

The Balasore Papers: A Compendium of Important Documents relating to the Anglo French Dispute over the French Loge in Balasore India: 1693-1949

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Already the author of over a dozen books, Dr K.J.S. Chatrath, IAS, prefers to carry his scholarship modestly. I had no inkling of his academic accomplishments when I first met him in 1998 at the IAS, Shimla, where he served as its then Secretary. It is my pleasant task, therefore, to review one of his several books and aptly enough, for a journal run by the Institute itself.

Dr Chatrath's keen interest in the history and culture of modern France has led him to work consistently on wide ranging subjects including Indo-French relations. He is also a researcher who relies much on arduous spade work, detecting and bringing to light archival material that would have otherwise remained hidden from public knowledge.

The Balasore Papers is a valuable collection of documents relating to a modest plot of land at Balasore, Odisha, which technically constituted a part of the French dominion in India. Balasore was one of the several sites in eastern and southern India where factories of the French East India Company (*loge* in French) were located. It was, however, never as well known or important a French settlement as were Chandannagar or Pondicherry. Apparently, the station had fallen into disuse by the early 18th century and the land periodically leased out to enterprising Indian landlords from adjacent British Indian territory. Interestingly though, the *loge* at Balasore never really became a matter of violent dispute between the English and the French even though both parties periodically expressed concern about the fate of this miniscule colony. The English were unhappy with the fact that this thickly wooded and sparsely populated area had become the

refuge for 'bad characters' and smugglers who were carrying out trade in illicit liquor. The problem of law and order seems to have persisted since as late as 1934 the French registered a complaint about a woman being abducted from their territory by British subjects. Reform minded Englishmen also complained about the 'barbaric' practice of hook swinging that was reportedly held in these territories. The French, on their part, alleged that Indian landlords from the British held territories surrounding the French *loge* were encroaching upon their lands notwithstanding the fact that the land around the Balasore *loge* was officially leased out to British Indian subjects. They also resented the fact that some 'trouble makers' in the area were unjustly apprehended by the British police and tried at the Calcutta High Court. The size of the land held by the French consistently remained under dispute. A document dating back to 1870 takes the area to be about 100 acres in size on which were erected about two dozen houses. In 1893, the French Overseer of Roads and Bridges alleged that some land holdings belonging to the French were not shown in British Cadastral Surveys. In 1947 though, the land was found to measure only 40 acres.

Notwithstanding recurring charges and counter charges, the *loge* at Balasore never turned out to be a very contentious matter for the French compared to certain other settlements. In 1936 for example, the French government approached the International Court of Justice at Hague for arbitration in some of its other colonies like Masulipatnam and Iskitpah. Following this move the French administration displayed a greater interest in providing civic amenities to the people settled at Balasore. In 1937, it responded favorably to a petition from local people demanding that a well be dug in the

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area and in 1942-43, it publicly distributed drugs for the control of malaria and cholera.

By 1945, however, the British appear to have made up their minds about annexing the disputed area to their territory. By this time, the knotty problem of decolonization was very much on the minds of all concerned and in May 1947, French officials entered into deliberations with Nehru about the prospects of integrating French territory with the nascent Indian state. Two important consequences followed from these deliberations; first, the interest that Nehru showed towards Indians gaining greater knowledge of French civilization and culture and second, the need for an amicable settlement between the contending parties. Of the first, the Research Institute at Pondicherry remains a very productive and enduring example. Happily, the amalgamation of French territory (officially completed by September 1947) with the Indian never produced the armed violence and diplomatic tension that came to pass over the colonies held in India by Portugal.

The present work is a collection of 271 documents besides extracts reproduced from books and gazetteers that helps us to reconstruct a little known history in its vital details. The documents cover the period 1693 to 1949 with certain gaps in time. Exchanges between the English and the French pertaining to Balasore were at their sharpest and most frequent in the 1890s but there are also substantial gaps in time as between the years 1720-57, 1758-85, 1786-1835 and 1870-81 when matters were rather quiescent. This is worth historical interrogation. Arguably, the nature and frequency of these exchanges were determined by political, military and diplomatic developments in both India and Europe. In India, the British East India Company had clearly got the better of

the French by the 1760s even though skirmishes between the two continued on the European continent for another 20 years. The French threat was temporarily revived in the 1790s by Tipu Sultan's liaison with the French and on account of the Napoleonic Wars. Surely, these would have diverted attention from as insignificant or inconsequential an issue as the dispute over Balasore. On the other hand, the sharpening of exchanges in the 1890s are explained with reference to Viceroy Northbrook's administration, by all accounts an imperialistic and conservative one.

There are a few factual errors and typos that I noticed in this otherwise finely produced and valuable book. First, contrary to claims made (p. 4) the French settlement at Cossimbazar was located in Murshidabad and not Dhaka. On p. 8 there is an intriguing reference to a *parwana* issued during the 39th year of Akbar corresponding to the year 1696 which, in all probability, is a reference to Aurangzeb. On p. 14, the author claims that charak puja and hook swinging was a part of Kali worship when in reality these are essentially associated with Siva. The goddess Kali may well have been invoked too since in Hindu mythology Siva and Sakti are never fully apart. I noticed a typo in the sub title where the word 'over' has been printed as 'ever'. This, at least, ought not to have escaped the proof reader. Technically speaking, this is a compiled and edited work and should have been mentioned as such. No date of publication is given in the book and I could only infer that it is 2011. Finally, this is a work that is best read with Chatrath's *Some Vignettes of Balasore and its French Loge*, also published in 2011. To all serious students of political and diplomatic history concerning our colonial past, I have great pleasure in recommending this valuable pair of books.