

## The Colour of Fraternity: Citizenship, Race and Domicile in French India

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Travelling through Pondicherry in the 1840s, Albert Hervey, a British army officer, remarked at being particularly impressed with the wide, straight boulevards of this French settlement, noting the white-washed colonial buildings and the cultural ambience of a place that was reminiscent of any coastal town on the *Côte d'Azur*. Of particular note in his observations, however, was his telling insight concerning the European population of *la ville blanche* or the 'white town' which seemed to cause so much anxiety to the British gaze. Describing Pondicherry's European population as comprising of "tawny-faced Frenchmen and their families,"<sup>2</sup> Hervey's observation was that physical skin colour or racial difference could not be deployed in any meaningful way to differentiate Frenchmen (or, indeed Frenchwomen) from the majority Tamil population. To be sure, those who claimed European status and who were treated, for all intents and purposes, as French subjects were not necessarily 'white'. Equipped with the lexicon and vocabulary of racial difference drawn from the colonial space of British India, British observers such as Hervey often found both the political and racial complexion of French life in India both intriguing and perplexing, for reasons some of which I hope to convey in this paper from the earlier period of the late eighteenth century.

As early as 1690, the French traveller, Robert Challe noted that there were about two hundred Frenchmen resident in Pondicherry, most of whom were employed in the service of the French East India Company and whom would never return to France. In his own memoirs, Challe notes with some poignancy that most of these men had come to India alone and that there were very few white women from France in co-habitation with them. In fact, the far majority of these men had married "Portuguese girls, who were not black, but *métis* or mulatto."<sup>3</sup> What Challe refers to as "Portuguese girls", however, deserves greater scrutiny and explanation. Descendants of a previous generation of inter-marriage between Portuguese traders and indigenous women, Portuguese Catholic Eurasians claimed European status

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<sup>2</sup> Albert Hervey, *Ten Years in India: Or, The Life of a Young Officer*, (London: William Soberl, 1850), 284.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Challe, *Journal d'un voyage fait aux Indes Orientales, 1690-1691*, [eds. F. Deloffre and M. Menemenciaglu], (Paris : Mercure de France, 1983), 11.

through their language, religion and dress and, hence, were already part of the cultural fabric of many coastal towns on the Indian subcontinent before either the British or the French had arrived to stake their claim in the competitive and lucrative East India trade.

Moreover, liminal racial groups such as the *topas* community who were known as ‘black Portuguese’ by some commentators, may have had Portuguese paternal origin or were else converted lower-caste Indians whose Catholicism gave them quasi-European status, added to the tawny-faced complexion of French life.<sup>4</sup> Even with the increased arrivals of Frenchmen and Frenchwomen in the eighteenth century, the police census of Pondicherry in 1790 reveals that Eurasians and the *topas* constituted a third of the population of the ‘white town’, revealing the complex and multiracial nature of Indo-French colonial society.<sup>5</sup>

In this session on ethnicity and identity in south Asia, I share with my co-panellists an interest in engaging with how colonialism created new and ambiguous Westernized identities in south Asia that could loosely be termed ‘hybrid’. However, in the early modern period, the current preoccupation with ‘hybridity’ needs more intense deliberation and scrutiny in view of the multiple axes in which cultural difference was articulated in historical context. ‘Race’ was but one of many indicators of cultural identity and it dovetailed with, and was often superseded by, the question of religious affiliation, social capital, gender and the adoption of clothing style. Hence, there is a need to historicize ‘hybridity’ and the ‘mixed-race’ experience in the context of the contours of belonging in which colonial subjectivity was forged.

In a broader disciplinary framework, moreover, the new histories of Eurasian identity in India tend to render their articulations of hybridity as products of the British world or as an aspect of a broader sense of Britishness. This paper takes us to a different colonial landscape by focusing on the lesser-known French experience in India which was situated in an altogether different context of global connections to that of British imperialism. Indeed, to a landscape where the French Revolution meets tawny-faced Europeans in a world context stretching from the West Indies to the East Indies.

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<sup>4</sup> The term ‘topas’ or ‘topaz’ is derived from the Hindi word ‘topi’ which refers to the characteristic hat worn by the men of this community as a marker of their cultural attachment to the European community. Hence, they are also referred to as *gente de chapeo* in Portuguese accounts or as *gens à chapeau* in French accounts. They are described as “dark-skinned or half-caste claimants of Portuguese descent, and Christian profession” in H. Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: Being a Glossary of Anglo-Indian Colloquial Words and Phrases of Kindred Terms*, (London: John Murray, 1903), 933.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Recensement de population de Pondichéry, 1789’, at National Archives of India, Pondicherry (NAIP): Série 21/ 689/ 7/ f. 73.

Anglo-Indian and British imperial historiography have often contained fleeting observations, suggesting that French Eurasians in India fared better than their British counterparts<sup>6</sup>, but rarely has this been investigated in an empirical sense. Hypotheses range from a more relaxed French attitude towards ‘mixed-race’ marriages<sup>7</sup>, to the binding role of Catholicism as an ideology that in some ways transcended racial identity. As the principal determinant of French cultural identity, the role of Catholicism was a significant shaper of cultural difference in French overseas colonies and while the marriages of Frenchmen were closely surveilled and regulated in the early modern period, cultural anxieties were framed around the social taboo of Catholics marrying non-Catholics rather than framed around French-Indian transgression. To be sure, official French policy dictated that marriages were acceptable between Europeans and ‘women of the country’ as long as both parties were Catholic and the director of the company approved of the alliance. This was stated explicitly in an ordinance issued in the name of Louis XIV that regulated the moral conduct of employees of the French East India Company in overseas outposts, dated 1664:

No Frenchman will be allowed to marry a native woman unless she is instructed in the Christian religion, that is Catholic, Apostolic and Roman, and unless she has received the Holy Sacrament of Baptism, and the Holy Communion, of which he needs to obtain a certificate from the Superiors of the Mission, and that he has obtained the permission of the Commander of the places where he will be established.<sup>8</sup>

The political context is also vital to understanding the reasons why French Eurasians posed less threat to the consolidation of European power than British Eurasians. Their defeat in the Battle of Wandiwash in 1760 meant that the French were all but thwarted in their attempts to secure an empire in India and the subsequent lack of French imperial ambition or territorial expansion beyond their tiny trading outposts meant that the nature and *raison d'être* of French colonialism was not concerned with political conquest. Nevertheless, Anglo-French antipathies in both European and North American contexts were exported to the Indian environment where the Catholic French found themselves treated as ‘colonized colonizers’ and demonized in even the most sympathetic colonial histories as the quintessential enemies

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<sup>6</sup> For example, see T. G. P. Spear, *The Nabobs*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 62 and Dorris W. Goodrich, ‘The Making of an Ethnic Group: The Eurasian Community in India’, unpublished PhD, University of California, 1952, 75

<sup>7</sup> For example, see K. S. Matthew, ‘Indian Ocean and Cultural Interaction’, in *Indica*, vol. 35, no. 2, September 1998, 123.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Ordonnances et règlements que la Compagnie établie pour le commerce des Indes Orientales’, dated 26 October 1664 at Centre des Archives d’Outre Mer (CAOM): FM/C2/ 3/ f. 71.

of British interests.<sup>9</sup> Hence, in the context of Anglo-French antipathy and antagonism, racial intermixture posed less threat to the French than the hegemony of Protestant Britishness.

These are often cited as some of the conjectural reasons for the seemingly more tolerant French attitude towards ‘mixed-race’ marriage and Eurasian identity, compared to the increasing social taboo in British India from the end of the eighteenth century. While aspects of these contentions certainly have some truth, I offer another explanation.

In this paper I argue that the structures of colonial sovereignty in French India underwent a radical transformation after the French Revolution was exported to the colonies on a global scale, carrying with it the notion of civic citizenship as the principal definer of identity in French overseas settlements. This provided a new engagement between racial hybridity and what it meant to be European in colonial India – an engagement that did not exist in British India where the dialogue with civic notions of belonging was shaped by the distinction between colonizer and colonized, between British subjects and natives of India.

In essence, what we have are two contesting representations of how racial hybridity dovetailed with European categories of civic belonging. For scholars of late eighteenth century British India, with the works of Christopher Hawes and William Dalrymple being but two voices in this chorus, the emergence and importance of Eurasian identity is inextricably interwoven to the consolidation of British imperialism.<sup>10</sup> After the 1773 Regulating Act and the 1784 India Act, legislation which defined the change in governance from Company to Parliament, racial distinctions in British India became more pronounced as the distinction between ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’ became one of physical skin colour and racial descent. From 1786, Eurasians were no longer categorized as British subjects, but re-classified as ‘natives of India’ and excluded from the main arenas of European social and political life.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, there was no notion of imperial citizenship in British India until 1870 and this, as

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Sudipta Das, ‘British Reactions to the French Bugbear in India, 1763-83’, in *European History Quarterly*, vol. 22, 1982, 39-65.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Evelyn Abel, *The Anglo-Indian Community: Survival in India*, (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1988); Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980); Lionel Caplan, *Children of Colonialism: Anglo-Indians in a Postcolonial World*, (Oxford: Berg, 2002); William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth Century India*, (London: Harper Collins, 2002); and Christopher Hawes, *Poor Relations: The Making of a Eurasian Community in British India; 1773-1833*, (London: Curzon, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Refer Christopher Hawes, op.cit., ix and Herbert A. Stark, *Hostages to India, Or the Life Story of the Anglo-Indian Race*, (Calcutta: H. A. Stark, 1936), 62.

Daniel Gorman and others notes, remained deeply ambiguous and attached to racial notions of Britishness.<sup>12</sup>

What is intriguing is that the French Revolution occurred in the immediate context of the period of the consolidation of British power in India and in the period where Eurasians in British India are demoted from their previous status as British subjects. News of the great event came to Pondicherry aboard the ship *Bienvenue* via the *Isle de France* or Mauritius in February 1790, sparking staged mini-revolutions in Pondicherry and Chandernagore, albeit without the grand drama and violence of the real thing in Paris. Nevertheless, this ushered in the establishment of a General Assembly of citizens in Pondicherry and a smaller Colonial Assembly in Chandernagore. These two settlements remained at odds with each other and at times suspended formal communications due to internal schisms and political differences.<sup>13</sup> With the export of the Revolution came the task of deciding who was entitled to civic citizenship and who was not. The direction on how to decide this came directly from the National Assembly in Paris through the application of Thouret's *Report on the Basis of Political Eligibility* which was intended as a directive on citizenship eligibility in France.<sup>14</sup> Hence, its central precepts were essentially disengaged with how Frenchness was being constructed in far-flung colonial outposts where sexual relationships across the colonial divide produced children whose claim to Frenchness was based on altogether different criteria to metropolitan boundaries of citizenship.

Despite the inclusive rhetoric of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* and the lofty universalism of revolutionary principles, the same selectivity which shaped citizenship in France was translated to the Indian context, but faced new dilemmas. To be sure, since only tax-paying men over 25 who satisfied residency requirements could technically be "citoyens", women were automatically excluded as were poor and itinerant men. Yet, the new challenge of attempting to define eligibility in India resided in the simple fact that citizenship itself provided a new model of defining who was French and who was not in a racially-mixed colonial environment where the distinction was far from clear.

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel Gorman, 'Wider and Wider Still? Racial Politics, Intra-Imperial Immigration and the Absence of an Imperial Citizenship in the British Empire', in *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2003, para. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Refer principally to Sibada Sen, *The French in India, 1763-1816*, (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1958) and Marguerite Labernadie, *La révolution et les établissements français dans l'Inde, 1790-1793*, (Paris: E. Leroux, 1930).

<sup>14</sup> Refer Lyn Hunt (ed), *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, (New York : St Martin's Press, 1996), 99-101.

What so alarmed British observers travelling to places like Pondicherry and Chandernagore was the fact that those who professed to be French and who were so visibly a part of European society in those places did not look French in their own estimation of that definition. A close examination of the *recensement* for Chandernagore in 1790, for instance, is far more revealing than the Pondicherry census for the same year. There were only 235 inhabitants who were classed as Europeans living in *la ville blanche* and, of those, only 27 were white Frenchwomen from France. More strikingly is the fact that eighty per cent were either *métis* or *topas*.<sup>15</sup> The actual numbers of white French men was statistically very small and, as British imperialism took hold in the years that followed, the vast majority of those claiming to be French were actually of Indian origin.

Before the Revolution, Frenchness in India was defined as being a Catholic subject of His Most Christian Majesty The King of France. Consequently, converted Indian Catholics, the *métis* and the *topas* community were all French subjects and treated as Europeans regardless of race in stark contrast to those described as ‘heathens’ in the archival records. Although French royal edicts expressed the toleration of Hindu and Muslim cultural institutions and religious festivals, and extended to Indians the protection of the French king, they were not entitled to civil status in the same way as Catholic subjects.<sup>16</sup> Hence, it was Catholicism rather than race that served the wider purpose of providing the cultural boundary of Frenchness in pre-revolutionary French India. This served to exclude Hindus and Muslims from the body politic of French colonial life as much as it served to deter Frenchmen from marrying Protestant women from British settlements.

The definition of what it meant ‘to be French’ in the Indian settlements changed radically after the revolution. After 1791, inclusion was articulated by the exercise of a dual definition by the National Assembly that encoded two separate legal avenues by which eligibility could be attained. To be a ‘citoyen’, it was necessary to “be French or to have become French” or “être français ou devenu français”.<sup>17</sup> This combined two legal principles – that of *jus sanguinis* or the right of citizenship through patrilineal descent or bloodline and that of *jus solis* or the right of citizenship through domicile in French territory. In order to qualify as a ‘citoyen’, it was necessary to fulfil at least one of this two-pronged set of requirements.

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Recensement de la ville blanche de Chandernagor, 1790’, at CAOM: FR/ Série B/ 592/ f. 429.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Edit du Roi concernant ceux qui ne font pas profession de la religion catholique, 1787’, at CAOM: FM/ F/ 3/ 95/ f. 217.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Instructions de l’Assemblée Nationale pour la formation des nouvelles municipalités dans toute l’entendre du Royaume’, dated 14 December 1789 at CAOM: FR/ Série B/ f. 1188.

Unlike their counterparts in British India, the *métis* of French India - as long as they were male, over 25 and had capital and a permanent abode – automatically qualified under both the *jus sanguinis* and *jus solis* definitions of citizenship. Born in French territory, professing the Catholic faith and possessing the names of their male French forebears, the *métis* could be elected to municipal posts in the colonial administration and serve in positions of leadership in the Company army. Unlike the rocky and insecure road of the Anglo-Indian experience, these brown-faced Europeans found sanctuary in the edict of the President of the Pondicherry Assembly, Maracin, who issued a statement in 1790 stating that “tous les européens et les descendants d’européens”<sup>18</sup> (that is, “all Europeans and the descendants of Europeans”) would be treated equally in terms of entitlements to civic status and financial support.

However, there were also ambiguities within the *jus solis* law that supposedly conferred upon foreigners the right of French citizenship by virtue of domicile alone; thereby relinquishing the need for French origin at all. While this was meant to apply to foreigners of means in France, in the colonial environment certain inconsistencies arose. While foreign European men living in Pondicherry and Chandernagore could claim citizenship under the *jus solis* provision if they had been living in French territory for four years, this requirement was drastically reduced if they had property and capital. It was a provision used by British and Irish Catholic men who had deserted the English East India Company to live in French territory with Catholic partners. However, an Indian could not “become French” in the same way as a European foreigner and, despite the language of domicile, the logic of racial exclusion continued to prevail. Hence, citizenship in the Indian environment was employed to guard the internal frontiers of French identity against the inclusion of Indians while simultaneously accepting European foreigners and the *métis* into its ranks, demonstrating above all that racial origin still mattered.

Perhaps the most interesting indication that racial descent still mattered despite the inclusive rhetoric of domicile can be seen in the contradictory ways in which the *topas* community in the Indo-French settlements figured in the citizenship laws which would have theoretically made them citizens by default. Whether the *topas* were Portuguese Eurasians who had Portuguese ancestry or whether they were converted Indian Christians who took on European identities is never fully ascertained in British or French archival sources. According to Yvon’s *Notes Sur Le Bengale*, a rare first-hand glimpse of French life in Bengal before the French Revolution, the *topas* are described as being included in the broader category of Europeans by virtue of their clothing and Catholic religion, and they were subject to the laws and protection

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<sup>18</sup> CAOM: FR/ Série B/ f. 1230.

of the French King.<sup>19</sup> After the Revolution, that status did not change. On March 2, 1790, the *topas* were originally admitted into the General Assembly in Pondicherry as active citizens where they voted, were appointed as Heads of Districts and were nominated to European posts in the colonial service. Indeed, the law of *jus solis* or domicile seemed to prevail.

However, in September 1790, they were expelled and stripped of their citizenship rights on the basis that they did not have European origin and, hence, could not become French citizens. Likewise, in Chandernagore, the *topas* were declared to be non-citizens. An edict states that “citizenship based on domicile alone is open to European foreigners but not to the race of vulgar Portuguese known under the name of the Portuguese of India or *topas*.”<sup>20</sup>

The reaction to this expulsion in Pondicherry saw the generation of a petition titled *Mémoire en faveur des topas* which was drafted and signed by twenty-four *topas* men in protest to the glaring inconsistencies in regard to the law on domicile. This outlines in some detail their grievances to being stripped of their citizenship rights and articulates their grievances in relation to the arbitrary way in which eligibility for citizenship was applied in India. “To be French”, commences the petition, “there is no absolute need to be born in France nor to be the son of a Frenchman.”<sup>21</sup> Drawing on the example of the children of European foreigners who were born on French soil, this petition was a fervent defence of the *jus solis* or domicile principle by strategically illustrating the biases of citizenship laws in the colonies:

An Englishman establishes himself in France, his wife is also English and gives birth to a son. This son stays in France and makes his home there and purchases properties there. Certainly, he is French though he was not born of a Frenchman.<sup>22</sup>

If the *topas* could not claim French citizenship based on the colour of their skin, then this not only contravened the *jus solis* principle, but also begged the question of how they were different from the *métis* who were entitled to full civic privileges. In this sense, the petition pointed out the most glaring inconsistency in the expulsion of the *topas*:

The colour of the *topas* must not exclude them from the class of active citizens. The *métis* are admitted not only as electors of the Assembly but are even nominated to posts in the municipal chamber. What right do they have more than the *topas*, who are as French as they and have been born and domiciled in the French settlements?<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> ‘Notes sur le Bengale’, at CAOM: FM/ DFC/ XIX/ carton 94.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Article 2’ at NAIP: Série 2/ 592/ f. 430.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Mémoire en faveur des topas’, dated 16 October 1790 at CAOM: Série B/ Tome II/ f. 1312.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

The petition was successful and by 1792, the *topas* were once again anointed as citizens in French India. The circuit from inclusion to exclusion and back again represented the tensions within the new concept of citizenship as it travelled with the fervour of the Revolution where it became an arena for the contested politics of whiteness. Through the experiences of these ‘tawny-faced Frenchmen’, the inclusion of *métis* and *topas* communities into a civic notion of citizenship may account, in part, for why they fared better than British Eurasians who, for the rest of the duration of British rule, were attempting to prove themselves as worthy of civic status and political respect. To be sure, to use the terminology of Matthew Jacobson, they were of a different political colour.<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, I have argued in this paper that the engagement between Eurasian and *topas* identity and the exported notion of citizenship in French India offers a corrective to studies of ‘hybridity’ in the British world context. The albeit flawed model of citizenship with its inclusionary rhetoric and exclusionary practices was tested in the colonial environment by liminal racial groups who strategically redefined what it meant to ‘be European’ in localized sites such as Pondicherry and Chandernagore. What has been less understood, however, are the global connections that place citizenship as a contested arena for the study of racial identities that do not fit neatly into the categories of national history. Whether the *topas* petitioners were Indian, Portuguese or French seems not to matter as much as their right to be world citizens. The Pondicherry petition was part of a broader global flow if seen from afar. One thinks of it as connected to the similar pleas of the Jews of Paris, Alsace and Lorraine to be included as citizens in 1790 and, perhaps more poignantly, to the more famous protest of Vincent Ogé a year earlier on behalf of the mulattoes of Saint-Domingue which eventually led to the Haiti Revolution. In this sense, Pondicherry was linked to the West Indies and the synagogues of Paris. However, it was Indians themselves who remained disengaged from the global discourse of citizenship that became the most far-reaching consequence of the French revolution. They had to wait until 1881 before they were granted the same privilege when the colour of fraternity was once again the subject of political renegotiation.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Matthew F. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> See E. G. Schmit, *Législation de l’Inde*, (Pondichéry: Imprimerie de la Mission, 1945).