

## The Origins of a Public Voice for Marginalised Workers in French India, 1935-37'

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**Résumé :**

**English (or French) Title :** *De l'émergence d'une expression publique des travailleurs en Indochine, 1935-1937*

**Abstract :** This article examines how far indigenous communications contributed towards the origins of anti-colonialism in French India, as an empowering voice. They are seen as an example of a politicising move from private to public sphere via print communications. The years 1935-7 reveal a saga of severe economic exploitation, violence and political struggle - a trajectory of social conflict in the public sphere. Local archives, including print publications such as the workers' Tamil paper *Swandanthiram* are used as a prism for the analysis of a forgotten episode in the history of a neglected corner of French empire. This article traces the development of the workers' public voice and characterises this as a form of advocacy journalism, compatible with John Downing's categorisation of 'lateral' and 'vertical' campaigning in 'radical alternative' publications (1984; 2001,p.x). The way that the move from private to public spheres happened, it is argued, reflects the roots of anti-colonialism communication - at a time when the Left in France was more receptive to anti-fascism as a campaigning tool.

**Mots clefs :** Presse, manifestation, Subbiah, grève, Indochine, Pondicherry, censure, salaires, nationalisme, espace public

**Keywords:** Press; protest; Subbiah; textile strikes; freedom movement; French India; Pondicherry; newspaper censorship; low wages; nationalism, private and public sphere

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## Introduction

In 1935-37<sup>1</sup>, in the state and town of Pondicherry (the main centre of population of France's five Indian 'comptoirs' with a total population of c.800,000)<sup>2</sup>, the feelings of a disempowered and previously passive textile workforce were articulated publically for the first time on a significant scale. With no public voice due to lack of political organisation and basic civil liberties such as the legal right to strike or hold meetings, and with press censorship, the indigenous Tamil speaking population - including peasant women - nevertheless emerged for the first time from the private to the public sphere as an organised force. Using their own clandestine newspaper '*Swandanthiram*' (meaning 'freedom') and printing press as a vehicle for mobilisation and to cement community support, workers campaigned for a labour code that had been granted in mainland France during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Colonial neglect was by no means new – in 1906 Henrique-Duluc told his fellow deputies in Paris that workers did a 14 hour day on 'des salaires de famine' of 40-45 centimes per day for men, 25 for women and 5 for children - who were as young as 8 years old and working 11 hour days. (AAN - S.O., 1906, t.1, p.1215) Temperatures in the mills could rise to 47 degrees C, health regulations were non-existent and there was no attempt to provide ventilation, or to prevent dust. The first strike was in 1908 when the management of the largest mill- Rodier (also called 'the Anglo French Textile Co.')

conceded a rise of a half 'anna' (a few centimes) per day. Although British investors in this compagnie had been lured by the total absence of legislation controlling hours, pay and working conditions (Weber, 1996 : 333), two year later they were obliged to concede a 20% increase.<sup>3</sup> Again in 1924, all 3 mills – Gaebelé, Savana and Rodier - had responded to a strike by a lock-out of workers and sackings.

The nature of indigenous communications was directly connected to basic disempowerment and lack of civil, political and economic rights, despite the fact that the authorities systematically suppressed all formal attempts at protest – including those during 1936, the year of left wing victory in France. Whilst workers in mainland France were celebrating the formation of Blum's Socialist Popular Front, 130 armed troops in Pondicherry were ordered by the governor to occupy the biggest textile

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<sup>2</sup> Apart from Pondicherry, Anasse (1975:134) provides the following statistics for 1940: settlements covered 510 square kilometres, with a further 4 square kilometres and 2000 people spread across 12 enclaves or 'loges'. The main towns were Karikal (84,000 inhabitants), and Yanaon (6,800 inhabitants) on the Coromandel coast, Chandernagor – not far from Calcutta in Bengal with a population of 38,000 and, Mahe – on the Malabar coast (population 14,000). A large proportion of French Indians were Brahmin, with an important catholic minority and also a muslim minority, mainly in Karikal. Textile workers in and around Pondicherry were mainly untouchables. There were 4 indigenous languages, with Tamil predominating in Pondicherry and Karikal.

<sup>3</sup> Even in 1936, mill managers were earning 20 to 40,000 francs a month, whilst workers were receiving 20 to 60 francs a week. On 14 Feb 1923, Albert Londres wrote in *L'Impartial de Saigon* that in terms of economic reforms for the Hindus, the French had only introduced one tenth of the British effort, yet in Pondicherry life was 'idyllic' whereas in British India 'hate' prevailed (ANFOM:AFFPOL2871).

mill that had been taken over by strikers, leading to a battle referred to as 'Pondicherry Shooting Day' in which 12 died, and 20 were injured. Textile conflicts with mass picketing spanned a two year period (1935-37), involving 3 mills and ten thousand strikers.

The formation of legal worker organisations for the first time and a new political party provided the context in which activist leaders used print publications in order to promote their formative anti-colonial ideas. This symbiotic relationship between print communication and social movement, characterised by the use of advocacy journalism, has its theoretical roots in studies of Gramsci's hegemony (1971:12-13) and, more recently, counter-hegemony. Counter hegemony as a post-Gramsci concept was first developed - in terms of definitions of modernity - by structuralist philosophers such as Louis Althusser (1969), Theodor Adorno (trans. 1997 from 1970, (7)), subsequently critiqued by the post-structuralists Marshall Berman (1983), and Jacques Derrida (1992), and has been widely discussed within journalism history by scholars in relation to minority communication. The restrictions of mainstream (hegemonic) rule are usually reflected in the raw material that is selected by media communicators reporting on the system. Minority voices are cut out because of the choice of official sources, reflecting the outlook of the (colonial) organisation. This point about framing has provided the main focus for post colonial theory, focusing frequently on the decolonization of the Indian subcontinent by the British. In particular works by Edward Said (1978), Homi Bhabha (1983) and Spivak (1988, 1993) have stressed that subalterns are exclusively framed by colonial power. However, subaltern studies scholars have not looked at alternative communications historically. In media expression, the selectivity of sources referred to above allows alternative media to use a different set of sources and voices (Murdoch, 2000; Cottle 2000: 434-35). Hence the insider/outsider divide has prompted categorisation of attempts to challenge existing ideological frameworks. These have been labelled as 'counter-hegemonic' and are referred to by John Downing as 'radical alternative media' (2001, p.x).

Downing points out that, under certain circumstances, media will be in a 'binary' or 'either-or' situation when censorship is applied. He proposes four characteristics of radical advocacy 'rule-breaking' (here defiance of censorship and support of picketing), 'democratic methods' (that is, an organ that represents the views of a democratic voluntary organisation is usually run with a lack of editorial hierarchy amongst its writers), 'attacks from authority' (Pondicherry Shooting Day) and 'combined lateral and vertical purpose'. Although Downing does not deal with anti-colonial journalism, he nevertheless provides a useful general definition for the analysis of communications by disempowered people: 'radical alternative media generally serve two overriding purposes: (a) to express opposition vertically from subordinate quarters directly at the power structure and against its behaviour; (b) to build support, solidarity, and networking laterally against policies or even against the very survival of the power structure. In any given instance, both vertical and lateral purposes may be involved'. (Downing 2001: xi). This categorisation of vertical and lateral provides a framework for analysing communications in this case study.

## Context and Background

In 1935 use of the newly popularised word 'imperial' was so mistrusted in newspaper rhetoric because of its association with the challenge of Bolshevism, that the colonial ministry sent out an order to seize all copies of the Socialist paper *le Populaire* when they arrived at the ports of all France's overseas possessions: the offending article in the 29 August edition carried an article headed 'Contre le brigandage colonial' (ANFOM, FM:1AFFPOL/1386). This crude censorship order appeared, of course, in the Indian case against a backdrop of a dramatic acceleration in political consciousness and the spread of communist ideology, most notably in Bengal (with a small French settlement at nearby Chandernagor). Although censorship existed in both British and French India, French territory in India was mainly known to the British as a safe haven for escaping revolutionaries and exiled nationalists; their newspapers were secretly printed in Pondicherry when banned by the British (Barrier, 1974:36). This tradition of asylum for revolutionaries and their publications such as the Tamil *India* can be explained by France's anti-British feeling, plus the somewhat contradictory belief that she could not expel them without going against her own historic principles of liberty, equality and

fraternity. The longer term consequence was that revolutionary papers provided a heritage of dissent that the local nationalist movement was later to evoke. A. Ramasamy, in his history of Pondicherry, acknowledges that print publications played an important role in the dissemination of ideas, preparing the population for the 'fight', as well as a more obvious function of providing a means of communicating programmes and progress by the movement (1987:161).

Prior to 1935, the main press criticism of the system flowed from the pages of the satirical monthly *Sri Soudjanarandjani* that published in French and Tamil. In 1920 the paper vociferously denounced conditions in textile production after an illegal strike failed. Workers were doing a 12 hour day – although workers in Madras did no more than 10 hours and were paid more.<sup>4</sup> Although the newspaper also regularly published Tamil language nationalist poetry by Subramanya Bharati, whose writings became a symbol of cultural identity, it was not consistently anti-French: in 1930 it praised security forces for doing an 'impeccable' job (15 Nov.-15 Dec.). Other Tamil papers made a stand from time to time: the *Puduvai Morasu* argued for the abolition of the caste system and for the liberation of women, and *The Basumati* reported on textile strikes in Madras during 1927 (FM:1AFF-POL/332). As reverberations from British India escalated, so also did criticism of the French 'comptoirs', exemplified by the youth organisation's solidarity with Gandhi's civil disobedience campaign. As early as 1930, the governor had warned in reports to Paris that young people with some education but no jobs could become vulnerable to recruitment for anti-colonialism. (ANFOM:Inde/E15).

On the establishment side, publications with titles such as *Dupleix* regularly reflected a sense of history in their pages – but of a different kind. Originally Pondicherry had been occupied in 1674 by the French trading business *Compagnie des Indes orientales*. From 1742 to 1754 (during the time of *Dupleix*), French influence extended to almost two thirds of southern India, but by 1815 this had been reduced to a handful of mostly coastal trading settlements following half a century of fighting with the English. Thus the 'comptoirs' always represented a vestige of the 'first' French colonial empire – an 'empire manqué', or symbol of what could, or *should* have been.

As elsewhere, French territories were governed by institutional integration with mainland France, despite local hostility to the politics of assimilation. Republicans still hoped that cultural assimilation would follow. Instead, corruption and control of the electoral system by the higher castes were both well entrenched. In the governor's opinion the system of government entailed burdensome administration – making the possibility of reforms more remote. The territory had no proper sewage system, lacked water management and electricity, typhoid and cholera were endemic (ANFOM: Inde, E16/1934). The more vulnerable lower classes suffered from long term economic disempowerment and became politically alienated.

## Literature review and research methods

There has been some research on censored material and issues of press freedom (Barrier, 1974; Israel, 1994), but not of a local, ethnic press. In general, French colonial historians have tended to concentrate on Africa and Indo-China (Blanchard & Lemaire, 2003; Ezra, 2000; Chafer & Sackur, 1999, 2002), although the latter authors acknowledge that anti-colonial feelings originated during the period of France's Popular Front government 1936-8. However, there is no discrete research on the press within French territories, although the rise of a Tamil press and the growth of a communist press

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<sup>4</sup> The local economy was dependent on the British sector: contraband in precious stones and gold to British India was prevalent, and one of the best sources of income was the salt tax income from Britain. Employment centred around rice, textiles, rice, coconut, sesame oil and animal bone powder production, light engineering and Indian crafts. (Annanse, 1975:135). Surprisingly, French India's performance in volumes of trade compared favourably with many other empire territories. For comparative statistics on this aspect 1919-34, see Maestri, 1993: 225-6, 232. Expenditure was always equal to income.

more generally in India are both given some attention by scholars (Mazumdar, 1993; Murthy, 1966). Kate Marsh (2007) analyses representations in metropolitan France of French India, but only studies a small number of Parisian based newspapers, and she does not look at any local communications.

Those historians who have taken an interest in French India have mostly gravitated towards the period of de-colonisation from 1947 onwards (Pitoeff, 1991; Neogy, 1997; Chaffard, 1965; Decraene, 1994), whilst some concentrate on the fortunes of French citizens post independence (Miles, 1995; de Comarmond, 1985). Arthur Annasse (1975) and Jacques Weber (1996, 2002) have addressed the history of French India for the earlier period, but the latter does not emphasise economic and social factors as part of his thesis that the colonial system made the wrong decisions on institutional rather than cultural assimilation.

Yet the Pratibha Jain (1985) argument that the Mathatma's nationalism was a social and economic programme, rather than simply a political one is clearly relevant to French territories, where he gained much support (see later), and where ideology became linked to economics. Although there was no communist party in Pondicherry at this time, when it became established in 1943, the 1935-7 textile strikes were similarly evoked as the formative event in the movement's history. Georges Lieten (1982) has demonstrated that for the first time the communists played an active role in the large scale Bombay textile mills strike of 1928-9, but does not mention similar conflicts in Pondicherry in the 1930s.

Methodologically, it has been necessary to adopt qualitative analysis, because of the fragmented and disparate nature of surviving sources. Colonial archives have their limitations for the labour historian: whilst the plentiful reports and correspondence of the Governor and staff communications are preserved at the 'Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer' in Aix-en-Provence, these, as Confer suggests, are 'archives of sovereignty' (1969, 6, 1 :120-126), although police kept an enormous number of files on individual activists such as V. Subbiah, the strike leader who also wrote a memoir. In addition, the police translated every Tamil leaflet and publication, but only limited runs of newspapers have been preserved, mainly because of the difficulty for editors, faced with censorship and jail sentences, of maintaining publication given their low or non-existent budgets. The regional archives in Pondicherry hold the individual papers of some local politicians: in addition project researchers used Tamil pamphlets and books published by the AITUC in Pondicherry. According to AITUC, after *Swandanthiram* was distributed and read (sometimes aloud to groups of workers), it would then be destroyed before the authorities could seize it (interview AITUC 10th December 2009).

## Newspapers and protest

In 1933 Pondicherry young people grouped together to form a branch of Tamil Nadu Harijana Seva Sangh dedicated to the abolition of the caste system. Harijana Seva Sangh then invited the organisation's founder - Mahatma Gandhi- to visit. Ramasamy has correctly noted how visits from nationalist leaders raised spirits and encouraged the message of freedom (1987:160). In his 1934 speech to the crowds, the Mahatma invited resistance to the inequalities of the caste system, in the name of the French constitution's traditional revolutionary principles of 'liberté, égalité and fraternité'. Harijana Seva Sangh was the first organisation to take an interest in textile workers, who were mostly untouchables: evening classes were instigated and secret trade union branches were formed. By January 1935 these organised a work stoppage, with the support of Harijana Seva Sangh. Meanwhile V.S. Subbiah, who was a leading fundraiser for the organisation, and had started *Swandanthiram* as a monthly, re-launched it as a weekly in Pondicherry only. Previously it had also been sold in British India, but had been censored.

Lateral campaigning in Pondicherry is evidenced by the fact that from time to time during 1935-37 *Swandanthiram* contained French language articles as well as Tamil, or an entirely French version would appear, clearly targeting the 3 % of the territory's ruling elite in their own language in order to influence their policies. Similarly, trade union leaders wrote numerous letters of protest and telegrams, translated into French, to the governor and to the minister for the colonies – both representing vertical attempts to express opposition to the existing power structure. These same protests were

simultaneously conducted via lateral propaganda with *Swandanthiram* and leaflets in Tamil explaining the overtures that were being made by leaders on behalf of the local working class.

The conflict escalated into a general textile strike in 1936- coinciding with similar ones in mainland France and with the same worker demands: 8 hour day, collective agreements, wage increases, paid holidays. In France such reforms were encapsulated into the Matignon Agreements in the wake of the coalition Socialist, Communist and Radical parties' Popular Front electoral victory. The same principles were agreed in Pondicherry, but with one exception: workers also demanded a liberty that they had never had – the right to form trades unions. It was refused. Successive French governors took the view that trade unionism was an Anglo-Saxon import, prematurely imposed on a previously passive workforce, who were unprepared for it. Strike leaders, however, were convinced that a Socialist government would eventually cede this basic right (FM:1AFFPOL/709).

How far was this agitation recognised in the French press? There was no tradition of working class leadership in Pondicherry, so local organisers needed help – but instead of decrying colonial abuses, *l'Humanité* was beginning to turn the spotlight on Hitler. Although the pages of the CPF organ were full of attacks on colonialism in the early 1930s, right wing riots in Paris in 1934 provided a wake-up call to the dangers of fascism and its threat to bolshevism. Thus by the end of the decade, fighting the fascists became the main tactical priority worldwide. Equally, France's ruling socialists (S.F.I.O.) seemed to be indifferent to such events. This can be explained by splits in the party at the time, with the faction that supported the colonial idea interpreting self-determination in a very limited way, and gradually imposing its support for political and cultural assimilation. In the face of Communist propaganda, the S.F.I.O. had moved to the right.

The policy agendas of the SFIO and the PCF help to explain why, when Subbiah and a French speaking colleague travelled by boat and train from Pondicherry to Paris to gain support for their call for the introduction of a labour code, sympathetic French journalists could not believe their ears, commenting that their stories were too fantastic to be credible. Interestingly, it was the British consul who reported this to his French equivalent, based on evidence from the English security services who had intercepted correspondence (FM: 1AFFPOL /2888).

## Pickets, massacre and public outcry

Despite the fact that picketing was also illegal, the tactic became well organised, as Subbiah explains: 'Women workers were posted from the mill gates extending to the working class villages. When the blacklegs were taken to the mills, women volunteers approached them and persuaded them not to betray and disrupt the strike. Some of the women volunteers were armed with broom sticks, raised up as a symbol of their protest...' (Subbiah 1991:64-5). This was the beginning of female politicisation, that by 1947 culminated in 10,000 people attending the first ever women's conference, held at Pondicherry's sports ground and reported exclusively in *Swandandiram*, by this time the organ of the communist party.

Workers occupied the Rodier mills in July 1936, and on 30th of that month a tragedy took place that became known as 'Pondicherry Shooting Day', enabling *Swandandiram* to campaign and report with extra purpose. The mill owners<sup>5</sup> made an official request to the governor via the UK ambassador for protection from troops and to secure the release of the British management who were effectively locked in their bungalows on the site. On- site negotiations soon gave way to a bloody pitched battle between armed troops and strikers, who threw stones from the rooftops, set fire to parts of the site and

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<sup>5</sup> In *Swandanthiram*, Chinntambi reports how police tried all sorts of tricks to persuade the workers to leave the mill. They told Raja Manickam's mother-in-law that she should go and tell him to come home because his wife was ill. When he got home he found his wife in perfect health (AITUC 2009).

used pieces of equipment as weapons. The strikers were gunned down. The tragedy has lived long in the memory of organised labour in Pondicherry and is commemorated annually on 15th August.

In Paris the siege was condemned by the colonial minister as symptomatic of the indifference of the authorities that had driven workers, in desperation, to insurrection. The government responded by sending Senator Justin Godart to conduct an enquiry into social and industrial conditions, with a view to extending France's new social legislation to the territories. 6000 people turned out to greet him at the port when he arrived to carry out his enquiry. After receiving representations from all quarters, he concluded in his report to Paris that the colony had been allowed to 'stagnate' for too long, despite genuine interest in politics and loyalty to France. People wanted more schools and the abolition of all mention of caste within the administrative and judicial system (FM: 1AFFPOL/716/3).

Meanwhile Swandanthiram reported how, faced with a French ban on public meetings, Subbiah marched 5000 workers 6 miles into British territory to hold a rally (Subbiah, 1971). Further agitation eventually led to the introduction of a labour decree on 6 April 1937 – this time including the right to trade union recognition as well as age controls on employment of children, reforms for female workers such as maternity allowance and the abolition of night work, holiday rights, wage increases and a reduction in the working day to 9 hours, to be further reduced to 8 by 1st January 1938.

When demands for independence started to emerge in local newspapers, the colonial authorities ignored them (Michalon, 1993: 24), although the Paris based *Le Courier Colonial* (4 June, 1937) warned that propaganda and malicious rumours from abroad about independence were circulating in all of the colonies, especially North Africa. These the article claimed, were the main reasons for disorders such as strikes. Thus unrest in Pondicherry was blamed on troublemakers (FM:1AFFPOL/2888).<sup>6</sup>

In fact, the extent of politicisation was far wider, evidenced by the fact that crowds lined up to welcome back their leader Subbiah on his return from France, where he had lobbied for a more speedy introduction of the new labour code. Swandanthiram carried a front page photo of this example of the emergence of the local population into the public sphere, whilst Subbiah recorded: 'I was back again in Pondicherry. Such was the distinctive change that I beheld among the people who were standing in an organised manner like a huge disciplined army. There were about 800 volunteers in white uniform with red bands around one arm and a red kerchief around their necks ... As I crossed Beach Road, I came across thousands of women workers standing in two parallel rows in an orderly manner. The more I advanced towards the town, I caught sight of milling crowds as if the whole of Pondicherry territory was mobilised. What did it show? ...the unprecedented resurgence of the people following a significant victory ... which had encouraged the will and determination ...for national emancipation from the colonial yoke.' (1991 :137)

The governor took the view that the labour code was 'prematurely imposed on an illiterate, credulous and impulsive population' (FM:1AFFPOL/ 709) and later called for it to be revoked. In the meantime, Rodier management were granted a license to hold fire arms on the mill site, and their general manager admitted to carrying a gun and killing one of the workers. After vertical representations from the workers to the Minister of the Colonies, further reports on the matter circulated between Paris and the colony. Meanwhile the new trade union branch mushroomed to 3000 members- the biggest in Pondicherry (FM:1AFFOL/2888).

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<sup>6</sup> Rodier mill manager, Mr.Marsland referred to trade union organisers as the 'budmarch' element that needed to be eliminated, whereas the governor suggested that union secretary Doressamy could be bought off by an offer of 15 rupees a month as a wage.

## Launch of a new party and effects on public communications

For many years the Gaebelé party, run by the ruling textile business dynasty of the same name, had run Pondicherry politics (Weber, 1996:329), but from 1928 this monopoly was broken by the Franco – Indian Party. According to the governor, this change in political control represented the first sign of the birth of nationalism, although it was not yet directed against French rule (ANFOM, Inde /E15). However, as the Franco-Indian Party supported the colonial system, the catalyst for change was actually the formation of a new political party by Subbiah and others. ‘Mahajana Sabha’ became the first party to campaign for freedom and was formed just in time for elections in May and October 1937, following Congress electoral victories in Madras. By now the English language dailies in British India were supporting labour rights for their French neighbours.

Vertical and lateral purposes of the nascent anti-colonial movement were further enhanced now that leadership of workers’ political and industrial organisations had become virtually interchangeable. In between the two election dates – May and October – the spotlight returned to lateral campaigning in the textile industry. Rodier management refused to recognise the new trade union and a further strike erupted. Workers’ leaders then reacted vertically by calling in the International Labour Office (ILO) in Geneva to settle the dispute, for a labour code had been agreed and specified by legislation, then ignored by the biggest employer.

Characteristically, in Pondicherry and outlying villages industrial violence was followed by political violence. Mahajana Sabha demanded free and fair elections with equal rights for Indians and whites and a single unified electoral list, but the controlling Franco-India Party, led by mayor M. David, resorted to strong arm street gang tactics to retain support in the face of this new challenge to their power. As Subbiah said, ‘Only Frenchmen and the privileged few had 50 per cent of our state and they dominated power in all these so-called democratic institutions. Therefore we demanded suffrage to all people over 21, including women’ (Subbiah, 1971). The system that he referred to consisted of 2 lists for the 2 Chamber of Deputies representatives in Paris: one chosen by the 1400 French nationals in the area, one by the several hundred thousand indigenous voters. This same franchise ratio existed for local representation.

In Swandanthiram (15 April, 1938) the defeated Mahajana Sabha Party accused the police and administration of collusion with the ruling Franco-Indian party in the systematic organisation of ‘banditism’: these complaints were repeated in letters and telegrams to the minister. In 1937 and in 1938, Swandanthiram was banned once more, despite protests to the colonial minister by Marie Savéry, Mahajana Sabha president (FM:1AFFPOL, 709). The paper’s Samudra printing works was also raided by the police and in 1939 their Liberty Press was also targeted. The paper was normally sold by activists on street corners and in villages, but these people were also attacked by pro-French gangs.<sup>7</sup>

Mahajana Sabha Party retaliated with their own gang pressure to force the resignation of Franco-Indian party municipal councillors so that their own representatives could replace them (FM:1AFFPOL/ 2888). Yet significantly and for the first time the real issue was not who took total control of the system, but rather whether people wanted a French India or an Indian India (Weber, 1996:335). Governor Crocicchia’s view was that hitherto the Tamil bourgeoisie had succeeded perfectly well in using the system to their own advantage, so there was no need for change, yet he intervened in the election in support of the Franco-Indian Party by persuading a retired friend of Henri Gaebelé – the venerable Selvaradjalu Chettiar - to return to the fray and re-assume leadership. This tactic was backed up by a further ban on public meetings. (FM:1AFFPOL/709).

It is clear that the nationalist movement was able to benefit from the criticisms of corruption (Michalon, 1993: 246). Mahajana Sabha reacted to the machinations of the governor by adopting lateral mimicry and launching a ‘non-cooperation campaign’ in defense of the ideal of fair elections. As in British India they called for a boycott of the administration, legal system, police and taxes, and British - ruled nationalists gave them support. On 24 April 1938 the governor reported to the colonial

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<sup>7</sup> In 1948 *Swandanthiram* sellers were murdered (AITUC 2009).

minister that magistrates could not cope with the volume of 700-800 cases a month because of 'local agitation' (FM :1AFFPOL/709). The anti-colonialists saw it differently : whilst visiting France, Jawaharlal Nehru and Krishna Menon presented to ministers a dossier of 'brutal repression' in Pondicherry. According to the Anglo-Indian press, the diplomacy worked (Bombay Chronicle, 1st August, 1938). The governor was replaced : this was the third change of governor in two years.

## Press and public sphere

The potential for newspapers to act as a potent vehicle for democratic expression in the discourses of the public sphere has been an on-going theme throughout the history of communications, with landmark texts such as John Milton's *Areopagitica* (1644) still providing inspiration (Chapman & Nuttall, 2011). Equally, the use of censorship as a weapon motivated by fear on the part of authorities has usually formed part of the vicissitudes of publishing. Yet there are several aspects that make the French India example of 1935-37 distinctive. First, the severity of censorship; second, the gang violence and intimidation – sponsored and condoned by the authorities, according to activists; third, the seriousness of economic exploitation in textiles. All of these factors contributed towards a highly charged public sphere environment to which the workers' victory (by 1938) gave a further boost. This was reflected in public discourses, despite bans, by a frenzy of newspaper publishing in French and Tamil. Even establishment papers such as *Dessobagari* came out with huge blank areas and one single word appeared in the middle of large expanses of white blank space - 'censuré'. Swandanthiram had sections totally blacked out and was banned altogether for part of that year, whilst Subbiah went into hiding once again: gangs had set fire to his house and the homes of many other worker activists were also burned down. Subbiah had edited *Swandanthiram* for two years, but now J.T.A. Arul had to take over. In (vertical) correspondence to the minister in Paris, and in telegrams to Nehru, the newly formed 'Comité des Ouvriers de la France Inde' claimed in July 1938 that 10,000 workers had been forced to flee their homes because of gang violence and intimidation. Once more, workers were being laid off as the economic crisis once more took its toll (FM:1AFFPOL/2888).

In British India, communism was progressively banned by a number of decrees, but activists went underground in various ways (The Statesman, 13 June 1938). *Mahajana Sabha* was now referred to publically as 'the party of Congress' (Madras Mail 7 July 1938), and by the end of the year most of their leading members were locked up in the overcrowded Pondicherry jail. The French governor still adhered to the view that Subbiah had no mandate and had been opportunist in introducing trade unionism to a population who were not prepared for it. His reports also admit to the widespread acceptance of 'swaradjistes' methods such as the organisation of volunteers, committees and cells at commune level, and the wearing of khaddar and Gandhi caps. A workers' proposal for the nationalisation of *Modieliaupeth* mill was blamed on Nehru's ideological influence, whilst Subbiah's 'propagande' was seen as having nationalist appeal, construed as hostile to European influence and increasingly aligned with the Communist tendency of the Hindu Congress Party. In short, the governor was forced to admit that from 1936 to 1938 Pondicherry was 'un theatre de troubles' (FM:1AFFPOL/709). In reality, economic and political tensions that had manifested themselves sporadically since the early 20th century, largely due to European neglect, had finally transformed into full blown conflicts. The timing was such that they were fuelled by, and simultaneously gave rise to, nascent anti-colonial feeling, influenced by the situation in British India.

## Conclusions

From 1935 to 1937, and extending well beyond that date, press usage was connected to basic civil, political and economic rights. The rhetoric used on both sides of the argument via newspapers, reports, leaflets, telegrams and correspondence, points to certain ideological inconsistencies. Both sides evoked the 1789 mantra of 'liberté, égalité and fraternité'. Supporters of French colonial rule quoted the phrase in order to propagate political and cultural assimilation, arguing that French national sovereignty had been 'generously' granted to an ungrateful population who were now placing it in jeopardy (FM: 1AFFPOL/709). Yet even the British who had already granted trade union rights,

accused the French of social and economic neglect and of being ‘feudal’ and ‘reactionary’ (1AFF-POL /2888).

Anti-colonialists argued that France’s proud tradition should lead the country to grant local freedom and democracy to all the people. In their speeches and in their newspapers, workers’ leaders recounted their version of French revolutionary history as a means of demonstrating to their audiences that liberation was indeed possible. Yet in metropolitan France the Left were largely disinterested in Pondicherry’s sufferings, explained by ideological inconsistencies amongst the Socialists and changed priorities by the Communists.

The interaction of economic events such as strikes and the formation of legal worker organisations for the first time with political events such as the launch of a new political party, all enabled activist leaders to adopt a twofold vertical and lateral strategy to promote their formative anti-colonial ideas. At this stage the vertical strategy was to challenge authority in order to win self rule from France, and then afterwards to join with the rest of India as an independent state. The lateral purpose of propaganda was to convince the previously passive indigenous population of the need to gain basic civil and political rights such as a labour code, press freedom and equal political enfranchisement – all as a pre-requisite to freedom from colonial direct rule.

After almost ten years of economic crisis, insufficient work for young people with some education, exploited workers, impoverished peasants, small-holders and under paid local civil servants were all easy prey for political factions - who resorted to violence and corruption in the absence of fair democracy. However, even if social legislation had been introduced sooner, there was a certain inevitability that counter-hegemonic propaganda would still have thrived, because of the situation in British India. References to the support of Gandhi, Nehru and the Congress Party appear in both lateral and vertical communications, typically as evidence of the strength of campaigns for change. From these publications it is clear that the combination of economic and political neglect led the indigenous population to organise themselves – representing a move from private to public spheres. The textile general strikes and the formation of the Mahajana Sabha party created a synergy that was reflected in writings - both vertically to galvanise support amongst the ranks, and laterally to lobby for social and political change. These two tactics combined to act as a catalyst for the emergence of anti-colonialism.

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