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## **17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century Chandernagore and the Jesuit Mission**

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### **Abstract**

*The European trading companies, starting from the Portuguese to the French, established their settlements in different parts of India, which, with time, emerged as busy urban centres. Each of these centres had some common features like, combination of port, fort and factory; demarcated urban space between 'white town' and 'black town' and connection with the larger framework of Asian trade. Chandernagore (present Chandannagar in West Bengal) was one such settlement of the French which rose into prominence during the early eighteenth century. Jesuit missionaries came to Chandernagore towards the fag end of the seventeenth century and immediately started to feature in the daily lives of this newly emergent urban centre in the Coromandel Coast. Although the relationship between the French Company officials and Jesuit Missionaries was sometimes topsy-turvy, the latter was finally protected by the former. The spread of the Christian faith was the most important plan of the Jesuits in Chandernagore, but their activities had a scientific discussion about them also, being the first European men of learning in India. French Jesuits even got associated with the astronomical pursuits of Raja Jai Singh Sawai of Jaipur and the astronomical as well as geographical data that they gathered during their journey from Chandernagore to Jaipur and return remained as valuable source of information from the colonial point of view.*

**Key Words:** Jesuit, Missionary, French, Chandernagore, Trade, Science

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### **Introduction**

With the arrival of the Europeans, many coastal and inland villages of India like Madras, Pondicherry on the Coromandel Coast and Calcutta, Chinsurah and Chandernagore in Bengal, had emerged as urban centres of varying importance by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In spite of local differences, all these new coastal and riverine towns possessed certain features in common. Each continued the Portuguese tradition of combining port, fort and factory. Secondly, each had its 'international' crowd, it neat and well-planned 'white' town quite clearly demarcated from its native or 'black' counterpart. Lastly, all seemed to owe their prosperity primarily to their skill to develop themselves into centres of Asian trade. But the obvious common feature of all these settlements was the presence of the Christian Missionaries. Speaking on the 'international' character of the crowd at the port-towns, whose fortunes were tied up with the Asian trade, it has been observed:

...the Ganges is the source and centre of India's trade. Here one seems the assembly of nations of Europe and Asia who differ so strongly in their

spirit, their manners and customs, agreeing perfectly with one another or falling apart according to the interest, this being their sole guide.<sup>1</sup>

It can be said in this context that unlike the European merchants or soldiers, the missionaries were the first European representatives who tried to understand the spirit of India, its manners and customs, its outlook towards life. While the soldiers and merchants had their job assigned, the objective of the missionaries was majorly different in this part of the world. They also had a purpose. But in order to fulfil that purpose they needed to mix with the common people while maintaining their link with the European trading companies. In short, the missionaries often bridged the gap between the commoners and the European traders.

Colonial geographers avidly scanned the thirty-four Jesuit volumes *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses* (i.e. a collection of letters from Jesuit Missionaries, translated to be 'Edifying and Curious Letters') Interestingly, an abridged translation in two volumes was edited in London in 1743 by John Lockman entitled, *Travels of the Jesuits into Various Parts of the World*. He deleted accounts of conversions and miracles. A fresh edition was published in Paris between 1780 and 1783 in twenty-six volumes by Ouerbocuft, who conveniently arranged the letters in geographical order. Volumes ten to fifteen give information about India. The works and activities of the French Missionaries are largely reflected in this compilation.

### **Chandernagore: Early Days**

Chandernagore did not play any important role in Asian trade down to the 1720s. The town, however, had grown from its original nucleus of 61 *bighas* of land, bought in the village of Borokishanpur by M. Deslandes. It included two villages, Borokishanpur and Chaknasirabad, acquired over the years in bits and pieces from local Zamindars under the names of obliging Bengali associates such as Jagannath Prasad Chaudhuri and Rajaram Chaudhuri. Dupleix himself would soon secure a third, Gondalpara, from its owner Hussain Chellaby, a renowned merchant of Surat.<sup>2</sup> However, the French East India Company legally got the ownership title of Chandernagore in 1693 and the fortification was completed by 1698. The next phase of expansion of Chandernagore started during 1715 under the guidance of M. Hardencourt, the then Director of the French Company in Chandernagore and by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the French extended over to a wider area comprising the villages like Sabinara, Prasadpur, etc. Chevalier d' Albert, Captain of the 'Syrene' belonging to the FEIC, arrived in Chandernagore in 1725, noted the comfortable and well-built houses of the European quarter; most of its streets, 'perfectly straight', were arranged in neat rows and planted with lovely trees; apartments in the forts were large and comfortable.<sup>3</sup> His description leaves the impression of a fairly big town with inhabitants consisted of 18 thousand to 20 thousand Hindus of 52 castes with their 'ugly' temples and 500 Europeans, while Armenians, Muslims and 'Metis' accounted for another 400. Life in the White town, however, was not gay and the rain was continuous. Again, Castonnet de Fosses describes Chandernagore in the pre-Dupleix period as almost "an isolated oasis, without life, stirred only by a caravan. Calmness reigned over the little European colony for the rest of the year."<sup>4</sup> So it can be assumed from the above narrations that Chandernagore was a calm and quiet European town acting as a centre for the trade stations at places like Kassimbazar, Jaugdia etc. and providing as well a perfect place for the Jesuits to carry forward their activities.

## Jesuits in Chandernagore

As early as 1694, two French Jesuits, Father Duchatz and Father Debeszes,<sup>5</sup> had come to Chandernagore after the failure of a scientific expedition to Siam (now Thailand). Duchatz died soon after, in 1696, but in a short time, another Jesuit F.H. Dolu, arrived in Pondicherry. On 10 April 1696 the priest, Dolu, was appointed official chaplain of the town by the Bishop of Mylapore.<sup>6</sup> In 1698, four more Jesuits, led by G. Tachard, landed in Chandernagore. Tachard soon opened a school for the French and Portuguese children. One of the important subjects of the curriculum taught in the school was navigated training to deal with the tortuous Hooghly River.

By the beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholics of Chandernagore were served by Jesuits working in two churches or rather chapels and a school. An adjacent *ashranm* (hospice) was also there. Since these chapels were small and still unofficial places of worship, the people asked Bishop Laynes, on his visit to Chandernagore in 1714, to allow them to build a real church.<sup>7</sup> The church was finished ten years later and dedicated to be named Sabina. Father Barbier, who accompanied Bishop Laynes during his visit to Chandernagore, mentioned in a report dated 4 January 1718 three types of Catholics in Chandernagore i.e. i) European merchants and officials attached to the fort ii) Mercenaries and iii) Converted Indian Christians.<sup>8</sup>

By 1719-20, the French Jesuits were legally recognised by the French Company authorities and became the official clergy of Chandernagore. During these years, the town was one of the several French settlements which were incorporated into the newly formed Compagnie des Indes. In 1725, it could boast of some 1600 Catholics.<sup>9</sup> In 1753, the Catholic population had risen to 4,000 among a total population of two to three lakhs.<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note here that among them many were Bengali Catholics, who had joined the church voluntarily, as is shown by the strong resentment of the local Brahmins at this change of religion.<sup>11</sup> Though there were instances of Hindu Kings inviting the Christians to join their armed forces, there were also instances of Hindu-Christian encounters, like one happened in Chandernagore when the Brahmins there rose against the conversion of the Hindus to the Christianity.<sup>12</sup> However, the contemporary Hindu society where the caste-system was in full swing did not have much respect for the lower class, only facilitating the process of the conversion to Christianity.

During 1726-29, the Jesuit house was rebuilt on a large scale.<sup>13</sup> Jesuit influence was increasing steadily over this period. Fr. Charles de Montalembert, a great friend of the factor, M. d'Hardencourt, and himself a scion of an illustrious French family who served as the Vicar of Chandernagore for twelve years (1715-1727), is an illustration of this fact. However, the Jesuits in Chandernagore had a strange kind of relationship with the French authority in Chandernagore, often overcharged with ambition and competition. In 1730, the latent conflict between the Jesuits and the French officials came out in the open.<sup>14</sup> The officials found fault with the Jesuits on several counts, but especially, because they allegedly neglected the French people. The dispute was settled on 11 February 1733 with an agreement, consisted of 26 articles, between the two parties which was confirmed and revised two years later.<sup>15</sup> It was decided by the agreement that the Jesuit Vicar of Chandernagore was to be appointed by the authorities of the French Company. St. Louis Church was to be the only Parish Church, and the Church of Our Lady of the Angels was to be a quasi-Parish. Actually, St. Louis served the French and their Indian employees,

while the other Church served the Indian Catholics. The appointment of Charles de Montalembert in 1738 as Vicar for the second time did much to ease the local tension.

But financially the Jesuit of Chandernagore enjoyed a privileged position. Like the Anglicans in Calcutta, they were salaried chaplains. The stipend began with Rupees 100/- a year, which was doubled in 1709, doubled again in 1720, rose to rupees 500/- in 1727, and reached the maximum of 100 French pounds.<sup>16</sup> According to the Article V of the agreement of 11 February 1753, 800 French pounds were allotted to the Jesuit priest in charge of the French congregation, and 400 to his confrere who served the Bengali Catholics.<sup>17</sup> The Jesuits also had a fund of Rupees 1667/- invested in the French Company. In 1712, this fund yielded rupees 200/- per year and was used to maintain the Jesuit House. The Parish lived on Rupees 400/- per annum.<sup>18</sup>

The suppression of Jesuits in France in 1764 did not directly affect those working in India, but it cut off the supply of fresh manpower and financial support. When the universal suppression took place in 1773, following the Papal decree, the problem of replacement became acute. By that time there were four Jesuits in Chandernagore, three priests and Brother Francis Broquet, the director of the school.<sup>19</sup> The Jesuits in Chandernagore preferred to give away to the French Capuchins who took over the Parish and school on 3 July 1788. The Jesuits left Chandernagore on 20 December of the same year.<sup>20</sup>

The spread of the Christian faith was the most important plan of the Jesuits in Chandernagore. But their activities had a scientific discussion about them also, being the first European men of learning in India. The French who was the last of the Europeans to arrive in India acted as patrons of to the French Jesuits. The contribution of the French Jesuits of Chandernagore was both literary and scientific.

### **French Jesuits: Cognitive Aspect**

Jean Francois Pons (1698-1752), who came to Chandernagore in the early 30s of the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, was an astronomer, a geographer, a canonist and a Sanskritist rolled into one. As early as 1734 he mastered the Sanskrit language and has composed one of the first Sanskrit grammars. In 1739, he sent to Paris an abridgement of a Latin-Sanskrit Grammar with Sanskrit words in Bengali. Twenty-two Sanskrit manuscripts, kept today in Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, were sent by Father Pons from Chandernagore in the same decade. In 1740, after his going to Karikal, he wrote Fr. Du Halde in Paris a long letter dealing with the various branches of Sanskrit literature, the four *Vedas*, the grammatical works etc. There were also references to translations of the Sanskrit and Bengali works, like *Manusamhita*, *Bhagavad Purana*, *Chandimangal Kavya* etc into the French language.

In Chandernagore the Jesuits made many geographical and regular astronomical observations and calculations. In Chandernagore Fr. Martin for the first time in 1698 calculated the various positions of sun.<sup>21</sup> Another noted astronomer, Fr. Claude Stanislaus Boudier (1686-1757) left France for Chandernagore in 1718. His chance to traverse to North India came about as a result of astronomical pursuits of Raja Jai Singh Sawai of Jaipur, who wanted the Jesuit to visit him for scientific contributions. Accordingly, Boudier and another Jesuit, Fr. Pons, set out from Chandernagore on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1734. On their arrival, they seem unfortunately to have wasted much time in disputing with the local Brahmins as to the extent to which Indian astronomy was indebted to the ancient Greeks. The two

Jesuits worked at Jaipur during August and September, 1734 and returned to Chandernagore about a year later.<sup>22</sup>

The Jesuit mission was no doubt a failure from Jai Singh Sawal's point of view. But seen from the colonial angle it was a huge success. During his journeys to and fro, Boudier fixed the longitude and latitude of many important places, and kept a survey of his route between Agra and Allahabad. His memoir gives the description of places on this road (between Agra and Bengal) - with the computed distance of the each from the course of the Gernne (Jamuna) and the Ganges. In later years the British had to depend on Boudier for his 1774 general map of Bengal.<sup>23</sup> There were also Fr. Nicholas Possevin (1748-77) and Fr. Joseph Tiffenthaler who worked for the enhancement of the geographical knowledge of Bengal.

The Jesuits in Chandernagore also provided information on trade material, crafts and craftsmen, local physicians, medicines and on sanitary conditions. It should not be forgotten that during the first two decades of the 18th century, eight Jesuits died in Bengal within twelve years.<sup>24</sup> The Jesuits, learning from their early experience, established a big hospital (Hospital Nationale) in Chandernagore in 1753. The hospital had the accommodation capacity for three hundred patients.<sup>25</sup> They also established an orphanage in the same year in Chandernagore where about 105 Indian girl-children were accommodated. They were given teaching in religion.

Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century there has been a debate regarding the origin and authorship of a work, known as, *Ezour Vedam*.<sup>26</sup> However, it is unanimously agreed that the work is written in imitation of the Hindu sacred books to show that the Christian faith fulfils the best teaching of the *Vedas*. E. R. Hamby is of opinion that it might be written in Bengal, perhaps at Chandernagore, by a clever Bengali catechist, possibly under the inspiration of a French Jesuit. In the light of the above discussion, we realise that the missionaries tried in many ways to understand the nature of India and its people. It is of no doubt that their foremost ideal was the spread and propagation of Christianity. However, it can be assumed that in the process of their understanding India, they probably tried to trace the loopholes of the Indian society or to identify the gray areas prevailing in the country's political, economic and religious infrastructure, so that they could initiate the propagation of Christianity as a faith or a way of living, a 'better' option from every respect.

In Chandernagore, during the period under review, the Hindus were the majority and the prevailing social order of the Hindus was divided into castes vertically. So far as the prevailing system was concerned the Brahmins used to determine or prescribe certain rituals to be performed by the other sections of the h society for their wellbeing. For example, the Brahmin used to suggest to the farmer, the ideal time for sowing the seeds calculating the time for eclipse, warn the people of the society to perform certain rituals to avoid any type of evil consequence. In this way, the Brahmins used to enjoy a revered position in the society, mostly not out of true reverence shown to them, but by their frightening of non-Brahmin section of the society.

## Conclusion

It is interesting to note here that the Jesuit missionaries in Chandernagore, like other parts of India, were mainly involved in inquiring about astronomical and geographical features of the country. It might be that they tried to acquire that particular knowledge to make an end to the Brahmin domination over the society. They, in many cases, began to guide the

illiterate section of the society to the right path leading to the gradual increasing acceptance of the Jesuits to the Hindu society. However, one thing should be noted in this context. The works of the Jesuits, so far as the translation works and geographical and astronomical researches were concerned, undoubtedly helped the eastern ideas and ideals to be transmitted to the West, which, with the course of the time, led to the emergence of Oriental Studies and researches in the Occident.

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<sup>1</sup> Roy, Indrani. (1974). 'Dupleix's Private Trade in Chandernagore', *Indian Historical Review*, No. 1, p. 280.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p. 283.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p. 279.

<sup>5</sup> Hambye, E.R. S.J. (1997). *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. III, Dharmaram Publications, p. 456.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p. 457

<sup>8</sup> D'Costa, Jerome. (1986). *Bangladesher Kathlik Mandali*, Vol I, Pratibeshi Prakashani, p. 222.

<sup>9</sup> Hambye, E.R. S.J. *op. cit.*, p. 457.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p. 474

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p. 458

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p. 476

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p. 460

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p. 348

<sup>22</sup> Kochhar, R.K. (1994). 'Secondary Tools of Empire: Jesuit Men in Science' in Teotonio R. de Souza (ed.) *Discoveries, Missionary Expansion and Asian Cultures*, Concept Publishing Company, pp. 175-179.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Hambye, E.R. S.J. *op. cit.*, p. 477.

<sup>25</sup> Seth, Harihar. (1950). *Sankhipta Chandannagar Porichoy*, (A Brief Introduction to Chandannagar), Chandannagar Municipality, pp. 18-19.

<sup>26</sup> Hambye, E.R. S.J., *op. cit.*, p. 477.