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**SOME ASPECTS RELATING TO THE ESTABLISHMENT AND GROWTH OF
EUROPEAN SETTLEMENTS ALONG THE TAMIL COAST
IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY**

Introduction

The phenomenon of large settlements of foreign traders in the main centers of Asian trade does not begin with the coming of the Europeans to Asia. The studies of Moreland on India and Van Leur on the Malayan Archipelago have shown that there existed in both these regions trading settlements of foreigners in such places as Calicut and Malacca (Moreland, 1923: 220-226, Van Leur, 1955:194 - 196). Arab settlements were a feature of Indian trading stations, just as Chinese colonies flourished in the Malay Archipelago. Not much evidence, however, is forthcoming on the nature of the relationship between these traders and the indigenous sovereign and the rights normally enjoyed by the former against the latter. Moreland would have us believe that even before the Europeans, there was in existence a kind of mercantile extra territoriality by which the foreign settlement had acquired the right to manage a considerable part of its internal affairs without interference

from the lord of the land (Moreland, 1923: 221-222). The Mopla merchants of the Malabar and Madurai coasts had their own separate heads who dispensed justice for members of then community according to their own laws and freely followed their own religious and social customs and practices. Such rights exercised by foreigners were not held to interfere with the sovereignty of the ruler.

European power

The most elementary connection was where the European power had just a hired house on the mainland which contained both its one or two officials and all its goods awaiting transportation. From there it moved on to the construction of a larger dwelling, belonging to it completely or by an eternal lease of the ground on which it was constructed. A major advance towards security was taken when the power received permission from the sovereign and constructed a fort within which its residences and all its effects were protected. This permission was grudgingly given, if ever, following a military defeat at the hand of the European power. When the European power was able to persuade the sovereign to renounce all his rights to the land on which the fort was situated, sometimes by commuted payment of the taxes that the place was obliged to bring, the fort became absolutely free of any interference from the local authority. Outright conquest was, of course, the pinnacle of authority which few European powers could afford.

Once the fort was constructed and some measure of security ensured for the European the settlement grew. The officers found it safe to live with their families within the area of the Fort. Thus a European community sprang up and around them, attending to their needs and performing the various functions connected with their trade, collected an indigenous community of mixed castes. The greater the security afforded by the place, the larger the European community, the bigger the town and its Indian population. The 17th Century, generally speaking, was in South India a period of instability and political strife. This feature in turn affected the growth of European settlements in some cases favourably, in others adversely

When, in the 17th Century, various European powers entered into competition for the trade of India, there was no one set pattern of practices or regulations that traders could follow. Coming, as they did, from a distance of thousands of miles, it was but natural that they should try to set up more permanent habitats in the centres of trade than their Asian counterparts. With the increase in the volume of trade that each nation was handling, its ties with the Indian soil became greater. A greater number of its officials had to be stationed in India; larger godowns were needed to store up its goods; a greater hold was necessary on the people to whom it was increasingly larger advances of capital. Factory grew into fort, fort into settlement. While this was the broad pattern of development, the manner in which it took place varied infinitely with each power and every region.

Portuguese settlements

The legacy of the preceding century is of some importance. The Portuguese had held undisputed supremacy as the only Western power along the Indian coast. Their attention was centred predominantly on the Malabar coast and later northwards to Goa and Daman. However, as they realised the potentiality of the cloth trade between the Carnatic coast and the East Indian Islands, small settlements of Portuguese traders began to grow up on the Eastern coast too. Of these the most noteworthy is that of San Thome. The prevalence of a legend connecting up this place with the Apostle St. Thomas encouraged the proselytising zeal of the Portuguese who erected a church here. In the course of the 16th century, this settlement seems to have developed both into a seat of intensive Catholic missionary activity, and of prosperous trade. Travelers' accounts of both this century and the next speak of the existence of several churches, monasteries and a Jesuit College. The many legends that were current in these times and reports of miracles connected with various aspects of the Apostle St. Thomas made the place a centre of pilgrimage not only for Catholics but even for Hindus from villages round about. There was a large Parish of Christian converts looked after by several priests. It would appear that a spacious and well-constructed town had grown up here and a considerable harbour handling a large volume of trade (Vestiges of Old Madras I, 1913: 286-305).

These events had given the Portuguese a political and a religious foothold on the Madurai coast. There were no Portuguese settlements as such here. There was no place conducive to the development of European settlements. But the religious tie was strengthened and the

whole coast was littered with churches and seminaries. Early observers of the Dutch East India Company, which displaced the Portuguese, speak of the immense influence of the priests over the people. There were three large churches in Tuticorin built of stone. Each of the smaller ports had a church of its own. The influence of Catholicism in this region may be gauged from the fact that later on, when the Portuguese had lost their political control over Ceylon, Madurai became the centre of clandestine missionary activity in Dutch possessions. The Portuguese settlement proper in this area is further eastwards in *Nagapatnam*. This was a walled-in town built and owned by the Portuguese and was the seat of their naval and military power in this region. There were, consequently, several Portuguese families in residence here and an active social life. This is evidenced from the fact that when they were expelled from this place in 1658, the Dutch found that the majority of the inhabitants were either *Mestices* (in the definition of a contemporary Dutch writer) 'such as are born of a Portuguese father and a she blackamoor', or *Kastices* 'such as their fathers were blackamoors and their mothers Portuguese women' (John Nieuhoff, 1745: 198 – 199). Here too there were several large churches and houses built according to Portuguese fashion.

It is evident that though actual Portuguese settlements on the Tamil coast were few and far between their influence was felt in several of the trading centres in this region. Their religion proved to be a notable medium for the extension of their influence and had penetrated parts of the coastline. Their comparative freedom of intercourse with the native inhabitants had resulted in a group of half-caste peoples who inhabited some of the sea ports. As privateers and *fidalgos* they were found all over, sometimes sailing their own

vessels, at other times in the employ of private Indian merchants. Long after their political power in India had declined their influence remained and, as will be seen later, they played an important role in the founding and development of many a European settlement in India.

Another region where the impact of the Portuguese was felt was along the coast of Madurai in the southernmost part of the peninsula. Because of its proximity to the centres of Portuguese power in Malabar and Ceylon their influence had begun to make itself felt in the course of the century. They were attracted here by the existence in interior villages of supply centres for all manner of coarse and fine textiles and a pearl fishery along the coastline. With the acquisition of Tuticorin there followed a gradual process of penetration ending up not merely in the control of Tuticorin and the seven other harbours here but even of an undisputed exercise of civil and criminal jurisdiction over the Paravas who inhabited these harbours. This development was helped by the fact that the Nayaks of Madurai were not greatly concerned with the control of trade and the exercise of authority over the coastline. This they seem to have left in the hands of the Paravas, Muslims of the coast and foreigners, being merely content to maintain an open door policy with regard to trade (Arunasalam, 1952: 96-98).

The way was thus open for the superior European power to emerge into a position of dominance. Local events themselves played into their hands. There had always been friction between the Parava and the Muslim inhabitants of the coast. In the course of one of these internecine conflicts the Paravas hit upon the expedient of summoning aid from the Portuguese who willingly took them under their protection. Under the protection of the

Portuguese the Paravas were established in positions of dominance along the coast and in return they embraced Christianity *en masse*. A few years later Francis Xavier, the celebrated missionary, took up residence among the Paravas and instructed the people who had embraced Christianity only in name (Moraes, 1952: 1542 – 1552).

European nations

The first reaction of the native powers was to receive the prospective traders with open arms and bestow several favours on them. The powers encountered little or no difficulty in contracting treaties with local princes guaranteeing certain privileges. In the first place they were permitted to occupy a certain demarcated territory and to erect structures for their residence and storage of goods. In April 1610, the Dutch East India Company entered into a treaty with the Raja of Carnatic by which they were allowed to reside and trade at Pulicat (*Paleacatte*). They were to pay toll on all incoming and outgoing goods at the concession rate of 2% (*Corpus Dip.*, I 1887 - 1931:84). Two years later by a further treaty they were allowed to construct a fortress there which then completed soon after with the name of Fortress Geldria (Heeres, 1887 - 1931:101). Later when the King of Golconda overran the Carnatic, a treaty was entered into with him by which they were given complete freedom of tolls at Pulicat (Heeres, 1887 - 1931:230). In 1639 the English acquired similar concessions at Madras. They negotiated with the Nayak Damarla Venkatadri, Governor of the area for the King of Carnatic, and received the right to trade freely there and to construct a fortress. This was Fort St. George. They were also exempted from the payment

of all customs dues (Foster, 1637 - 1641:157). When in 1658 the Dutch had expelled the Portuguese from *Nagapatnam*, they sought to reinforce this right to conquest with a treaty of recognition with the Nayak of Tanjore in whose domains the city lay. Here too they secured freedom from tolls (*Corpus Dip.*, II 1887 - 1931:138). Thus all the trading powers were unanimous in their desire to secure some recognised title to their settlements and to put the whole problem of customs dues on a definite footing.

The 17th Century brings more European nations into the scene. Dutch, English, Danes and French, in turn, seek their fortunes in Asian trade. The Coromandel coast, forming a vital link in this trade, attracts all of them who begin to work for footholds in this area which would give them positions of vantage in relation to the trade. Ideas of monopoly and political control follow in the wake of competition. Trade has to be backed by power if it is to be safeguarded from an enemy nation or even to be wrested from her. This power has to be lodged at convenient points along the coastline and secured from both the Europeans as well as indigenous states. A new emphasis is thus given to the problem of European settlements. As a result of this European competition, the share of the Europeans in the country trade which had been negligible in the preceding century, now began to increase by leaps and bounds. The European trading nations were thus on the look out for suitable places along the coast which may be used as centres of their trade. None of them was looking for political aggrandizement. It was sufficient if, by consent with the native authority they could lease out strategically situated places insured with certain recognised rights.

Construct fortresses

The right to construct fortresses and keep the settlements in a state of preparedness for war was generally by the European power but not always granted. It was desired because it would give the Europeans the security that was necessary for the expansion of their trade and would provide a defensive shield behind which the settlement could develop. Madras and Pulicat, the two settlements that prospered in these years, owed their prosperity mostly to their fortified character. It was not always granted because it would cut into the sovereignty of the indigenous state if it were to admit an armed power within its borders. On the coast of Madurai, the Dutch tried their best to secure permission to erect a fortress. Successive deputations were sent to the Nayak and peaceful persuasion as well as force was used but the Nayak was adamant in his refusal to permit an armed fortress anywhere in his domains. He was, however, quite willing to give the Dutch the right to build ordinary houses anywhere along the sea coast for purposes of trade (*Corpus Dip.*, II 1887 - 1931:145). The history of the Dutch settlement at Tuticorin illustrates the practicality of European policy in this respect. More than once the armies of the Nayak attacked the settlement and the Dutch had to withdraw with all their movable assets into the security of their possessions in Ceylon.

The right to administer justice and punish offenders for acts done within the area of European jurisdiction was generally given without any fuss. This provision is seen in its most effective aspect where it relates to the enforcement of payment of debts that merchants have incurred on the delivery of goods for which advance payment has already

been made. There had to be some effective machinery to ensure the security of money invested by the Europeans in the land. The *Caul* granted by the Madurai Nayak to the Dutch in June 1645 states: “*You shall have right of preference on all merchants who trade with you and are in debt to you; your money will be paid first even from what they owe me*” (*Corpus Dip.*, I, 1887 - 1931:456). In Pulicat they were given the right to seize and place under arrest anyone who failed to fulfill a contract for the delivery of cloth. In Madras the native authority promised the English that they would make good any sum the English may lose through defaulting merchants or weavers and deliver their persons to the English authority if they happen to abscond in the interior (Foster, 1637 - 1641:157). Another aspect to this problem was the administration of criminal justice within the settlements in order to preserve law and order. Generally there was agreement to return absconding criminals in each other’s territories. There is record of a murder committed in Madras and the Naik was informed of it. Though those involved were native inhabitants the Nayak issued instructions that justice be done according to the laws of England (Foster, 1637 - 1641:315). For the development and prosperity of the settlement it was essential that it received a reputation for orderly government and impartial administration of justice.

European quarters and local quarters

The growth of the settlement and the prevalence of an active social life within it depended on several considerations. *Some* of the powers followed more restrictive policies than

others and this hindered progress. The rapid development of the English settlement at Madras as contrasted with the Dutch at Pulicat showed the advantages of a more liberal general attitude. European observers of the 17th Century of all nationalities are unanimous in their view that the city of Madras was a model European settlement in India and was far ahead of others of the same type. Though at the beginning of the century, the English began their career in the East as rivals of the Portuguese and allies of the Dutch, after the first three decades this position changed and from then on they were more friendly towards the Portuguese than to the Dutch. The Portuguese were by now feeling the full force of Dutch opposition to their positions in the East and hence were becoming increasingly dependent on the English.

Thus, though to begin with they opposed the establishment of an English settlement so close to their own at San Thome, later on there were friendly relations and mutual co-operation between them. The circumstances that favoured most the rise of Madras, however, was the fall of San Thome to the King of Golconda in 1662. This resulted in a mass exodus of Portuguese and their dependents to Madras. Thus the population of Madras increased immensely and the English were in possession of valuable man-power of the type they could use for their diverse needs. It was observed by several people in the latter half of the 17th Century that there were plenty of Portuguese settled in the city of Madras. Some of them were taken into the local defence force and supplemented the usually meagre English garrison. "The number of English may amount to three hundred", says a contemporary, Fryer (1673), "of Portuguese as many thousand" (John Fryer, 1909:107). Some of the Portuguese were men of considerable affluence, being successful traders. But most of them

were odd jobmen and not particularly well off. There was a carefully maintained distinction among them of white Portuguese and black Portuguese and intermarriage between these two groups was very rare. The latter were those who had intermarried with Indian races while the former had maintained their racial purity. Their general living habits left much to be desired.

Geographically, most settlements tended to divide themselves into two sections - a European quarter and a quarter inhabited by local inhabitants. The European quarter was situated along the sea and would consist of buildings used as stores and houses for the officers. If there were a fort it would usually embrace the European section of the town as in Madras and Pulicat. The soldiers were generally stationed here and the place was so fashioned that in the event of an attack from inland they could protect their lives and property within this fortification. Beyond this was the native town where lived the merchants, labourers who performed all kinds of services to the Europeans and, in some instances, those few Indians, who had become Christian converts. Sometimes. As in *Nagapatnam* and Tuticorin, entire families of weavers chose to leave their villages and settle down under European jurisdiction, particularly if they found the native authority exacting in its impositions. When sufficiently good relations had been established with the local authority and the people as to produce a sense of general security, European families ventured out of the fort and lived in the native quarter. This was unavoidable later as the European population increased and all could not find room within the fortified town. In Madras towards the latter half of the 17th Century most of the subordinate employees of the Company, both civil and military, were living in the outer town. It is seen from Abbe

Carre's observations that it was not unusual to meet Englishmen and other Europeans in the interior of the country (Abbe Carre, 1947:358).

Religion practices

One of the factors that attracted the Portuguese and their Indian co-religionists to Madras was the toleration in matters of religion practised by the English. To begin with, the Indian states granted to every European power that sought to settle along this coast the right of unhindered practice of its own religion. It was in the divisions between Catholics and Protestants that the trouble arose. It has been seen above that the Portuguese had succeeded in establishing pockets of Catholicism in many parts of the coast. The later Protestant powers would naturally be expected to view those with hostility. Happily for the prosperity of the English settlement of Madras, these differences were not allowed to come in the way of a policy of religious tolerance. In fact, both from official records and unofficial travellers' diaries, there is evidence of a flourishing and active Catholic community, public worship of their faith in their churches and priests to attend to their spiritual wants. Much of this was due to the existence for a long time of two French Capuchin priests, Father Epraim and Zenon, who maintained cordial relations with the political authority and won several concessions for the Catholics. Owing to their long residence in the country (over 40 years) they had a phenomenal knowledge of local customs and habits and were of immense help to the English in matters of trade and politics (Abbe Carre, 1947:549 - 553). Besides

the English preferred having them in the settlement to having Portuguese priests of whom they were very suspicious (Fawcett, 1670 – 1677:154).

The Dutch experienced even greater difficulty in dealing with the Catholics in their settlements. On the Madurai coast they had succeeded to positions that the Portuguese had held for long and they felt that the extirpation of the political power of the Portuguese from that region should be followed by the rooting out of their religion too. In this they had to admit failure. The Parava community along the coast stuck doggedly to their faith and no amount of prohibitory bans by the Dutch would wean them away from their loyalty. The Catholic priests continued to use the Kingdom of Madurai as a base for their activities and secretly attended to the needs of the Paravas. Soon after the Dutch conquest of Tuticorin in 1658, Fr. Baldaeus, a Protestant padre in the service of the East India Company, was asked to carry out a reformation of the Church in this town and its dependencies. He records, with frankness, the failure of his efforts and the fact that the Paravas preferred to walk miles into the country to be administered by their own priests than listen to the preaching of the Protestant religion (Baldaeus, 1672:150). Though their political hold over the Parava community was complete and the latter were loyal to them, they never could win them over to their religion. Language was a great barrier between the Protestant priests and the people. Very few of them could speak Tamil, while as Rev. Valentijn observes, most of the Catholic priests could speak, read and write the Tamil language (Valentijn, 1726:237). The Protestant faith itself was not as attractive as Catholicism, with its rich ceremonialism. Baldaeus records that once he removed the images and ornamental decorations from the Catholic Church at Tuticorin, the Paravas refused to enter it (Baldaeus, 1672:150).

The split in the Christian faith which so dominated the history of Europe in these years was reflected in the East also. Largely owing to the influence wielded by the two French priests and the presence of a large Portuguese community, Catholicism appeared to be much more virile than Anglicanism in Madras. This offended the Anglican priests who urged the officials to take strong action against Catholicism. Even among the employees of the Company, there appeared to be several Catholics and others who embraced Catholicism because of their marriage with Portuguese girls who were the only whites available for matrimony. The Anglican community was not well looked after and during certain periods there was no chaplain at all in the Fort. Rules and regulations there were against the public practice of the Catholic religion but their compliance depended on the Agent and high officials of the Fort. Sir William Langhorn, Agent at Madras 1670-77, was, for example, more tolerant than most others and was very accommodating to the Catholic community. His action in firing a salute of guns at the consecration of a newly built Catholic Church in Madras brought on him the disapproval of the Directors from London who also wrote, "*We desire to give as little countenance and encouragement to that religion [Catholicism] as they do to ours; and we would have you discountenance and discourage all of our nation that any ways incline to that profession*" (Talboys Wheeler, 1882:47). His successor Master (1677-1681) was less tolerant and took several measures to curtail the activities of Catholic priests and to reduce their increasing influence over English inhabitants of the city. The Test Act of 1673 forbidding Roman Catholics from holding office under the Crown was strictly applied in India also (Fawcett, 1678 - 1684:6). Yet never was such drastic action

taken as would result in a mass exodus of Catholics that would have affected the prosperity of the settlement.

Bad behaviour

One problem that confronted all European powers was that of keeping men of their own race in good behaviour. Authorities in most settlements were hard put to it in exercising discipline among their men. The average type that came out East were adventurous and not very educated. Those settlements which had so expanded as to necessitate Europeans living in the native quarter were the most difficult to handle. An over fondness for the bottle, consequent brawls and sexual immorality were the common vices. Everyone blamed the Portuguese as bringing down the tone o moral life in any place. The English at Madras grappled with this problem seriously as they were concerned with maintaining the reputation of the city. Regulations were introduced in 1672 limiting the opening hours and quantity of liquor served in taverns (Fawcett, 1670 - 1677:150, 179). In a letter written by the Company's Chaplain at Madras, Rev, Warner, to the Directors (1676), he complains bitterly about the 'drunkenness, debauchery and profaneness' that prevailed in the settlement and the generally poor attendance at Church on Sundays (Wheeler,1882:34 - 36). The Dutch in Pulicat were faced with similar problems. They found that those soldiers who were forced to live outside the Fort generally got married to local women and their life left much to be desired. The Dutch seem to have generally had a reputation in these parts for intensive drunkenness. Daniel Havart, a contemporary Dutch writer, takes the trouble of

refuting this and says that it is a story spread by their rivals, the English and the French, to tarnish their reputation (Daniel Havart, 1693:134 - 135). However, as far as the native of Coromandel Coast was concerned, the European of this time was generally noted for his excessive drunkenness.

Conclusion

The Seventeenth Century is of interest in the study of European contact with India as being a period when the attitudes of Westerners towards Indians is not coloured by the outlook of superiority which is so characteristic of a later age. Consciousness of difference there is and Europeans in India generally feel, that they are in a land of strange people and strange customs. These differences are generally given expression to in a straightforward manner and with the least inhibition. There is evidence of a general desire to learn and know more about the people among whom they lived and to accommodate themselves more to their environment. Yet the European settlements maintained a character of foreign outposts, limited in their extent and the influence they wielded in the countries where they were implanted. However, the growing interest they were showing in the religions and customs of the people around them was to bear fruit in the next century when there emerge some distinguished scholars of all nationalities who have left behind valuable works on the language, history and culture of the Indian people.

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