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## A 3 Fact and Fiction about Franco-Pondicherry

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### **Abstract:**

*History is a science that could give space only to facts. In such documents sentiments and human relationships are dealt with only to a limited extent. When it comes to colonialism, these humanitarian factors play a major role since two extremes are to survive together: in this case, powerful France and traditional India. These parts that cannot be touched by History are easy to be dealt with in a work of fiction. This Paper presents the novel *La Conquête du Paradis*, published in 1890 by the French writer, Judith Gautier. The story takes place in Pondicherry, a Union Territory in South India, which was then under the governance of Dupleix in the middle of the 18th century. The hero is De Bussy, an officer under the fold of Dupleix. He falls madly in love with Ourvaci, the queen of Bangalore. This beautiful love plot has for its décor true historical events. The period was strongly marked by the rivalry between the English and the French which is narrated to the best of the author's honesty. Besides, the novel focuses also on the disparities between castes, a tradition deeply rooted into the soils of India, seen through the eyes of the French. This two-way narration, with romance on one side and history on the other, illustrates not only the Pondicherry of yore and the projects of the ambitious French on the land, but also the feelings and the reactions of the natives towards the reforms of the French. Through this article, I would like to bring out the point that besides historical documents the works of fiction of such kind based on historical events, could also serve as documentation of India's colonial history.*

### **1. Introduction**

India with her beautiful and powerful natural assets has always been a land envied by the people around the world and a paradise that encloses mystical treasures that different powerful nations have highly desired to conquer. This has certainly enriched her history while making India the mother of various races. Europeans, especially the English and the French, have played a major role in the colonial history of India.

The French, who settled in peninsular India for their trading profits between the years 1667 and 1954, were particularly interested in the Deccan plateau. They were far from being considered as conquerors and have proven themselves many a time as allies of the Indian rulers. These people were ready to support, with their strong military forces, some Indian kings in the restitution and protection of their kingdoms against traitors and remained loyal to the Emperor of Delhi.

For the memories the Indian ancestors had of their colonizers we have the historical documents to be browsed. But the image that France had of India was certainly not a less interesting one. India, seen through the eyes of the French is revealed to be more outlandish that makes Indians feel proud of themselves at times. We often seek the traces of Indians in their minds through the historical scripts and documents, and forget most of the times that works of fiction that are created with a true historical plot would serve the purpose better, since they could hold a delightful liberty of detailing the cultural land in its true local colors. This Paper is destined to throw light on India as imagined by a French woman writer Judith Gautier of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Judith Gautier was a French poet, historical novelist and an oriental scholar whose writings mainly conspired on Chinese, Japanese and Indian themes. The novel that we have for the object of study is called *La Conquête du Paradis* (The Conquest of Paradise) and was written in 1890 and published by Armand Colin editors. This novel contains 33 chapters in which the story takes place in various places around the Deccan plateau, among which Pondicherry, Madras (Chennai), Bangalore, Aurangabad, Hyderabad are the important ones. With some editors, this work takes a subtitle of 'Pondicherry of 18<sup>th</sup> century' and this highlights the reliability of the historical character of this novel.

The novel opens with the arrival of Charles de Bussy in India in the year 1746. This period was strongly marked by the conflicts between the English and the French over the question of the colonial powers in Madras. The English get defeated and the French take hold of Madras. But Dupleix, the governor of French India, was not happy with the treaty that La Bourdonnais signed with the English.

Meanwhile Bussy accidentally meets the queen of Bangalore, Ourvaci, whose life he saves from a tiger, and falls madly in love with her. He later learns that his act of rescue is considered to be a stain by the queen and her community who are called Brahmans. Yet, he remains obsessed with her. He learnt from a loyal friend that since Bussy had not accepted any of the queen's presents, she still bears the stain caused by the touch of a foreigner who is considered equal to the lowest caste. Further, Ourvaci is engaged to Salabet-Cingh,

a Muslim prince, (whom the Brahmans can accept, for he is expected to inherit the powerful throne of Aurangabad). In a party at the Governor Dupleix's place he meets his rival Salabet-Cingh and burns of jealousy. A messenger was sent to Bussy to learn what he would expect the queen to pay as her debt of gratitude to which he replied a kiss from Ourvaci.

In the period in between, the French had to face three wars, one against Allah-Verdi, the nabob of Carnatic who attacked Madras yet withdrew incapable of withstanding the French defense. The second was against Marphiz-Khan, son of Allah-Verdi who wanted to take revenge on the French near the river of Adyar and Méliapore. This war was witnessed by Chanda-Sahib, the dispossessed but legitimate heir to the Carnatic throne, Ourvaci and her friend Lila who accidentally met each other there. The third war was against the English who had set up camp in the village Ariancoupan and the siege lasted for 5 weeks after which they lifted it on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1748. All these wars raised the reputation of Bussy and his bravery.

As a result, in the dinner organized in the governor's place, Salabet-Cingh seeks a friendship pact with him. Meanwhile, Chanda-Sahib solicits the support of the French to acquire his due Carnatic throne by defeating Allah-Verdi and then to move to Aurangabad to defeat Nasser-Cingh and thereby help Mouzaffer-Cingh to procure his power. Dupleix who has a secret plan of bringing the whole of India under the control of the French company was waiting for a chance to gain the sides of Indian princes by winning their allegiance and sees this as a good opportunity. He shares his secret with Bussy who he considers as the only person who could second him in this plan. Therefore, an army under the command of Auteuil and Bussy marches to Ambour and defeats Allah-Verdi.

Before going to conquer the throne of Aurangabad, Bussy was summoned by the queen of Bangalore to get his sacrilegious kiss. During the few minutes he spent alone with Ourvaci, Bussy felt the real love of the queen for him. But after kissing him passionately Ourvaci ordered her warriors to kill Bussy, who was though rescued by his friends who were following him without his knowledge.

The war against Nasser-Cingh was a failure for the French because of the disobedience of Mouzaffer who thereby got imprisoned by the enemy. Not happy with Nasser-Cingh, his allies the nababs of Kadappa and of Kanoul have covertly joined hands with French and Chanda-Sahib and agreed to perfidy the king during the next attack. In between the French had to put down Mahomet-Aly who was disputing with Chanda-Sahib the naboby of Carnatic. With the victory the grand army marches to wage war against Nasser-Cingh, kills him and sets Mouzaffer-Cingh free.

After this, Dupleix assigns Bussy to follow Mouzaffer-Cingh to his kingdom to protect Salabet-Cingh. On the way to Aurangabad, thanks to the princess Lila, the favorite of Ourvaci, Bussy discovers the queen's love for him. Then comes a situation in which Mouzaffer-Cingh gets killed by the nabobs of Kadappa and Kanoul. Bussy, after taking revenge on them, had no other choice but to make Salabet-Cingh, his personal mortal enemy the king of Aurangabad.

The new king sends Bussy as an ambassador to the queen of Bangalore. Our hero accepts the mission and moves to meet Ourvaci. But in the letter of Salabet-Cingh to Ourvaci, the lovers learnt that the king sets her free to choose her own life. Bussy now feels ashamed for not having recognized his friendship and is extremely grateful to the king who discretely resigns himself from being an obstacle for his love.

While Bussy was away, Marattis managed to invade Deccan. Bussy runs for the rescue of king and defeats the Marattis. But, Panch-Anan who has meanwhile smelt the affair between Bussy and Ourvaci, intoxicates Bussy with a slow poison which makes him very weak and vulnerable to the extent that he even ordered for a retreat of French army when Aurangabad was attacked by the English and an Indian prince and commanded Salabet-Cingh to escape to Hyderabad. Somehow Dupleix sent another army to manage the situation, yet the reputation of Bussy is highly damaged by the effects of the slow poison in his body which finally pushes him to his death bed. It is only by a miracle of a saint Sata-Nanda that Bussy revives his life and lost energy. Learning that this plan was that of the minister of Bangalore Panch-Anan and believing that Ourvaci would be a part of it, he pledges not to have any more contact with her who made him so defenseless.

Ourvaci who is now abandoned by her lover considers herself as a widow and makes her mind to throw herself into fire as a sacrifice as per the practice of Hindus. Bussy learns the truth, thanks to the princess Lila, and the danger which the queen is surrounded by and hurries to Bangalore with his troop and rescues his lady at the right time. And thus ends the story happily.

We see that this historical fiction traces the true historical events that took place between 1746 and 1752 which include a series of colonial wars between the French and the English and the internal wars between the Indian princes reinforced by these colonizers. These wars and conflicts have strongly been marked in the course of history by many historians and even poets. To quote an example, the famous French poet Voltaire cites about the war that has taken place in Gengi in the 34<sup>th</sup> chapter of his *Précis du siècle de Louis XV*. Moreover, the facts in this novel are proved to be of extreme accuracy, including the date and time that coincide with the facts as recorded in the documents.

For instance, in the '*Mémoire à consulter pour la famille du Sieur Dupleix*', a record of all the correspondences and capitulation during that period, conceived by Bertrand-Francois Mahé de La Bourdonnais and published in the year 1751, we see the exact time and date in which the English Governor Morse handed over the power to the French. And we have in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter a comprehensive portrayal of the Siege of Pondicherry by the British which broke out in the village of Ariancoupan under the command of Boscawen. About this conflict that took place towards the end of the war of Austria's Succession, to be precise, on 29<sup>th</sup> April 1748, we have an account in *Illustrated France* written in the year 1853 by Victor Adolf Malte-Brun, a French mapmaker-geographer.

So keeping these true wars and conflicts between the different nabobs and the plan of the French company for India in mind, the author of this novel has tried to bring out the image of India in its own colors. Coming to the core of the presentation, it is this image of ourselves as conceived by a French writer that I would like to throw light on and I propose to do this study under six aspects: Landscape and Architecture, Harmony in religions, Caste system, Appearance and dressing, Habits and customs, Rituals and Ceremonies. It is mainly in these six grounds that our motherland is viewed as a paradise, which provokes the various nations to conquer her.

## 2. Landscapes and Architecture

Landscape is the first thing that a foreign mind would like to frame when he steps on a new soil. Be it a writer of yore or a contemporary tourist, it is mainly the landscape and architecture of a place that would be the base of design of his conception. In the very first chapter Gautier describes a panoramic view of the Indian land such that its buildings have a mysterious and sly appearance. Bussy's conscience as he approaches the peninsular India reveals this better.

"The name of India has always had for the young Marquis something of magic. This country seems to him as a mysterious land, a superior creation, masterpiece of the nature, vital paradise of which the heightened humanity had overflowed as from a cup too much filled. He loved it without knowing about it, as a motherland, and in this love there was an intuition that his destiny had to be accomplished there." (La Conquête du Paradis, 18). This love for India made him learn our language, history and literature too. He even adored the characters like Nour-Djehan across centuries.

The sight of Gengi in Bussy's eyes is cited as follows: "Gengi appears, now, beyond the plain, as a wild and impossible creation. It was a mountain, abruptly risen, by rough slopes, covered with greenery, till a nearly triangular plateau, at each angle of which has emerged a breathtaking steep peak, with straight slopes like high walls where there was no path other than few gashes made by men. The city was on this plateau, between these three mountains, and the extremely strong walls, with many towers, were following the windings of the land [...]. Down below, in the plain, built against the mountain, there was a white mosque, with two rows of arcades, with delicate minarets; and, on the peak of each hillock stands out in the sky a fortress, surrounded by a ring of stronghold." (La Conquête du Paradis, 234).

This fiction rich with Indian colors doesn't spare the landscape of Bangalore too. When Bussy visits Bangalore to get the sacrilegious kiss from Ourvaci he encounters the architecture of the princess Lila's palace, and later the queen's palace. In the scene where Bussy arranges to meet Ourvaci, we learn about Kamadeva, the god of Love, his posture and the significance of his five arrows that attack five senses, and his temple in Asoka forest.

Apart from the landscapes, the architecture and the aesthetic beauty of some important forts, monuments and buildings and their usage by the English are also evoked in this work. For example, when Dupleix's officers come to interrogate La Bourdonnais on his treaty that dangerously favors the English, they get imprisoned in the first floor of Saint George in Madras. Through a window, these officers anxiously watch the French army moving away in the sea in the time of a cyclone. One of these officers named Paradis who was frustrated at being imprisoned by La Bourdonnais states that he had treated La Bourdonnais well when he came to stay in Pondicherry at his place at Oulgaret.

Pondicherry being the capital of the French India, the whole 7<sup>th</sup> chapter is dedicated to it. This chapter opens with a house in Valdaour, just outside the walls of Pondicherry. This house belonged to Marion, orphan of a French family who got settled there for trade. A detailed description of this house pictures the architecture of Pondicherry. When Bussy was to enter into the city with his friend, Pondicherry seemed to be a huge park to him and a tropical Versailles. His friend explains to him that inside the walls the town wouldn't be as fresh as it was there and all this place that envelops Pondicherry from the sea up to the river of Ariancopan by forming a semi-circle six miles long is covered with a hedge of coconut and palm trees, and aloe and cactus which served as a natural strong defense against the cavalry and infantry.

And about the governor's palace in Pondicherry, the writer says: "The residence of the governor was constructed in the style of the palace of Versailles, but with a more noticeable and more colorful luxury and with certain concessions to the climate of the country, like verandas and open galleries." (La Conquête du Paradis, 88). It was also said that the room of Mrs. Dupleix who is fondly called as begum by the indigenes had a more Indian décor.

## 3. Harmony in Religions and Ceremonies

India which has always been known for its unity in diversity was depicted in this novel just as it was. Hindus and Muslims live in peace and harmony. Even in the royal Brahman family who were considered to be the most sacred caste in the society, the Muslims were respected and given high positions in the court. Moreover, they were told to be extremely talented in the science of medicine and masters of Al-Teifaschi, a new method of treating with precious stones. And when it came to politics the Hindu and Muslim kings and queens had no reluctance in having inter-religious marriages for the welfare and security of their kingdoms. Apart from Hindus and Muslims, there were also communities such as Moors and Armenians who lived in the society. These were the Muslims who migrated from Mauritania, Maghreb and Turkey. Whenever there was a celebration in the governor's place, people were invited irrespective of their religions or races.

## 4. Caste System

Caste was conceived as the most sickening feature of the societal design of our country. The vigor with which they were following the caste system made them feel disgusted at times. The Brahmans who called themselves as the most superior caste considered even the French as barbarians for their eating habits and treated them implicitly as parias. After rescuing Ourvaci, when Bussy was treated in a shed, he was visited by a Brahman who asked about his caste. In anger, Bussy told him that he was a Marquis in his country which is equivalent to Kchatria. Yet, Brahmans didn't bother about taking him to the palace.

Paria is the lowest caste and these people had restrictions in whatever they did. They were allowed to enter neither into the temple nor into the palace. They used to have a small plank tied with a rope around their hip, which they take and keep in front of their mouth every time they talk to the high caste people. Naik was the paria whom Bussy met and he found the man to be of a refined personality. He saw him reading a book and enquired about it and learnt that it was book written by a Valouver, a member of a sub-community of

paria who are literate to a certain level. This particular Valouver, who was later called Tirou-Valouver, surpassed even the most intelligent Brahmans of his time and hence rose to the level of the president of the temple of science.

### 5. Attire and Appearance

It is in the second chapter that the appearance and attire of Indians as per their own caste and community are well depicted. In the shed where Bussy was treated there were two parias who were assigned to serve him. Then a Brahman named Ragoonat Dat who is the minister of Bangalore came to visit him. He was accompanied by a doctor who was a Moghul. The presence of these three divisions at a place threw light on the contrast in their dressing and overall appearance. The parias were according to Bussy looking very miserable: "Nude, apart from a scrap around the waist, of an excessive skinniness, the skin dried and brown like an oak tree, long thighs, sharp elbows, he had the strange look of a grasshopper" (La Conquête du Paradis, 26). He also added that his eyes had a spark of intelligence contrary to the reserved expression and attitude of his body and that his eyes resembled a light in a grave.

When the two noble men entered, he saw that the Brahman was having a majestic look and was wearing a white dress fastened to his waist with a small silver cord. The Moghul was looking pale with his turban and a thick black moustache, luxuriously dressed in a predominantly green brocade. Salabet-Cingh, the prince of Aurangabad when seen by our hero, "[...] was wearing a rich oriental costume, fully embroidered in golden, with his necklaces, bracelets, earrings, gems crochets, he was looking like a ravishing woman (La Conquête du Paradis, 106).

It was common that Bussy associated the look of Salabet-Cingh wearing so many jewels with a woman, because for them, they imagined Indian women decorated with gold jewels. When Bussy saw Ourvacî for the first time, it was only for a second since he had to quickly act to rescue her from the tiger, and the first thing that struck him was that she was dazzling with gold ornaments. Bussy, who out of his passion for India, learnt its language, history and mythology, had in his mind an ideal woman who would resemble Sita or Nour-Djehan. Hence this could be the image that a young man could have of an ideal Indian woman.

### 6. Habits and Customs

The writer doesn't fail to speak also about the vehicles used at those times in Pondicherry: palanquins, carried by the blacks and escorted by three rows of guards dressed in white, sedan chairs richly painted and polished, held by servants in livery, chariots with golden roof dragged by bullocks, huge coaches topped with roof racks, showing emblazoned doors, camels carrying a messenger, elephants with mahouts on their necks and Hindu barons on their backs.

Many more adorable habits of Indians are brought to light in this novel. When Bussy after saving the queen of Bangalore gets treated by the Brahmans, the minister says: "A guest, whoever it may be, is sacred for a Hindu; with or without weapons; you have nothing to fear on us" (La Conquête du Paradis, 30). This speaks about the hospitality of the South Indians for they wanted to treat Bussy well though they consider his country and his people as barbarians. While they take leave, these guests considered sacred are offered betel leaves on which the host pours some rose essence. To get rid of the heat they had a big fan called 'panka' that was generally suspended from ceiling and operated with the help of a rope by a black from the adjacent room. And the honorable guests to royal palaces were woken up in the morning by a Vetatika who comes with a golden harp and sings for the guest.

In one of the celebrations in the governor's palace, Bussy comes upon a fakir, an Indian sage who was foretelling the destinies of the people around him. He was hired to amuse the guests of the party and while foretelling, he was also collecting the coins thrown to him and was hiding it under his feet. Though it is for fun that Bussy approaches him, the fakir correctly tells about the wound on his shoulder caused by a tigress and earns his respect. We also see his foretelling of Bussy's destiny come true in no time. Further, this fakir was the one who, when Bussy is dreadfully sick and everybody is certain of his death in a few hours, comes at the correct time to save his life. So, it is definitely not an image of mockery that Sata-Nanda is adorned with in this novel.

Not only the customs of the Hindus, but those of the Muslims are also enlightened. In the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter we have a detailed account of the morning ablutions and prayers carried out by the Muslims. "[...] he sucks up water by his nose, washes his face and the back of his ears thrice, and, taking hands full of water, drenches his right shoulder, then the left, and the top of the head, washes the openings of his ears, his neck, his chest, his stomach, his thumb, all his fingers, and finally his feet, saying his last prayer: "Hold me strongly, oh Lord! And don't suffer that my feet stumble out of fear on the sharp bridge of sirat which goes over Gehenna"" (La Conquête du Paradis, 193). When Bussy's friend mocks this practice of Muslims, the hero says that he cannot help having great respect for this religion in which the cleanliness is a prayer. Amongst the Hindus also, the practice of ablution in the evening in front of Sun god was prevailing, which they call as the sandia of evening.

The practice of medicine was also flourishing. The Muslims were mostly the doctors in palaces and we learn about a peculiar method of treating illness called Al-Teifaschi which was prevalent. This is a method in which the doctors treat illness by placing precious stones like rubies, diamonds and emeralds on different parts of the body. The fakirs were also capable of treating the sick. When Bussy is about to die of a slow poison, the fakir comes to his rescue and revives him by rubbing a poisonous plant vigorously on his body to fight against the poison in his blood.

They also had a few beliefs that were considered to be superstitious by the French. For example, the Hindus strongly believed that the Gods who have descended on earth in human disguise don't blink their eyes.

### 7. Rituals and Ceremonies

Hindus in the 18<sup>th</sup> century had a long list of rituals and ceremonies which they performed fastidiously. While most of these ceremonies were regarded with respect by the French, a few of them fall under superstitions. One such ceremony was portrayed in the chapter named Rahou. The Hindus were having a ceremony during Rahou, the moment in which they believed the monster Rahou swallows

the Tchandra, the moon in order to take revenge on her for having betrayed him to Vichnou about his stealing of amirtha when the Gods were churning it from the sea. During this occasion, they used to shout at the Rahou and abuse him while trying to save the moon.

The worst ritual that the French detested was that of Sati. The queen of Bangalore, Ourvaci who learnt that she was abandoned by her lover Bussy considered herself as a widow and wanted to sacrifice her life by throwing herself into fire. There were certain rituals that the Brahmans performed before this sacrificial act. In the royal necropolis the sandalwood was arranged and the Brahmans were seated on a stage in front of it, praying with hands raised towards the sky. The musicians used to play with an intensive volume. The pyre was decorated with flowers and leaves and they pour amber and musk around it. They give a drink that was supposed to numb the victim's senses in order to avoid any scandal during the suicidal sacrifice. The victim throws herself on this pyre after which the slaves set fire. This practice was conceived by all the Hindus irrespective of their caste and creed.

Hence I conclude that works of historical fiction, with their liberal story plots that are designed in the framework of true historical events, are more appropriate to refer to when a foreigner would like to know more deeply about the indigenes of a certain period. It is with all these facts which include mystery, magnanimity and an outlandish glamour that a foreign soul would have built an image of India that remained exotic for most of the young French warriors who stepped into our country. Their power and passion for this mysterious country, when added to the tradition and divinity of the indigenes, made our regions especially Pondicherry which was the capital of French India more appealing such that this city still continues to have an important revenue source from its tourism.

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