal commission were elected by suffrage based on a property qualification. The Indian protest against this innovation was so vehement that in 1865, when the Madras municipality was instituted by the authorities, there were no elected members. The same was true of the legislative council for British India organised in 1861 or of the Madras and Bombay presidency councils.
14. While promulgating the 1st February decree, which accorded to India a deputy, Governor Bontemps pointed out, "most of these wretched people, understand nothing of these measures and feel suspicious rather than glad". Cited in Moracchini, *Les indigènes de l'Inde française et le suffrage universel*, Imprim. Ch. Blot, 1883.
15. Ponnuthambi Pillai was born in 1832, at Pondicherry in a powerful *Vellajacaste*-Christian community. He had his education at *petitseminaire*-college and got a degree in law. He went to Paris passed his higher degree exam. His father Chinnasamy Pillai was very proud of his son, because getting degree in Law was considered to be a highest level of education at that time. To fulfill his father's aspiration, Ponnthambi Pillai joined the civil service as an interpreter in police department in 1853. After three years service, in 1856 he was promoted to the post of interpreter in chief of the Tribunals. He entered the politics in 1872, elected to *Conseil général* and *Conseil local* of Pondicherry and virtually dominated the French India politics until his death in 1886.
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31. *Le Progrès de Karikal*, 2, August 1881.
32. *Le Progrès de l'Inde Française*, September 1881.
33. Since Ponnuthambi Pillai served as a "gateway" to *renonciation*, the beneficiaries of the decree fondly called him as Ponnuthambi Pillai 'La Porte' (the door towards the West).
34. Pondicherry Municipal record, in the 19th and 20th century documents, N.A.I., Pondicherry.
35. Moracchini, *Les indigènes de l'Inde française et le suffrage universel*, Imprim. Ch. Blot, 1883.

36. Before the decree of 1899, there were on an average, 75 renunciations annually. After 1900 no more than 22 were registered, “evident proof that the conversion were not inspired only by love of France and the Republic”, commented Governor Martineau in 1910.

37. Moracchini, *Les indigènes de l’Inde française et le suffrage universel*, Imprim. Ch. Blot, 1883.

38. *Le Progrès de l’Inde Française*, 20, June 1882.

39. *Le Progrès de l’Inde Française*, 20, June 1882.

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57. **Evolution of Renonçant Voters (1884-1894)**

Settlements	1884	1894	1898
Pondicherry	1,032	1,426	2,064
Karaikal	433	488	538
Chandernagor	19	36	70
Mahe	53	81	163
Yanam	0	0	26
Total	1,537	2031	2,861

Source: *Annuaire des établissements français dans l’Inde pour l’année*, 1885-1899.

58. Victor Quaintenne, *Les scandales du régime électoral de l’inde française, Protestation adressée a MM. Les membres du gouvernement et du Parlement*, Paris: Alcan-Levy, 1900, p. 119.

59. 1,088-490=598.

60. Victor Quaintenne, *Les scandales du régime électoral de l’inde française, Protestation adressée a MM. Les membres du gouvernement et du Parlement*, Paris: Alcan-Levy, 1900, p. 119.

61. Victor Quaintenne, *Les scandales du régime électoral de l’inde française, Protestation adressée a MM. Les membres du gouvernement et du Parlement*, Paris: Alcan-Levy, 1900, p.119.

62. 45 in Pondicherry commune, 2 in Olgarat, 2 in Villianor, 15 in Karaikal, 1 in Nedungadu, 1 in Grand-Aldeé and 4 in Mahe.

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65. *Le rapport du gouverneur Girod au ministre des colonies sur la situation des listes électorales en Inde pour les années 1896 et 1897, 13 juillet 1897*.
