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Anne Raffin, *Republican Citizenship in French Colonial Pondicherry, 1870-1914*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022. 250 pp. €99.00. (hb). ISBN 9789463723558; €98.99. (eb). ISBN 9789048553556.

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This book begins with two arresting images from the late nineteenth century. The first is a polling booth in Pondicherry. It is manned by upper-caste men and lower-caste men are shown casting their votes. The second is a postcard of two French schoolchildren arriving in Pondicherry, pointing towards the symbol of the French Republic, the French flag. Raffin's book seeks to explore the tension between these two images: one that marks Pondicherry as belonging to the French Republic and the other, which demonstrates what it might have meant in practice. In doing so, Raffin aims to contribute to the historiography of republican citizenship during the Third Republic, as well as that of French India.

The key focus of the book is the French colonial state's *mission civilisatrice* in French India, or Pondicherry more specifically, as it manifested itself through the ballot box. Raffin draws inspiration from Alice Conklin's seminal *Mission to Civilize* and aims to do for Pondicherry what Conklin did for French West Africa.[1] Raffin wants to explore how the French state created imperial citizens and whether the language of the civilizing mission reflected a "genuine belief in the superiority of French culture and its ability to improve the lives of inhabitants of Pondicherry" (p. 16).

Like most books on French India, Raffin begins with a chapter on the history of early colonial rule, competition with the British and the eventual emergence of Pondicherry as the heart of French India. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a social, cultural and political context for the introduction of universal suffrage and political rights in French India. It also places Pondicherry within its geographical location—a small enclave on the periphery of British India, which raises the potential for points of comparison with British India. When these comparisons are made, however, they lean more heavily on primary sources than the sophisticated historiography of British colonial rule in India. For instance, caste, which is a key concept in the book, emerges as a static entity, quite contrary to what it was in practice in the late nineteenth century. The extensive literature on the caste system in India has demonstrated the ways in which it was a dynamic system. The efforts of the colonial state (British, in this case) to enumerate the caste system only led to opportunities for different caste groups to articulate their identities and their position in the socio-cultural and political hierarchy in response to the census. There is evidence of similar practices in French India. Indeed, Raffin shows us how higher castes,

especially the Vellalas, came to manipulate and control the electoral process. But these engagements, and how they might have shaped caste identity in Pondicherry, remain peripheral in an analysis which is aimed at understanding the role of the state in shaping its citizens.

Raffin defines citizenship as “the relationship between an individual or a group of people with a political entity” which in this case is the French empire (p. 18). The proposed analytical framework to understand this relationship, inspired by T.H. Marshall’s work from 1950 on Great Britain [2], involves an examination of the development of “civil (individual rights such as freedom of speech), political (right to vote) and social rights (access to education, for instance)” (p. 18). The key chapters of the book explore these facets one after the other. First, there is a discussion of the identity of the French citizen and the multi-layered political society of the Topas, the *renonçants*, and Catholics. The Topas were descendants of Indians who had converted to Christianity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, had renounced their personal status, and therefore were treated as equal to Europeans. They were distinguished by the right to wear hats, like Europeans, their Catholicism, and their adoption of Portuguese names. The *renonçants* were those who had renounced their personal status and subjected themselves to French law. Renunciation was permanent and irrevocable. It was invariably accompanied by a conversion to Christianity and an adoption of a Francophone name. This chapter looks at how these three groups engaged with the colonial state and its attempts to classify them for legal, administrative, and electoral purposes. What comes through unambiguously is a “civilizational” ordering of local society very much in line with the political ideologies of the Third Republic.

The following chapter looks at schools and the military, two pillars of the republican state. Raffin argues that these should have worked towards inculcating an idea of republican citizenship in the colony. She offers a remarkable synthesis of the history of education in colonial Pondicherry, which examines key debates amongst local elite and the administration about the nature and purpose of education, its reach, and the value of French-language teaching. Raffin concludes that because, in practice, education and military structures were shaped by local compromise, such as respecting caste hierarchies and limited use of the French language, neither the military nor schools could serve as “instruments for the formation of a republican nation based on a shared language, equal participation in public life and the defence of the motherland by all young males” (p. 101). This is followed by a chapter on electoral practices, focusing especially on the politics of petitions. Here Raffin systematically examines petitions to the colonial state challenging the outcome of local elections in order to argue that, while these petitions questioned the state’s ability to conduct fair elections, they simultaneously, and paradoxically, legitimised colonial authority.

The greatest strength of the book is the richness of its primary source material. The author has consulted a wide variety of archives from France to Pondicherry. Despite the heavy focus on French-language sources, we are nonetheless given access to an array of actors—metropolitan politicians and local French administrators as well as Indian civil servants, politicians, and petitioners. The book is full of stories such as that of a lower-caste schoolboy who wanted to join the colonial army. The boy apparently expressed this desire to the governor general on a school visit in 1889. The republican press in French India used this to highlight the double standards of upper-caste French Indians who sought to enjoy republican rights without any responsibilities. Compulsory military service was not a criterion for citizenship in French India. This story is mentioned in passing, as part of a history of military service in Pondicherry. But it deserved more attention for giving us a glimpse into the ways in which republican institutions provided a way

for lower castes to claim equality in a context where none existed. Existing work on British India has made clear that access to education was seen as a way out of a restrictive socio-economic order, and this appears to be another example of that, but in a French colonial context.

Throughout the book there is a tension between the richness of the source material and an attempt to contain it within a single overarching analytical framework. This is perhaps most evident in the chapter on petitions. In this chapter, Raffin records a range of petitions made to the colonial state complaining about electoral fraud. These petitions are used to bolster a well-established argument that elections in French India witnessed a high degree of manipulation and voter fraud. Historically, election results were routinely questioned well up to the famous referendum on merger with India in 1954. Raffin uses the petitions to demonstrate the scale of electoral fraud and ask why it was so prevalent. The answer to that question is found in the weakness of the state, colonial institutions, and poorly trained officials. It is, however, worth moving beyond this analysis and revisiting the content of these petitions. If they are read alongside the countless editorials cited in the book, we see two parallel narratives of imperial citizenship being articulated in Pondicherry, one representing a more “assimilationist” version emphasising rights and equality (as articulated by the *renonçants*) and another resting on preserving traditional social structures and hierarchies of cultural and political power (as articulated by conservative leaders like Chanemougam Modéliar). The tensions between these two visions are constantly visible throughout the chapters, even where they are not explicitly drawn out by the author.

The book successfully demonstrates that for all the rhetoric of a civilising mission, in French colonial Pondicherry it was the realities of a heterogenous, caste-based society that shaped the experience of republican citizenship. In Raffin’s words, while “citizenship initiatives” in colonial Pondicherry “were derived from the ideology and practices of the metropole, they were negotiated through a triangular relationship between the French metropolitan authorities, colonial administrators in Pondicherry, and members of local society” (p. 100). Yet in limiting the study to Pondicherry, the work ignores one significant and characteristic feature of French India that shaped the experience of citizenship and exposed its limitations. French India was a disparate, diverse, and multilingual space with its various composite parts separated by hundreds of miles of British Indian territory and princely states. This fractured geography shaped how the French saw their Indian colony and limited the extent to which they could exercise political power. A narrow focus on “colonial Pondicherry” elides much of this complexity. Finally, while citizenship was a right granted by the colonial state, its meaning on the ground was just as important. It could, for example, be a form of engagement with the colonial state, a way of challenging the presumptions of colonial knowledge, or a means of manipulating state structures both in the metropole and the colony. These are the stories we can see coming through the archival sources cited, through the petitions and editorials. And it is in these that we should look for meanings of imperial citizenship in French India.

NOTES

[1] Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[2] T.H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class, and other essays* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1950).

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