

OFFICE OF *CHEF DE COURTIER* AND THE FRENCH EAST INDIA COMPANY: REVISITING COMMERCIAL RELATIONSHIP IN PONDICHERRY (1674-1761)

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ABSTRACT

Pondicherry was occupied by the French East India Company in 1674 and it developed as an important commercial center on the Indian Ocean Rim, which represented the French presence in India for centuries. In initial phase of their rule, they had established their relationship with the indigenous merchants of the region and appointed them as chef de courtier and chef de malabar. In traditional historiography, indigenous merchants have been represented as middlemen or intermediaries, who worked for the French East India Company. However, such description does not do justice to the interaction and the crucial roles played by indigenous merchants of the town that developed between the long-term resident merchants and the French East India Company in Pondicherry. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to address the various aspects of the indigenous merchants, such as their commercial activities, mutual ties, collective association, and their integration with the French officials and traders to show how the relations between indigenous merchants of Pondicherry and the French authority were negotiated and renegotiated continuously with some ruptures.

Keywords: *French East India Company, Pondicherry, Indigenous Merchants, commercial relationship, chef de courtier*

INTRODUCTION

Pondicherry has a centuries-long history of maritime and economic interaction with France and other distant countries as well as with local regional trading communities on the Indian Ocean rim. The commercial links between France and India were historically associated with a group or groups who affected them. They were indigenous merchants and intermediaries who facilitated and transacted trade and commerce under/with the French East India Company (henceforth the French Company). The French East India Company, along with other European traders, was not alone in the local/coastal market of early modern India, actively dependent on these indigenous merchants. Therefore, the main objective of the present study is to examine the commercial links/interaction between indigenous merchants, who were appointed as *chef de courtier* and the French East India Company at its important *comptoirs* Pondicherry. This study covers the period from the last quarter of seventeenth century, when the French Company established itself in Pondicherry in 1674 to 1761, roughly after 85 years, when English seized this place as a result of Anglo-French rivalry in the subcontinent.

SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on the historical methodologies of the study of archival source material. The list of sources for this study expands a wide range of primary and secondary material, of official and non-official nature, in French and English language. This study will use the sources produced by European as well as by the indigenous actors. Both sets of sources (produced by the French and the Indians) are extensive and unique.

The National Archives of India has contained microfilms of important documents, titled *Nouvelles Acquisitions Françaises*, *Bibliothèque Nationales*, *Département des manuscrits*, which have received from the French Archive. These documents are contained wide range of issues related with the French Company. Few of them proved to be important for the present study such as: “*Memoire on the French East India Company, (1642-1720)*” (NAI, 6231, *Nouvelles Acquisitions Françaises*, *Mémoire sur la compagnie des Indes Orientales (1642-1720)*, XVIII siècle and *Recueil de pièces sur l’Inde française, 1701-1800* (NAI, 8971, *Nouvelles Acquisitions Françaises*).

The National Archives of India, Record Centre, Pondicherry, (henceforth NAIP, Regional Centre of National Archive, Pondicherry) has a collection of papers titled with ‘*The Eighteenth Century Documents*’. This series contained hundreds of folder related with various issues; importantly some of them provide crucial information connected with indigenous merchants. *Memoire of Tirouegadam Pillai* (NAIP, Folder no. 20, *Copie d’un mémoire de Tirouvengadam Poulle, 1715.*) is proved of great importance, it discusses about the migration of merchants in Pondicherry from the surrounding regions and condition of merchants under the French etc. Another collection titled “*French Correspondences of 18th Century (Archives between Glasses)*” contained some letters and papers related with some indigenous merchants like Tiruvenga Chetty, Tirvenga Pillai, Ananda Ranga Pillai.

In the first two decade of 20th century, some French scholars like Alfred Martineau, Edmond Gaudart, and Gnanou Diagou etc. have published a wide range of official documents of the French Company from the Archives of Pondicherry. For this research, *Deliberation of the Superior Council of Pondicherry* proved vital, they provide great information about the commercial relations of indigenous merchants, their way of dealing, their demands as well as about the decision of the French officials and traders on such issues. Besides, series of correspondences of the French officials and traders to the Directors of the Company (Paris) from 1728 to 1757 has been published, which gave knowledge about the intricacies of the French commercial and political activities in India.¹ The collection of judgments of the Superior Council of Pondicherry² and collection of documents, edicts, declarations, orders and regulations of the French Company³ are also crucial source for the study.⁴

Another significant genre of sources that this study has used are memoirs of the French officials-traders and accounts of several French Voyagers. Some important memoirs of French officials and traders are of Francois Martin⁵, Bellanger de Lespiney⁶, Abbé Carré⁷ and Robert Challes.⁸ All these accounts give very rich information about the conduct of indigenous merchants.

Apart from these sources, I have used indigenous source material particularly Diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai (henceforth the Diary). It is an invaluable source for the studying early-modern trading activities at the French *comptoirs* Pondicherry and the Diary gives information about the activities that were happening on the Coromandel. Although the Diary suffers from several shortcomings, such

as the biasness of the Diarist as well as inefficiencies of the Diarist in recording exact data about vessels, commodities etc. Yet notwithstanding these few drawbacks, the Diary has proved to be more reliable and informative than is often thought. It provides ample of information about the indigenous merchants and their activities.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TREND/ SURVEY OF SECONDARY LITERATURE

There are several detailed and excellent studies on the maritime commerce in Indian Ocean from sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Till the second half of twentieth century, the studies on Indian Oceanic trade largely confined to issues such as European expansion in Asia, their commercial ventures and wars in the seas, and political rivalries and ambitions, traits of western civilization that account for their supremacy over Asian etc. The history of the people of the sub-continent and their role in these ventures were not the concerns of these historians.⁹ If in case they have talked about Indian actors, they undermined their role as in case of Jacob Van leur who suggested that the Indian trade was conducted by petty traders meaning thereby that they were peddlers and that their trading activities were limited to the trade in luxury goods.¹⁰ Historiographical orthodoxy tends to assume that indigenous merchants merely as peddlers and intermediaries. They only played a function of mediating the trade and commerce in early modern India with their European counterparts.

However, widely known, such sort of Eurocentric approach has been challenged on many fronts and appears as dated now. An increasing amount of work has been produced that interrogates or contests the presumptions of this approach. These newer works, on the one hand present detailed evidence to show the profile, importance and role of European companies and traders in development of trade and commerce in the subcontinent at regional, provincial, national and international levels; and on the other hand, these also attempt to document the agency of indigenous actors in these commercial ventures and conflicts. Historians, particularly, Ashin Das Gupta, M.N. Pearson, S. Arasaratnam and K.N. Choudhuri, Om Prakash, and more recently Sanjay Subramanian, Laxmi Subramanian, Kanaklatha Mukund, Joseph J. Brenning, Pius Malekandathil and C.A. Bayly have explored the world of Indian merchants between sixteenth to eighteenth century that the historiography on the theme of maritime and oceanic trade and indigenous merchants in early modern India has witnessed significant shifts over last three decades.¹¹ Their studies have also influenced the macro history writing on this theme. The present study is also a micro-level research about commercial relations of the Indigenous merchants and the French East India Company in Pondicherry.

In order to get a sense of the possible contribution of this research work to the historiography of the present theme, it would be better to make a brief survey of some of the landmark scholarship in the history of French in India. Historians who have studied maritime history of India and European expansion in the Indian subcontinent have generally focused on Portuguese, Dutch and English maritime and commercial ventures. However, history of French in India remains a neglected area. Few scholars have paid attention on the French activities in India which confined to the accounts of their trading, military and diplomatic activities.¹² Some influential works done by French historians like Paul Kaeppline, Jacques Weber, are biographical in nature and only available to French knowing readers.¹³ Henry Weber and Jules Sottas, in their writings provide rich information about the activities of the French Company in India from the rise of connection of the French with Indians.¹⁴

In addition, S.P. Sen did important work in this field, he emphasized on political and diplomatic history of the French in India after the treaty of Paris.¹⁵ Phillip Haudrère on the basis of extensive archival data discusses the French Company's military, trading, political ventures at global level and place of India particularly Pondicherry and in that role of indigenous merchants received no attention at all.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Holden Furber also gives sketchy information about French East India Company.¹⁷

In his pioneering study of the French trade with Bengal or indigenous merchants of Bengal, Indrani Ray using a wide array of French sources, reconstructed the changing world of the Indian merchant as they rubbed shoulders with the European trading companies.¹⁸ About a decade ago, Arvind Sinha in his excellent and detailed study reveals the French Company complex commercial relationship with the English as well as indigenous merchants in the Coromandel region, 1763 onwards.¹⁹ Catherine Manning, in her study concentrates on French trade within Asia. In other words, she has focused on country trade of *Compagnie Des Indes*.²⁰ She has examined the French relation with Indians as well as British, Dutch and Portuguese 'partners'.

In addition, some scholars paid attention to the position of the indigenous merchants in Pondicherry. In this turf, probably, first article was written by C.S. Srinivasachari, in which he gives a meager narrative of the first Indian *Courtiers*, Thanppa Mudaliar and his descendents, of the French East India Company on the basis by some private documents.²¹ K.S. Mathew also wrote a paper on similar theme in which he described relations of the merchants of Pondicherry and the French as 'an age of partnership'.²² In similar vein, B. Krishnamurthy devoted attention on the role of indigenous merchant as 'commercial intermediaries', who assisted the French Company in their commercial ventures.²³ On the same turf, recently, S.J. Stephen contributed an interesting article about the indigenous merchants, middleman, and joint stock Company in Pondicherry.²⁴ Besides, Ajit Neogy, traces the relation between authority of Pondicherry, Jesuits and the *Mudaliars* (here Neogy used the word 'Mudaliar' for broker or *Courtier*).²⁵

OBJECTIVES

Much has been written about trading activities of the French East India Company *per se* and much has also been written on the relationship of Indian merchants with European companies (Portuguese, English, and Dutch). In surveying these works, the purpose is not to undermine their importance; instead the point is that the field of Indo-French commercial interaction and its micro level analysis needs further research. This brief survey shows that existing secondary sources does not provide explicit depiction of trading activities of the indigenous merchants in relation to the French in Pondicherry. As mentioned above, it is crucial to point out here that existing studies on the present theme, historians like B. Krishnamurthy, S. J. Stephen, K. S. Mathew, Catherine Manning et al. in their studies on indigenous merchants in Pondicherry only focused on their role as intermediaries or as 'partner' in this commerce with the French East India Company. The present article emphasized on that these indigenous merchants were not passive participants or merely 'partner' of the commerce but were active agents on various fronts and had a strong agency in this commercial world. Therefore, this work intends to fill some of the gaps in this field by throwing light on the complexity of commercial relationship between *chief-courtier* of Pondicherry and the French East India Company's

traders, officials; and impact of such relations on the commerce and on the Company too. Besides, the article is confined to those indigenous merchants who were directly and officially were under the apparatus of the Company, known as *chef de courtier* in the French colonial town of Pondicherry.

CATEGORY OF MERCHANTS: *CHEF-COURTIER* AND ITS FUNCTIONS

In early-modern India, we can divide indigenous merchants, individually and collectively as well, in two broad groups according to their functions or roles which were quite overlapping because there was not any set of. First, developed trade flows by engaging in activities that increase supply of products and stimulate additional demand. They traded along the overseas and overland routes to several destinations. They were mainly involved in importing and exporting commodities according to their capacities.²⁶ Ashin Das Gupta called them 'shippers' or 'ship-owning merchants' and categorized them within this category.²⁷ Second, they acted as bridge between buyers and sellers. They were facilitator of trade. They delivered services, which were indispensable for the accomplishment of trade. Ashin Das Gupta classified them in three groups, merchants, brokers and *sarrafs*.²⁸

This is not that simple as it sounds like because all these actors traded even if they were not principally merchants, their functions were overlapping, and there were sub-categories within these categories, all these issues always confuse or clear the scenario about the role of indigenous merchants. In milieu of Surat, Ashin Das Gupta suggest two branches of broker, one, who dealt in special commodities and second who do worked for a richer merchant or for a Company and did all purchases. Tapan Raychaudhuri claims that the line of demarcation between merchant and middleman was not always clear. The European companies' brokers were often considerable merchant with independent trading activities of their own. However, the function of broker and *dalal* was also a specialized one.²⁹ *Chef de Courtier* (chief broker) was responsible for such activities in Pondicherry for the French Company. *Chef de Courtier* generally had a large trading network through his various agents. These agents were included of merchants (conducted trade at both levels large and small), sub-brokers etc. There are many terms used to refer these brokers like *dalal* (Arabic), intermediaries, go between, middlemen, cultural broker etc. These categories indicate the pivotal role they were playing in trading activities and at the same time this indicate that these broker had capabilities to act in a such wider arena. A. J. Qaiser describes four categories of broker: one, those who were regular employees of or agents of merchants, companies etc. and who were paid either by salary or by a commission;³⁰ second, those who worked for more than one employee; third, those who work ad hoc; fourth, those were appointed by the state.³¹ They also did the work of interpreter and translator for/under East Indian Companies, to whom they called *dubashi*, meant a man of two languages. There was also distinction between *dubashis*, one the head *dubashi* and second, under *dubashi*.³² Former one had essentially managerial responsibilities and was the direct forerunners and later one performed various activities like interpreters, translators, secretaries and mediators between Indian and company's officials.

The merchant community of Pondicherry also comprised of people involved in various fields of activity. There were merchants who were ship-owners, inland traders, trading agents, *chef de marchand* (chief merchant), *chef de Courtier* (chief-broker), bankers, middlemen, suppliers and

dubashis. Nonetheless, a careful scrutiny of the commercial history of Pondicherry suggests that these categories of merchants were not watertight categories. In order to demonstrate it, this article would focus on commercial relations of indigenous merchants, mainly *chef de Courtier* with the French East India Company in Pondicherry. It explains how indigenous merchants were vital for the trading activities of the French Company and individual traders in India; how they played dynamic roles as active agents.

These indigenous merchants were transacted commerce at two levels; First, within the colonial structure, where they trade as part of apparatus of the Company. For this, we will study the office/institution of *chef de Courtier*, which was very crucial to the French commerce in Pondicherry. Without the indigenous officials appointed in this office trade was not possible at all for the French Company. At the same time, the *Courtier* was also appointed on the post of *chef de malabar*. The paper shows that who were the key merchants and their significance in the mercantile interaction/relations between France and India. Second, they traded outside the machinery of the Company, individually or collectively. In this, they traded and facilitated the commerce with/of the Company but not as their servants; not as a part of Company apparatus, this aspect is not part of the present paper.

The French Company in Pondicherry used to appoint an indigenous merchant on a post called *chef de Courtier* and the same person was also appointed on another post *chef de Malabar*. These two offices were quite crucial for the French commercial interests in the town. The Indigenous person appointed on these posts wielded considerable authority, and the French Company was unable to dispense with the need to appoint indigenous traders on these posts. Functions of both of these posts were different but complimentary. The services provided by *courtier* in India were diverse; the main task was to procure varied mercantile goods for the Company which needed to be export to France to sell in European markets and other French colonies. For this, the *courtier* negotiated with regional merchants, weavers, painters (of cloths) and dyers for the supply of several goods and different cotton fabrics, which consisted to be major part of the commerce. At the same time, they also set up both farming operations and artisanal centers, where raw materials were produced and transformed into commodities. In return, *Courtier* received some fixed amount from the Company. He was also responsible to fix the prices of all of the Company's merchandise. He was the legal guardian of Tamil merchant or regent of the Company and acted as the surety for the good conduct of the various indigenous lessees and intermediaries who had established commercial relations with the French company.³³

The designations of *Courtier* and *chef de malabar* required a number of skills, e.g. good knowledge of both the sources and the target community, knowledge about trade pattern, financial terminology, *neutrality* and an understanding of cultural diversities. It also required *impartiality*, independence and professional confidentiality. All information should be provided by the *Courtier* to both communities as exactly as possible. *Courtier* was the representative of both communities. He was the fundamental figure of authority.

PROMINENT INDIGENOUS MERCHANT-CUM-COURTIER OF THE COMPANY

Various prominent merchants of Pondicherry became *Courtier* of the French East India Company during the period under study. All the *Courtiers* and *chef de Malabar* came alternatively from the two families of Mudali and Pillai in the period from 1674 to 1761. The French Company appointed them, because they were already the leading merchants of the region; they were the men of capital, credit and network; and they were the contact links of the French Company in all aspects of trade and Politics involving the indigenous population. The indigenous merchants accepted these positions, because through this, they received French patronage and protection of their trading activities under the Company as well as from other traders. In order to elaborate these points, I will now briefly discuss the examples of some prominent merchants of Pondicherry who were also appointed as *Courtiers*.

THANAPPA MUDALIER

The CDI's first chief intermediary in Pondicherry was from the *Mudaliar* caste, known as Thanappa Mudaliar.³⁴ *Mudaliar* were transacting commerce at the port of Santhome near Mylapore. In fact, since the time the French Company arrived in Pondicherry, they wanted to have a share in the trade of the region; and for this purpose, they looked for the assistance of indigenous merchants and local persons. During this period, a French Jesuit, Abbe Careé³⁵ was on a mission to India. Careé was settled in Mylapore, near Madras, where he met Blanquet, who was the *navire* (sailor) of de la Haye. Careé had good influence around Madras and had earned the sympathy of local merchants also. Among these merchants, Careé was especially close to Thanappa Mudaliar. Careé appreciated Thanappa's honesty and uprightness as well as his knowledge of Portuguese also as it was lingua franca of maritime commerce. Careé brought Thanappa to French officials Bellanger de Lespiney, Francois Martin and Blanquet, so they could decide to keep him with them in transactions of trading affairs.³⁶

Thanappa Mudalier began earning the confidence of the beleaguered and struggling French community by supplying them food, as their position was precarious at that time in San Thomé.³⁷ The Dutch had besieged the place and food supply was completely cut off.³⁸ Thanappa was thus trying to win French favor by taking advantage of their dire situation. Though, we do not have much information about Thanappa's previous commercial ventures, he hoped to be in a more profitable position if he could work with the French Company. Of course, this relationship was reciprocal as the officials of the French Company were also in need of a strong indigenous person with the bilingual talent and knowledge of local customs, politics, trade routes, trading networks and commercial skills. Since the condition of the French Company was not initially very powerful in Mylapore, therefore, in order to improve and maintain their status in the region, they needed reinforcement in the form of food and materials for the garrison and additional armed forces recruited from the natives.³⁹

In 1673, Thanappa came to Pondicherry from Mylapore. In fact, there were already French merchants in Pondicherry at the beginning of 1673; the main appears to have been a Sieur d'Lespinay.⁴⁰ Yet, the French officials decided to send a troop of some selected people—which included Thanappa as

well—to Pondicherry under Martin’s guidance for establishing a trading port there. Here Thanappa served Martin as a consultant in matters of trade and commerce.⁴¹ Martin could have gone either by ship or via land, but it was the suggestion of Thanappa that the French selected sea route for their journey and reached Pondicherry on 15 January 1574.⁴² Besides Thanappa, a local Portuguese Antoine Cattle also served to Martin as interpreter.⁴³ Subsequently, his descendants were also appointed on the same. He maintained his status of *Courtier* under François Martin.⁴⁴ In 1680, Martin became the governor of the French East India Company and the next year Thanappa also got a new designation “*chef de malabars*”, which shows further improvement in Thanappa’s position. After getting position of *chef de malabars*, he became the head of entire local/indigenous community associated with the French in Pondicherry. Thanappa and his family served to the French Company for three generation with occasional periods when other indigenous rival group of Pillai’s replaced them. However, the Mudaliars have not left any account or memoir of their lives and activities. It is nothing unusual except for some indigenous merchant families in those times.⁴⁵ Whatever scanty and scattered information is available about Thanappa and his family is exclusively based on French documents.

NANIAPPA PILLAI

Naniappa Pillai (1708-1716) was a prominent merchant of Madras, who settled in Pondicherry in the initial year of eighteenth century and was involved in trading activities with the French Company even before he was employed as *chef de Courtier de la Compagnie*. Earliest reference to him in the French records we find is that of 23 September 1704, when he was appointed as an adjudicator of a piece of land under the French Company.⁴⁶ According to the Deliberations of the Superior Council of Pondicherry, the Council had granted the farm of tobacco and betel to Naniappa for two years in 1704 and he had to pay two thousand four hundred pagodas per annum.⁴⁷ Again the Company contacted Naniappa in 1708 (July 11) for a business deal, because then the French Governor Hebert wanted to send the ship *St. Louis* to Europe with as much as possible cargo loaded in it. However, the Council was not satisfied with the Society of indigenous merchants (*ancien marchands*) with whom they were dealing until then, because, as per the record of the Deliberations of the Council of Pondicherry, it had earlier suffered loss due to these merchants. The Council, therefore, resolved to seek ways to deal with some other merchants and to accomplish their aim. The Company provided the name of Naniappa. Naniappa made them better offer than the other merchants. However, ironically though, the Council found it to be more advantageous to deal with former merchants, because Naniappa was asking for a large sum in advance, whilst French officials did not have enough reason to trust him. Therefore, after some negotiations, the Council resolved to offer the deal to the Society of Merchants (*ancien marchand*) with whom it felt to be safer. However, very soon, the situation turned upside down and Naniappa started coming closer to the Company as discussed below. In 1708, the existing *Courtier* of the Company, Moutiappa, son of Thannappa, negotiated with the above-referred Society of Merchants for the cargo and the Council paid six thousand pagodas in advance.⁴⁸ Hebert wanted to expand the trade of the Company, but for this purpose, he needed a huge amount. However, the Company was already under huge debt. The Company needed to pay the debt of 11, 00,000 Livres at Surat, 4, 50,000 at Pondicherry and 3, 00,000 at Bengal.⁴⁹ The Company used to

import coral to Pondicherry to sell in India. Hebert decided to sell the large stock of coral as soon as possible, so that he would be able to get some fund.⁵⁰ At this time, Moutiappa Mudaliars was *Courtier* of the Company. Before the arrival of Hebert, the Company already had a quantity of coral in Pondicherry, to this, was added a quantity of 50 boxes of corals that the vessel *St. Louis* had brought from France.⁵¹ Hebert ordered to Moutiappa that, “*we have stock of coral and you tell merchants of Pondicherry and its surroundings that whoever wants to purchase can come and buy on the spot*”.⁵² Merchants who arrived to visit coral stocks on the request of Moutiappa found it to be of lower quality and smaller pieces than the earlier supplies. The Company’s officials had decided the price of coral for 120 pagodas but Moutiappa told Hebert that merchants were not ready to buy coral at this rate. Merchants wanted to purchase it at 106 pagodas on the past rate. But Hebert wanted to increase the price of coral. However, two days later the Governor decided to decrease the price to 110 pagodas and ordered Moutiappa once again to invite the merchants. Hebert thought that the deal happened on this rate of 110 pagodas. After few days, he called Moutiappa and instructed him to deliver the coral to said merchants. However, the latter said to the Governor, that merchants did not agree among themselves about the prices. Now they did not want to purchase it even at the cost of 106 pagodas and a part of these merchants have moved to their town.⁵³

In view of the Council, such conduct of a *Courtier* deserved retribution. Nevertheless, Hebert did not do anything. The Company was still hoping that the deal would somehow be settled. However, it did not happen, because the indigenous merchants of coral were united together and resolved not to take French coral unless a large rebate is declared by the French Company. The English Governor of Madras advised the French Company to offer coral at the further reduced cost of hundred pagodas. The officials of the Company thought that he might have a part in this bargain. This example, however, clearly shows how the indigenous merchants attempted to powerfully bargain the terms of commerce. If required, they were prepared to get united in order to force the Company to do trade on their own terms. The company apprehended that Moutiappa was the person who was leading the united indigenous merchants; and because he had influence in surrounding areas of Pondicherry, he also approached the governor of Madras. Therefore, finally Hebert removed him from the post.⁵⁴

Thereafter, Naniappa Pillai took the place as a *Courtier* of the French Company by the order and support of Hebert. In Hebert’s perception, Naniappa was more intelligent and skillful merchant than Moutiappa. Naniappa had the knowledge about tension between Hebert and Moutiappa and in some ways, he tried to utilize it in his favor through assisting Hebert and by the support of Hebert. French officials wanted that now Naniappa would execute the pending deal of coral. Therefore, he brought all coral merchants to Pondicherry with great difficulties, because the latter were not ready to buy coral due to disagreement over the price and owing to its alleged lower quality. The merchants said that they would never pay more than 106 pagodas for coral. Hebert said that Naniappa had done his best and his appeal was accepted by merchants with a small increase in the price of corals. Thus with the efforts of Naniappa merchants were ready to pay 108 pagodas.⁵⁵ As it was necessary to dispose the corals, the Company agreed on the price obtained by Naniappa due to its influences on merchants and skilled experience in the trade.

The Council described him as a man of spirit, reputed and well known. He was quite keen in commercial dealings.⁵⁶ As a *Courtier*, considerable property of Naniappa, symbolized his status and authorized him as a crucial element in contemporary political economy of Pondicherry. We come to

know about his wealth when Hebert deprived him from his job and sold his warehouse, furniture and other commodities in an auction. Naniappa had gems and ornaments, around four houses, two gardens, shops in grand bazaar, about 20 slaves consisting men and women, elephant, horses etc. It seems that Naniappa's clothes were very precious, because they were purchased by French officials for their use. It is quite surprising that even a person of the status of Hebert, who was 'general of the nation of the French', bought a Cabaye (sort of caftan), a scarf embroidered of gold, eleven woolen shawls, six belts, thirteen caps etc. Apart from Hebert, other French officials like Dumas and Flacourt also purchased his clothes. Hebert estimated his property around 40,000 pagodas and 11,570 pagodas in total.⁵⁷ On the basis of these evidences, one could guess about affluence and influence of Naniappa.

KANAKARAYA MUDALIER

Kanakaraya Mudalier (also mentioned as Pedro in French documents) was another prosperous merchant of the Pondicherry, who later on became the *Courtier* of the Company. Prior to having the post of *Courtier* of the Company, Kanakaraya Mudalier was continuously doing trade with the French Company and its traders. He had quite good reputation compared to other merchants of Pondicherry among the French because he had been twice on the same post, respectively, in 1716 and 1724. Even after exclusion from the post in 1717, he was doing trade with the Company till his second appointment as an individual trader. Kanakaraya Mudalier had a vast trading network and the French were quite dependent on him for their commercial transactions. We know that principal commodities in which all European companies were dealing were cloths. Kanakaraya Mudalier was one of the most leading merchant of textiles in Pondicherry and had hold over merchants and merchandise.⁵⁸

In the entire period between his first and second appointment on the post, he continued to trade with the French Company including the phase when he was not the *Courtier*. This conduct of Kanakaraya Mudalier was appreciated by the Company during his second appointment of which he got the benefit. At the time of his second appointment in 1726, the Council pointed out that Kanakaraya Mudalier was continuously giving his marks or signs for the service.⁵⁹ In similar vein, Cojande claims that despite the dismissal of Kanakaraya Mudalier, he always took care to provide goods destined for vessels trading with the Company and had maintained its relationship with employees of the Governor.⁶⁰

Kanakaraya Mudalier also had a ship, which shows his affluence in Pondicherry. He used this ship for his personal trade on local ports. Sometimes the Company also used this ship for their work. We can also say that Kanakaraya Mudalier gave his ship to the Company on rent and this was another medium of his income. For instance, in 1736, French Company needed to send some money to M. Golard, chief of Mazulipatnam to buy some goods.⁶¹ It was quite risky to send money from the land route and the French did not have a small ship at that time at port of Pondicherry. Therefore, Kanakaraya Mudalier offered his ship (brigantine) '*Dauphlin*' to the French Company.

ANANDA RANGA PILLAI

After the death of Kanakaraya Mudalier in 1746, French appointed Ananda Ranga Pillai as the next *Courtier* of the Company after many deliberations, which lasted for more than a year. During this

interim period when there was no *Courtier* holding the post officially, Pillai was already doing all related work. Owing to his influence in the surrounding region of Pondicherry and knowledge of trade, Pillai possessed a high position among the French and local inhabitants of the town. Pillai's father, Tirouvengadam also had a large trading network. Consequently, he was involved in the affairs of the commerce and trade from the age of sixteen. He also had a shop for the sale of areca nuts near the grand bazaar in Pondicherry. All these things helped him to obtain information and knowledge about the maritime trade and proved crucial for becoming a notable merchant of his time. He conducted commercial transactions at the national and international levels. He not only assisted the French traders in doing private trade or country trade but also traded for his personal benefits in the region of South Asia and South East Asia particularly in Mocha, Colombo, and Bengal. He had his own vessel *Anandapuravi*, which used to sail in surrounding port towns of Pondicherry. At one instance, he mentions in his diary that on 15th march 1740, "*my ship was made ready today to proceeds to Colombo, laden with goods.*"⁶² On another occasion, he talks about return journey of his ship from Colombo.⁶³

After the death of his father, the Company appointed Ananda Ranga Pillai on the same work: head of indigenous people of the French factory at Porto-Novo.⁶⁴ Porto Novo served as an important center of the import of commodities from Malayan archipelago, China and Manila. This place was also famous for horse trading; horses were imported from various places in Porto Novo from where the French purchased them by auction.⁶⁵ There, Pillai was made in-charge for loading the ships of the Company; making up into bales; and securing enough merchandise, not only for the Company but also for the French private traders.⁶⁶ He generally secured blue piece goods, candies of leads, black cloth, two cubit broad, coarse cloth, and eighteen cubit long etc. His relations with the weavers of Porto Novo were quite good. At one instance when the Company did not want to buy goods from Porto Novo but Pillai had already made advances to weavers, consequently, due to his influence, he made the weavers in his favour and postponed the receiving of material.⁶⁷ For further extension of his private trade and the French commerce, he established trading posts at his own cost at Lalapettai and Arcot, from where he carried brisk business in the exchange of European goods for the merchandises of the country. Then he sold these European goods in local market, which was a great source of his income. He had amicable commercial relations with the petty merchants of Lalapettai, main by with Muttaiya Tirumalai Pillai,⁶⁸ Pilla Chetti and Velayuda Chetti etc.

The main reason for Pillai's success was his agents. He had several agents at two level, first, trade and commerce and second, political and military. Almost all trade of Pillai was conducted by his agents, who were appointed by Pillai on all major ports. His chief agent was Rayal Ayyan at Lalapettai, who took care of establishment and trade there. His agents like Pir Marakkayar and Muthukumra Pillai were engaged in trade with Ceylon on behalf of Pillai. Apart from trading agents he had a body of trained spies by whom he made his inquiries. At one instance, Dupleix requested to Pillai to discover where the English concealed their treasure, he set up his spies to work and mentioned some place they had heard of, including the wall of the English Church. At another instance, when Pondicherry was siege by English admiral, Pillai called his countrymen into faith, and through them he was providing information to the French Company about all the movements of enemy.

CONCLUSION

This work shows, through the case studies of several generations of two merchant-families, Mudali and Pillai, varied function of merchants. It demonstrates that it is not enough to say indigenous merchants simply carried out the tasks of middlemen. In other words, indigenous merchants not only acted as intermediaries between manufacturers, producers, French East India Company and French private traders in import-export channels, but they were also providing as well as using for their own ends strategic information relating to the market. More importantly, they acted as the agents of changing the focus and direction of commercial relationship. These merchants ran the trade of the coastal town of Pondicherry and provided vital links between the inland producers, artisans and the market in other parts of the subcontinent and France. One chief aspect of this paper is to explore and argue that indigenous merchants were extremely useful for the French Company from its very beginning for its commercial ventures. The offices of *courtier* and *chef de malabar* were most crucial for Company's commercial transactions. On the one hand, the work of *Courtier* was to provide enough merchandise for the French vessels. On the other hand, the same person appointed as *chef de Malabar* was responsible to present the interest of artisans, common people and other merchants before the French authority. Sometimes, the Company was not only dependent on indigenous merchants for their assistance in commercial ventures, but also depended on them for the resources particularly capital resources.

Chef de Courtier of the Company from 1674-1761

Name of <i>Courtier</i>	Duration of office Holding
Thanappa Mudalier	1675/76-1691
Moutiappa Mudalier	1699-1708
Naniappa Pillai	1708-1716
Kanakaraya Mudalier (Pedro)	1716-1721/22
Guruppa Pillai	1721/22-1724
Kanakaraya Mudalier (Pedro)	1724-1746
Ananda Ranga Pillai	1747-1761

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majority on the ship but does not have description because of presence of other rich and influential merchant on ship.

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