

THE TELEGUS OF YANAM AND MASULIPATNAM: FROM FRENCH RULE TO INTEGRATION WITH INDIA. By J. B. P. MORE. pp. 283. Madimchetty Satianarayanamurty, Pondicherry, 2007.
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The “development of national consciousness and freedom movement” in the French Indian territories of Masulipatnam and Yanam is the subject of Dr J. B. P. More’s study. What can he offer that cannot be found in the magisterial volumes of Jacques Weber’s *Les Etablissements français en Inde aux XIXe siècle, 1816–1914*, (Paris, 1988) and *Pondichère et les Comptoirs de l’Inde après Dupleix* (Paris, 1996)? The distinctive feature of More’s work is his use of oral testimony and local vernacular sources, which he put to such effective use in an earlier work (*Freedom Movement in French India: the Mahé Revolt of 1948*, Tellichery, 2001). Despite a later update, Weber’s emphasis is on the nineteenth century, just as Ajit Neogy’s indispensable *Decolonization of French India* (Pondichère, 1997) deals with the endgame of French India. Inevitably, by comparison with Pondicherry and even Karaikal and Mahé, Masulipatnam and Yanam were backwaters to which these historians could devote little attention. It has not been easy for More to bring to life the small-town notables of these enclaves. But, supported by appended potted biographies and many photographs, some undated, his narrative is a political micro-history of great thoroughness.

Masulipatnam is a minor theme in the book. Despite earlier promise, it never developed a significant population in the modern period which is More’s focus. A French–Armenian factory was set up in the Krishna delta in 1669 following a *firman* from the Sultanate of Golconda. Its fortunes and even the French presence fluctuated with the vagaries of European colonial rivalry and the Mughal invasion of the Deccan. It was upstaged by the new bases at Pondicherry (1673) and Chandernagar (1688), the former becoming the headquarters of French India in 1701. Refounded in 1720 and hugely expanded in 1753 with the Nizam’s support, it became again the French colonial headquarters. Almost immediately, Masulipatnam sank with the general wreck of French fortunes in the Seven Years War. But even by the mid-eighteenth century its wealth had gone. Its 100,000 population had more than halved as the weavers moved north to the Godaveri delta. Though, in 1753, its tax revenue amounted to Rs 110,897, Dupleix complained that it was a liability on the colonial budget. After 1765, it was merely a French factory in British territory, and in 1787 it became a dependent of its former offshoot, Yanam. Restored yet again in 1816, it continued feebly through the nineteenth century, surviving half-hearted attempts at land-swaps with British India in 1856, 1867 and 1884. Though a lame watchman daily raised the tricolour, the factory was dependent for water, electricity and foodstuffs on the British authorities, who even administered justice and collected municipal taxes. French authority was artificially revived in support of a local Indian refusal in 1929 to submit to a British court. But after the British withdrawal, when the French were hoping to perpetuate their Indian presence in some form or another, Masulipatnam was not included. On 6 October 1947 a decayed factory with a hundred inhabitants was transferred to the new India.

Fifty kilometres to the north, Yanam, the real subject of the book, was only marginally more successful. Situated fifteen kilometres from the sea, above a bar in the Godaveri that obliged larger ships to approach on another branch past a British factory, Yanam was a mere 4,200 metres by 12,000 metres. Every trading opportunity, even liquor smuggling, was dashed on British rocks. Saltpetre, opium, salt, all were prevented, just as customs duties drove the weavers into British territory. A brief prosperity in the mid-century as half a million coolies were exported through Yanam to other French colonies ended with a British interdict, reinforced by cyclone, famine and flood. The first French Indian census of 1852 showed 6,317 residents with a score of French and *Topas* (Franco-Indians), a figure that was slowly to decline. In 1894, the Governor of French India reported that Yanam yielded 32,000 francs against costs of 54,000, and that no Frenchman had chosen to settle there or found a business. Was its survival just a matter of inertia? More shows that after 1911 metropolitan national

feeling put withdrawal firmly off the agenda. All this fits Brunswig's thesis in his *French Colonialism, 1870–1914*, (translation published, London, 1966) that the colonies were an economic irrelevance but a matter of national honour and cultural extraversion.

Of the latter there could be precious little in such a small community. French revolutionary politics gradually percolated to the Bay of Bengal. After 1871, French Indian males over 21 had the vote. But the following year when the Yanam council began, it proved difficult to find either candidates or voters. But following Pondicherry, conflict arose over the electoral lists. There was a separate list for French residents to offset their small numbers, then a third list for 'renouncers', those Indians who rejected their family laws and chose the French civil code. More has much detailed information on the, roughly, five landed families (*Kapus*) and a few merchant families (*Komutty*s) whose rivalries for prestige and patronage were to dominate the life of Yanam until, and beyond, independence. This was the 'arena' or 'Coliseum' politics, as More calls it, the competition in all aspects of life which followed from the imposed structure of French rule. But French cultural values made little headway in Yanam, the most conservative of all the French territories. There were no 'renouncers' here as the dominant *Kapus* defended the status quo, and unlike their *Komutty* rivals, resisted assimilation to French legal norms; nor did the missionaries have any local success.

An awareness of collective ownership is the core of More's understanding of nationalism. His engine of change is the idea of private property which the French brought from Europe. This sense of land ownership which created the dominant agricultural caste of *Kapus* was the principal agent in setting in train the 'arena' politics which is the author's main concern. More stresses that the French, who through their electoral manipulation kept this competition for a time away from themselves, alone held executive and legislative power. Yet his brusque dismissal of Cambridge School historians prompts the thought that his narrative might sustain various interpretations both in terms of the appropriate unit of study and from the thickness of his detail.

As the author shows, Yanam cannot be a meaningful unit for all the questions a historian will ask. This little community could not be self-contained, and More skilfully relates its various dimensions. The political agenda was set in Pondicherry with which all forms of communication were by courtesy of the British. As were the local practical realities, since Yanam was dependent in every way on the adjacent British territory. Rajamundry was also the cultural heart of the Andhra country and Yanam, which had no printing press, was evidently affected by the Telegu revival of the late nineteenth century. Even local rivalries could be triggered by external events. More recounts the case of a rich merchant honoured in British India with the title of *zemindar* who asked for the right in Yanam to a silver baton and two torches before his palanquin. The *Kapus*, unwilling to concede public precedence, got their way after riots. Further riots brought the fishermen into the public arena before French equality declared palanquins for all.

Yet, even in the last phase, as disorder and uncertainty involved wider sections of the small population, Yanam could still seem, to the French especially, an inert if enigmatic backwater. Even in 1945 Congress had no organised presence; the Andhra communists only cast an occasional glance at the territory. But, despite Nehru's francophilia, independent India exerted a grip on the colony more pervasive and deadly than had British India. Then, on 13 June 1954 came Yanam's moment in history. An insurrection – though More uncovers evidence of Indian troops in civil dress – ended 234 years of French rule, and, such was the unexpectedness of the blow, punctured French morale in Paris and elsewhere in India. More, a great controversialist himself, must concede that his meticulous research will provide meat for future controversy.

LIONEL KNIGHT
Royal Asiatic Society