

Ajit K. Neogy, Decolonization of French India. Liberation Movement and Indo-French Relations, 1947-1954

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Ajit K. Neogy
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and Indo-French Relations, 1947-1954***

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Foreword by Jacques Weber
Pondichéry, Institut français de Pondichéry, 1997
XXVIII + 299 p., index, bibl., 4 append.

In the decade following the end of World War II, the world was transfixed as movements of national liberation hastened the dismantling of British and French rule in the Middle East, Indochina, North Africa and South Asia. At the same time, but with much less fanfare, a sideshow in colonial deconstruction was being played out in the five establishments of French India. Although these were small, relatively insignificant «pockets» within the massive Indian subcontinent, the global *Zeitgeist* of Third World national sovereignty and India's self-image of nonaligned leader meant that even the relatively sleepy backwaters of French India could not escape the pressures and symbolism of decolonization.

In envisioning the ultimate transfer of French India to the Indian Union, Prime Minister Nehru expressed the wish that Pondicherry become an «open window» on French culture and civilization in India. Both French and Indian diplomats have often invoked this phrase to emphasize the origins and depth of ongoing French and Indian relations in the five former French establishments of Chandernagore, Karaikal, Mahe, Pondicherry, and Yanam. One of the institutions purposely established to foster this harmonious relationship between post-colonial France and sovereign India is the French Institute of Pondicherry.

Thirty-five years after the *de jure* cession of Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam to India in 1962 (Chandernagore officially joined India ten years earlier), the Institut Français de Pondichéry has become the paradoxical publisher of Professor Ajit K. Neogy's exhaustive account of the seven years leading up to the prior *de facto* transfer of 1954. I say «paradoxical» because

the Institute, originally conceived as a face-saving symbol for the departing French, has given Neogy (professor of history at Visva-Bharati University in West Bengal) the uncensored opportunity to chronicle and document the rather embarrassing details of France's doomed and protracted attempts to retain her foothold in India following India's general independence in 1947. However antithetical the conclusions to the aims of its conceptual architects, it is to the immense credit of the French Institute's current directors that they have permitted an Indian scholar to publish a book which is so critical of the erstwhile French Indian administration. Publication by the French Institute of Pondicherry of *Decolonization of French India* is a stellar example of academic freedom in the French world.

By the same token, Professor Neogy might have made some greater effort, at least for the benefit of the non-Indian and non-specialist readership, to convey the French position during the period under consideration. He gives short shrift to the argument, rooted in two and a half centuries of cultural diffusion and progressive enfranchisement, that France had indeed made a substantial mark in these few «pockets» of the Indian subcontinent and that substantial numbers of French Indians might actually have voted for continued French sovereignty had they been given the opportunity. (The fact that thousands of Pondicherrians subsequently did opt for French citizenship, and treaty loopholes encouraged many more to acquire it even later, is relevant in this context.) Nor does he reflect much sympathy for the French constitutional conundrum which prohibi-