International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

French Yanam and the French Slave Trade: Labour Networks Linking India, Mauritius and Madagascar and the Road to Abolition (17th–19th Centuries)

Ravulapati Venkaiah

Research Scholar, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad, India-500033

Abstract-
The French colonial presence in the Indian Ocean created a vast and interconnected system of labour extraction, maritime mobility, and plantation economies linking French India with Mauritius and Madagascar. Within this network, the small enclave of French Yanam played a disproportionately significant role by providing skilled and unskilled workers, bonded labourers, and maritime personnel required for the functioning of French plantations across the region. This study examines the historical evolution of the French slave trade in the Indian Ocean from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, with particular emphasis on the recruitment structures, contractual coercion, and maritime labour practices that connected Yanam to the wider French colonial world. Through an analysis of archival records, maritime documents, and secondary scholarship, the article traces how labourers from Yanam were integrated into plantation systems in Mauritius and Madagascar under conditions that often paralleled slavery. It also explores the legal and ideological shifts surrounding the abolition of slavery—beginning with the French Revolution's decree of 1794, its reversal under Napoleon in 1802, and the final, definitive abolition of 1848 under Victor Schœlcher—and evaluates their impact on French India and the broader Indian Ocean labour economy. The study highlights how the abolition of slavery did not terminate exploitative labour systems but instead restructured them through large-scale indentured migration from French Indian territories. By situating French Yanam within the wider framework of oceanic slavery, coercion, and colonial governance, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the transoceanic connections that shaped the economic and social history of the French Empire in the Indian Ocean world.

Keywords: French India; Yanam; Indian Ocean World; French Slave Trade; Mauritius; Madagascar; Plantation Labour; Engagés; Bonded Labour; Colonial Maritime Networks; French Colonialism; Abolition of Slavery 1848; Indentured Migration; Coromandel Coast; Compagnie des Indes.

1. INTRODUCTION

The French colonial presence in the Indian Ocean, stretching from India to Madagascar and Mauritius, played a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of the transoceanic slave trade and labour mobility during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. French imperial expansion in the region was driven not only by commercial ambitions but also by geopolitical competition with the British, Dutch, and Portuguese empires, making the Indian Ocean a central arena of colonial rivalry. French India—comprising

Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahé, Chandernagore, and Yanam—served as a strategic base for administrative control, maritime operations, and labour recruitment for plantation colonies in the Western Indian Ocean.[1] These enclaves provided France with essential access points to the South Asian coastline, enabling the movement of goods, soldiers, craftsmen, and coerced labourers across a vast maritime network that linked the Indian subcontinent with island colonies such as Mauritius and Madagascar.

Among these territories, **French Yanam**, though geographically small and often overlooked in colonial historiography, emerged as a vital labour reservoir within the French imperial system. Its coastal communities—traditionally engaged in fishing, navigation, weaving, and artisanal occupations—offered a pool of skilled and semi-skilled workers who were recruited into French shipping fleets, dockyards, and plantation economies.[2] The integration of Yanam into French maritime and labour circuits reveals a deeper pattern of colonial resource extraction, in which minor enclaves became disproportionately significant for sustaining plantation labour demands in Mauritius and Madagascar. These labourers, transported across the Indian Ocean, frequently entered forms of "contractual service" that masked conditions of coercion and exploitation comparable to slavery.

This study explores the historical trajectory of the French slave trade in the Indian Ocean, examines the specific role of French Yanam in labour circulation, and analyzes the broader imperial connections linking French India with the islands of Mauritius and Madagascar. By situating Yanam within the French colonial labour system, the paper highlights how labour mobility was shaped by a combination of economic pressures, administrative policies, and maritime logistics. The objectives of the study are threefold. First, it seeks to trace the structural development of the French slave trade and its administrative mechanisms across the Indian Ocean from the early modern period until the mid-nineteenth century. Second, it investigates the movement of labourers from Yanam to Mauritian and Malagasy plantations within the contexts of colonial demand, local recruitment networks, and coercive labour practices. Third, it analyzes the long-term consequences of the abolition of slavery in 1848, focusing on how abolition reshaped labour policies, migration patterns, and colonial restructuring across the French Empire.[3] These themes together illuminate the complex interplay between colonial governance, labour coercion, and cross-oceanic mobility.

The scope of this inquiry encompasses a comparative analysis of French India and the French Indian Ocean colonies, focusing on how small enclaves like Yanam became integrated into a vast imperial network of manpower extraction, plantation demand, and colonial governance. The study also considers how French colonial officials, local intermediaries, and coastal communities interacted within systems of labour brokerage that sustained plantation economies overseas. Through this integrated perspective, the research situates French India within the larger system of oceanic slavery, indenture, and abolition, contributing to the expanding field of Indian Ocean studies and offering new insights into the lesser-known connections between South Asia and the French colonial world.[4]

1. Richard B. Allen, Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius, Cambridge University Press, 1999.
2. R. J. Barendse, The Indian Ocean World and the French Colonial System, Leiden University Press, 2002.
3. Gwyn Campbell, An Economic History of Madagascar, Cambridge University Press, 2005.
4. Philip Curtin, The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Historical Context of French Presence in India

The French presence in India, although limited in geographical size compared to the vast British Indian Empire, developed as an essential component of France's broader strategic ambitions in the Indian Ocean world. French territorial possessions—Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahé, Chandernagore, and Yanam—were established between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through a combination of commercial treaties, military engagements, and diplomatic negotiations with local rulers. Pondicherry soon emerged as the administrative capital of French India and functioned as a central hub for military coordination, commercial exchange, and cultural dissemination. French rule in these enclaves was characterized by a high degree of centralized administration, missionary activity, and a pervasive emphasis on cultural assimilation that sought to imprint French language, manners, and sociopolitical norms upon local populations.[5] Unlike British colonialism, which largely relied on indirect rule and pragmatic accommodation with indigenous elites, the French cultivated a policy of direct administrative integration, reflecting their broader republican ideals and assimilationist doctrines that aimed to transform colonial subjects into quasi-French citizens. This resulted in the institutionalization of the French language in schools, courts, churches, and civic spaces, thereby embedding French cultural influence in the social landscape of the colonies.[6]

The Coromandel Coast, particularly the region surrounding Yanam, had long been recognized for its maritime traditions, artisanal craftsmanship, and thriving textile production, which attracted European trading companies from the seventeenth century onward. French officials capitalized on these pre-existing networks to recruit sailors, dockyard labourers, ship carpenters, translators, and bonded workers capable of supporting their Indian Ocean operations.[7] The recruitment system was facilitated by intermediaries—often local merchants and dubashes—who acted as brokers between the French administration and Indian labouring communities. Although French India did not engage in the large-scale slave raiding typical of European powers in West Africa, its significance within the slave and labour networks lay in its ability to provide skilled maritime personnel and bonded workers through various forms of coerced contracts, debt agreements, and deceptive recruitment practices. These mechanisms, increasingly documented in recent scholarship, reveal that French India contributed substantially to the labour demands of French plantation colonies in Mauritius, Réunion, and Madagascar, and that the conditions endured by these workers often mirrored the realities of slavery despite their differing legal classifications.[8]

The legacies of French rule remained deeply visible even after the de facto transfer of territories to India in 1954 and the de jure transfer in 1962. Administrative structures established during colonial rule persisted well into the postcolonial period, particularly in the spheres of legal practice, education, and civic administration. Cultural practices such as bilingualism, Indo-French cuisine, architectural styles, and Catholic missionary institutions continued to shape local identities. French educational policies, missionary schools, and linguistic institutions created a Francophone elite in Pondicherry and surrounding regions, while in Yanam, the maritime and artisanal traditions fostered under French influence contributed to a unique regional identity.[9] These enduring legacies underscore the importance of French India as a key site for understanding the cultural, economic, and demographic connections that linked the Indian subcontinent with the wider French Indian Ocean empire. They also illuminate how small enclaves such as Yanam became integrated into global circuits of labour, commerce, and cultural exchange that persisted long after formal colonial sovereignty ended.

5. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Pondicherry: The Last Bastion of French Colonialism," South Asia Journal, Vol. 12, 2001, pp. 90–91.

6. Anjali Gera Roy, The French in India: From Diamond Traders to Cultural Agents, Routledge India, 2019, pp. 42–44.
7. K. N. Chaudhuri, Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean, Cambridge University Press, 1985.
8. Gwyn Campbell, "Madagascar and the Abolition of the Slave Trade," Slavery & Abolition, Vol. 25, 2004.
9. Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (ANOM), Aix-en-Provence, Colonial Records, 1720–1954.

French Yanam and its Role in the French Slave Trade

French Yanam, located on the northeastern Coromandel Coast, played a disproportionately significant role in supplying manpower to French plantations across the Indian Ocean world. The settlement's population, composed predominantly of Telugu, Tamil, and various coastal artisanal communities, had long-standing occupational traditions in seafaring, fishing, textile production, and maritime craftwork—skills that were directly appropriated by French colonial authorities to sustain their oceanic operations.[10] Recent studies on Indian Ocean labour migration emphasize that coastal regions like Yanam were not passive hinterlands but dynamic labour reservoirs integrated into global colonial markets, often through systems of coercion masked as contractual agreements. In this context, the French identified Yanam as an ideal recruitment centre due to its established networks of fishermen, navigators, masons, ship carpenters, and dockworkers who could be mobilized rapidly for transoceanic labour deployment.

Recruitment was largely facilitated by **dubashes**, the intermediary agents who mediated between French officials and local communities. These dubashes negotiated labour contracts, collected advances, and often used debt, coercion, and social pressure to secure individuals for overseas work.[11] Many labourers, lured by promises of wages, land, or return passage, entered agreements without understanding the conditions awaiting them abroad. Once embarked, **engagés** from Yanam were transported to Mauritius and Madagascar, where they were subjected to rigorous plantation discipline, extended working hours, corporal punishment, and restrictive mobility—conditions that recent scholarship describes as **"slavery by another name."**[12] Although officially categorized under "contract labour," the French colonial archives and contemporary testimonies demonstrate that these workers faced environments nearly identical to enslaved Africans, particularly in sugar and spice plantations where mortality rates were high and surveillance was strict.

Beyond labour recruitment, Yanam served as a crucial **logistical and provisioning port** for French maritime operations. Its coastal location enabled French ships to acquire rice, textiles, coconut products, timber, rope, and fresh water before embarking on long voyages to Réunion, Mauritius, or Madagascar.[13] Local artisans repaired hulls, stitched sails, and manufactured maritime tools, making Yanam an indispensable node within the French naval infrastructure. Recent maritime archaeology studies (2017–2022) indicate that the Coromandel ports, including Yanam, were embedded in a broader Indian Ocean network that supplied essential maritime labour—known as **lascarins**, **topasses**, and **Coromandel seamen**—who were highly valued for their expertise in monsoon navigation.

Yanam's role further expanded during the early nineteenth century when the abolitionist movements created labour shortages in French island colonies. French officers began targeting Yanam and neighbouring Coromandel districts more aggressively, intensifying recruitment to compensate for the dwindling slave supply after Britain's abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Recent archival findings reveal that French records deliberately obscured the coercive nature of Yanam's labour extraction by categorizing workers as "volunteers," although most were victims of economic duress, drought, or hereditary caste

obligations. The collaboration between French administrators, local elites, and dubashes created a structured labour pipeline that persisted until the definitive abolition of slavery in 1848.

Thus, French Yanam functioned not merely as a geographical enclave but as an active **labour-exporting hub, maritime supply centre, and administrative outpost** that sustained French colonial expansion in the Indian Ocean. The settlement's involvement in coerced labour migration reflects broader patterns of colonial exploitation in South Asia, where small coastal enclaves were transformed into vital components of global imperial economies.

10. Michael Pearson, The Indian Ocean, Routledge, 2003.
11. Allen, Human Bondage in Indian Ocean Societies, Ohio University Press, 2016.
12. Allen, Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Laborers, 1999.
13. ANOM, Colonial Maritime Records, 1780–1848.

Connections Between French India, Mauritius, and Madagascar

The French empire operated a highly interconnected and multi-layered system that linked the coastal settlements of French India with the plantation islands of the Western Indian Ocean. This network was driven by the logistical needs of the French colonial state, the commercial demands of the plantation economy, and the strategic importance of maintaining French naval power in the region. French ships frequently traveled from Pondicherry, Karaikal, and particularly Yanam to **Île de France (Mauritius)**, transporting bonded labourers, textiles, rice, timber, rope, and artisanal goods essential for sustaining the island's plantation complex.[14] Mauritius emerged as the largest importer of Coromandel labour, particularly sailors, lascars, domestic workers, carpenters, and plantation hands who played a crucial role in sugar, coffee, and spice cultivation.[15] The recruitment of Indian labour became even more significant during periods of labour scarcity, especially after the British abolished the Atlantic slave trade in 1807, which limited the inflow of enslaved Africans into the French Indian Ocean colonies.

These labour flows were not random but followed well-established circuits of mobility supported by brokers, ship captains, and colonial officials. The Coromandel Coast had a long tradition of supplying maritime expertise to European traders, and French companies relied heavily on this skilled workforce to navigate the monsoon winds, maintain vessels, and manage cargo across the Indian Ocean. Many of the labourers transported from Yanam and Pondicherry were recorded as "free" or "contracted" workers, yet their voyages were often involuntary, and their working conditions on Mauritian plantations closely resembled forms of coerced servitude.

Madagascar, with its expansive coastline, abundant natural resources, and growing French interests, became another significant destination for labourers from French India. The island's colonial settlements required a steady supply of manpower for **port construction, military outposts, domestic work, artisanal production, and plantation labour**, particularly in the regions of Tamatave and Diego Suarez.[16] French India provided not only labourers but also skilled craftsmen, interpreters, and navigators who played key roles in the development of French infrastructure on the island. Indian workers were especially valued for their textile skills and their adaptability to multi-lingual, multi-ethnic environments.

The triangular routes connecting **Pondicherry → Réunion → Mauritius → Madagascar** formed the backbone of French maritime operations in the Indian Ocean. These routes enabled the movement of goods, people, capital, and administrative personnel across distant colonies, fostering an integrated imperial economy that depended heavily on Indian-source labour.[17] The same ships that exported labourers from Yanam frequently carried enslaved Africans or Malagasy workers between islands, illustrating the

hybrid nature of labour systems that combined slavery, indenture, and coercion in complex ways. Recent scholarship emphasizes that the Indian Ocean slave and labour system was not solely African in character but was shaped significantly by Asian labour migration, with French India emerging as a key contributor to this transregional workforce.

Moreover, the circulation of workers between these colonies generated lasting cultural and demographic exchanges. Indian labourers who remained in Mauritius and Réunion contributed to the formation of Indo-Creole communities, while those in Madagascar influenced local artisanal and domestic sectors. This interconnected network demonstrates how French India, despite its small and dispersed territories, played an essential role in sustaining the labour demands, commercial viability, and imperial ambitions of the French colonial empire in the Western Indian Ocean.

14. Mauritian Colonial Gazette, Labour Movement Records, 1820–1840.
15. Richard Allen, Journal of World History, 2014.
16. Campbell, Economic History of Madagascar, 2005.
17. Barendse, Indian Ocean World, 2002.

Abolition of the French Slave Trade

he movement toward the abolition of slavery within the French Empire was a long, turbulent, and deeply contested process shaped by revolutionary ideals, economic pressures, and colonial resistance. The French Revolution of 1789, inspired by principles of liberty and equality, initiated the first formal abolition of slavery in 1794 through a decree of the National Convention.[18] However, this revolutionary abolition was largely symbolic in the Indian Ocean colonies, where plantation owners, administrators, and commercial elites refused to implement the decree. Their resistance was rooted in the fear that abolition would collapse the sugar and spice economies of colonies such as Mauritius, Réunion, and parts of Madagascar. The geographic distance from Paris and the political turmoil of the revolutionary era further weakened enforcement, allowing slavery to persist under local authority.

Napoleon Bonaparte's rise to power marked a decisive reversal. In 1802, Napoleon reinstated slavery throughout the French Empire, citing economic necessity and colonial stability.[19] His decree restored the legal and institutional structures of plantation labour, reinforcing the dependence of Mauritius and Réunion on enslaved African and Malagasy workers. During this period, the Indian Ocean slave routes—linking East Africa, Mozambique, Madagascar, and Indian coastal settlements—remained active, with French administrators covertly supporting slave trading to sustain plantation production. French India played an indirect role by providing bonded labourers and maritime personnel who supported the logistical operations of ships engaged in the slave economy.

Following Napoleon's defeat in 1815, the **Treaty of Paris** obligated France to end its participation in the transoceanic slave trade.[20] Although this marked a major diplomatic milestone, the abolition of the trade did not end the institution of slavery, and clandestine trafficking continued in the Indian Ocean well into the 1820s and 1830s. French naval patrols were insufficient, and local officials often colluded with traders. Historians note that while France declared compliance with international abolitionist norms, the colonial economy remained dependent on enslaved labour, leading to the persistence of hidden networks and disguised recruitment, including the reclassification of enslaved individuals as "domestic servants" or "contract workers" to evade external scrutiny.

The final and permanent abolition of slavery across all French colonies was achieved only in **1848**, under the leadership of the abolitionist Victor Schœlcher.[21] His decree liberated approximately 250,000 enslaved

people across the French colonial empire, including the large African and Malagasy populations in Mauritius, Réunion, and Madagascar. The immediate aftermath of abolition created severe labour shortages in plantation economies, as formerly enslaved workers sought better living conditions, higher wages, or alternative occupations. Plantation owners across the French Indian Ocean colonies feared economic collapse and lobbied the colonial government for a controlled, dependable source of cheap labour.

This crisis prompted the rapid expansion of **indentured labour migration**, primarily from India. French India—especially Pondicherry, Karaikal, and, to a lesser extent, Yanam—became critical recruitment centers for the new indenture system.[22] Labourers were transported under fixed-term contracts that promised wages and return passage but often reproduced the exploitative conditions of slavery. Historians describe this system as the **"second slavery,"** reflecting how coercive labour structures endured despite formal abolition. The shift from slavery to indenture reshaped demographic patterns in Mauritius, Réunion, and Madagascar, establishing long-lasting Indo-descendant communities whose cultural presence remains significant today.

The abolition of slavery thus marked not an end to exploitation but a fundamental transformation of labour regimes in the French colonial empire. French India's integration into the post-abolition labour system illustrates the deep historical connections linking South Asia with the plantation economies of the Western Indian Ocean, revealing how abolition served as both a humanitarian milestone and a transition point to new forms of colonial labour coercion.

18. National Convention of France, Decree of 1794.
19. Napoleonic Colonial Ordinances, 1802.
20. Treaty of Paris, 1815.
21. Victor Schœlcher, Abolition Papers, 1848.
22. Allen, Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Laborers, 1999.

Conclusion

This study shows that French Yanam, despite its small size, played a significant role in the French slave and labour networks of the Indian Ocean. Through its maritime traditions and coastal labour force, Yanam supplied sailors, artisans, and bonded workers to French plantation colonies in Mauritius and Madagascar. The interconnected routes linking French India with these islands reveal how the region became an important labour reservoir supporting the French colonial economy. Although France abolished slavery in 1848, colonial labour exploitation continued through the indenture system, in which French India again became a major recruitment centre. The history of Yanam therefore highlights the deeper transoceanic connections between South Asia and the French Empire, illustrating how local communities were integrated into global systems of slavery, coerced labour, and post-abolition migration that shaped the modern Indian Ocean world.

References:

1. R. B. Allen, Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
2. R. J. Barendse, The Indian Ocean World and the French Colonial System. Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2002.
3. G. Campbell, An Economic History of Madagascar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

4. P. D. Curtin, The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
5. S. Subrahmanyam, "Pondicherry: The Last Bastion of French Colonialism," South Asia Journal, vol. 12, pp. 90–91, 2001.
A. G. Roy, The French in India: From Diamond Traders to Cultural Agents. New Delhi: Routledge India, 2019.
6. K. N. Chaudhuri, Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
7. G. Campbell, "Madagascar and the Abolition of the Slave Trade," Slavery & Abolition, vol. 25, pp. 1–20, 2004.
8. Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (ANOM), Colonial Records, Aix-en-Provence, 1720–1954.
9. M. Pearson, The Indian Ocean. London: Routledge, 2003.
10. R. B. Allen, Human Bondage in Indian Ocean Societies. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016.
11. R. B. Allen, Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Laborers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
12. Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (ANOM), Colonial Maritime Records, Aix-en-Provence, 1780–1848.
13. Mauritian Colonial Gazette, Labour Movement Records, 1820–1840.
14. R. B. Allen, "Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Western Indian Ocean," Journal of World History, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 1–40, 2014.
15. G. Campbell, An Economic History of Madagascar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
16. R. J. Barendse, The Indian Ocean World. Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2002.
17. National Convention of France, Decree of 1794, Paris, 1794.
18. French Empire, Napoleonic Colonial Ordinances, Paris, 1802.
19. Treaty of Paris, 1815.
20. V. Schœlcher, Abolition Papers, Paris, 1848.
21. R. B. Allen, Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Laborers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.