JOSEPH FRANCOIS DUPLEIX

1697-1763

LIEUT-GENERAL S.L. MENEZES

DUPLEIX, the Governor to be of French India, was born in 1697 into a wealthy, provincial bourgeois family, though not of the nobility. After his successful siege of the English at Madras in 1746, he was ennobled and awarded the cross of Saint Michael. (Nearly two centuries later, the English named a New Delhi road and lane after him, as a tribute to his prowess.) His father's family came from near Poitiers, where for some generations they had been trades people. Dupleix's father, however, entered into tax-collecting and his work took him to Landrecies, where he became the Controller General of the lands of Hainault. In 1695 he married Anne Louise de Massac, the daughter of a royal official.

The father moved soon after to Brittany, becoming a Royal Councillor and Receiver General of the King's farms by 1700. Together with the scions of the Breton aristocracy the young Joseph was educated by the Jesuits at Quimper. Later he was to champion the cause of the Jesuits at Chandernagore against the prejudices of the French Superior Council at Pondicherry. One might also explain Dupleix's later aristocratic pretensions, in terms of his adolescent association with the Breton nobility, less class-ridden than the other French provincial nobility.

Francois Dupleix, the father, eventually moved to Paris. By 1721 he had prospered sufficiently to become one of the Farmers of Tobacco, a lucrative government office which brought him into close contact with the Directors and Syndics of the French East India Company. (The sale of tobacco, a French government monopoly, provided part of the capital necessary for the various French trading companies which rose and fell in rapid succession between 1717 and 1722.) It seems probable, that the elder Dupleix used his influence with the Directors to get his son appointed First Councillor and Commissary General of troops at Pondicherry in June 1721.

Although Joseph Dupleix was only twenty-four years old when this appointment was made, he was not entirely without experience. During the previous five years he had travelled extensively in France, and had sailed to India on at least one occasion and to America on another. He remained on intimate terms with his elder brother, Charles Claude Ange, who became in time another highly successful financier and took the title of 'Bacquencourt et de Mercin'. In 1730 Bacquencourt bought his way into the company of the Farmers General and his financial acumen—along with a fashionable second marriage to the daughter of the Chamberlain of the Duc de Lorraine, the father-in-law of Louis XV—gained him an entree into court circles. He remained Dupleix's most powerful ally and spokesman in France.

Arriving at Pondicherry in August 1722, Dupleix encountered an unfavourable reception from his future colleagues on the Superior Council, which comprised the Governor and five other members. At last he was accepted, but only as Fourth Councillor—a clear illustration of the way in which the local power in India would disregard instructions from the metropolis.

Until his appointment as 'directeur' of the French establishments in Bengal in 1731, Dupleix led the fairly humdrum life of a Company servant. He extended his knowledge of South India by visits, and in 1724 sailed to Canton as supercargo. Meanwhile relations between Governor Lenoir and this young man in a hurry deteriorated.

Dupleix used the influence of his brother, now a Farmer General at Paris, to gain the chief post in Bengal. As he frankly acknowledged to his brother in a letter written after his new appointment: I have always been of the opinion that without you I would have had nothing from the Company'.

He proceeded to Chandernagore with great hopes, for as early as 1727 he had recognised the potential which Bengal could offer as a centre of the 'country' trades, as distinct from 'foreign' trade. As with many other younger sons in the eighteenth century, his original intention in going to the East was almost certainly to amass a private fortune. He was now in a favourable position to achieve this goal and during the next ten years he was the chief inspiration behind French efforts to establish and sustain an extensive trade with the ports of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, the Maldives, Malacca and Manilla. Dupleix was nothing if not enterprising. Interested in opening up trade with Assam and Nepal, he even suggested to the Ministry at Versailles that an expedition be organised to search for

'des terres australes'. But owing to a number of shipping losses in the late 1730s he was not satisfied with his efforts to acquire a personal fortune. Martineau estimated his then assests at 555,000 livres.

In 1773 he was joined at Chandernagore by his personal friends, the Vincens family, whom he had first met at Pondicherry. Jacques Vincens was a Pondicherry Councillor who in 1719 married Jeanne Albert, later to become famous as Johanna Begum, the Marquise Dupleix. She was the daughter of a French Company surgeon, Jacques Theodore Albert, and her longlived mother was Elizabeth Rose de Castro, born at Madras in 1684 and herself the daughter of a Portuguese and an Indian woman. Certainly Madame Vincens spoke Tamil, English and French fluently (though she preferred to speak Portuguese), and she was conversant with Indian customs and politics. Dupleix was free to marry her after the death of Jacques Vincens in 1739, and they were wed at Chandernagore on 17 April 1741.

In 1735 Benoit Dumas and Mahe de La Bourdonnais, both of whom enjoyed the favour of Orry, the Controller General, and brother Fulvy, Commissary of the Company, were appointed as the Governors of Pondicherry and the French Islands in the Ocean. (Mauritius, etc.) respectively. Naturally this news was not welcomed by Dupleix who was even less pleased when titles of nobility and other distinctions were conferred on these two officials without similar recognition for his own services. It was at this time, too, that a French surgeon, Volton, at the Mughal court in Delhi, expecting the overthrow of Muhammad Shah by Nadir Shah, proposed to Dupleix that the Governors at Chandernagore and Pondicherry apply to become mansabdars of the Mughal empire. During the eighteenth century each mansabdar was graded in the imperial service according to his personal rank and the number of men in his service, there being mansabs of ten to ten thousand troops. A mansabdar was paid either directly from the imperial treasury or indirectly through the revenues of certain territories—these were the famous jagirs. By Dupleix's time, however, the office had lost much of its original importance as Mughal officials broke away from the empire and intermingled with the regional aristocracy, in this way acquiring for themselves strong local bases of power. Moreover, the system also suffered from a steady inflation of honours and offices in the eighteenth century.

Despite all this Dupleix was evidently impressed with the scheme. In a letter to Dumas dated 10 January 1740 he wrote that the mansabdar title 'would avoid for us a great many insults, especially

in Bengal; it is the highest mark of distinction and protection that one may obtain from the Mughal (Emperor) and on many occasions it would curb the avidity of the wretched (local) government with which we have to deal.....'The Company and the nation would be far more respected than they are in these districts and other nations would not delay to spend immense sums to be on the same footing'. Was personal glory his motive or did he acquire the title for the Company to enhance its opportunities for trade and profit? Had Dupleix become the first of the European 'nawabs'?

His remarks to Dumas suggest that he made an appraisal of the political and commercial advantages which would probably accrue to the French from their new status within the empire. Martineau believed that Dupleix was concerned with the honorific value of the title and not with the privileges and emoluments of office : Jouveau-Dubreuil argues that Dupleix saw in it a weapon of conquest. Dumas in Pondicherry warmly endorsed the idea and it was by all accounts the latter's initiative in providing refuge for the relatives of the slain Nawab of the Carnatic, Dost Ali Khan, in May 1740 that induced Muhammad Shah to accede to Volton's request. The French thus began to intervene in the politics of South India some years before the 'nawabised' Dupleix arrived at Pondicherry as Governor. Nor should we forget the general decline of the Mughal empire, revealed in 1739 by Nadir Shah's sack of Delhi.

Dupleix was one of the first outsiders to perceive the opportunities provided by the Mughal empire's disintegration; and certainly the French were the first Europeans to exploit such opportunities on a large scale. From his vantage-point in Bengal Dupleix was a great deal closer to the core of the Mughal state than were his countrymen in the South. He only felt the distant repercussions of Maratha turbulence. He saw in Bengal at first hand the growth to power of the Nawab-Nazims, largely independent of outside control. And when at last he received the title towards the end of 1741, he was quick to proclaim its merits : 'this title brings honour to the nation, and it can only result in good on this coast. The Faujdar of Hugli deferred to it by refusing to accept the salaam or gift that M. Dupleix presented to him when he took his leave of him : by such an action he acknowledged the superiority of his (Dupleix's) title over his own'.

On 30 December 1739 Dupleix was nominated Governor of Pondicherry by the Company, this decision being ratified by the King on 1 January 1740. Owing to the inevitable lag in communications the order was not executed until the summer of 1741, when Dumas

returned to France. Dupleix was now officially recognied as Commander of the French forts and establishments in India and President of the Superior and Provincial Councils.

Less than two years before, the Maratha cavalry had invaded the Carnatic to collect 'chauth' and rescue the Hindu ruler of Tanjore from hostile attack. Following the defeat of Dost Ali Khan's forces near Arcot in May 1740, there had been a general retreat to Pondicherry, where with great pomp and ceremony Dumas had received the immediate relatives of the slain Nawab. By this action the French were confirmed in their dual role as allies and guardians of the Navait (or Nait) community.

Ever since Aurangzeb's campaigns in the South, which partially extended Muslim rule there, the Nazims of the Carnatic had been men of the Navait community. The Navaits had originally settled in the costal region of Konkan, claiming to have come from Arabia in the eight century. At least the militant Tahir clan, if not all the Navaits were Shia Muslims. Sa'adatullah Khan, Aurangzeb's general and the first Navait Nazim Nawab of Arcot, invited his relatives and family from Konkan to the Carnatic and bestowed on them many jagirs and forts. By 1737 the relatives of Nawab Dost Ali Khan were firmly established as governor throughout the province and one of the most enterprising of them, Husayn Dost Khan (later to become famous as Chanda Sahib and a son-in-law of the Nawab), acquired the then Trichinipoly from its Hindu ruler.

In collaboration with the forces of the Nawab's son, Safdar Ali, Chanda Sahib next attacked Tanjore, now a Maratha state. Even at this early stage the French enjoyed close relations with Chanda Sahib and the Navait clan, often receiving delegations and loans from them at Pondicherry. Not surprisingly, the French hoped to profit from the war against Tanjore since they were themselves attempting to gain Karikal and its surrounding villages as a trading base. But the agression against Tanjore drew on their heads the Maratha eruption of 1740-41. Chanda Sahib was captured in April 1741 and taken to Satara as a prisoner; his wife and family were to remain at Pondicherry for the next eight years.

The disorder which followed in the wake of Nawab Safdar Ali's murder in October 1742, provided the pretext for Nizam-ul-mulk's intervention in the affairs of the Carnatic early in the next year. As Wazir of the Deccan and 'saviour' of the empire, Asaf Jah was an impressive though ageing personage. In many ways he resembled Aurangzeb, whom he had served with great distinction, and

he was ever careful to secure the interests of the Turani faction and foster Sunni orthodoxy. Inevitably, therefore, he alienated the Navait leaders, one Muslim historian reporting that Asaf Jah 'imprisoned all the people of the Nait community who were the source of mischief, trouble, enmity and intrigue, and took them along with his army'. Before returning to the Deccan he installed one of his veteran warriors, Anwar-ud-din, as Nawab of Arcot.

By the time Dupleix arrived at Pondicherry the Maratha armies had withdrawn from the area. Instead, the French cautiously eyed Fort St. George, the chief settlement of their English rivals on the Coromandel. When England declared war against Spain in 1739 and when in 1740 the War of the Austrian Succession broke out on the continent, it was clear to all that France would not long remain indifferent. In fact, French forces allied with Prussia intervened in Germany against Maria Theresa in 1741, although Fleury's policies averted a collision with England until 1744. In India, where news of the war reached Madras in September 1744, Dupleix optimistically believed that he could negotiate truce with English which would outlaw the extension of European hostilities to the East.

The English Council at Fort St. George was polite but evasive. A small squadron despatched from England soon after the declaration of the war conducted a campaign against the French merchant ships in the Malacca and Banca Straits area late in 1744. Dupleix, some of whose own ships had been captured, was outraged and his hostility towards the English probably dates from this period. As the War of the Austrian Succession continued, in September 1746 a French force succeeded in capturing Madras, a spectacular blow to English trade and prestige in South India. Pondicherry was thereafter invested by the British under Admiral Boscawen, with a fleet of 30 sail and a land force of 6000, on 30 August, 1748, and was defended by Dupleix. In October Boscawen was forced to withdraw having lost by sickness or in action nearly a third of his land force. The French lost only 250 during their whole seige of Pondicherry. In 1748 Madras was returned to Britain against Dupleix advice in exchange for Louisburg in Nova Scotia.

Much about the attitudes and behaviour of Dupleix at this time can be gathered from the profuse jottings of the Tamil diarist Ananda Ranga Pillai-Dupleix's chief 'dubash'. Ananda Ranga Pillai wrote, 'A hundred French soldiers are a match for 1,000 men of this part of the world'. Dupleix emerges as a more energetic and capable administrator than Dumas, with whom he is often compared. In

the style of the Regency grand seigneur or an eastern potentate, he loved display.

Since Dupleix found himself engaged increasingly in the affairs of the Company and the country powers—receiving embassies from the Nawab, the Nizam and their relatives, and conferring on them nazarana or gifts—he delegated much of the authority in matters affecting the 'ville noire' or the Indian population of Pondicherry to his wife. During the months in 1748 when Pondicherry was besieged by the reinforced English army and blockaded by Boscawen's fleet, Dupleix relied on his wife to organise a network of espionage and intrigue amongst the local community.

In the recorded interviews between Ananda Ranga Pillai and his master, who was eulogised in his writings as the 'Maharaja Raja Sri His Excellency Nawab Monsieur Chevalier Dupleix Bahadur Mazaffar Jang', we encounter a man as described by Brian Kennedy "who prides himself on his brilliance, his diplomatic finesse, and his sense of occasion. With subordinates he sometimes displays a suspicious and impatient nature, qualities which are to become aggravated during the siege of Pondicherry. But in sentiment and attitude he remains a Frenchman, a servant of the King desirous to win honour and glory for himself, his family and his country. Significantly, when the dubash seeks to influence his master it is through an appeal to such personal and patriotic ambitions."

His dramatic penetration of the politics of South India came after the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748. This involvement was a response to altered circumstances. While Dupleix attempted to keep in touch with Chanda Sahib during his exile at Satara, 'negotiating with the Marathas to pay his ransom and caring for his family at Pondicherry, this was no more than an intelligent gamble at the time.' There is no evidence concerning the success of the negotiations : whether the French actually paid the reasom, or if they did, whether this payment resulted in the release of Chanda Sahib early in 1748 ? That Dupleix saw the obvious—the imminent deaths of the aged and debilitated rulers of the Carnatic and Deccan, and following these the likely succession disputes between the Navaits and the ruling dynasty—is sufficient to account for his interest in the fortunes of Chanda Sahib and his relatives. In this way he was continuing the policies of Dumas.

With the death of Nizam-ul-mulk in June 1748 and the siege of Pondicherry by the English, however, Dupleix interest in the movements of Chanda Sahib ceased to be of merely academic concern.

Actual negotiation between Chanda Sahib's embassy and Dupleix appear to have been established in Feburary 1749, arms and men being promised well before the battle of Ambur. As Chanda Sahib later confided to Dupleix: 'you were pleased to send my son Raza Sahib with soldiers, sepoys, guns, mortars, shot, powder, shell and other munitions against Arcot'.

It was the exigencies of a European global war which had provided Dupleix with a large number of French troops, there being nearly two thousand French troops at Pondicherry in 1748. Until their repatriation they could be farmed out to native rulers in return for territorial revenues and commercial concessions. For years Dupleix had been embarrassed in his trading activities by the delay or insufficiency of funds from home, but now disputed successions in the Carnatic and the Deccan provided him with a splendid opportunity to acquire for the French the jagirs of Villiyanallur (or Villenour) and Bahour with their eighty-one villages around Pondicherry.

When the English intervened as the champions of Muhammed Ali, who had taken refuge in Trichinopoly after the battle of Ambur, Dupleix was forced to see the local conflict as an extension of European rivalries. The power of the English and their proteges, Muhammad Ali and Nasir Jang, must be checked and destroyed, while that of France and her allies, Chanda Sahib and Muzaffar Jang, must be consolidated and expanded. Ananda Ranga Pillai describes the great pleasure which Dupleix derived from his elevation to the exclusive military order of Saint Louis in 1750, his exploits in India earning him a marquisate in 1752. Of greater political and material value, however, was his appointment as Muzaffar Jang's nominal deputy to govern the lands south of the Krishna—a status that included 'the jagir of Chenji (Gingee), Tiruvati and other places', expected to produce a revenue of 350, 000 rupees.

By this time, Dupleix had become the patriarch of a large clan. Many of his commanders in the field and his colleagues on the Superior Council at Pondicherry were bound to him by personal as well as by official ties. Saint-Paul, admitted to the Council in 1749 as second-in-command, had married a sister of Madame Dupleix: the Irish baron, Jacques O' Friell (or Friel), formerly manager of a factory at Canton who had had dealings with the then French Cochin China, was married to a niece of Madame Dupleix and became a Pondicherry Councillor in 1748; while Choisy, the husband of Dupleix's own niece, also entered the Council in 1745. Furthermore, Dupleix

commander in the Carnatic, Combault d' Auteuil, was married to a sister of Madame Dupleix; Duval d'Espremenil, who was in command of Madras during the French occupation, married a daughter of Madame Dupleix in 1743: and the Marquis de Bussy, the most distinguished of the French officers and a close friend of Dupleix, was for a time betrothed to one of Madame Dupleix's daughters. There can be no doubt that Dupleix valued these bonds of kinship.

At first Dupleix met with considerable success in his diplomatic and military endeavours. The jagirs ceded by Chanda Sahib in 1749, together with the later revenue grants made by the ruler of Tanjore and the Subahdar of the Deccan, contributed substantially to the payment of the wars—at least for the initial phase.

From the time of Aurangzeb's death ambitious officials and local rulers had eagerly exploited opportunities at the periphery of the diminishing Mughal empire, and according to Brian Kennedy, Dupleix followed in their steps on behalf of France. There was little difference in method that separated this Frenchman from his Indian counterparts : both aimed to build up local power bases independent of the central government.

The conflicts between the French and British in India continued till 1754, when the French government anxious for peace in Europe and as the British viewed Dupleix's activities with growing suspicion and alarm sent to India a special commissioner with orders to supersede Dupleix and, if necessary, to arrest him. These orders were carried out with needless harshness. Dupleix's work in India was ruined at one blow, and he himself was compelled to embark for France on 12 October 1754. He had spent his entire private fortune in the prosecution of French public policy in South India, estimated by Martineau at 7 million livres. The French government refused to acknowledge the obligation, and would do nothing for the greatest of French colonial governors, who died in France in obscurity and want on 10 November 1763. His wife's demise in 1756 had preceeded his and he had remarried two years later. In a memoir in 1727, quoted by Martineau, he had written, "what joy it would be, if, after serving well and with careful management having accumulated something, one were to increase it considerably on returning to France, and by this means finish one's days in peace in the bosom of one's country." Alas, on his return in 1754, his country did not take this great administrator to its bosom.