

Republican Citizenship in French Colonial Pondicherry, 1870–1914

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Republican citizenship in Pondicherry is a gripping subject. The story features unexpected twists, complicated individuals and complex not-quite-citizens, some ardently desiring to be more French, others wishing to be less so, all fighting it out at the ballot box. Anne Raffin's new book *Republican Citizenship in French Colonial Pondicherry, 1870–1914*, for its use of little-explored papers in the Pondicherry branch of the Indian National Archives, is a welcome addition to scholarship in the field. These papers, particularly a little-studied collection of petitions against electoral fraud, promise to reveal the vital social life of French citizenship in Pondicherry, and what happened in practice when French ideals met the society, culture and political context of a nineteenth-century Tamil trading post.

There are insights in Raffin's chapters which add rich detail to the story of Chanemougam, the traditionalist Hindu leader who overturned official French efforts to manage its newly founded colonial democracy under the Third Republic. Having extended suffrage to the Indian (male) population in 1870, the colonial state created separate electoral colleges for Europeans and Indians in an effort to ensure that Indian preferences did not hold sway. Chanemougam opposed French interference in Indian society, most notably colonial efforts to improve the social condition of outcastes. Chanemougam is depicted in existing sources as man who came to power only by abusing the electoral system, winning his elections through manipulation, deceit and violence.

Raffin's work reminds us that Chanemougam was a villain only in the eyes of the (republican) colonialists who opposed him. Politically ambitious French settlers used dubious means themselves to garner votes. They supported highly conservative and caste-based Indian causes, misaligned as these were to the French republican project, because such means could propel them to power. Deputy Alype reinstated the controversial practice of firewalking (banned in 1861) to guarantee him enough Hindu support to win the 1879 election, while from 1890 electoral hopefuls Gallois-Montbrun and Gaebelé courted Sadassiva, leader of the upwardly mobile Vannia caste, to secure their own bloc of votes.

If local values could be co-opted for French ends, so too could French policies for local ends. In a fascinating section of the book, Raffin shows that the strict Hindu Chanemougam became an eager advocate of the French secularization of education. Despite his zeal in guarding Hinduism against colonial innovations, when the French colonial state took power away from the Catholic orders, which ran most existing schools, he recognized how effectively and conveniently the state's secularist policy hindered both the expansion of French-medium teaching and the education and advancement of outcastes.

Republican Citizenship, to its credit, conveys a sense of important developments taking place in France, without falling prey to the assumption that policy was handed directly from metropole to colony. Compulsory primary education for children in the metropole, it is made clear in Chapter 4, was itself only instituted in the first years of the Third Republic. Its adoption in the metropole was being worked out even as it was meeting obstacles (caste prejudice, lack of will and finance) in Pondicherry. The Third Republic itself, moreover, rose out of military defeat in Europe. The renewal of republican ideals was accompanied by a sense of injured national pride, embodied by the loss of Alsace-Lorraine after the Franco-Prussian War, driving a renewed French determination to extend its power overseas.

The open wound of Alsace-Lorraine festered right at the heart of Pondicherry's local politics. As Raffin points out, two of the most powerful families at the forefront of French commercial and political life in Pondicherry came to French India in flight from Alsace-Lorraine.

The co-existence of these odd bedfellows – republicanism and heightened colonial fervour – seems to be at the heart of an overall argument about colonial citizenship. The lack of a sustained argument on these issues, however, is a serious shortcoming of the book. The stated aim of the book is to evaluate the extent to which republican ideals were realized in French colonial Pondicherry (p. 14). However, weaknesses in presentation and analysis – of otherwise rich and fascinating material – mean that the analysis in each chapter does not build towards a convincing or rewarding overarching argument.

The three opening chapters are poorly organized and repetitive. Anyone not already familiar with the strangeness of nineteenth-century French India would find it difficult to establish the context for any argument to follow.

Two central chapters draw on primary sources. Chapter 4 (“Education and the Army”) examines in its first half the obstacles faced when (French-medium) universal primary education was extended to Pondicherry. The definition of citizenship is expanded here beyond the rights and obligations set out in revolutionary principles to cover social inclusion and equal access. It is questionable whether this expanded definition is useful in this context. Raffin refers to British sociologist Marshall's (1950) notion of “social citizenship,” which he conceived of post-World War Two to hold to account the nascent British welfare state. Yet within the time frame of Raffin's book, public education was in its very infancy in France itself, and the notion of “inclusion” far in the future. Moreover, colonial education was extended elsewhere without being linked to citizenship (e.g. in Indochina). The extent of educational inclusion, likewise the overall “extent to which Republican ideals were realized” (p. 14) seems less relevant than the entangled questions of what was at stake – for all players concerned – in extending the rights, or only some of the rights, of citizens to the people of French India.

The assumption runs throughout the book that Pondicherry's males were French citizens because they had the vote (and because they were often termed “French nationals”). Yet their status was much more ambiguous. This was because when France eagerly set out to extend French citizenship to its colonized peoples, it was unable to subject those in its possessions in India to the French Civil Code. France had previously guaranteed that it would not intervene to alter Indian “habits and customs,” and it was hesitant to break this prior agreement for fear of social unrest. This meant that while French Indians were voters, they were not quite citizens.

The uncertain legal status of the people of French India was challenged by a rival of Chanemougam. Ponnoutamby (later known as Paul Laporte), and a group of elite, French-educated Catholics, claimed to be seeking equality with their French colonizers, as well as discarding distinctions between all Indians, casted and uncasted. While France respected their local personal laws, Laporte argued that nothing prevented them from renouncing these “habits and customs.” They had every right to voluntarily embrace the French Civil Code, and in doing so they could then claim to be full and proper French citizens with all the rights this entailed. Raffin covers the broad outlines of this “renunciation movement.” However, it is unfortunate though that she does not give it greater consideration, given that the phenomenon of renunciation is vital to understanding what was at stake in making Frenchman – or not – out of the people of Pondicherry.

The book's sidestepping of debates over whether renouncers were citizens leads to problems in the latter section of Chapter 4, on the introduction of French military service in the colony. An 1815 treaty with Britain barring France from keeping troops on its territory in India further distanced Indian voters from a strong claim to citizenship; they were unable (had they wanted to) to fulfil the French citizen's “blood debt” by serving in the military. Young men from Pondicherry finally began to be recruited to serve in the French army circa 1908 when they were called up to Saigon to avoid the bothersome treaty with Britain. Unless they had renounced, Pondicherry's voters were not required to serve in the army because renouncers by that time were legally recognized as citizens and the others were not. The chapter discusses the perils of the *kala pani*, the Hindu hesitation to cross the sea for fear of ritual pollution, as the force that held would-be Indian soldiers back from reaching

Saigon. In fact, a great many French Indian recruits were called up directly from Saigon as they were the offspring of renouncers who had already lived there for many decades.

Chapter 5 (“The Art of Petitioning in a Colonial Setting”) explores the many complaints about electoral misbehaviour. A rich set of primary sources gives us some sense of where the interests of social groups opposed to each other could in some circumstances align. A focus on fewer representative cases would have helped here to pick out patterns and give structure and direction to some very complex primary material. It might have allowed readers to better understand the internal workings of Chanemougam’s electoral machine, and why it came to an end so abruptly in 1908.

The final chapter (Chapter 6, “From Electoral Politics to Expansion of Rights and National Independence”) aims to draw on the findings and analysis of the previous chapters to “reflect on the larger purpose of the study.” The preceding chapters’ lack of analytic focus makes that task a difficult one. Given the struggle in this section to pull the purpose of the study into sharp focus, the addition of a section on the legacies of colonial citizenship in Pondicherry adds little to the discussion. Finally, the book has been carelessly edited. To cite but one example from this final chapter, reference is made on to a petition penned by “Ponnountamby [sic] and Laporte, the leaders of the renouncers” (p. 194). This is worrying given the fact that Ponnoutamby and Laporte have been one and the same person through the previous chapters. We can only hope Amsterdam University Press is taking note.

Scholars with an interest in French colonization and in the history of citizenship more broadly, will come to appreciate the vibrant complexity of nineteenth-century Pondicherry through this new book, though they may wish to refer to earlier publications to better establish a context within which to set the book’s findings.

Reference

Marshall, Thomas Humphrey (1950). *Citizenship and Social Class: And Other Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Iran’s experiment with parliamentary governance: The second Majles, 1909–1911

By Mangol Bayat. Syracuse University Press, 2020. p. 520 pages. Hardback, \$85.00, ISBN: 9780815636762. Paperback, \$45.00s, ISBN: 9780815636861.

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The Iranian Constitutional Revolution was inspired by and took place among several other democratic movements, including the 1905 Revolution in Russia, the Egyptian struggle for independence from Britain (from 1906 onward), Finland’s struggle for autonomy from Russia, Indian nationalist campaigns, the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, the Mexican Revolution of 1910–11, and the Chinese Republican Revolution of 1911–12 (Bonakdarian 2010, p. 291). One main objective shaped the Iranian Revolution of 1906–1911: “Iran for all Iranians.” The period immediately after Mozaffar al-Din Shah’s order of the Constitution in 1906 began with promise. The new shah, Mohammad