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CITY

NATION

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BUSINESS

SPORTS

WORLD

EDIT PAGE

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HOME

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BAZAAR

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When France left India

Claude Arpi

Fifty years ago, a treaty for the de facto transfer of the French Establishments in India to the Union of India was signed between France and India. When some colleagues and I began to work on a publication commemorating the event, we were told: "But which history are you going to write? There are two histories, the Indian and the French!" This observation is quite accurate. Having had a keen interest in the subject for years, I knew that the story of the "merger" had a myriad of different angles.

One has to first understand the basic difference in perception between Paris and Delhi. But that is not all, history is often more complex. Indeed, in France itself, there were two stances: The Ministry of the Overseas Territories (which still hoped to be able to "emancipate" its "overseas" countrymen) had an opposite attitude to the Ministry's of Foreign Affairs, which knew from the day the British left the subcontinent that there was no point in shilly-shallying: The colonial era had come to an end.

Further intricacies, in the "freedom struggle movement" in Pondicherry, the various leaders such as Iduart Goubert or V Subbiah saw the events quite differently; most of the time their views diverged and they often ended up in confrontation. Fifty years later, most of these aspects are corroborated by declassified archival material available in the India and French Archives. They reveal wheels within wheels.

The French Establishments in India Seeing Pondicherry today, one forgets that this city used to be a sleepy colonial settlement on the Bay of Bengal, the colonial town par excellence. For decades, nothing apparently happened.

August 1947 saw the subcontinent's independence, its partition and the long-awaited departure of the British. The headquarters of French India finally emerged from its colonial torpor. Some letters from Colonel Fletcher, the Consul General of Great Britain in Pondicherry, addressed to Indian officials illustrate the little known role played by the British during the historic months before independence. Their endeavour was clear: "We are leaving, the French also should leave."

Francois Baron, the last Governor of French India, had other aspirations, probably too idealistic. He dreamt of a "cultural" collaboration between France and India. His view was that though the British were leaving, their language, their model of governance and even their McCaulayan system of education remained behind on the sub-continent. Why could not the French leave behind a great University based on French language and culture. The British opposed it tooth and nail. It was never to be. One can only regret it today, while so many IITs or IIMs are producing graduates which brilliantly represent India in English speaking countries, there is no such possibility for France.

In September 1947, Maurice Schumann, the Special Envoy of President Ramadier, came to India. During his visit to Pondicherry, he had the occasion to meet Sri Aurobindo who, for the first time in 19 years, accepted to receive an outside visitor. Though Sri Aurobindo was firmly in favour of the merger, this gesture shows the importance the master attached to the relations with France. The Master wanted French India to return to the arms of Mother India, Bhavani Bharati but did not see anything wrong for this tiny piece of India to keep its French "particularity" (Nehru also always favoured the concept of a window on France). Today, bureaucrats and politicians in Pondicherry understand better the

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Forecast: Mainly clear sky, Mist in the morning.
Max Temp 30.6 C (-1)
Min Temp 16.0 C (-1)
Max Humidity 90%
Min Humidity 36%
Rainfall -
Sunset (Mon) 5.35 pm
Sunrise (Tue) 6.35 am

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importance of this French "distinctiveness" when they try to promote tourism.

The Last Months: During the last weeks before France took the decision to leave the Establishments, there were few possibilities left for Paris to save the "sinking boat": One was evacuation without an agreement, the other was to "refloat" the ship and defend it by force. Delhi argued that France was bound by the Treaty of Paris of 1814 which stipulated that the French Possessions could not be militarily defended. It was evoked by the Government of India after the landing of 50 armed police personnel in Pondicherry in June 1954. Fifty years later, the incident seems laughable. In any case, both solutions were not satisfactory for French self-respect.

An external factor played a prime role in the events of the months of June and July 1954, ultimately tilting the balance in favour of withdrawal of the French administration from its Indian Establishments: It was the Geneva Conference on the future of Indochina which followed the French defeat in Dien Bien Phu.

The merit for the smooth transfer undoubtedly goes to Pierre Mendes-France, the French Prime Minister. His role, though not well known, was essential. July end saw Mendes-France win his gamble in Geneva: A week after a solution was found for Indochina, Paris informed Nehru of its decision to cede the French Establishments in India. The merger of the French India was one of the first concrete steps towards decolonisation for France. Was it a coincidence, but the Freedom movement (or Algerian war for the French) began that very 1st November 1954?

The Merger Functions: October saw the last days of French Pondicherry. On October 18, a Congress was held in the tiny village of Kizhoor in a hurriedly built shed. The building spanned both French and Indian territories giving a chance to those who were under arrest warrant by the French authorities to participate (from the Indian side of the shed) in the historic vote. The electoral college, consisting of the members of the representative assembly and the municipal councillors, voted with an imposing majority in favour of the merger with India. The transfer was formalised on November 1, 1954.

Delhi was delighted that the transfer went smoothly and that France could leave without too much bitterness. It was also a precedent for Kashmir: A foreign power acknowledged that a "popular consultation" could be held outside the framework of a plebiscite or referendum.


2004: Fifty Years Later: Today, 50 years after the merger, if one looks back, one could ask, "What is left of the French presence in Pondicherry"? Apart from the French Lycie, the French Institute, the Alliance Frangaise, an initiative to preserve the colonial architectural heritage of the town has recently been undertaken by INTACH. With the support of the European Community (Asia Urbs) this project progresses swiftly. It has been taken seriously by the local government which has understood that it is the best way to attract tourists to Pondicherry.

Mentalities are fast changing; the colonial period is no more a taboo. Even some of those who fought with great ardour against "French imperialism" now admit that not everything was bad with the French. Today, India and France often speak the same language: Both want a multilateral world. This was one of the main themes of President Chirac's recent visit to China. Unfortunately, France is still fixated on China for often meagre results (President Chirac and its entourage used five planes to go to Beijing but they sold only six Airbuses, according to The Straits Times). The brief visit of Michel Barnier, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, to India may not change the equation.

In many ways, a democratic India is more suited than China to be France's ideal geo-strategic partner in Asia. Father Ceyrac (a Jesuit who has lived for 66 years in India) told us: "France should invest itself more in India. In the cultural field, there is so much between the two cultures, something very deep." Until these deeper dimensions are found, it may take some time before Pondicherry really becomes the "window of France on India".

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