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Sahapedia



My City
My Heritage
My
Puducherry

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My City My Heritage My Puducherry

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Contact:
Sahapedia

Website:
www.sahapedia.org

Email:
contact@sahapedia.org

**My City
My Heritage** **My**
Puducherry



Foreword

It is with great pleasure that we present to you this compendium of booklets showcasing some of the lesser-known and overlooked treasures of select cities in our country. Over the past decade, the InterGlobe Foundation (IGF) has been steadfast in its commitment to preserving and restoring India's cultural and built heritage.

Launched in 2019 as a collaboration between the InterGlobe Foundation and Sahapedia, the My City My Heritage project is guided by a shared vision to promote India's vibrant intangible culture through the documentation and celebration of the cultural fabric of its cities. Each city has its own unique story to tell—stories rooted in its monuments, crafts, festivals, and the lived experiences of its people. By documenting these stories, this project not only preserves our cultural fabric but also inspires pride and awareness in local communities and visitors alike.

As custodians of a shared heritage, we at IGF believe that initiatives like this are crucial for exploring a deeper connection between the communities and the spaces they inhabit. We also hope that in each of the project cities, a group of concerned citizens, institutions and government will come together to carry forward this beautiful curation of their city's history. We hope these booklets will entice you to discover these cities and their treasures and share them with others. We welcome more organizations, individuals and researchers to build on the repository created here.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the team at Sahapedia, my colleagues at InterGlobe Foundation, as well as the researchers, photographers, and local communities who have contributed to this endeavor.

With best wishes,

Rohini Bhatia

Chairperson
InterGlobe Foundation

Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to introduce this collection of city booklets created under the 'My City My Heritage' initiative, a collaboration between Sahapedia and the InterGlobe Foundation (IGF). These booklets celebrate the rich and layered cultural heritage of Indian cities, bringing to light their stories, unique traditions, and enduring legacies.

At Sahapedia, our journey since 2011 has been defined by a vision—to document and share India's vast and diverse cultural knowledge. Over the past 15 years, Sahapedia has established itself as an open, digital resource dedicated to exploring the histories, arts, and traditions that define our shared heritage. The Sanskrit term 'Saha,' (together with), embodies the spirit of collaboration that fuels our efforts in documenting local contexts and pluralistic traditions, and creating meaningful engagement with India's cultural legacy.

'My City My Heritage,' launched in 2019, has become an extension of this vision. With the generous support of IGF, this project underscores the role of cities as living repositories of history and culture. Beyond research and documentation resulting into City Booklets, the project engages communities, scholars, and enthusiasts in celebrating their cities' unique identities. Initiatives like heritage walks and Anubhutis—Sahapedia's initiative for children with disabilities and marginalized groups—have redefined heritage engagement.

Each booklet reflects research, thoughtful curation, and a commitment to accessible heritage. This endeavor owes its success to the unwavering support of IGF and the contributions of researchers, photographers, local communities, and Sahapedia's team.

It is my hope that these booklets will not only serve as resources for exploration and education but also foster a sense of responsibility for our cultural legacy. I invite you to dive into the stories within and to share in the joy of our collective heritage.

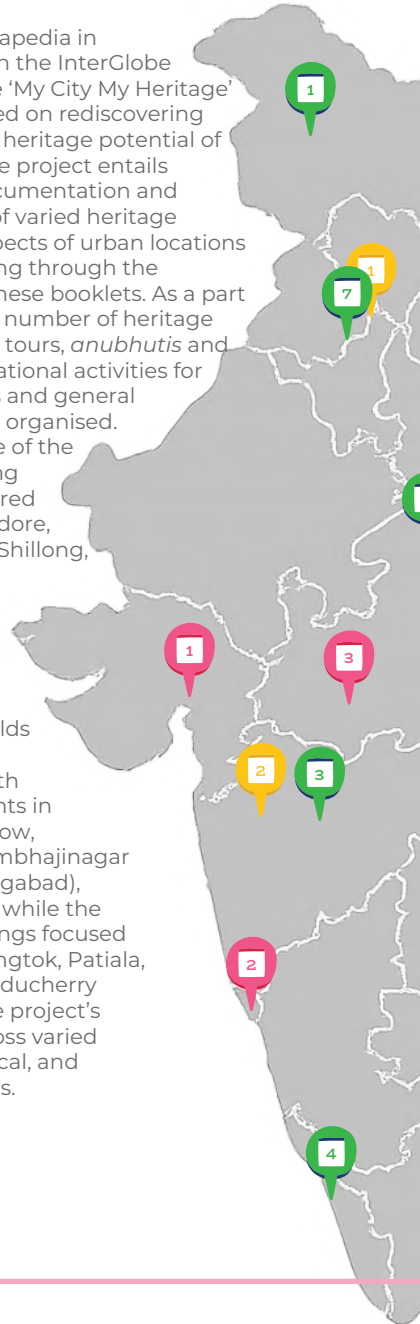
With warm regards,

Sudha Gopalakrishnan

**Executive Director
Sahapedia**

My City My Heritage My Puducherry

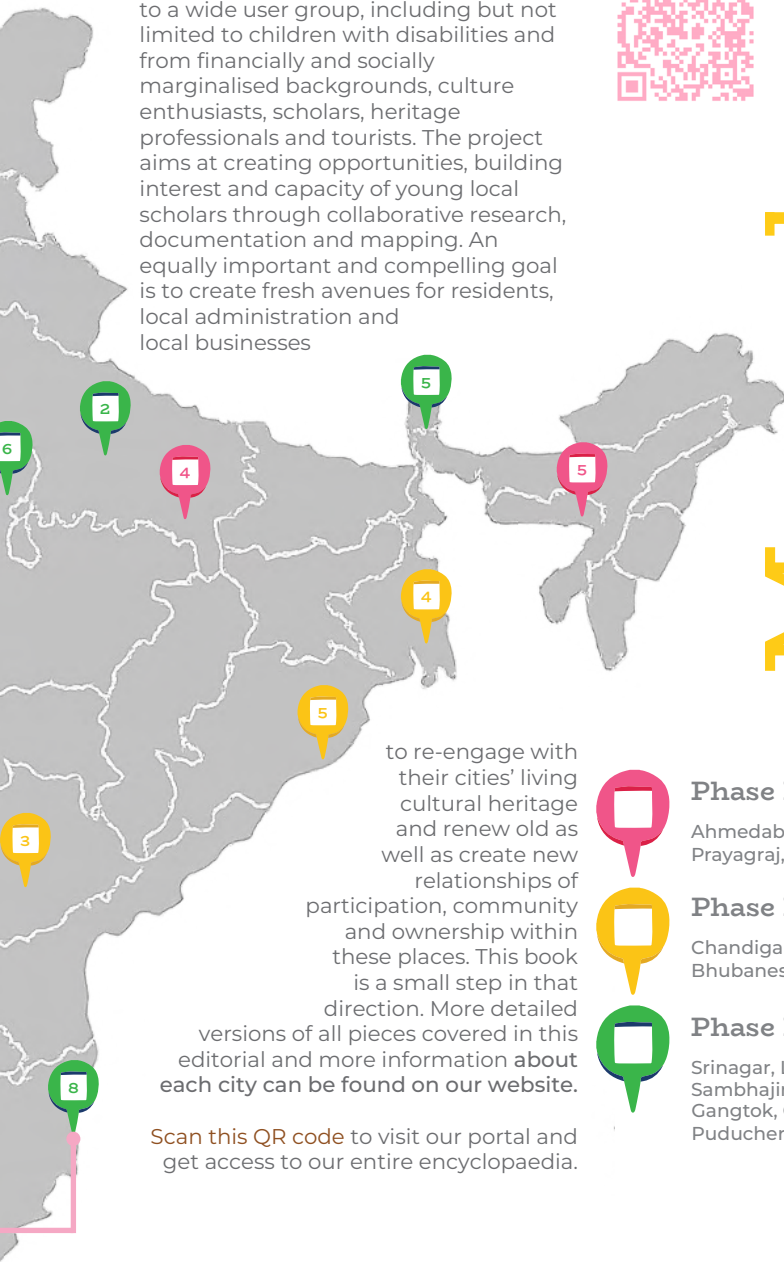
Initiated by Sahapedia in partnership with the InterGlobe Foundation, the 'My City My Heritage' project is focused on rediscovering the culture and heritage potential of Indian cities. The project entails exploration, documentation and dissemination of varied heritage and cultural aspects of urban locations in India, including through the publication of these booklets. As a part of the project, a number of heritage walks, museum tours, *anubhutis* and engaging educational activities for school students and general audiences were organised. The initial phase of the project, spanning 2019–2022, covered Ahmedabad, Indore, Prayagraj, Goa, Shillong, Bhubaneswar, Chandigarh, Hyderabad, Kolkata, and Nashik. The ongoing phase (2024–2025) builds on this legacy through in-depth city engagements in Srinagar, Lucknow, Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar (formerly Aurangabad), and Kozhikode, while the current year brings focused attention to Gangtok, Patiala, Gwalior, and Puducherry—extending the project's exploration across varied regional, historical, and cultural contexts.



The 'My City My Heritage' project caters to a wide user group, including but not limited to children with disabilities and from financially and socially marginalised backgrounds, culture enthusiasts, scholars, heritage professionals and tourists. The project aims at creating opportunities, building interest and capacity of young local scholars through collaborative research, documentation and mapping. An equally important and compelling goal is to create fresh avenues for residents, local administration and local businesses



More about the project



to re-engage with their cities' living cultural heritage and renew old as well as create new relationships of participation, community and ownership within these places. This book is a small step in that direction. More detailed versions of all pieces covered in this editorial and more information about each city can be found on our website.

Scan this QR code to visit our portal and get access to our entire encyclopaedia.



Phase I

Ahmedabad, Goa, Indore, Prayagraj, Shillong



Phase II

Chandigarh, Nashik, Hyderabad, Bhubaneswar, Kolkata



Phase III

Srinagar, Lucknow, Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, Kozhikode, Gangtok, Gwalior, Patiala, Puducherry

Contents

Introductory Note	07
At the Fringe of the French Empire Sayali Athale	11
The Grid and the Canal Ashok Panda	19
A Mélange of Cuisines Deepa S Reddy	25
Little Saigon Ananya Jahanara Kabir	31
The Silent Mills of Pondicherry Bharathapriya R	37
Walking through Crafts Sayali Athale	43
Casting the Divine Sayali Athale	51
Temples of the Town T Ganesan	57
Of Mangoes, Monstrances and Firewalks Pattabi Raman	63
From Temple Grounds to Theatre Halls G Gobi and Sayali Athale	69
A Meeting of Minds Aneesh Raghavan	75
Architectural Solace by the Sea Pankaj Vir Gupta and Christine Mueller	81
The Wealth of the Delta Priya Davidar	87
The Congress of Arboreal Legislators Ari Gautier	93
City Reads	101
City in Films	102
Craft Encounters	103
City Offbeat	104
Trail 1: Through the French and Tamil Quarters – A Tale of Two Towns	107
Trail 2: Puducherry's Pre-colonial Heritage	113





Festivals

Introductory Note

Puducherry is a city along the Coromandel coast, born of the surrounding Tamil landscape and its long colonial history. Its compact heritage town, with verdant boulevards and polychromatic street facades, is often the most photographed part of the city. Yet this enclave, covering less than three square kilometres, is only a pocket within a much larger, complex urban landscape.

Pondicherry was officially renamed Puducherry in 2006 to reflect its original Tamil name meaning 'new town'. While it shares language, culture and ecology with its wider Tamil backdrop, Puducherry, at the same time, retains a distinct civic identity. This distinctiveness, a result of its particular colonial trajectory and its political separation from Tamil Nadu, is not confined to architecture alone. It is visible in its institutions, intellectual life, and daily practices.

The city is home to major research and cultural institutions such as the Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate

Medical Education and Research, the École Française d'Extrême-Orient, and the French Institute of Pondicherry. It houses temple traditions that predate the early modern period, an important spiritual centre in the form of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and an archival collection of international significance, recognised by UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. Puducherry's unmistakable romance has even made it popular in international literature. The city has lent its name to Prince Pondicherry in Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, served as the opening setting of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, and formed the backdrop for Lee Langley's *A House in Pondicherry*. Along with this cultural legacy, the city is also rich in natural heritage with wetlands and mangrove forests of considerable ecological significance.

This curation seeks to move beyond viewing Puducherry solely through the lens of its colonial quarter. Instead, the essays gathered here explore multiple dimensions of the city, covering its historical legacy, lesser-known stories



of colonial encounters, intellectual exchanges and ecological systems that continue to define its everyday life.

The collection opens with ***At the Fringe of the French Empire***, which offers a historical overview of the city. ***The Grid and the Canal*** follows by tracing the spatial logic of Puducherry's urban landscape that formed its distinctive precincts.

The city's culture unfolds through ***A Mélange of Cuisines***, which captures Puducherry's multiple culinary expressions, and ***Little Saigon***, which explores its exchanges through transnational links with French Indochina. ***The Silent Mills of Pondicherry*** follows the story of textile production and its trade networks.

Material traditions come into focus through ***Walking through Crafts***, exploring local practices across the city, and ***Casting the Divine*** documents a now seldomly practiced form of metallurgy. ***Temples of the Town*** takes us through the sites embedded within the city's urban fabric.

Community life and the territory's vibrant festivals are explored in ***Of Mangoes, Monstrances and Firewalks*** while ***From Temple Grounds to Theatre Halls*** looks at the city's rich legacy of theatre.

A Meeting of Minds dwells on two figures whose presence in Puducherry shaped early twentieth-century political and intellectual thought. The built environment returns to the foreground in ***Architectural Solace by the Sea***, examining a landmark modernist structure.

Finally, ***The Wealth of the Delta*** and ***The Congress of Arboreal Legislators*** draw attention to the ecological dimensions of the city—its wetlands, mangroves, and trees—reminding us that natural heritage is as valuable as cultural heritage.

Through this wide-ranging collection, we invite you to view Puducherry in a new light, as a city whose many histories continue to shape its present.



Within Boulevard Town

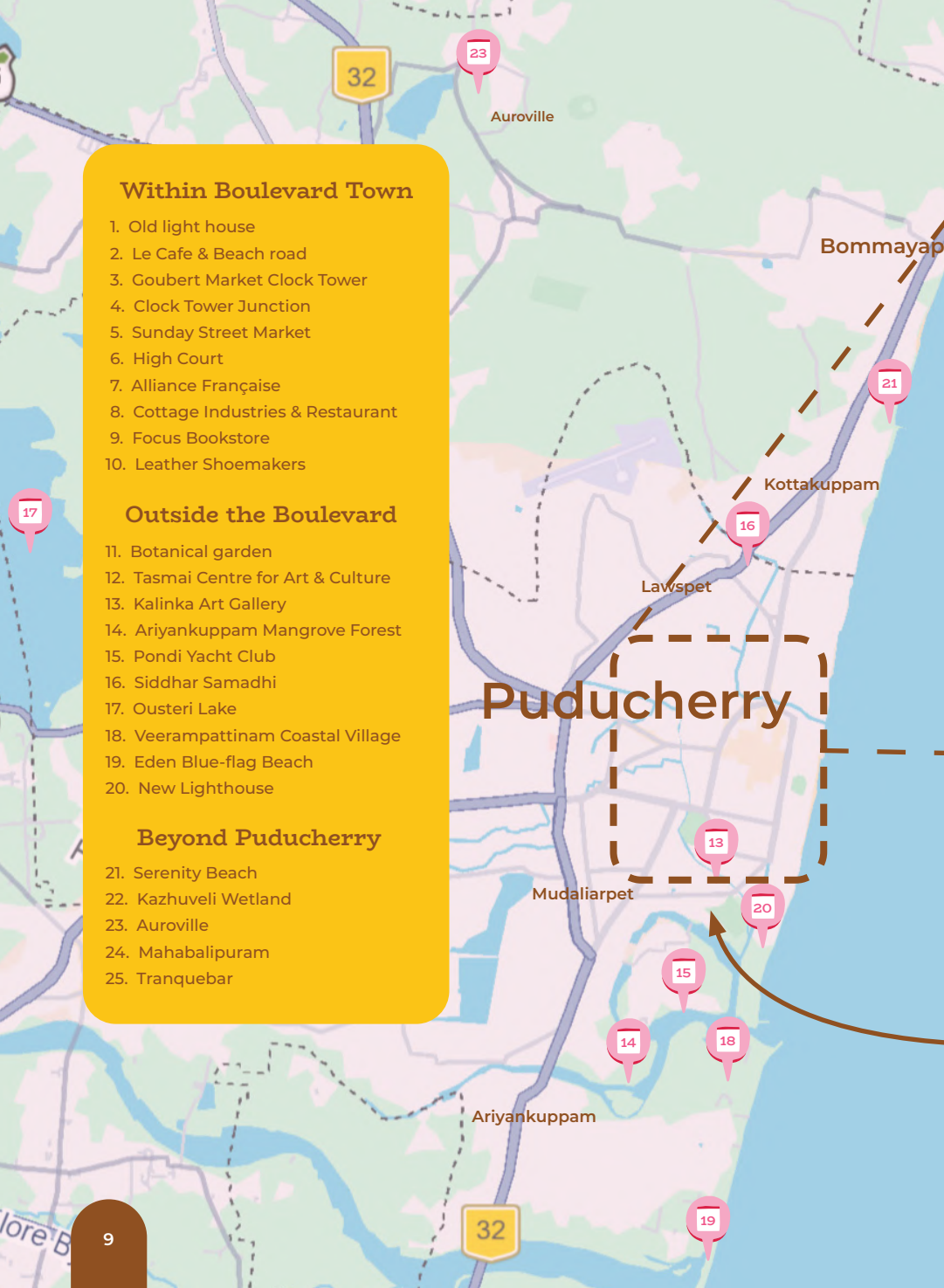
1. Old light house
2. Le Cafe & Beach road
3. Goubert Market Clock Tower
4. Clock Tower Junction
5. Sunday Street Market
6. High Court
7. Alliance Française
8. Cottage Industries & Restaurant
9. Focus Bookstore
10. Leather Shoemakers

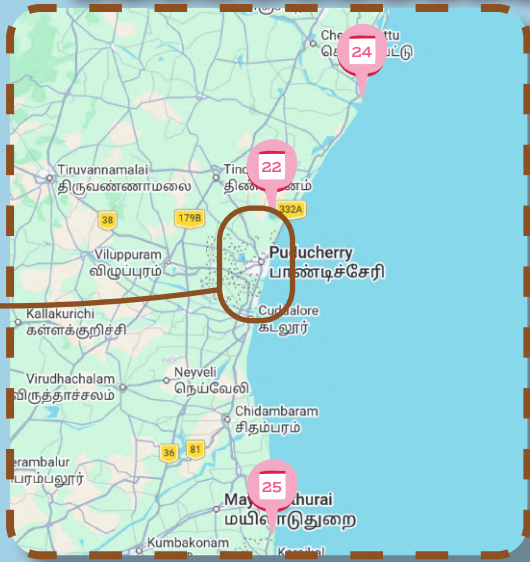
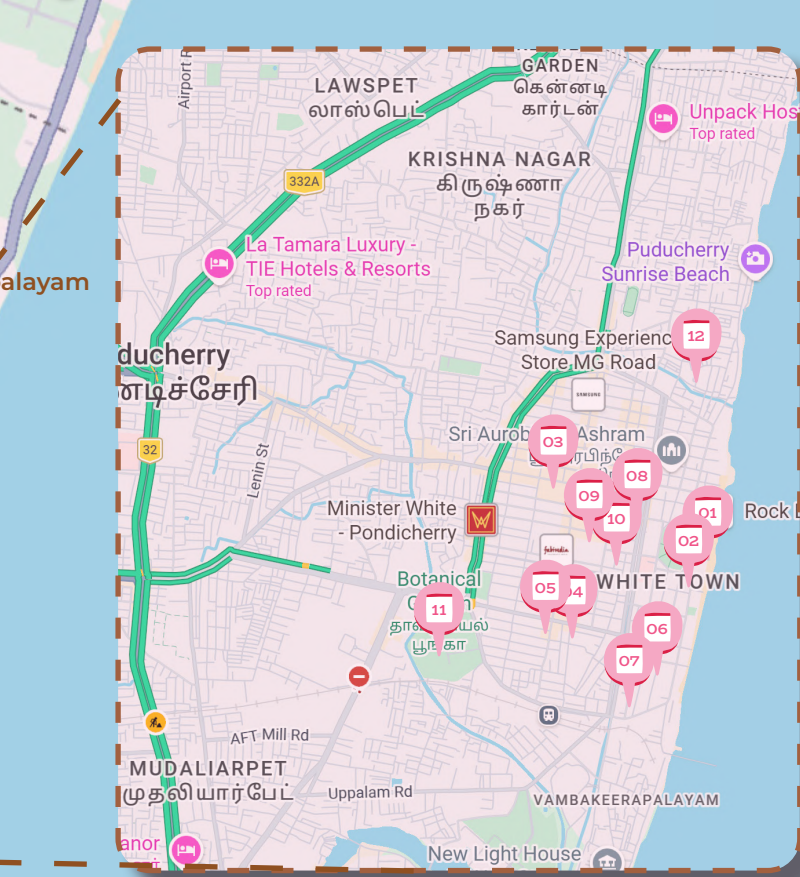
Outside the Boulevard

11. Botanical garden
12. Tasmai Centre for Art & Culture
13. Kalinka Art Gallery
14. Ariyankuppam Mangrove Forest
15. Pondi Yacht Club
16. Siddhar Samadhi
17. Ousteri Lake
18. Veerampattinam Coastal Village
19. Eden Blue-flag Beach
20. New Lighthouse

Beyond Puducherry

21. Serenity Beach
22. Kazhuveli Wetland
23. Auroville
24. Mahabalipuram
25. Tranquebar







At the Fringe of the French Empire

Sayali Athale

Arikamedu currently has visible remnants of only an eighteenth-century monastery.
Photo by Joseph Rahul.

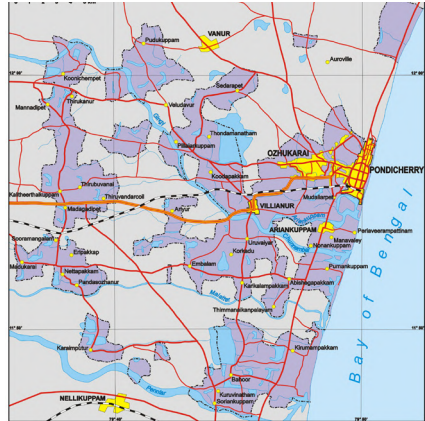
Pondicherry, like Russian nesting dolls, is a city within a district within a Union Territory (UT), all sharing the same name. The UT of Pondicherry comprises four geographically distinct districts that were former French colonies: Pondicherry, Karaikal, Yanam, and Mahe. Of these, the district of Pondicherry lies embedded in the larger Tamil landscape on the east coast of India, and is in turn, further broken down into 4 *taluks* made of 12 non-contiguous enclaves. Within one such enclave, embracing the Bay of Bengal, lies the city of Pondicherry. It spans an area of 19.5 sq km, with the erstwhile French quarter occupying an area of less than 3 sq km within. While this quarter displays remnants of its colonial history, Pondicherry largely shares culture, language, and heritage with surrounding Tamil Nadu.

Ancient Unknowns

Four kilometers south of Pondicherry lies an archeological site named Arikamedu ('an eroding mound', in Tamil), once an industrial port city with links to Rome between 300 BCE and 300 CE.

Referred to as 'Poduke' in the Greco-Roman record, *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, it sat on the eastern bank of the Ariyankuppam River, close to its opening into the Bay of Bengal.

The settlement was known for fine muslin textiles, terracotta objects, and a wide range of beads in glass,



Map of the Puducherry District (areas in purple only), Union Territory of Puducherry. Picture Credits: Aotearoa/Wikimedia Commons.

semi-precious stones, and gold.

Early twentieth-century archaeology has revealed that the ancient settlement at Arikamedu was inhabited until 1500 and again after 1771. Though often equated with present-day Pondicherry in colonial writing, Poduke may have been a seasonal trading point rather than a permanent settlement, as suggested by historian J.B.P. More. Its absence from *Sangam* literature, medieval records, and temple inscriptions complicates a direct identification.

The Coromandel coast, during the medieval era, passed from the rule of the Pallavas to the Cholas to the Pandyas until the fourteenth-century, when the territory fell to the Senji (Gingee) Nayaks of Vijayanagara. There is no consensus on the status of Puducherry in this period. However, between the tenth to fifteenth-century, there is some evidence of a large settlement

called Olukarai in present-day parts of Pondicherry between Eglise Notre-Dame and Oulgaret.

It is in the late fifteenth-century that the travelogues of Arab navigator Sulaiman Al Mahri formally note the existence of Bandikeri: Pondicherry.

The story goes that between 1553 to 1614, the Senji Nayaks permitted the Portuguese to establish a godown for trade in the area. Goods were transported via bullock-carts (*vandi* or vehicle in Tamil)—and hence the area became Vandicheri (*cheri* being town). In the Telugu of the Senji Nayaks, the word became Bandicheri—resembling the Bandikeri of Sulaiman. Over time, the word twisted to Pandichery, or the land of the Pandis (the predominant Tamils). The French would adapt this as Pondichéry and the English as Pondicherry. Sixteenth-century Portuguese historian Joao de Barros would be the first to reference it as Puducheri (*pudu* being new in Tamil), concluding the story of its many names.

Arrival of the Europeans

The Portuguese were expelled in 1614, but soon replaced by the Dutch and the Danes. From 1648, the Coromandel coast was controlled by Sher Khan Lodi, a vassal of the Sultan of Bijapur. On his invitation, the French, the last Europeans to set foot in India, arrived to establish a trading station in Pondicherry in 1673. From 1673-1693, under François Martin's

leadership, the French East India Company established a factory and constructed a fort, warehouses, and trading facilities, drawing in weavers, painters, merchants and other craftsmen to Pondicherry.

In 1693, the French lost Puducherry to the Dutch after two weeks of bombing. Six years of Dutch rule shaped the architectural planning of the town as a gridded urban centre. In 1700, the French regained control and fortified the town to secure themselves.

The Growth of Empire

Post-recapture, Pondicherry became the capital of French colonies in India. The French expanded their presence to the surrounding regions of Ariyankuppam, Kakayanthoppe, Villianur, and Bahour. By 1741, Pondicherry was a major urban centre with a population of about 1,30,000. Simultaneously, the city was racially segregated into Ville Blanche (White Town) for Europeans and Ville Noire ('Black' or Tamil Town) for the locals.

The locals were a mixed population. Hindus, mostly Shaivites, formed the majority and were organized along caste, as were Muslims. Christian population included both upper-caste converts known as *choutres*, and outcaste pariahs, evangelized by French Roman Catholic and Jesuit missionaries. The European population of the town was divided between the white population from France and the mixed-heritage *topas*, regarded as socially inferior by the whites.



Map of Pondicherry from 1694. Created by Jacob Verbergmoes (land surveyor/ mapmaker). Picture Credits: Dutch National Archives/Wikimedia Commons.

Despite the segregation, the French relied on locals to liaise with the local Tamil and Telugu communities. Known as *dubashes*, these Mudaliar middlemen earned commissions from foreign buyers and local suppliers, exercised certain judicial functions, and enjoyed significant privileges. In fact, it is the detailed diary (1736-61) of Ananda Rangapillai, the *dubash* to Governor Duplex, that remains a primary source for the history of eighteenth-century French Pondicherry.

Over most of the century, Puducherry was part of the tussle in the Anglo-French conflict, shifting hands between the two powers but returning eventually to the French. In 1761 and again in 1814, the British

destroyed the town, leaving it to the French to rebuild.

Economics and Employment

Agriculture was the main source of revenue in Pondicherry, but small holdings prevented intensive cultivation or self-sufficiency. Even rice, the staple food, had to be imported from British India or French Indochina. Socially, the French administration's introduction of private land ownership led to the emergence of a small landowning elite, which controlled the larger class of agricultural labourers.

The establishment of cotton mills, which later expanded to include

weaving and other textile production, improved opportunities for employment.

By the nineteenth-century, nearly one-sixth of Pondicherry's population depended directly or indirectly on the mills for their livelihoods.

Besides this, Pondicherry was, in many ways, a colonial backwater. Its port lacked importance, with ships unable to berth close to shore and the town under the shadow of the busier Madras port. Industrial development was limited, with the French relying on British India for supplies like cotton, coal, petroleum, medicines, and electricity. Despite these constraints, the French introduced certain modern amenities. French and Tamil printing presses were established in 1817 and 1828. A lighthouse was built on the seafront in 1836, a railway line connecting Villupuram to the pier was laid in 1879, and the first telephone network set up in 1887.

Over the nineteenth-century, French colonial policies and political strategies changed in Pondicherry. Guided by assimilationist ideas, they granted male Indian subjects the right to vote in 1871, although elections in Pondicherry were largely a sham. In 1881, men were also offered the option of full French citizenship, provided they renounced their personal status under Hindu or Muslim law and accepted the French Civil Code: such locals came to be called the *renonçants* (renouncers).



Portrait of Ananda Rangapillai, the dubash to Governor Duplex. Picture Credits: Sir Frederick Price/Wikimedia Commons.



Painting of Pondicherry market c. 1850. Picture Credits: S Himley/Wikimedia Commons.

French enmeshment and assimilation among the locals also took place due to economic opportunities and exchange. During this period, Franco-Pondicherrians sought their fortunes in French Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos). Several Tamil merchants from Pondicherry established themselves

in Saigon as traders, contractors, moneylenders, and shipping agents. Over time, families that acquired wealth sent money back to fund the purchase of land and construction of properties, enhancing their social prestige within Pondicherrian society. Migration to Indochina was also not restricted to the upwardly mobile. Men from economically disadvantaged classes enlisted in the French army or worked in lower-ranking administrative and clerical posts to receive regular pay and sometimes French citizenship and pensions. This assimilation into the colonial network, paired with exposure to the French language and culture, reinforced a Francophone identity within locals.

Simultaneously, however, France also took advantage of economically disenfranchised Indians. Thousands were sent to work on sugar plantations under the indentured labour system in Martinique, Guadeloupe, the French Antilles, Indonesia, and Réunion to work on sugar plantations. Often compelled to work without pay, these workers suffered from immense ill-treatment.

Treading Independence

In the beginning of the twentieth-century, since the convention of 1876 protected political refugees from extradition, Pondicherry became the refuge for fleeing Indian nationalists.



View of the Governor's palace around 1850. Picture Credits: S Himely/Wikimedia Commons.

Members of the Congress party such as Mandayam Srinivasachari, Neelakanta Brahmachari, and V.V.S. Iyer, as well as poet Subramania Bharathi were among them. Aurobindo Ghose arrived in 1910 and later, with Mirra Alfassa (The Mother), established the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1926.

Initially Pondicherry had no strong pro-independence inclinations. In the First and Second World War, youth voluntarily enrolled in the French Army; French Indians contributed substantially to war funds. Even the Quit India Movement did not stir nationalistic fervor, with no Congress Party in the enclave.

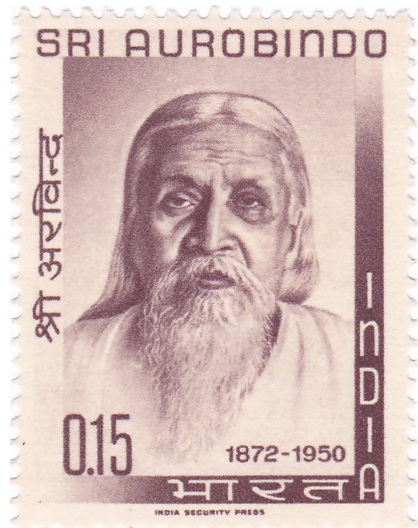
After Indian independence, when France was under pressure to clarify the status of Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe, and Yanam, they proposed the concept of an autonomous state under the French Union to Pondicherry. The Socialist Party of Pondicherry supported the idea, arguing that although Indian by ethnicity and language, the Pondicherrian population had a distinct identity given their assimilation of French culture. On the other hand, the Congress and Communist Party demanded full independence and a merger with India that did not detail how the specific interests of French-Indians would be protected.

By the early 1950s, a pro-merger sentiment was rising. France suggested a referendum to determine Pondicherry's future. In October 1954, elected representatives from the four settlements met at Kizhoor and voted overwhelmingly

for a merger with India. On 1st November 1954, a de facto transfer occurred. French administrative authority ended, although sovereignty legally remained with France.

The Treaty of Cession was signed in 1956 and ratified in 1962. Amongst other provisions, it enabled France to retain ownership of certain properties and educational institutions.

Crucially, it allowed former French citizens to choose between French and Indian citizenship. Nearly 4944 individuals, most descendants of *renonçants*, chose to retain their French nationality.



Sri Aurobindo 1964 stamp of India. Picture Credits: India Post GoI/Wikimedia Commons.

Independent Status

In 1963, the Indian Parliament passed the Government of Union Territories Act, which allowed the formation of a Legislative Assembly and council of ministers in five Union Territories. This included Pondicherry.

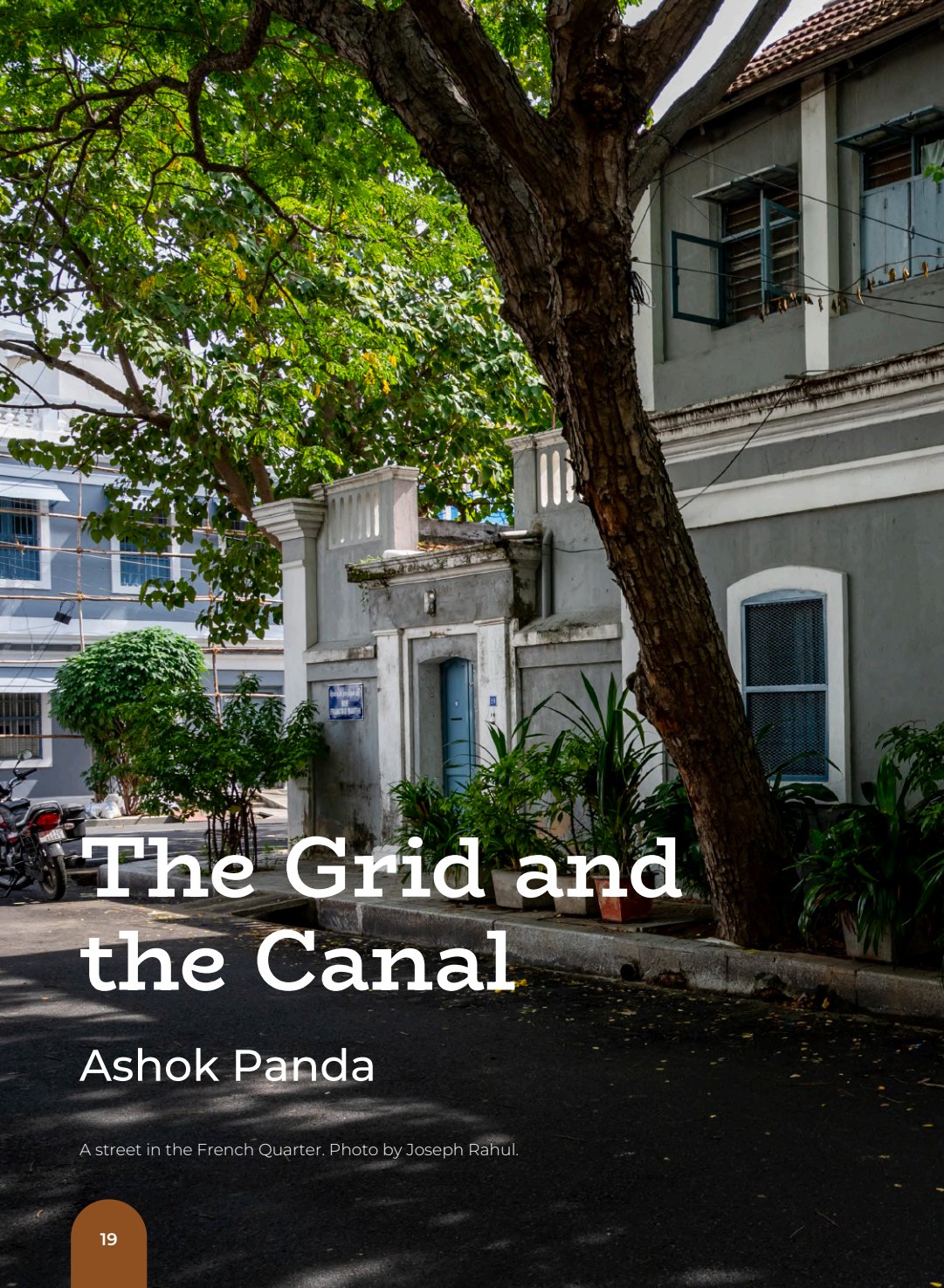
Since, Pondicherry has retained separate administrative status, resisting proposals to merge with Tamil Nadu. The most significant confrontation occurred in 1978-79, when suggestions from the Morarji Desai-led central government triggered widespread protests that escalated into violence in January 1979. Police firing resulted in

casualties and the episode came to be remembered as a “Day of Sorrow,” even described as “second freedom struggle.”

Pondicherry’s resistance to a merger has been on the grounds both of preserving a distinct cultural identity shaped by French rule and of safeguarding economic advantages such as lower taxes and liquor policy. Renamed to Puducherry in 2006, this territory remains one of the only three UTs in India, along with Delhi (NCT) and Jammu & Kashmir, to have partial statehood with its own elected government.

Aerial view of the city’s coast. Picture Credits: Karthik Easur/Wikimedia Commons.





The Grid and the Canal

Ashok Panda

A street in the French Quarter. Photo by Joseph Rahul.

The French planned the Canal as a physical *cordon sanitaire* (line of separation, usually to prevent infection) to enforce racial segregation.

To the east, facing the seafront, lies the Ville Blanche (French Quarter), characterized by tree-lined streets and stately villas. To the west lies the Ville Noire (Tamil Quarter), with denser streets and traditional row houses in narrower lanes. Despite this colonial logic of separation, a hybrid urban identity emerged as the two quarters engaged via trade and domestic service.

The French Quarter

The French Quarter developed around Bharathi Park, which is encircled by government buildings in expansive compounds. Residential villas extend outward from this nucleus, interspersed with institutional structures. Public buildings are typically set within fenced enclosures, projecting authority through scale and spatial openness. Residential structures, by contrast, create continuous wall-to-wall street façades defined by high-compound walls.

These façades are articulated by vertical pilasters and horizontal cornices, punctuated by flat or segmental arched openings fitted with louvered wooden shutters. Wooden balconies supported on iron brackets and parapets define the skyline. The street elevation presents a composed, formal exterior, while the interior spaces are more elaborate.



View of Bharathi Park with its central Aayi Mandapam. Photo by Joseph Rahul.

Although inspired by French prototypes, these houses were adapted to the Tamil climate. For instance, pitched European roofs were replaced by classic Madras flat-terraced roofs, allowing the space to function as a usable evening space. Window shades were constructed in wood or metal to reduce heat retention and enhance ventilation.

Most residences follow a broadly similar ground plan. A colonnaded portico provides shade, and behind it a walled garden rests. Inside, the rooms are marked by high ceilings, tall arched doors and windows, and in two-storeyed houses, rising staircases. The garden court is the central breathing space, ensuring ventilation and light to the whole house.



Houses in the French Quarter. Photo by Joseph Rahul.



View of louvered windows and window shades. Photo by Jubin Bennet.

The Tamil Quarter

The native Tamil town developed around a nucleus of temples in the northern section. Streets were laid along an east-west axis, with back-to-back row houses. Continuous wall-to-wall construction persists here, yet the architectural vocabulary differs from the French Quarter.

The most distinctive features of these houses are the *thalvaram* and the *thinnai*. The *thalvaram* is a street veranda formed by a lean-to roof supported on wooden posts. Because the streets are long and straight, the *thalvarams* align to form a near-continuous shaded walkway—they extend shelter to the household and to pedestrians, blurring the boundary between private and public.

The *thinnaï*, equipped with masonry benches, functions as a semi-public reception area where neighbours, visitors, and pilgrims are welcomed.

These have often been described as “talking streets” due to their intimate scale and the ease of social interaction they encourage.

Cornices, pilasters, engraved wooden columns, and ornamental parapets contribute to a cohesive skyline, but individual variations in detailing ensure that no two houses are identical.

Entry into the house is through a carved wooden doorway leading to the *mutram*, a colonnaded courtyard at the heart of domesticity. Around this are arranged living quarters, service areas, and ancillary rooms. Some houses contain multiple courtyards. Older Hindu quarters retain single-storeyed houses with country-tiled roofs. Later Hindu and Christian residences developed into two-storeyed forms with increasing colonial influence. On the ground floor, doorways are simple and ceilings low; the first floor may incorporate arched openings, decorative plasterwork, capital columns, and stained-glass windows. Prayer rooms, wells, and rear courtyards further articulate the domestic layout.

The southwest Muslim Quarter presents another variation within the street grid, with its principal streets subtly angled to orient mosques towards Mecca. Houses in this

quarter are often more elaborately ornamented and vividly coloured, reflecting a distinct cultural presence.

The Franco-Tamil Synthesis

The architectural landscape of Pondicherry cannot be understood as a simple juxtaposition of European and Tamil forms. Instead, it represents a sustained synthesis. Across France's former colonies, including Indochina, Reunion Island, and Algeria, French architecture adapted to tropical climates through modified materials and techniques. In Pondicherry, the interaction went further: Tamil spatial concepts such as the courtyard and veranda were absorbed by European spaces, even as European structural and ornamental elements were incorporated into local buildings. The result is a Franco-Tamil hybrid architecture that evolved gradually, responding to climate, materials, craft traditions, and social exchange. This integration of form and function makes Pondicherry's built environment distinctive.



The thalvaram outside Tamil houses. Photo by Jubin Bennet.

The Path Ahead

Pondicherry is an inhabited historic town that has experienced rapid urbanisation. Conservation involves managing growth while safeguarding architectural integrity.

The INTACH Pondicherry Chapter has played a significant role in the protection of the Boulevard Town and its surrounding historic precincts, by framing conservation as a process of managing change rather than freezing time. Under existing Heritage Regulations, 245 buildings have been formally notified as protected. Efforts are underway towards recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage City. Yet beyond formal designation, the preservation of Pondicherry's architectural landscape depends upon sustaining its living patterns. The courtyards, shaded verandas, and ordered streets are not relics but components of daily life.

Heritage buildings are being preserved using period materials and techniques, while new constructions within notified precincts adopt compatible scale and vocabulary to maintain heritage streetscape continuity.

Pondicherry's significance lies in how French influence and Tamil traditions converge into a coherent urban fabric. The grid and the canal once marked separation. Over time, however, architecture became the medium through which that division softened.



Street in the boulevard town with French architecture and Indian style rickshaws. Photo by Jubin Bennet.



A Mélange of Cuisines

Deepa S Reddy

Roll rotis from one of the few remaining wood-fired bakeries in Pondicherry's commercial district. Photo by Deepa Reddy.

One of the stories Pondicherry most likes to tell about itself is of its Frenchness. It does this in many ways: street names, the surviving instances of French architecture, even bar signs designed with the colours of the French flag. Most important among all these signifiers, of course, is the town's regional gastronomy.

Pondicherry-French?

What counts as French food in Pondicherry is anybody's guess. True enough, there were once several Vietnamese restaurants in the city—many of these home-based eateries established by pensioner “soldats” who fought in the French army or other Indians who sought fortunes in French Indochina, bringing tastes acquired abroad back home. But their fondness for *chaiyo* (from *cha gio*, the South Vietnamese fried spring or egg roll) or noodle soup was not a French, but Eastern, influence.

French influence on local eating appears to have emerged from the demand of French or Créole households for specific foods. “Thym-laurier” (dried bay laurel leaves bundled with thyme) could be brought from abroad, but daily bread needed to be procured locally. A dwindling number of single-room wood-fired bakeries, established by enterprising Tamils (some trained as cooks in French households) today tell tales of supplying to families in the racially distinguished White Town.

“Roll roti” was an everyday bread of choice and the “*erral roti*” was the

croissant (for its curved resemblance to shrimp, *erral* in Tamil). The former was distributed to servants too, consumed by dipping in sweetened tea or coconut milk. So it was that roll rotis came to stay: they are still baked daily, though the buyers have changed and the pairing with sweet coconut milk has not entered public eateries any more than *bouillabaisse* (*puyabaise*, in local Tamil pronunciation), *petits farcis*, or any other such Provençal classics prepared for old Pondicherry's elegant Franco-Tamil homes. Those who cooked these foods have either resettled in France or passed on, leaving their culinary legacies largely to their trained cooks and out of the public eye.

Emphasizing the Frenchness of Pondicherry's food, in other words, entirely effaces its fundamentally local moorings. Even when creolized, Pondicherry's cuisine has always been predominantly Tamil,

retaining the importance of the spiciest *milagu kuzhambu* (pepper gravy), alongside *kozhakattai* (*modakas*) or a *thala kari* (goathead curry). So-called “French” tastes are limited to the more subtle use of spices in *vadavam* (sun-cured seasoning balls), for instance, or the admission of wine and vinegar into dishes. Créolisation may be signified by the use of coconut milk in place of vinaigrettes or to mute spices. Some suggest that it is a sign of how Pondicherry cuisine adapted to French taste—but the other coastal

cuisines of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and even Karnataka, with their equally heavy reliance on coconut milk, could easily challenge that conclusion.



Traditional *vadagam* preparation in a Reddiyar household. Photo by Deepa Reddy.

Pondicherry Tamil

Regional food in Pondicherry, no less than elsewhere, is a *mélange* of local community foodways: Tamil Catholic fare; the preparations of the Chettiars and Mudaliars, merchants in Pondicherry's once-designated "black" areas, the fishermen, Vanniars, Gounders, Jains, Muslims and others. *Koozh* (a fermented ragi porridge), *pazhaiya soru* (fermented day-old rice), *avusu* (a Tamil *khichdi*), *sora pinji* (*vadas* soaked in coconut milk), *vettu sambar* (a quick, low-cost "killi-potta" or "pinched-off chilli"-spiced sambar) are common dishes in these communities, much-beloved for their ease of preparation, low-cost, taste, and health-benefits. But they lack cosmopolitan glamour, being rustic and not rich enough. Yet the family which taught me to make *vettu sambar* extolled its virtues: "Nothing like this with hot rice and lime pickle to satisfy hunger," my



Petits farcis provençaux—a Classic recipe from southern France, adapted by using hollowed snake gourd instead of the traditional marrows. Photo by Deepa Reddy.

host gushed, recounting stories of eating it during leaner days. Now with greater means, the family prepares this dish simply to demonstrate its method to me, replacing it with thicker, vegetable-based sambars in their own daily fare.

Simply walking around the city's many markets and older neighbourhoods reveals the city's hyper-local Tamil culinary moorings via sought-after culinary plants. Families with hardly any garden space grow *karpooravalli* (Indian borage) for coughs and colds and *kodi-pasalai* (Malabar spinach) for nutrition. *Pirandai* (the adamant creeper), prized for digestion, climbs small pots. Even the smallest free public areas are quickly planted with *aranelli* (star gooseberry) and *murungai* (drumstick) trees. Granny vendors at the local market stock a supply of medicinal herbs and native greens, foraged and bundled in readiness for efficient home-preparation (as *kalavai keerai*, mixed greens).

This continuing reliance on older Siddha-Ayurveda understandings of health and nutrition remains core to local Tamil foodways, with the ingredients more accessible and the practices more evident in Pondicherry than in urbanized areas elsewhere in the state.

Pondicherry's Mixtures

Then there are other external influences, some subtle and difficult to trace. Fish assad is frequently counted as uniquely Pondicherrian, though by itself it is Portuguese, from the classic “*assado*” (roast). Dr Lourdes Tirouvanziam-Louis, an old acquaintance and author of *The Pondicherry Kitchen*, once distinguished the classic Portuguese vinegar-based *vindaloo* from the local Pondicherry *vindail*, refuting any Portuguese influence on Pondicherry's cuisine. But the dishes

are a razor's thickness apart, and other dishes classed straightforwardly as Pondicherrian often carry rather distinct Portuguese traits.

The *vivika*, for example, regarded as a Pondicherrian (Tamil Catholic) Christmas cake, seems a derivative of the Goan *bebinka*, versions of which dot port regions once commanded by the Portuguese.

It is true, however, that Portuguese influences tend to be oblique and modulated, in spite of being quite widely broadcast.

Such small signs of non-Indian influence coexist with many cross-regional Indian exchanges. Pushcart vendors near the Sri Aurobindo Ashram are often stocked with *potoi* (pointed gourd), *kakrol* (teasel gourd), and *muri* (puffed rice)—and they sell out fast, telling of a substantial Bengali-Odia presence. These ingredients go towards the



Little gardens in humble homes invariably grow karpooravalli, pirandai, and aloe for dhrishti. Photo by Deepa Reddy.



Prawn fritters being made in a Catholic family home. Photo by Deepa Reddy.



Potal (pointed gourd) and *kakrol* (Teasel gourd) being sold by a roadside vendor, especially to Bengali and Odia families associated with the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Photo by Deepa Reddy.



Banana flowers, their thick "*kallan*" ("thief") stamens removed, prepped by a roadside vendor and made ready for quick kitchen use. Photo by Deepa Reddy.

preparation of home foods, or at most, the food supplied by the Ashram's dining room to its inmates. These are dishes generally not documented, never mind entering restaurant menus or being visible enough to represent culinary heritage. Then again, neither do the city's many Reddiyar, Naidu, and Andhra messes become definitive, despite their enduring successes in providing simple, low-cost meals to a vast number of eaters.

Pondicherry à la mode

Over-writing these rich dimensions of regional cuisine, some unspecific notion of French-créole remains à la mode—what visitors seek and what restaurants scramble to produce.

The proprietors of old bakeries are surprisingly nonchalant about the disappearance of their old clientele, despite being eclipsed by more than

a few swanky nouveau French café-style restaurants. “You cannot look at change as a loss,” they told me, rejecting my offer of social media sharing, “People still come and buy from us and that is enough.”

Meanwhile, a street photographer on Pondicherry's beachfront promenade tells me of visitors from Madurai who came searching for croissants but discarded them after a taste, comparing them unfavourably to the vegetable, chicken, and stuffed ‘puffs’ at local bakeries: “We thought they would be special! But they were like bland puffs, so we threw them away.” Not far away, a chic promenade restaurant removed the classic *vazhaipoo* (banana flower) vadas from its menu. What counts as culinary heritage now is this kind of push-pull of taste and expectation amongst the many groups that continue to seek Pondicherry's culinary distinction.

Petits farcis provençaux. Illustration by Jisha Unnikrishnan.





Little Saigon

Ananya Jahanara Kabir

Photograph of a Vietnamese ancestor at the Jardin Suffren.
Photo by Joseph Rahul.

Pondicherry, once the centre and headquarters of French India, shares deep connections with other places worldwide that were also part of the French Empire. One such is Ho Chi Minh (or Saigon) in Vietnam, the capital of the Southeast Asian French colony of Indochina (comprising present-day Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam). From the nineteenth-century, as the French consolidated their imperial presence in the Indian Ocean world, Pondicherry and Saigon were connected as major hubs in the older (Indian) and newer (Indochinese) colonies.

Entire families now living in France and Pondicherry spent generations in Vietnam. Their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents served the French Empire as bureaucrats, schoolteachers, and soldiers; others had sailed to Indochina from Pondicherry and its sister port Karaikal to serve the social needs of the colony in capacities ranging from merchants and financiers to milk-suppliers. On the one hand, inter-marriage between Indian men and Vietnamese women resulted in multiple generations of mixed-race children. But what was more striking was the cultural transformation of entire families through long association with Vietnam. People descended from these transnational families continue to carry traces of Vietnam. They were—and still are—fluent in Tamil, French, and Vietnamese; they continue to incorporate Vietnamese dishes into home cuisines.

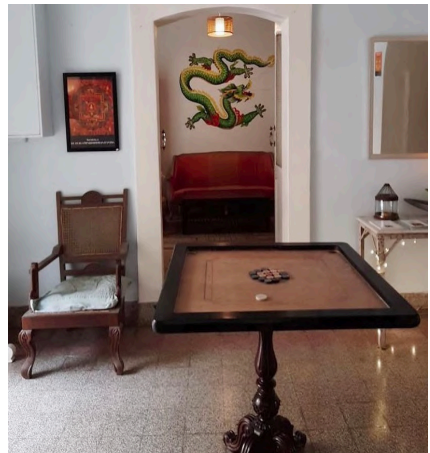
In Pondicherry today, there are very few Franco-

Pondicherrian families that will not possess a Vietnamese connection.

Their stories belong to a period of Indian Ocean mobility that lasted from the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, but seem to have been forgotten from the public gaze after the abruptly changed cartographies of decolonization and the Cold War. This essay seeks to highlight three categories of heritage in which elusive traces of an Indo-Vietnamese history are to be found in Pondicherry: domestic interiors, public memorials, and foodways.

Social Traces

In the words of French scholar Pauline Burtin: 'If one lingers to read the inscriptions that the Indian city of Pondicherry preserves in its streets, its churches and its cemeteries, one guesses a special link with a foreign country whose name has become historic: Indochina.'



Interiors showing Vietnamese influence. Photo by Ananya Jahanara Kabir.

Today, neither public nor private heritage initiatives in Pondicherry curate the impact of the Indochina link on urban spatiality. As with the Chettiar mansions of inland Tamil Nadu, however, domestic interiors in Pondicherry reveal Vietnamese influences in details of tiling, furniture, displayed photographs, and even the arrangement of space, decoration, and layout. Some of these features are visible to tourists and the public gaze in homes that have been transformed into guesthouses, Airbnbs, or boutiques. Guesthouse Jardin Suffren, for instance, displays numerous framed photographs, wall hangings, and furniture in its reception area: the photos of the owner's *sari*-clad Vietnamese grandmother, her forehead marked by a *pottu* (bindi), her ears and neck adorned by Indian-style jewellery, make visible the familial connection between Pondicherry and Vietnam, though no textual or narrative explanation is supplied alongside them.

Such explanations are lacking also for public monuments that memorialise the connection between Saigon and Pondicherry.

In Pondicherry's Uppalam Cemetery, which stretches on two sides of the State Highway RC-2, there are graves with details of the deceased person's employment in Indochina inscribed.

Beyond Uppalam, in the Reddiarpalayam suburb called 'Little



Gravestone of a Tamil-Vietnamese couple. Photo by Joseph Rahul.



Gift of the Saigonese at Reddiarpalayam. Photo by Ananya Jahanara Kabir.

Saigon' because of the number of people it sent to Indochina, is the small St Anthony's Church, built in Indo-Iberian baroque style. A hundred yards before it, protected by

a wrought-iron railing and shaded by banana trees, is a stone plinth painted the standard yellow and cream of Indo-French architecture. On it is the white stone statue of Marianne, personification of France, an arm protectively around a mustachioed Franco-Pondicherryan *poilu* (infantryman) rendered one-third her size and painted dark green. An inscription on the plinth's base declares it 'a gift of the Saigonese originating in Reddiarpalayam, 1917' ('Don des saigonaises originaire de Rettiarpaléom, 1917'); above it, we read, 'Long live the French Army' ('Vive l'armee française'). Similarly, in Pondicherry's White Town, outside the Immaculate Conception Cathedral, a bronze statue of Christ the King was similarly gifted by Madame Marie Louise Pregassam of Saigon in 1925.

Intimate Associations

Through such declarations, diasporic Pondicherryan families domiciled in Indochina converted economic capital to cultural capital to maintain their connection to a city that was now an imperial hub in the Indian Ocean. Occasionally, these were also gifts of personal or professional effect, as with the Adiceam Bequest, which occupies an entire room lined from ceiling to floor with bookshelves in the École Française d'Extrême Orient, a handsome yellow-and-white colonial building very close to the Jardin Suffren guesthouse in the White Town. The Adiceam Bequest comprises the personal library of Franco-Pondicherryan civil servant Emmanuel Adiceam. Thick handwritten ledgers record hundreds

of thousands of books including literary and philosophical works from classical antiquity, and in Sanskrit, Tamil, French, and English that Adiceam accumulated as he moved around North Africa, Europe, South Asia, and Southeast Asia to deliver France's educational mission as schoolteacher and geographer.

Even as Saigon's link to Pondicherry receded following French exit from Vietnam in 1954, books that circulated with their owners came to rest as gifts in Pondicherry, donated to institutional libraries in the White Town. Meanwhile, print culture kept alive the Pondicherry-Vietnam connection as well.

From 1946, the gazette *Le trait-d'Union* began expressing the interests of Saigon's Franco-Pondicherryans, presenting news from Saigon and being published from Pondicherry. All its volumes can also be read today in the École Française library.



The Adiceam Bequest. Photo by Ananya Jahanara Kabir.

While books and inscriptions on monuments are difficult to decipher by those unfamiliar with French, gastronomy is one aspect of Pondicherry-Saigon connectivity that is more distinct. As Claude Marius, another Franco-Pondicherrian civil servant with a Vietnamese family history, says: 'Vietnamese food is the link that unites all the Pondicherrians of Indochina.' Emblematic of this is the Vietnamese spring roll *nem*, called 'chaioy' by Pondicherrians after the name 'cha gio' in South Vietnam. A favourite in Franco-Pondicherrian gatherings worldwide, even street food hawkers can 'describe in great detail each step in the production of spring rolls, in French as in Tamil, without ever having been in Vietnam.'

The only restaurant in Pondicherry that serves the spring roll today is the rather dated Paris Restaurant. Despite Pondicherry's numerous restaurants offering 'Creole' and 'Indo-French' cuisine, Paris Restaurant is the city's sole sit-down purveyor of Vietnamese food: unfortunately, its dishes, though announced as Vietnamese, lack the vibrancy of taste. However, if you know Anita Decanaga through the Franco-Pondicherrian circuit, you can enjoy Vietnamese dishes cooked by her mother Pushpa at their home. At Decanaga's table d'hôte venture, 'Chez Pushpa', home-cooked meals laced with stories of Saigon unravel their multi-generational familial presence in Indochina.

Late in 2023, the Bel-Ami Café opened in the heart of the White Town. It brings together Pondicherry-Vietnam cuisine as well as a family history of Saigon entanglements via the well-known family of Ragounath Manet, one of Pondicherry's best-known Bharatnatyam dancers, whose mother was Vietnamese. The author of one of the most acclaimed Pondicherry cookbooks, Lourdes Tirouvanziam-Louis, also has a Vietnamese mother; and one of Argentina's most interesting winemakers, Aziz Abdul, is Franco-Pondicherrian via Vietnam. Spread out between Paris, Pondicherry, and the world are many more writers, hoteliers, chefs, musicians, and cultural entrepreneurs waiting in the wings whose family histories join Indochina's material transformation of Franco-Pondicherrian foodways, interiors, and urban



spaces as palpable yet elusive deposits of the past on the city and the body. The time is hopefully not far off when these histories will be told in a manner that does justice to this rich and vibrant heritage—as the Bel-Ami Café already confirms.



A meal at 'Chez Pushpa', starting with *Cha gio*.
Photo by Ananya Jahanara Kabir.



Vietnamese Pho at Paris Restaurant. Photo by
Ananya Jahanara Kabir.



The Silent Mills of Pondicherry

Bharathapriya R

The run down building of the abandoned Savana mill, later renamed Swadeshi Cotton Mills.
Photo by Jubin Bennet.

Under French rule, Pondicherry became a trading hub for the French East India Company, which dealt with textiles—and in particular, guinée cloth. Also known as blue cloth for its indigo dye, this exported textile was renowned for its colour and quality, attributed to the alumina content in the river water used for dyeing. In fact, in Senegal in West Africa, it served as a medium of currency in the gum trade.

Pondicherry's reputation for dyeing drew Jamshedji Tata's attention. In 1885, he sent his son, Dorabjee Tata, to establish a textile mill in town. The endeavour failed, due in part to the ill health of Jamshedji, and in part to the difficulty of setting up a mill from scratch.

Earlier, between 1793-1816, the French lost Pondicherry to the British. When they regained control, newly-appointed Governor Richemont Debassayns sought to restore trade and economy by establishing a spinning and weaving cotton industry. He pointed to the availability of 60 leagues of cotton from Tirunelveli, the safety of the harbour, cheap labour, the large number of weavers, the quality of water for dyeing, and the long-standing reputation of its linens. Finally, in 1827, a local ordinance formally invited private entrepreneurs to establish industries, transforming Pondicherry from a trade post into an industrial hub.

The First Mills

In 1828, Blin, a businessman from Pondicherry and Delbruck, based in Bordeaux, set up a textile mill with various government concessions. He was granted a 20 per cent discount on the machine, free shipping for equipment and workers, free land for the factory, and a loan of 30,000 francs at 4 per cent interest, repayable over six years. Inspired by the project, Charlemagne Poulain of Le Prince et Poulain, the machine builders for Blin and Delbruck, also set up a spinning mill in Pondicherry.

Poulain and Duboy faced several challenges in Pondicherry: the climate, the negligence of local workers, their religious biases, and lack of knowledge in the mechanical industries. Even so, their belief in being the pioneers of European industry in India drove them forward. Despite obstacles, including delays and losses with shipment due to weather, Poulain did become the pioneer of mill operations in Pondicherry. By 1832, even the mill of Blin and Delbruck operated under his name.

By 1835, the factory workforce grew to include 86 men, 97 children, and even 35 women, suggesting diminishing prejudice. In 1886, the ownership was transferred to another office in Bordeaux and the factory was renamed Savana.

The success of this first mill encouraged the establishment of two other mills. In 1892, the second textile mill 'Filature et tissage Gaebele' (also called

Pondicherry Cotton Mills or the Mudaliarpet mill) was established under Henri Gaebele.

Finally, Rodier Mill—the largest mill established in town—was opened in 1898 under a British firm with headquarters in London.

Working Class Strikes

With the growth of the textile industry, a new working-class community emerged in Pondicherry. In 1936, around 8000 Indians were employed across the three mills of Pondicherry. Like workers worldwide, they encountered extended working hours, low wages, and unfavourable conditions.

In Bombay and Madras, workers had 10 hour working days, while in Pondicherry, it extended to 11-12 hours or more. Their wage was the low rate of 12-14 annas, earning them a poor living.

The workers, agitated by these concerns, eventually organised a strike to demand an 8-hour workday.

The Harijana Seva Sangham (HSS), an organization that worked for the betterment of lower-classes and castes, worked closely among the mill workers to raise awareness and urge them to strike. Finally, in 1935, the Savana mill workers took to a strike, which resulted in hundreds



Rodier Mill, later renamed Anglo-French Textiles in 1955. Photo by Jubin Bennet.

losing employment. In response, the workers organized a conference on 10th May 1936 to directly urge the government to legislate labour measures. V. Subbiah, editor of *Swadhanthiram* magazine, and L. J. X. Doraiswami, Secretary of French India Labour Conference Committee, supported the strikes. V. V. Giri and S. Gurusuwami, General and Assistant Secretary of the All India Railwaymen's Federation, were also invited to participate and represented the nearly 1000 transport workers of British India.

The conference was banned. The workers then sought refuge in British territory in Madras, where they convened a meeting to protest against the authorities of Pondicherry. Around the same time, on 23rd May 1936, the French government enacted new labour legislation (exclusively for women and children). On 21st June, the workers gathered to commend the government and advocate for the legislation to include adult males. As such meetings were still banned in French territory, it took place in British terrain two miles away. This gathering led to the complete loss of workers' rights to hold public meetings.

Within the week, by 29th June 1936, the workers of all three mills responded by organizing a stay-in strike. They sought 8-hour workdays, collective bargaining rights, wage increases, holidays, and the right to form labour unions. Led by the workers, headed by Subbiah in coordination with activists in British India and France, the strike won ground on all legislation excluding

the right to trade-unions. In the last week of July, the workers initiated a final strike. Monsieur Solomiac, governor of French-India, ordered an open assault by the police and military. Shooting issued at the Rodier and Savana Mills, killing 12 and injuring hundreds. Subsequently, thousands of workers left for refuge in British territory in Tamil Nadu.

The violence forced the coalition government of France to step in. They appointed Senator Justin Godart to examine workers' issues in French India—and under his review, the workers' demands were all successfully met. With that, Pondicherry's workforce became pioneers in their own right, securing an eight-hour workday. To commemorate the event, a statue was erected in front of the Swadeshi Mill.

Closing the Mills

After Pondicherry merged with India, the cotton textile continued to thrive. In the 1972-74 survey of industries, for instance, it accounted for nearly 72 per cent of total employment across industries.

Two mills, Bharathi and Swadeshi, stayed under the control of the National Textile Corporation until 2005, when the Puducherry government took over.

Rodier Mill closed in 1983, but the government took control in 1986 and ran it until Cyclone Thane hit (2011). In 2020, however, all three mills closed permanently following an extended court proceeding, due to the

economic crisis, the decline of the overseas market, and a diminished demand for cotton.

The Workers' Union stated that despite initial profits, mismanagement and corruption led to losses in the mills. All the mill workers lost their jobs and fell into financial crises. The areas surrounding the mills, once densely populated by mill workers, are now sparsely inhabited, with not even a few hundred remaining. No surveys or reports exist to document what happened to them.

Conclusion

Since late 2018, many prospects for reopening the mills have emerged. The potential benefits are significant, particularly to the people of the area. Currently, the government is examining possibilities for the



Defunct weaving machines inside Swadeshi Mills.
Photo by Bharathapriya R.



Statue commemorating the textile workers who fought for labour rights and were killed in police firing.
Photo by Bharathapriya R.

establishment of an information technology park and a textile industry at the site of the erstwhile Anglo-French Textiles in the town.

Despite tourism thriving in Pondicherry, none of the century-old textile mills have been conserved or turned into museums. These mills are not merely abandoned industrial buildings: they also showcase unique Anglo-French industrial architecture and provide insights into the lives of workers at the core of the French-Indian economy. It is vital to highlight the contributions of these workers, past and present, to ensure that the city's heritage reflects not only colonial aesthetics but also its vibrant labour history.



An image from a collection of lithographs depicting life in French India in the nineteenth-century. The image shows a weaver preparing the warp, his wife spinning, and in the background, the warp mounted and the loom suspended from a tree branch. Picture Credits: Caryatid, INHA digital library, NUM FOL EE 9 (1).



Interiors of the abandoned Anglo-French textile mills. Photo by Jubin Bennet.



Walking through Crafts

Sayali Athale

Handmade stoneware made at Golden Bridge Pottery displayed in the workshop space. Photo by Joseph Rahul

I began my search for handcrafted products at the Puducherry Sunday market on Nehru Street, expecting it to be lined with artisans selling handmade wares. Instead, the stalls were heaped with synthetic garments and plastic toys. Finding craftware, it seemed, would require more persistence.

Eventually, I spied columns of rolled *kora mats*. *Kora* or sedgegrass mats are typical in Tamil country, where the wetlands and riverbanks abound in *kora* grass (*cypernus malaccensis*) that is intricately woven into durable floor coverings.

Kora mat-making came to Puducherry in the 1840s via Muslim mat weavers from the North Arcot region of Tamil Nadu, who travelled to harvest the *kora* grass on the Sankaraparani (or the Gingee) riverbed. Eventually the Kuvandurs, Vanniyars, and Udayars, who assisted in harvesting grass, began practicing mat-weaving — as agriculture was not always sustainable. In 1943, when a flood uprooted the growth of *kora* grass, the craftsmen began purchasing it from the villages of Mannadipet, Villianur, Nainar-mandapam, Chinnababusamudram, and Vandavasi.

Till the 1960s, kora mat-making was practiced in Kaiklapet in the Mannadipet commune and Odiampattu village in the Villianur commune, where mat-weavers formed co-operative societies.



Kora mats feature a variety of intricate designs.
Photo by Sayali Athale.

Over time, however, this practice faded away. The *kora* mats currently sold in Puducherry are sourced from mat weavers in Vandavasi, Kollidam, and Karur.

Moving from the market, down the road by the cathedral of Our Lady of Immaculate Conception, I glimpsed handmade leather footwear in unusual shades of pinks, blues, and yellows. Leatherwork is a historical profession in the region. In the 1970s, Dilip Kapur, an Aurovillian, established the Hidesign enterprise — to create contemporary leather products using traditional, environmentally responsible techniques — and turned leatherwork into a prolific handicraft in Puducherry. Today, there are several craftspeople in Shanmukhapuram, Muthialpet, Villianur, and even nearby Auroville, who tailor bags, purses, and shoes of impeccable quality. In the Heritage Town are several shoemakers, who even make customized leather sandals.

Belonging to caste-based communities called the Chikkiliyar and the Arunthathiyar, the leather-



Shoemaker near the Immaculate Conception Cathedral. Photo by Joseph Rahul.

workers source material from Ambur, or Perimed, Ranipet, and Metpalayam — they use tough cow-hide for footwear and softer goat-hide for bags and purses.

Though most workers are local Tamilians, there is a growing trend of northern Indian craftsmen migrating to Pondicherry.

Craft culture was supplemented by another initiative in the 1970s: under the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Deborah Smith and Ray Meeker set up the Golden Bridge Pottery (GBP) in 1971.

Inspired by Japanese pottery and American stoneware, GBP trained considerable potters and ceramicists over



Potter Sadasivam at this workshop near Villianur. Photo by Joseph Rahul.

the years — and developed a style of glazed stoneware now recognised as Pondicherry pottery.

Terracotta clayware, on the other hand, is a traditional industry—earthenware is still sold in the potter's street, or Kosakadai street, in the Tamil Town. In Villianur, I met Sadasivam, a potter by family profession who learnt the ropes at GBP, where he worked for a decade. He runs an independent workshop with his wife, his earthenware inflected by GBP's influence. His preference is still for terracotta and he showed me a batch of fired-clay casseroles he was shipping to Kerala. Also at Villianur is the workshop of Padma Shri winner V.K. Munusamy, near the Sri Kasi Vishvanathar Temple. It is filled with terracotta

figures of the Ayyanar horse, a signature of Villianur pottery, conferred the official Geographical Indication (GI) tag to signify unique regionality in 2011. Villianur pottery traces back to artisans from the Kulalar community, who traditionally worked with clay to create everyday and ritual objects.

The clay mix for Villianur pottery is composed of three soils: *kalippu* (soft clay), *thennal* (river clay), and *saavudu* (fine sand), some of which were traditionally excavated from the Shankaraparani riverbed. The raw material is sieved and kneaded with water into a wet mix. For large idols, the limbs are shaped separately and later assembled. Simple bamboo tools are used to carve the clay. After sculpting, the items are decorated with patterns and stamps, then sun-dried to draw out residual



At the Golden Bridge Pottery. Photo by Joseph Rahul.

moisture and minimise cracking during firing. In Villianur, firing takes place not in permanent kilns like at GBP, but in temporary ovens assembled using paddy husk, wooden shavings, and cow-dung, with each oven large enough to fire forty to sixty pieces at once. Sculpting is the men's job, but women knead the clay, decorate, prepare the kiln, and load the products. Ayyanar horses, elephants, Ganesh figures, *Kamadhenu* (wish-granting cow), *drishti-bomma* (masks to ward off evil), and Buddha statues are popularly made pottery products.

Puducherry is also associated with another GI-tagged craft: Thirukannur papier-mâché, named after a village in Mannadipet, which produces masks and dolls. In the craft market behind the Promenade in Puducherry, I found out that few

makers are left in the village today. Many dolls are now instead made in Bengaluru and transported to Puducherry, raising questions over the significance of the GI tag at all.

In the last century, such dolls were also made in Kosapalayam (Kuyavarpalayam) near the heritage town.

Traditionally made from terracotta, artisans adopted the use of papier-mâché, a combination of paper, limestone, and gypsum, after colonial influence.

Ancillary materials like chalk powders, cement, adhesives, maize and rice flour, metal wire, zinc powder, white lead, copper sulphate as a preservative, natural gums, oils



Making of Ayyanar horses. Photo by Jubin Bennet.

and varnishes were also used in the process. These papier-mâché dolls range from three inches to a foot and a half in size, based on a spectrum of religious and cultural sources from Hindu mythology to the Bible, and everyday characters and occupations. The dancing girl and the *Gundu Chettiar* (a man with a paunch) are particularly popular. Some of these dolls are also used as 'kolu' dolls, or decorative pieces for festivities, during Navaratri in the Tamil month Purattasi (September–October).

Having examined the Sunday market on Nehru Street and the state-run craft market behind the Promenade, I headed towards the Ashram stores – several outlets that sell handmade objects produced by departments of Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Work is part of Integral Yoga for the ashram and the Mother encouraged craftwork, so workshops are scattered across the Heritage Town within white-and-grey buildings. Most were established between 1940-60, some focused on fulfilling everyday needs within the Ashram, while others, such as GBP sought to encourage ashram disciples' skills. Over time, several became income-generating units.

Amongst these is the hand-weaving department, producing textiles, and a batik department. A cottage industries section, established later, now has an outlet on Gingee Salai selling handmade incense and soaps.

One of the Ashram's best-known departments, the hand-made paper factory,



Display of kolu dolls. Picture Credits: Ksiva21/Wikimedia Commons.

was established in 1959 in a coconut plantation to the north of the Boulevard.

While it uses a variety of bio-based materials, such as bamboo, pineapple, and eucalyptus leaves, banana and sugarcane fibres, straw, and husk to make paper, its primary material is waste generated in textile factories in Tirupur. Received in the form of white cotton rags, this is hand-sorted, cut to smaller sizes, and beaten with water in Hollander beaters to release long, strong cotton fibres that form a chutney-like pulp. Poured into traditional moulds, pressed into sheets, then peeled off and drained further on felt surfaces, these are finally dried in open air or drying rooms (above the factory) and calendared to produce smooth surfaced paper. These are decorated,



Marbled paper at the Ashram Handmade paper factory. Photo by Sayali Athale.



Inside the Cluny Embroidery centre. Photo by Joseph Rahul.

often by marbling. Marbling, inspired by the Japanese technique *suminagashi* (floating ink), was attempted by the ashram in 1942. Oil paint is dropped on water and spread into patterns by a stick, after which handmade paper is laid on the surface to draw the paint onto it and then dried for a day. This procedure produces unique patterns, used both for paper and silk and chiffon. Today, the handmade paper factory has an extensive collection of marbled paper; an independent unit called 'Harmonie' produces sarees and other apparel in marbled fabric.

My self-guided craft tour ended at the stately colonial mansion of the Cluny Embroidery Centre. Run by the sisters of St Joseph of Cluny, the centre trains underprivileged local women in needlework — their work is exemplary, the backs of the embroidered pieces embroidered as clean as the fronts.

For a town of its size, Pondicherry holds an unusually dense concentration of craft practices, both community and studio-based. Influenced by French rule and the presence of the Ashram, they lend the city a distinctive material character.

Ayyanar Horses. Illustration by Jisha Unnikrishnan.





Casting the Divine

Sayali Athale

Lost wax bronze casting at Swamimalai. Picture Credits: Rainer Halama/Wikimedia Commons.

Along the Rue du Bazaar Saint Laurent in the French Quarter of Pondicherry, a modest showroom named 'The Metal Crafts' displays bronze images of a plethora of Hindu deities: Ganesha, Vishnu, Shiva, Parvati, Hanuman, Garuda, Narasimha stand along the walls in varying scales and postures. Vasanth, the artisan who crafts these divine representations, explains that each image is created using a true-to-process, lost-wax bronze casting method that originated centuries ago in the Chola period.

Called *madhuchhithavidhana*, it is described in detail in the *Manasollasa*, a twelfth-century CE treatise by King Someshvara of Kalyana.

While Swamimalai in the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu is best-known for this craft today, the technology has roots across Tamil Nadu, including areas in Pondicherry. Despite this long historicity, the difficulty of the craft has meant that few are interested in continuing with the occupation. Today, Vasanth and his uncle, Bhaskar, are the only practicing artisans in Pondicherry.

The Making of the Model

Lost-wax bronze casting is a long and laborious process. Crafting a three-foot tall statue may take four months. The sculptor first shapes the figure in beeswax mixed with a local tree resin and coconut oil, then models every detail—the jewellery, facial features, and *hasta* (hand formations)—by

hand. The proportions of the materials dictate pliability: a harder mixture with lesser oil is used for the main body, while a more malleable mix with a higher ratio of oil is used for finer details like the face and adornments. The main body and the pedestal of the sculptures are created separately. The wax model is usually based on photographs of older idols in museums or temples. Vasanth uses a *tala* (coconut frond) to measure and mark the proportions of the statue; through years of practice, he can recreate classical sculptures fluently.

Once the wax model is ready, it is coated in successive layers of fine clay to form a mould. Bronze-casting flourished at Swamimalai as the Kaveri riverbed there contained the required quality of clay. Earlier, Vasanth imported clay by the truckload from Swamimalai, but given the expense and inconvenience, he has shifted to using a mixture of Plaster of Paris (POP) and sand. In his workshop, he coats the model in layers of POP, interspersed with steel-wire reinforcement. Using POP speeds up the process significantly, drying within a day as opposed to the two weeks taken by clay. However, POP is only useful for statues upto 20 kgs, and Vasanth resorts to traditional clay for heavier pieces. Once the mould dries, it is heated so the wax melts out from a port in the top, leaving a cavity in the clay or POP body. Then, it is baked to bring its temperature closer to the molten alloy that will be poured into the cavity next.

Although called bronze-casting, the

alloy used by Vasanth to make these icons is gun-metal. While bronze is an alloy of copper and tin, and brass of copper and zinc, the alloy Vasanth uses is a ratio of 84 per cent copper, 14 per cent zinc and 2 per cent tin, giving it malleability and hardness.

The molten alloy is sometimes sprinkled with gold and silver for ritual auspiciousness (*shashtra*), with this five-metal mixture being called *panchaloha* (“five metals” in Sanskrit, a sacred alloy for making temple idols).



A dancing Thirugnanasambandar. Picture Credits: Wuselg/Wikimedia Commons.

High-quality metal scraps are melted in the furnace to create the alloy; simultaneously, the searing hot mould is buried in the ground to keep it stable while the molten metal is poured inside. Statues for temples are usually solid-cast and heavier. Private clients or non-religious institutions prefer lighter, hollow statues. Typically, the arms and torsos of such statues have cavities created by clay spacers; Vasanth, however, has adapted to using newer materials such as silicon rubber.

Casting the statues is a task for evenings: the metal cools over-night and the outer mould is broken to reveal the metal image the next morning. This image is then filed and polished to articulate details of the face, jewellery, clothing, and weapons. Since every mould can be used only once, each image created by this process in Vasanth's workshop is unique.

The History of the Art

This sculptural tradition originated from experimentation in stone and bronze under the Pallava kings. Upon their defeat by Aditya Chola in 875 CE, these conceptual and technical foundations remained even as the style of sculpting transformed.

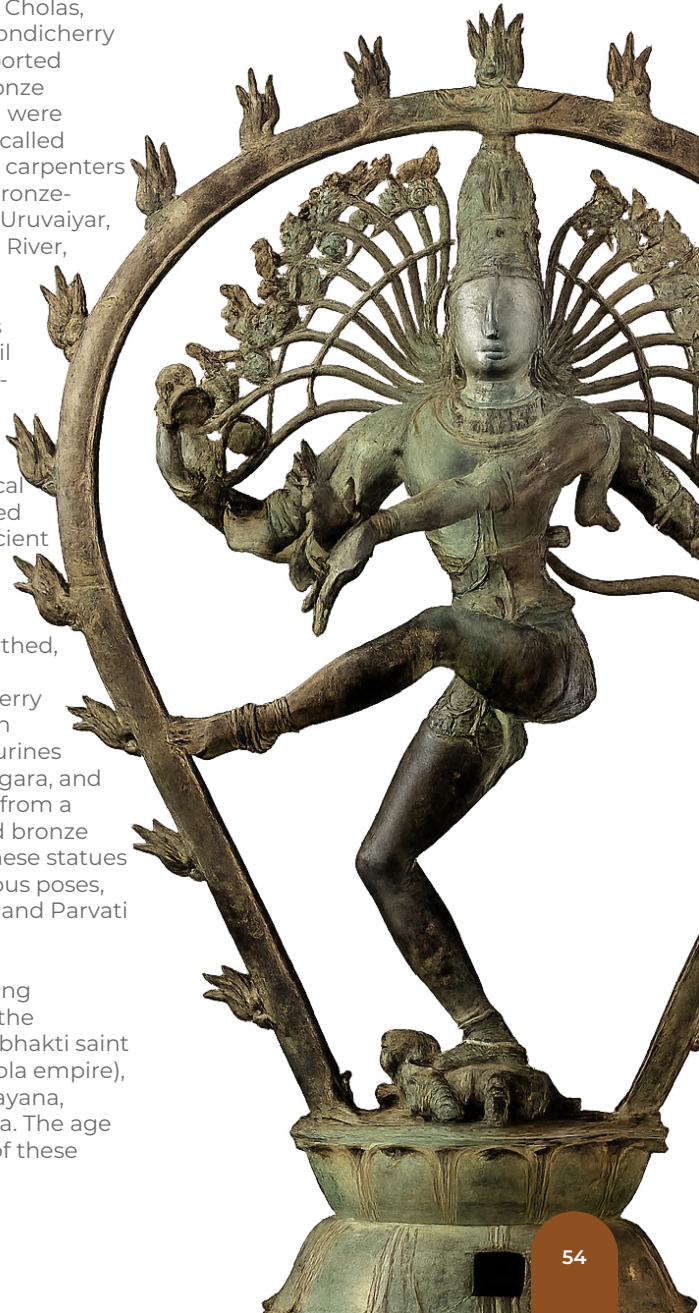
From the ninth-century, lost-wax bronze casting became the signature of Chola image-making: dynamic, sensuous *utsavmurthis* (idols of Hindu deities, movable, used for

processions) were popular.

Historical references indicate that regions governed by the Cholas, including present-day Pondicherry and its communes, supported clusters of hereditary bronze craftsmen. Among them were families of *Asaris*, locally called *Thachar*, who worked as carpenters but were also skilled in bronze-casting. Villages such as Uruvaiyar, along the Sankaraparani River, housed communities engaged in producing bronze icons for temples across the region up until the end of the twentieth-century. These artisans created images on commission, which adhered to strict canonical measurements prescribed in the *Shilpashastra* (ancient Hindu treatises).

Several such historical statues have been unearthed, both in Pondicherry and Karaikal — with Pondicherry Museum now housing an impressive 81 bronze figurines from the Chola, Vijayanagara, and Nayaka period. Ranging from a golden-red of weathered bronze to a rich-green patina of these statues include: Ganesha in various poses, representations of Shiva and Parvati as Thiripurandhaka and Thiripurasundari, the Pradoshamurthi, a dancing Thirugnanasambandar (the prominent Tamil Shaiva bhakti saint who lived during the Chola empire), and Vishnu as Laxminarayana, Gopalakrishna, and Rama. The age and storage conditions of these

Nataraja, the most famous motif of Chola bronze statues. Picture Credits: LACMA/Wikimedia Commons.



figurines have not dented their aquiline features, the finesse of their jewellery, or the serenity of their expressions.

Vasanth's Workshop

Vasanth's work follows in this heritage. Although not a hereditary *sthapati* (bronze caster), his lack of interest in academics led him to begin training in this profession at the age of 16, under the tutelage of an icon-maker named Ragan from Swamimalai. Working with his uncle Bhaskar, who handles the filing and detailing work, Vasanth makes wax models and handles business operations.

He notes, "It is important to keep in mind the varying characteristics of all the figures. For example, Shiva is lean and powerful while Vishnu has a more rounded body. Ornaments and clothes are often specific to the different characters, and expressions also vary according to their avatars."

Among Vasanth's notable creations is *Gajasurasamhara*, a powerful iconographic of Shiva dancing within the flayed hide of the elephant-demon Gajasura, popular in Pallava and Chola art for its dramatic energy and composition. Another significant image is *Somaskanda*: Shiva with four arms, Parvati seated beside him, and the infant Skanda or Kartikeya positioned between them in a dancing posture. This representation, a major motif in temple art, emerged during the Pallava period. A final

standout model: Nataraja, standing on his hands, in an unusual posture that replicates the seventeenth-century statue currently in the Aurobindo Ashram library. Vasanth, speaking of his most memorable works, describes the replica of a statue of Narsimha currently in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: a magnum opus, 20 kgs, taking four months of labour and sold for approximately 2.5 lakh rupees.

Currently, Vasanth and Bhaskar are training two apprentices. While they once had a team of ten, interest in the craft is now sparse and most trainees come from Thanjavur. Inflated tourism draws the young to the quick-earnings it promises; in contrast, becoming a bronze artisan is a slow, demanding process. Vasanth says, "Learning this craft requires a lot of patience and hard work. It takes more than six months to just learn to create wax models. When the master works, one must watch carefully; and when his work is done, one has to practice by imitating what he has made. One must be prepared to work on the floor for several hours." The craft's demands on the body have health implications as well: despite donning protective gloves and masks, constant exposure



Working on the floor for several hours often leads to chronic back pain. Photo by Vasanth K.



The Somaskanda sculpture at the Rijksmuseum. Picture Credits: Rijksmuseum/Wikimedia Commons.

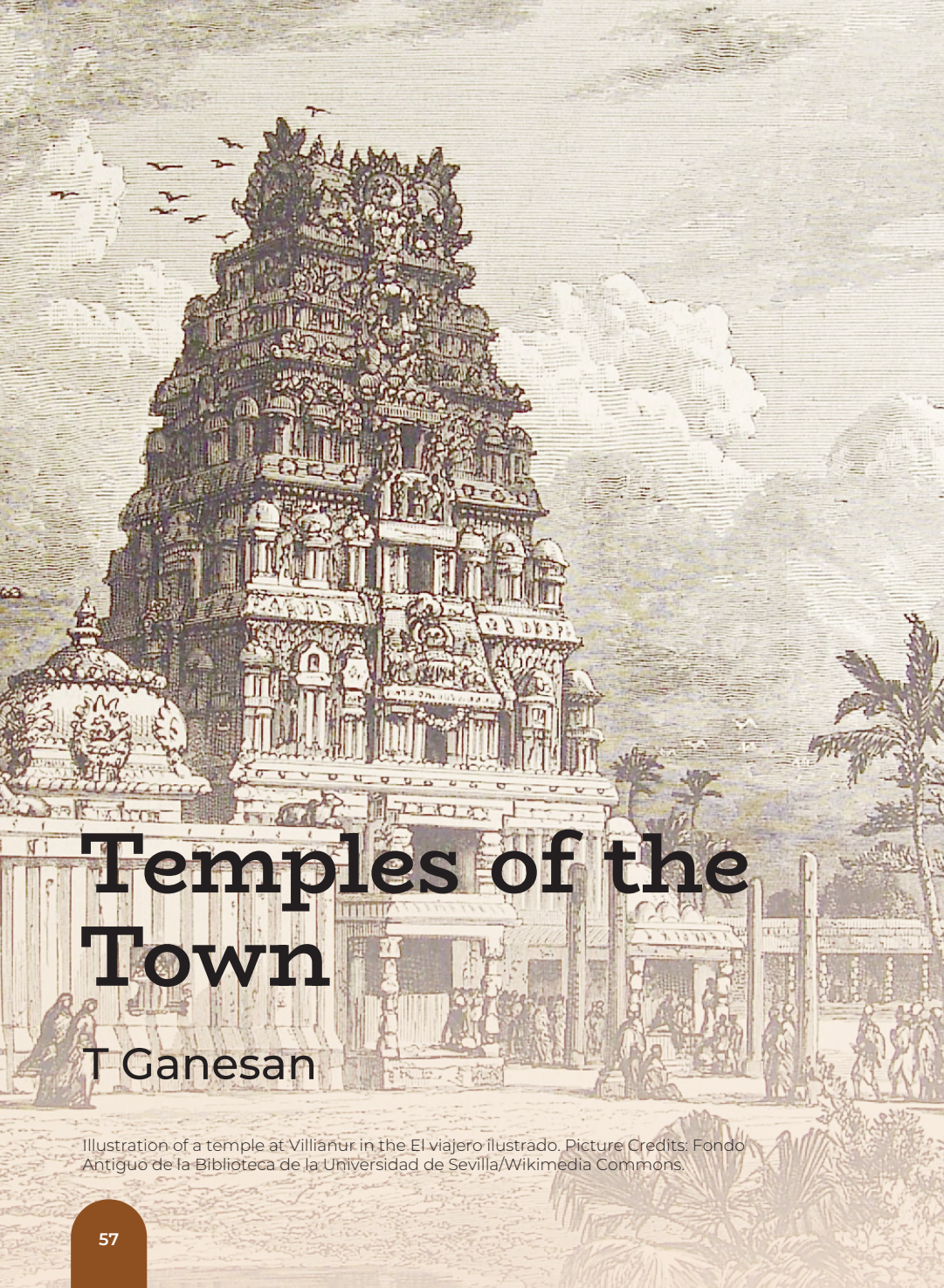
to high temperatures — for the metal is heated up to 1000 degrees Celsius — leads to eye problems and hair fall.

Working on the floor stresses the spine and causes chronic back-pain. Vasanth recollects how his master looked older than he was at 55 years, a peril of the job, but suggests these health risks are hardly a deterrent for him. “If it was an easy task, everyone would be making sculptures,” he states.

Through artisans like Vasanth and Bhaskar, Pondicherry maintains a fragile tether to a once-flourishing bronze-casting tradition—their practice keeps this aspect of the city’s intangible culture alive.



An unusual sculpture of Nataraja created by Vasanth based on the statue in the Ashram Library. Photo by Vasanth K.



Temples of the Town

T Ganesan

Illustration of a temple at Villianur in the *El viajero ilustrado*. Picture Credits: Fondo Antiguo de la Biblioteca de la Universidad de Sevilla/Wikimedia Commons.

Though Puducherry is often viewed through the lens of its French colonial past, the region's sacred history predates European arrival by many centuries. Located between Tondaimandalam and Cholamandalam, it became part of the Chola realm in the eleventh-century CE, inheriting a tradition of temple construction, artistic patronage, and inscriptional record-keeping that shaped much of medieval Tamil Nadu. Several *koils* or *kovils* (temples) in and around the town are referenced in early Saiva devotional hymns, linking the region to the itinerant pilgrimages of the Nayanmars, such as Thirujnanasambandar, and to the wider sacred geography of Tamil country.

These temples functioned not only as ritual centres but also as repositories of social and political memory. Their walls bear inscriptions spanning centuries; their icons and mandapas reflect changing artistic idioms; and their histories register episodes of patronage, destruction, relocation, and rebuilding — particularly during the period of French colonial consolidation in the eighteenth-century.

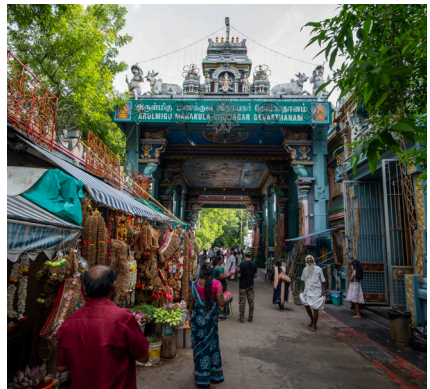
Today, that sacred landscape of Puducherry survives in multiple forms: in large Siva and Vishnu temples, in neighbourhood Vinayaka shrines sustained by local communities, and even in sites shaped by interfaith patronage. Read together, they reveal a temple-town whose religious and cultural continuities persist alongside and beneath the better-known colonial urban fabric.

Manakkulavinayakar Temple

A popular temple of Vinayaka, located near the sea and at the heart of the French town, it was included as part of the fort by the French in the seventeenth-century. Statues of Vinayaka with his mount, the *musika* (mouse) at his feet are installed in the temple.

In the *garbhagraha* (sanctum sanctorum), an ancient idol of Vinayaka with four hands is worshipped, with a shrine for Candeshvara at the north-west. A small linga made of crystal is also present, particularly noteworthy as it was unearthed from cultivable land at a village near Senji 60 years ago.

Two legends mark the walls: on the north, portraying Vinayaka offering a *chakrayudha* (disc-weapon) to Vishnu; on the south is a legend of Vinayaka receiving a mango after circumambulating Siva and Parvati, with Subrahmanya (Murugan) mounted on a peacock in the sky. The ceilings have paintings of Purana stories with floral designs.



Manakula Vinayagar, the only temple in the French Quarter in Puducherry. Photo by Joseph Rahul.

Siddhivinayakar Temple

This temple, also known as Elai Pillayar Koil (the Vinayaka temple for the poor) is situated on the southern part of the Gandhi Road. A modest structure without much pomp and hence for the poor, this temple is nearly 300-years old, with the main tower constructed in 1876.

The image of Vinayaka installed is small, but the temple includes a special shrine for Siva, here named Vaidyanatha, and for Taiyalnayaki. Other deities found in a Siva temple are also installed: Nataraja and Sivakamasundari, alongside bronze images of Siddhivinayaka and Murugan with spouses Valli and Devasena.

Salai Man Pillaiyar Koil

This small shrine, situated on the junction between Anna Salai and the Easvaran Koil Street, is popularly known as 'Akhanda Paripurana Yazppana Akkasami Man Pillaiyar Koil'. The huge image of Vinayaka here is made of clay. The story goes that it was worshipped by a young saint from Jaffna (or Yazppanam, in Sri Lanka) who settled in Pondicherry: known for uttering the word 'akka' (the Tamil word for addressing sister) often, he came to be known as Akkasami and the temple too was named after him. Though very small, a large number of people regularly come here to pray.

Muthaliyarpettai Murugan Temple

Muthaiya Muthaliyarpettai, now

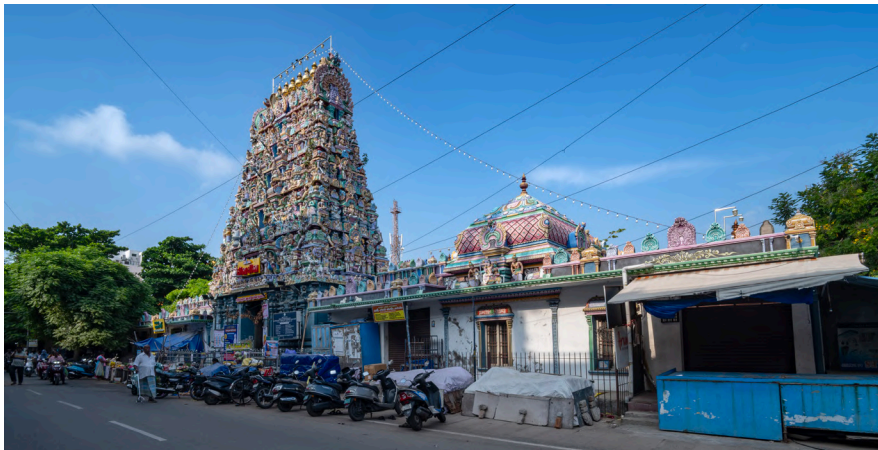
called Muthiyalpettai, has a temple for Subrahmanya on the street opposite to the clock tower. In the twentieth-century, under supposed divine command, idols of Murugan, accompanied by his consorts Valli and Devasena, were installed on the 300-year old samadhi (shrine or tomb) of Muthaiya Siddhar. This temple was constructed by the Senkuntar community, whose profession is weaving and who are traditionally staunch devotees of Murugan.

Kausika Balasubrahmanyar Temple

This temple, opposite the railway station, was constructed by a Muslim. Mohammad Ghouse, devoted to Murugan since boyhood, used to worship his image at home and helped priests decorate idols in temples nearby. It is said that Murugan appeared in Ghouse's dream to direct him to construct a temple and Ghouse followed the directive. After his death, it was managed by his brother and sons. Today, the temple occupies an important place among the Murugan temples in Pondicherry.

Vedapurisvarar Temple

The ancient name of Puducherry is Vedapuri, and the deity in this Siva temple is known as Vedapurisvara—the Lord of Vedapuri. Now situated on Gandhi Road, the original temple was once where the Janmaraggini Matha Cathedral stands. The original temple had a lingam that is said to have come out of itself (*svayambhu*). However, as recorded in



Vedapurisvarar Temple in Puducherry. Photo by Joseph Rahul.

Anandarangam Pillai Diary, the temple was demolished on 8th September 1748 under the orders of then French Governor Duplex. Only in 1777, after many protracted meetings with the government was land allotted to construct the new temple.

Today, the temple has a tower measuring 75 feet, with a library between the tower and the inner sanctum. Inside is the *Vrishabha* (bull). Further in is the sanctum where the large *lingam* of Vedapurivara is installed. On the northern side is a sanctum of a five feet granite statue of Tripurasundari with four hands. This sanctum was built in 1901, while the segments around it and the connecting portion to the sanctum of Vedapurisvara were constructed in 1890. Among the other gods in the temple is a long and separate shrine for the 63 Nayanmars, each constructed by different people at different times.

Kalahastisvarar Temple

This Siva temple was constructed to the north of the old Vedapurisvara Temple on Mission Street in 1715. Surrounded by a wall sixteen-feet high and three-feet wide, the temple occupies a large area of 12,000 square feet, with three entrances—east, south, and north, of which the eastern tower is five-tiered. Besides the shrine of Kalahastisvara, there is a shrine to Jnanambika. On the northern side there is a separate shrine for Vishnu, under the name of Varadarajap Perumal. The temple being so large, many festivals throughout the year are celebrated here. The complex is managed by the Ayira Vaisyas community.

Varadaraja Perumal Temple

This Vishnu temple was already in existence, right at its present place in Gandhi Road, when the old Vedapurisvara Temple was



Kalahastisvara Temple. Picture Credits: Ssriram mt/Wikimedia Commons.



Sri Varadaraja Perumal Temple in Puducherry. Photo by Joseph Rahul.

demolished in 1748; in fact, some of the images from that demolished temple were stored here for safety. On the wall around the sanctum different forms of Vishnu in other holy places are sculpted. The deity inside the sanctum is seven feet in height, sculpted in a standing pose with Sridevi and Bhudevi on either side. It is said that these images, along with some others, were found in the sea some 200-years ago. This temple also contains the images of Alvars (devotees of Vishnu) and of various Vaishnava *acharyas* (saints). Next to a shrine of Andal is a shrine for Kodandarama; adjacent is a small room where four walls are covered with mirrors, and at the centre is placed the idol generally taken on processions. This too is a popular temple and many festivals are celebrated here throughout the year.

Conservation and Heritage

Though some of these temples were destroyed (as in the case of the ancient Vedapurisvarar Temple) by the French colonial authorities, most have been restored by the work of local communities. Nearly all of these temples continue to be daily sites of use and engagement for devotees, which has contributed to their maintenance.

Simultaneously, the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) and the Puducherry Government are jointly working towards ensuring the preservation of these historic sites. On the recommendations of the State-Level

Heritage Conservation and Advisory Committee (SLHCAC), the Puducherry Government has declared several temples 'protected buildings' and granted them heritage tags, including the Vedapurisvarar Temple. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has also recognized several historical temples as Monuments of National Importance, including the Varadaraja Perumal Temple, and authorized their protection. These legislative efforts, in concert with the local communities, have ensured the relative maintenance and upkeep of these ancient temples in Puducherry.

Devotees gathered in front of the temple-like chariot during the Veerampattinam Car Festival. Illustration by Jisha Unnikrishnan.





Of Mangoes, Monstrances, and Firewalks

Pattabi Raman

The crowd of devotees by the beach for Masi Magam. Photo by Pattabi Raman.

Puducherry is often famously spotlighted for its town-wide celebration of Bastille Day, yet its festive landscape extends far beyond this well-known commemoration. Across the year, Puducherry's calendar marks a range of popular celebrations by local communities. Many of these draw on larger traditions of faith in the subcontinent and beyond, with the town incorporating different and vivid elements of its own into existing regional and global festivities.

Not all of these celebrations are religious by definition, as in the case of the famous International Yoga Festival. Yet many festivals emerge from religious traditions and unfold into shared cultural events. They frequently extend beyond doctrinal boundaries to become occasions of social gathering, marked by fairs, food, music, and performance. Institutions such as the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, for instance, celebrate Christmas as they do Diwali. This essay details a set of festivals to draw out how the landscape, the local materials, and the arts are folded together into spectacular occasions that also bring together the people of Puducherry.

Maasi Magam: Confluence of Faith and Sea

It is early March in Puducherry: the heat rises alongside the tide of people thronging the coast of Vaithikuppam. Among them is Chitra, a mother of three and a vegetable vendor at the Grand Bazaar. She holds her youngest child close, asking the other two to clasp

her tight as the crowd swells toward the Bay of Bengal—converging for *Maasi Magam*.

Celebrated during the Tamil month Maasi (February–March), when the *Magam Nakshatra* (an auspicious star) aligns, the festival celebrates the visit of celestial deities to Earth to bless their devotees. The primary deities associated with the festival are Shiva and Vishnu, as well as various versions of the mother goddesses. A procession of temple deities, adorned in flowers and silk, are carried from temples across Puducherry and neighbouring Tamil Nadu districts—and into the sea for a ritual bath. This immersion symbolically purifies the gods and the devotees who take a dip alongside. Along the eroded coastline of Vaithikuppam, the sea becomes a site of spiritual renewal for thousands.



The sea-facing rituals are performed as part of the Maasi Magam festival. Photo by Pattabi Raman.

Mangani Thiruvizha: The Offering of Mangoes

A singular sight only seen in the Tamil month *Aani* (June-July), *Mangani Thiruvizha* marks the day that hundreds of women gather around noon at the Vedapureeswarar Temple in Puducherry, their arms filled with bags of ripe mangoes. Under the blazing sun, they lay the fruits upon a temple chariot, adorning it with garlands and leaves.

An echo of the Karaikal festival held in honor of Karaikal Ammaiyar—the only woman among the 63 revered Nayanmar Shaivite saints—the Puducherry observance, held for over two decades, venerates her legacy through an offering of mangoes, a symbol of devotion, fertility, and gratitude. The highlight is the chariot procession, the beautifully decorated car with mangoes drawn through the temple streets, while mangoes and *prasadam* (religious offerings) are distributed. During the day, a simple fruit becomes a sacred offering that unites people in celebration.

Veerampattinam Car Festival

Every year in the Tamil month *Aadi* (July–August), Veerampattinam, the largest fishing settlement in Puducherry, transforms into a vibrant pilgrimage site. For six consecutive Fridays, families arrive from near and far for the Sengazhuneer Amman Car

Festival, which honors the guardian goddess of the local fishermen. On the festival's fifth Friday, a *ther* (chariot) carries the idol of Sengazhuneer Amman through the village streets. The Governor of Puducherry traditionally inaugurates the procession by pulling the first rope, a custom dating back to the French colonial era, and then thousands of devotees join in to pull the car together.

Corpus Christi Procession

On a quiet Sunday afternoon along Rue Suffren in White Town, Puducherry, the Corpus Christi procession moves slowly through the narrow streets, hymns rising softly. Beside me walks Anita Rheeman, a French professor based in Puducherry, who explains the significance of the occasion as we follow the crowd. The procession pauses at two places—first at the Cluny Convent and then near Alphonse Liguori's house—where the parish priest elevates the monstrance, a gilded vessel carrying the consecrated host, and offers prayers to the gathered devotees. "Usually, people go to church for Benediction," Anita says. "But on Corpus Christi, God comes to bless you through the streets."

Corpus Christi is a major Christian feast that marks the only time of the year when Catholics publicly proclaim their belief in the Eucharist, carrying the Blessed Sacrament through the streets.



A chariot decorated with mangoes offered by devotees makes a ceremonial procession inside the Vedapureswarar Temple. Photo by Pattabi Raman.



The Corpus Christi procession. Photo by Pattabi Raman.

In Puducherry, the celebration begins at Our Lady of Angels Church (Église Notre-Dame des Anges) on Dumas Street, with mass offered in three languages: Tamil, English, and French. The trilingual liturgy and French hymns lend a distinct cultural character to the observance. Slowly, the procession weaves through the lanes of White Town, where homes and corners are adorned with candles, flowers, and banners. Families kneel as the monstrance passes, and little girls from the parish—the “flower girls”—walk ahead to scatter petals and welcome the Lord.

Theatre in the Draupadi Amman Temple

In Murungapakkam, Jaya, Nandhini, Suguna, and Rajee—four sisters—lean

over their balcony, waiting eagerly to catch sight of the *Pakkasuran* (an infamous demon) procession. Below, the community gathers around the famed temple of Draupadi Amman, the goddess of fire and feminine strength. The temple becomes a stage for a series of mythological performances and rituals that populate the annual *koothu* (street play) festival cycle.

As dusk falls, *therukoothu* (the age-old street theatre of Tamils) folk artists narrate the Mahabharata through song, dialogue, and dance, their painted faces glowing under the oil lamps. The night echoes with *Pakkasuran Vadham*, the slaying of Bakasuran. At dawn, the performances shift to daylight rituals like Pongal Vaithal, where devotees offer freshly cooked pongal (a sweet rice dish) to deities. Other performances proceed, like *Arjunan Tapasu*, depicting Arjuna performing



The traditional street procession. Photo by Pattabi Raman.

severe penance to receive a celestial weapon from Lord Shiva—portrayed by an artist who climbs a 30-foot ladder to symbolize Arjuna’s spiritual ascent. The drama culminates in the *Padukalam*, the climactic battle between Bhima and Duryodhana. The festival concludes with devotees walking barefoot across burning embers in a sign of endurance and faith. Hundreds of locals gather to witness this two-week summer festivity, where mythology, theatre, and devotion merge into one living tradition.

Pillayarkuppam Transgender Festival

During April-May, Sheetal Nayak, a transgender activist and the president of Sahodaran Community Oriented Health Development Society, arrives at Pillayarkuppam with a group of transwomen. She has returned for six consecutive years, both as a transwoman and a committed trans-rights advocate. One of her friends is preparing to participate in the fashion show that night, held alongside the symbolic wedding ceremony where temple priests tie the *mangalsutra* (auspicious thread signifying married status) for visiting transwomen.

At the centre of this celebration is the re-enactment of Aravan’s one-day marriage to Mohini. Rooted in the *Mahabharata*, the legend tells of Aravan, the son of Arjuna, who offered himself in sacrifice to ensure the Pandavas’ victory. Before his death, he wished to marry, but no woman agreed to wed a man destined to die at dawn. Krishna then assumed the form of Mohini, a woman, to fulfill his final wish.

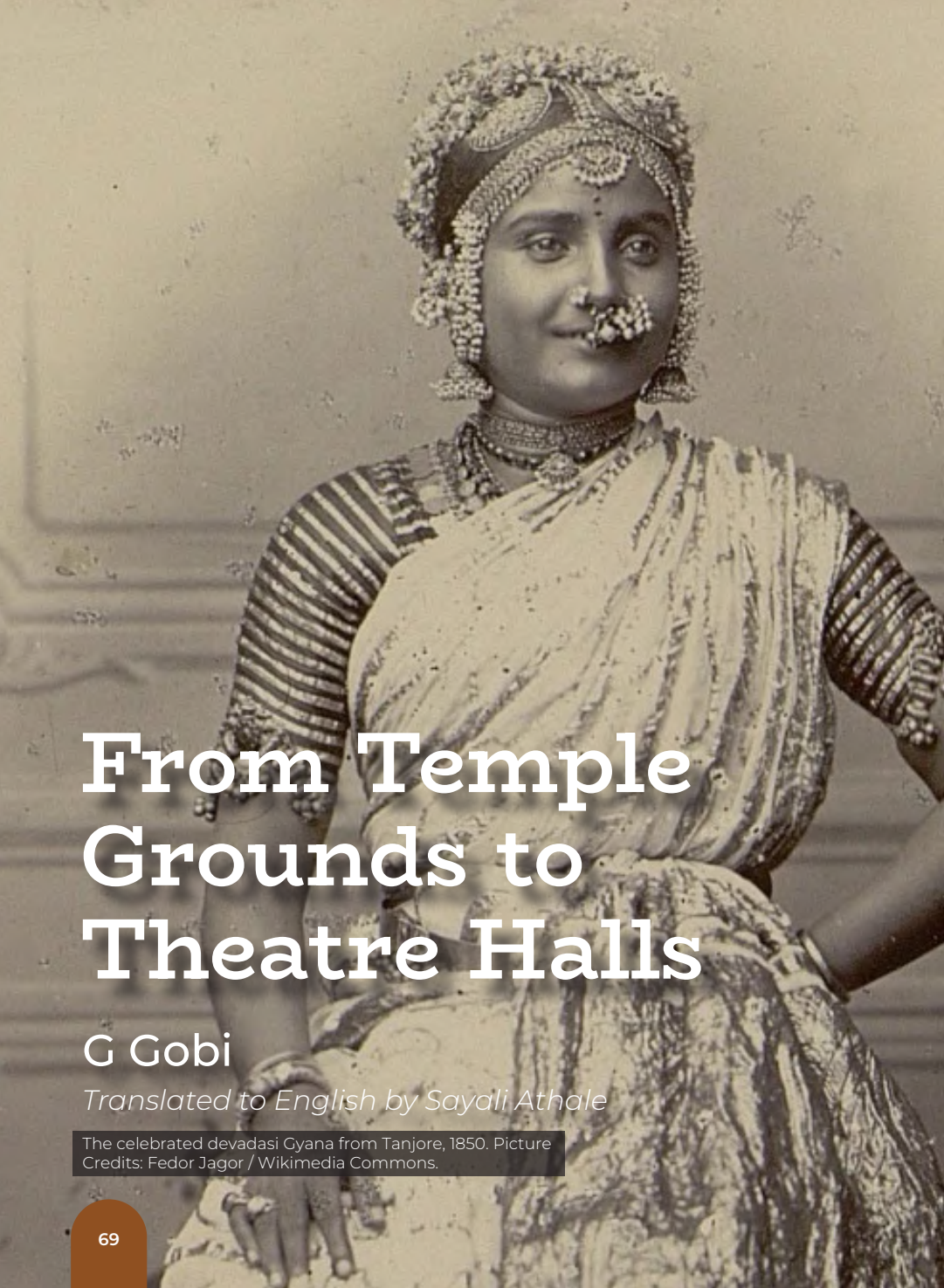


The idol of Aravan being taken in a procession. Photo by Pattabi Raman.



Sheetal Nayak, the transgender devotee holding the balloon, seen with other transwomen at the Pillayarkuppam festival. Photo by Pattabi Raman.

The Pillayarkuppam transgender festival spans several days and unfolds in three distinct phases: a lively beauty pageant, the symbolic marriage ceremony inside the Koothandavar Temple, and finally, the widowhood ritual that marks Aravan’s sacrifice. Each phase creates a space where gender identity is celebrated openly. For the transgender community, this festival is more than a religious observance; it becomes a space where the marginalized find visibility, connection, and sacred recognition within the region’s cultural fabric.



From Temple Grounds to Theatre Halls

G Gobi

Translated to English by Sayali Athale

The celebrated devadasi Gyana from Tanjore, 1850. Picture
Credits: Fedor Jagor / Wikimedia Commons.

The Tamil language has a prolific literary tradition, represented in Puducherry by its rich history of theatre. Through the contributions of numerous artists, institutions, and venues, Pondicherry's theatre evolved from traditional performance forms to modern practices over the past centuries.

Traditional Theatre

Early dramatic traditions in the region were connected to *koothu*: local, often on-street, theatrical enactments. In older Tamil language, this referred to dramatic storytelling performed through acting, music, dance, and dialogue, accompanied by elaborate costumes and make-up. *Koothu* exists in several forms. *Therukoothu* is traditional Tamil theatre, connected with Hindu temples and mythical storytelling — it's still practiced in parts of Puducherry and Tamil Nadu today, albeit without its earlier vibrancy. *Ariyakoothu* is a classical form historically performed in temples, while *kuravanjikoothu* is a form of dance-drama based on poetic texts.

Most drama was also connected in its early forms to dance, with the two being intertwined elements of performance. Traditional explanations distinguish between *abhinayam*, a dance performed to a specific song, and *natakam*, a dramatic performance based on a narrative.

In the early modern and medieval periods, temples were primary sites for the performing arts. Historical inscriptions from the eleventh-century mention annual *ariyakoothu*

performances at the Thirunallur Temple at Thirunallur during the Tamil months of *Maasi* (February–March) and *Vaikasi* (May–June). The inscription also notes that these were two-day performances with five acts, all the performers receiving twenty measures of paddy as payment.

Similarly, the *devadasi*, or temple-dancers, presented dance-dramas based on stories of the gods. Sculptures of female performers in the Siva temple at Bahour, built during the reign of the Chola king Parantaka, depict the costumes and performance styles of dancers. Records from 1822-24 note the presence of thirty-six *devadasis* at the Sri Kokilambal-Thirukameswarar Temple in Villianur. During annual festivals such as the *Ther* (temple chariot procession) and *Theppam* (float festival), these dancers once performed for the public. Temples thus provided substantial patronage to dance and drama.



A Therukoothu artist. Picture Credits: Vinc3nt / Wikimedia Commons.

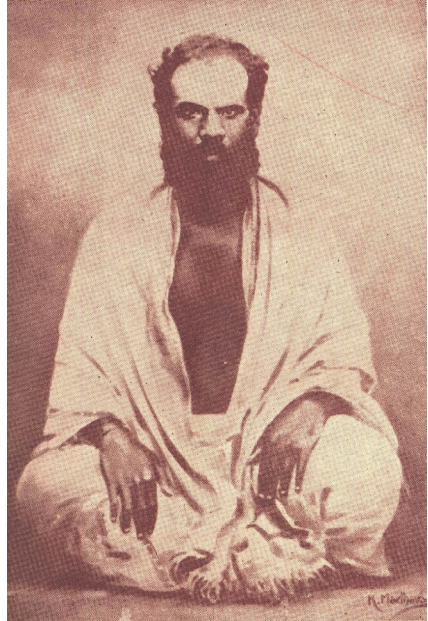
Evolving Forms

In the nineteenth-century, theatre shifted from verse-based *koothu* to dialogue-driven drama.

Vasagappa, referred to as *vasappu* in colloquial Tamil, emerged as a combination of prose narration with song. French Christian missionary Vallet de Virville wrote a work titled *Punitha Esthash Vasagappa* (The Sacred/Saint Eustace Vasagappa play) in 1837, staged in 1845 in Puducherry. The Othiyar Salai *maidan* (ground) staged *vasappu* performances in Puducherry, particularly at night. It is said that during midnight performances, the actors' voices—projected strongly, due to the absence of any sound amplification—could be heard all the way till the Aurobindo Street a kilometre away.

Simultaneously, the *Vilasam*, a drama written in prose dialogue emerged. Similar to Western theatrical forms, *Vilasam* relied on spoken dialogue and structured dramatic presentation. In 1880, Thandavaraya Mudaliar published a *vilasam* play titled *Manmatha Vilasam* (the play of the Manmatha/God of love) in Puducherry.

By the early twentieth-century, prominent dramatists such as Sankaradas Swamigal, an ascetic, were popularising staged theatre in Puducherry. His plays, including works like *Gnanaseoundari*, *Paduka Pattabhishekam*, *Lanka Dahanam* and *Sulochana Sathi*, were performed from 1919 until 1922 at venues such as Gaebele Theatre.



Sankaradas Swamigal, considered as the father of Tamil theatre. Picture Credits: Tamil Virtual Academy / Wikimedia Commons.

Socio-Political Stage

The twentieth-century also saw the emergence of politically engaged theatre. The acclaimed playwright Bharathidasan produced works infused with rationalist and social reform ideas. His plays *Viduthalai Court* (1930), *Chintamani* (a celebrated play in 1931), *Logaragam* (1932), *Nimida Nadagam* (One-Minute Play) addressed themes such as caste discrimination, religious orthodoxy, and Dravidian identity. Some of these works were controversial. The play *Iranian Inaitraveeda* (1934) spoke about Aryan domination and highlighted Dravidian resistance. Initially banned only by the French government, it

was later banned even by the Madras government in 1948. In 1970, Bharathidasan was posthumously awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1969 for his Tamil play *Pisiraandhaiyaar*.

Other writers such as Pudukai Sivam and Tamil Oli continued to develop socially conscious theatre too. Pudukai Sivam was an important figure in the history of theatre in Puducherry, being both a student and close associate of Bharathidasan. His first play, *Sundara* (The Secret Tunnel), was reportedly staged several times by the Pudukai Reform Youth Association, and his works were later compiled by his son Ilango. Another play, *Social Service*, written in the late 1930s, was performed in 1941 at Gaebele Theatre in Puducherry. Because of his close association with the Dravidian Movement, Pudukai Sivam's plays strongly emphasised themes of social reform. His dramas were also staged in places such as Sri Lanka and Malaysia, which had substantial Tamil population.

Born Vijayarangam on 21 September 1924 in Puducherry, Tamil Oli renamed himself out of deep devotion to the Tamil language. He was known for his involvement in labour movements and progressive political struggles. While still a college student, he wrote the play *Sirpiyin Kanavu* (The Sculptor's Dream) in 1944, which was staged in Chennai by the Sakthi Drama Sabha, and the lead role was played by the renowned actor Sivaji Ganesan. The play was well received, eventually leading to its adaptation into the film *Vanangamudi* (1957). Another significant work by Tamil Oli is the

short poetic epic *Veerayi* in 1947, an expression of progressive ideas concerning Dalit issues and women's rights. The work was later adapted for stage by director Pralayan, who performed it in various parts of Tamil Nadu.



Stamp issued by the Government of India commemorating the poet Bharathidasan. Picture Credits: India Post / Wikimedia Commons.

Performance Spaces

Several performance venues played an important role in the development of theatre in Puducherry. Among the most notable were Othiyai Salai Maidan (now Anna Ground), Othiyai Salai Tharai Kottagai (later called Kamban Kalai Arangam), Gaebele Theatre on Dupleix Street (now Nehru Street), and the Jeanne d'Arc Theatre near Cluny Hospital. These spaces hosted many theatrical events and contributed significantly to the city's performance culture.

Gaebele Theatre, in particular, was an important centre for major productions. Associated with Henri Gaebelé, who became the mayor of Puducherry in 1908, the theatre was established by his family as a recreation hall. It later developed into a prominent venue for Tamil

theatrical performance, staging several plays by Sankaradas Swamigal, including *Gnanaseoundari*, *Paduka Pattabhishekam*, *Lanka Dahanam*, and *Sulochana Sathi*. In later years, figures such as the political leader M. Karunanidhi, the playwright K. Kesavan, and the actor Nadigavel M.R. Ratha also staged productions there. Today, only the stage structure of the theatre survives.

Another important venue was the Jeanne d'Arc Theatre established in 1934. In 2012, it was taken over by Koumarane Valavane and renamed Indianostrum Theatre. It was handed back to the neighbouring church in 2024 and is unfortunately slated for demolition.

Today's Theatre

Theatre groups that have played an important role in sustaining and promoting theatrical culture in Puducherry are Thayagambin Arts, the Puratchi Kavignar Drama Forum, Good Evening Creators, the Apex Fine Arts Forum, the Teachers' Cultural Group, the Tamil Thai Arts Forum, and the Youth Arts Group. These organisations participate in theatre competitions and organise drama festivals, contributing to the continued vitality of the city's stage traditions. In addition, the Department of Art and Culture of the Puducherry Government provides opportunities for registered drama groups to perform during cultural festivals. Alongside stage productions, the Dalit-support organisation, *Adecom*, runs a street theatre initiative called *Koottukural*,

which uses performance as a platform for social awareness.

In the late twentieth-century, theatre culture was institutionalised with the establishment of the Department of Drama at Pondicherry University in 1988, later renamed the School of Performing Arts. The department has trained students in various aspects of theatre production and has contributed significantly to the development of contemporary theatre in the region.

In recent decades, graduates and researchers connected with theatre in Puducherry have established several avant-garde groups, including Indonostrum Theatre, Kalam Theatre Group, Avatharangal Arts Group, Yaazh Theatre and Research Foundation, Velippadai Theatre Group, and the Pondicherry Theatre Academy. Alongside these collective initiatives, individual artists such as Chevalier Dr Gandhymary, Dr V. Arumugham, Aazhi Vengadesan, Dr Gobi, Dr P. Arokia Mary Stella, Dr P. Arunagiri, M. Ramasamy, Sugumar, Prem, and Kandanathan have made important contributions through their work in writing, directing, and theatre education. Through these organization and individual efforts, numerous plays have been staged for the public.

Although the history of theatre in Puducherry has not been systematically documented, the city possesses a rich theatrical heritage rooted in traditional performance forms that have been transformed and sustained by the dedication of many artists.



Last remaining sections of the Gaebele Theatre. Photo by Gobi G.



Velippadai theatre group production -Nadapaavadai(The Woman Who Performs Funeral Rites)
Design & Direction: Ramassamy S. Photo by Gobi G.



A Meeting of Minds

Aneesh Raghavan

The former residence of Subramania Bharathi, now converted into a memorial museum. Photo by Sayali Athale.

Puducherry has been home to some of India's greatest poets, spiritual seekers, and visionaries, especially during British rule. Not only did it hide several freedom fighters and spiritual seekers from raging British persecution and fuel the national movement from underground, it also nourished them with the spirituality that the town had seen for over centuries, with the presence of many *siddhas* (realized souls) and their *samadhis* (final resting place).

This was also the case for two famous figures — freedom fighter, poet, philosopher, and spiritual guru, Sri Aurobindo and nationalist poet Subramania Bharati, both of whom found Puducherry not only a source of safety but a space where they both, interacted and influenced the other.

The Intersection

Aurobindo came incognito from Bengal on 4th April, 1910, not only escaping the British but also in pursuit of an *adesha* (spiritual instruction) to sail to Puducherry. The town became his “cave of *tapasya*” (a space of sustained spiritual practice and meditation), which he never left. His spiritual practice and writings here attracted disciples across the world. The Aurobindo Ashram stands today in Puducherry as a testament to his philosophy and vision, housing the *samadhi* of him and his spiritual collaborator Mirra Alfassa (known as ‘The Mother’).

Just streets away is No. 20, Eeswaran Dharmaraja Koil Street: the residence of Mahakavi Subramania Bharati during his stay in Puducherry from



Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Puducherry. Photo by Joseph Rahul.

1908 to 1918. Arguably a forerunner of modern Tamil literature, his poems sparked revolutionary zeal. Himself a visionary with a spiritual quest, much of his writing also was composed during his stay in Puducherry. He found a home here in the face of imminent arrest by the British, staying for ten years. This was the period that he forged a cherished acquaintance with Sri Aurobindo.

Puducherry holds silent witnesses to the coming together of these two literary giants more than a hundred years ago. Among them is a row of iron poles far out at sea: these are the remnants of a pier that served as a pathway to those who came to Puducherry by sea, damaged by a cyclone in 1952.

Inaugurated in 1865, this pier once stretched into the sea for over 100 metres from the *Place de la Republique*, known today as Gandhi Square. This was where Sri Aurobindo disembarked from the SS Dupleix on 4th April 1910 to meet Bharati and other revolutionaries.

The Duo's Dynamic

For Bharati, Aurobindo was already “the proudest gem of our nation...the rising sun—the worthiest and the noblest son of Sri Bharata Mata”, as he expressed in his praise of the *Karmayogin* journal edited by Sri Aurobindo in Kolkata. Inspired, Bharati began a Tamil *Karmayogi* in Puducherry. Simultaneously, in his *India* magazine, he reported on Sri Aurobindo's revolutionary activities and translated his speeches and writings for a Tamil audience in Puducherry, long before Aurobindo set foot in the South. He even portrayed Aurobindo in his weekly cartoon, representing his release from Alipore jail as the release of the sun of Dharma (*tarmasuriyan*) from the malicious eclipse (*Rahu*) of the British acquisition. Bharati also published a conversation between his press representative in Kolkata and Sri Aurobindo, stating that his man was convinced that Aurobindo was a “*maha-siddha*” (great saint) who had a direct vision of god.

Post their meeting on the piers of Puducherry, Bharati and Aurobindo met nearly daily to speak and share knowledge over the next ten years. As Aurobindo's presence was a secret, given the fear of British spies, he sheltered with several disciples and few resources for six months in a hidden room—located on the top floor of the house of a wealthy, respected citizen of Pondicherry, Shankara Chetty. Bharati was one of the few permitted to meet Aurobindo without restrictions. He would introduce Aurobindo to other revolutionaries, like Ramaswamy Iyengar. Recalling their meetings as

magnetic, Iyengar wrote that “poetry, history, philosophy, experience, creativity, humour, wit, deliberations, the eagerness to discover the truth, an abundance of literary delight, boundless thrill; all of these danced in and out during their conversations.”

Grave political danger and severe want for resources hounded both Aurobindo and Bharati. Once, pushed to write to a wealthy patriot in Chandannagore, Motilal Roy, for financial assistance, Aurobindo acknowledges: “No doubt, God will provide, but He has contracted a bad habit of waiting till the last moment. I only hope He does not wish us to learn how to live on a minus quantity, like Bharati.”

Despite these difficulties, both Aurobindo and Bharati produced volumes of writing during these years. Aurobindo practiced his yogic sadhana and even instructed the revolutionaries in it.

In 1914, he began his famed monthly journal *Arya*, which contains his major works and also contributions from Bharati.

By then, Aurobindo had moved to a residence in Francois Martin Street, now known as the ‘Guest House.’ Bharati's visits continued, long hours into the night spent in the study of the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and the *Shrimad Bhagwad Gita*.

In an English essay, Bharati speaks of his surprise and curiosity regarding Sri Aurobindo's “marvelous new

theory of Vedic interpretations,” indicating it as revealed knowledge by citing Aurobindo’s statement, “it was shown me.” From then, Bharati’s poetry and his unique poetic prose reflected Vedic ideas—undoubtedly influenced by Aurobindo’s teachings. In return, Bharati introduced Sri Aurobindo to the world of the Tamil Alvar saints. Together, they translated Tamil poetry too.

Bharati’s Spirituality

While Aurobindo worked in his residence and avoided coming outside, Bharati roamed the town and found poetic inspiration. Retreats to groves in Karuvadikuppam, which housed the temple and the *jeevasamadhi* of the great *siddha* Siddhananda, resulted in his surreal and major work, *Kuyil Pattu* (Song of the Koel). The small but famous Manakula Vinayagar of Puducherry the forty-versed *Vinayakananmanimalai*, praising the deity from a universal, esoteric perspective. Inspired by the Alvars, he composed *Kannan Pattu* (Song of Krishna), one of his three major works and a modern reimagining of engaging Krishna through human relationships.



The 'Guest house' on Francois Martin Street. Photo by Aneesh Raghavan.



House of Shankara Chetty. Photo by Aneesh Raghavan.



The Siddhananda Temple was frequented by Bharathi. Photo by Aneesh Raghavan.

Bharati also found, broadly, meaning in his spiritual quest through contact with *siddhas* in Puducherry, as mentioned in his famous *Parati Arupattaru* (Bharati Sixty-six).

Aurobindo's role in this was central. Aravamudan, a disciple of Aurobindo and a devotee of Bharati who was present in their company since 1913, recalls how Bharati was inspired by this new knowledge and how intimately Aurobindo was involved in his literary process: "He recited and sang all his songs and poems—almost all of them—each as it rose from his soul, to Sri Aurobindo, before releasing them to the public." One might say that a turning point in Tamil literature was being shaped in the verandah of the 'guest house', under the influence of Sri Aurobindo.

Departures

In 1918, Bharati's financial conditions paired with political tensions forced him to leave Puducherry, bringing an end to the companionship with Sri Aurobindo. Bharati's daughter Shakuntala, who accompanied her father for a last darshan, recalls the final moments of their parting when "Sri Aurobindo's peaceful and radiant eyes had moistened, and Bharati's fiery eyes overflowed with tears." This was the culmination of a rare confluence of two great minds—but even today, Puducherry is an enduring witness to the shared legacy of Aurobindo and Bharati.



The piers still visible in the sea off the Puducherry Promenade where the old pier once stood. Photo by Aneesh Raghavan.



The Manakula Vinayagar Temple. Photo by Joseph Rahul.



Architectural Solace by the Sea

Pankaj Vir Gupta and
Christine Mueller

Golconde. Photo by Joseph Rahul.

On a sweltering, humid June afternoon in 2003, we disembarked from our bus outside the Seaside Guest House in Pondicherry. First, we headed to the Aurobindo Ashram. Surrounded by its austere walls, painted gray and white to match the sea, and meandering through carefully swept corridors, we felt enveloped by a sense of order and serenity. Our olfactory radar led us to the Ashram perfumery, a high-ceilinged and cool room, where a selection of Ashram distillations (frangipani, sea salt and lime, hibiscus and *khus*) refreshed our spirits. From there, we walked towards the local bazaar across a large drain. This drain had historically been the border between the French colonial enclave and the “Tamil town.” As we approached the intersection of the streets Rue Dupuy and Rue D’Orleans, the lights and din of the evening bazaar were palpable even from a distance. In the fading light, we found ourselves walking alongside a high boundary wall, its exposed concrete surface draped with the foliage of bougainvillea and jasmine. A polished teak door, adorned simply with a diminutive brass ornament, beckoned.

As our gaze wandered skyward, we caught our first glimpse of an extraordinary façade: hundreds of concrete louvers, arrayed in a grid, their tips catching the fading pink light of the setting sun. Golconde!

Over the next few years, our obsession with the building

deepened. We returned again and again, spending months documenting and recording the story of this remarkable cloister — a dormitory building for the devotees of the Aurobindo Ashram, commissioned by Sri Aurobindo and his spiritual companion known simply as The Mother (Mirra Alfassa). We were fortunate to spend hours with Mona Pinto, the long-serving custodian of Golconde. The wife of Udar Pinto, one of the Mother’s confidants who played a vital role in the construction and completion of this building, Mona introduced us to the ‘spirit’ that pervaded the initial years of design and construction.

The Makers of Golconde

Established in the early 1920s by Sri Aurobindo, a prominent Indian activist and spiritual leader, the Ashram focused on a spare, meditative existence. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother sought an architectural style that was similarly devoid of excess and ornament for the devotees’ dormitory. Golconde, designed by architects George Nakashima and Antonin Raymond, was to fulfil this requirement.

In 1935, Antonin Raymond’s architectural office in Tokyo received a commission for the design of a new residential dormitory for the ashram. Raymond had been recommended by Philippe B. St. Hilaire (also known as Pavitra), a French engineer and ashram devotee. The French government had expressed concern at the growing influence of the ashram and proposed that the ashramites refrain from any further purchases of property in the French

section. A property adjacent to the local Tamil neighborhood was selected as the proposed site for the new building. Funds for construction were donated by Sir Akbar Hydari, Prime Minister of the prosperous state of Hyderabad, whose son, Ali Hydari, had received solace in the ashram community. The dormitory was eventually named Golconde, after the famous Golconda diamond mines in Hyderabad.

The schematic design for the dormitory project was completed in early 1936. The construction supervision was entrusted to Nakashima and Francois Sammer — a Czech architect who had worked for Le Corbusier in Russia before joining Raymond's staff. The ingenuity of Raymond's design and the absence of skilled contractors in Pondicherry posed a particular dilemma for the construction of the building.

Nakashima spent the next two years as both an ashram devotee (he adopted the Indian name Sunderananda: one who delights in beauty) and the project architect. Slowly, he developed many of the building's careful construction methods and details on site. During his stay, he maintained a meticulous diary of the construction progress and dutifully submitted it to the Mother for her commentary. Although Raymond originally envisioned a six-month time frame for construction, this schedule did not account for Sri Aurobindo's desire to protect the tranquil ashram environment from the din associated with a commercial construction company. Thus a workforce

composed solely of members of the ashram began construction. Due to the absence of an experienced construction crew, Nakashima's duties included the preparation of detailed drawings for the construction of the concrete form work.

By 1937, due to the imminent threat of war and political unrest in Asia and Europe, many of the materials and hardware originally stipulated in the building specifications could no longer be imported. The development of alternative solutions on-site became necessary. In order to cast all metal hardware components stipulated in the design drawings, the architects constructed a foundry on the building site. The devotees of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram donated brass utensils, including cups, bowls, and plates. These were melted and recast as bolts, hinges, and door handles.

Finally, George Nakashima left India in October 1939, having completed most of the concrete work for the structure. After his departure, Udar Pinto, an Indian aeronautical engineer assumed the task of supervising the construction. He continued to work on the completion of the drawings and the design of the furniture. Like Nakashima, Udar consulted with the Mother on all decisions pertaining to the design. Under his supervision, the building was finally completed in 1942 — and had the distinction of being the first reinforced, cast-in-place concrete building in India.



The front elevation of Golconde. Photo by Joseph Rahul.

The Design of the Dorm

Predating even the more renowned, Indian modernist ventures by Le Corbusier in Chandigarh (1951–64) and Ahmedabad (1952–56), Golconde seamlessly negotiates the tenets of early modernist architecture while addressing the pragmatic impositions of its tropical context. The immaculately maintained building uses a spare material palette: reinforced concrete primary structure, bowed concrete shell roof, and polished *Cuddapah* (a local slate) stone floors.

From the exterior, the building has a surreal, abstract quality. The facades are modulated with operable asbestos-cement louvers set in custom-made brass hardware. Sliding teak lattice screens separate the interior rooms from the main,

single-loaded corridors. Each room has crushed seashell plaster walls and black stone floors, against which light reflects as it enters through the louvers and sliders.

A central core, containing the main stair as well as the bathroom units, services the building. The rooms — all designed with a view of the South garden—are accessed via a gallery overlooking the North garden. The building interior thus functions as a threshold, always within proximity of the exterior. The most striking feature of Golconde is the skillful integration of the building with its seaside landscape, particularly in its palette. The structure and its purpose are one of the clearest examples of the modernist credo: architecture as the union of aesthetics, technology, and social reform.

In the years since our book on Golconde was first published, the reasons to revisit the story of its creation have intensified. Accelerating urbanization in India has seen an explosion of unplanned growth in slum settlements. The problems of social inequity have been exacerbated by the advance of climate change. A disregard for ecological safeguards has seen the proliferation of buildings with little sensitivity to site-appropriate building materials and scant knowledge of local construction technology. Unlike these modern constructions, even eight decades after its completion, Golconde thrives as an archetype of visionary architecture that remains aligned with its cultural context.

Seeking spatial solace has been a human preoccupation for much of human existence. Today, the notion of sanctuary—of a place in the world at a safe remove from its tribulations—is all the more crucial. Created during another tumultuous time of human suffering, at the onset of the second World War, Golconde prevails as an exemplar of calm succor.



Note: Parts of this article were originally published in the book 'Golconde: The Introduction of Modernism in India' by Pankaj Vir Gupta, Christine Mueller, and Cyrus Samii (New Delhi: Urban Crayon Press, 2010; New York: Actar Publishers, 2021).



Golconde. Photo by Joseph Rahul.

Golconde. Photo by Joseph Rahul.



The Wealth of the Delta

Priya Davidar

A kingfisher in the mangrove forest in Ariyankuppam.
Photo by Joseph Rahul.

Pondicherry is part of the Cauvery delta with typical deltaic ecosystems such as mangroves, inter-tidal zones, estuaries, and lagoons. Small rivers empty into the Bay of Bengal and feed estuaries such as Ariankuppam that lie at the interface between salt and fresh water. The coastal zone has an intertidal belt extending up to the continental shelf, with the local people depending on fisheries practised in the backwaters and ocean. This region primarily receives rainfall from the north-east or winter monsoon, which feeds the natural and human-constructed fresh water ponds and lakes.

Here is brief description of the different ecosystems in this region:

Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest (TDEF)

The tropical dry evergreen, a dense, closed-canopy forest, once occurred thickly along the Coromandel coast but only around 0.01 per cent of the original extent now remains, as settlements expanded. The remnant patches are protected as sacred groves by local communities.

The total recorded forest cover is estimated to be 9-10 per cent of Puducherry. The commune of Bahour hosts a few sacred groves, while other communities in Auroville International City have undertaken extensive restoration work of the TDEF. Communities such as Pitchandikulam have also documented 735 plant species, including 400 medicinal plants used by local practitioners, in this forest.



Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest type in Auroville.
Picture Credits: Wikimedia Commons.

The Mangroves

Mangroves are unique vegetation that grow in coastal intertidal zones and protect the areas from the impact of storms and tsunamis. Small patches of degraded mangroves are found in the Ariankuppam estuary in Pondicherry.

Of the 18 mangrove species that are documented in Puducherry, six to seven are in Ariankuppam.

This area mitigated some damage during the 2004 tsunami by reducing wave velocity and water spread. However, its effectiveness was reduced as it was degraded due to wood-harvesting. Regardless, the mangrove plays home to resident and migratory birds, such as the kingfishers, storks, and mangrove whistler. It also serves as a breeding site for fish and crustaceans.



Stretches of mangroves along the Ariankuppam river. Photo by Joseph Rahul.

Wetlands

There are two inland freshwater wetlands in Pondicherry, Ossudu (Ousteri) and Bahour, and one brackish water wetland in neighbouring Kaveli (Kazhuveli).

Lying between Chilka Lake and Pulicat Lake in the north and Point Calimere Bird Sanctuary in the south, the wetlands are used by migrating birds as stopping points to feed and rest. All three are Important Bird Areas (IBA) and host winter migrant birds across 200 species, including 58 species of long-distance migrants from northern Eurasia.

They also host 47 species threatened by extinction, including the Greater-Spotted Eagle, the Pallid Harrier, Spot-billed Pelican, Painted Stork and others mentioned in the International Union for



Mangroves are breeding sites for crustaceans. Photo by Joseph Rahul.

the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) red list.

Ossudu

Ossudu, an irrigation tank shared between Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu, lies in the Villianoor commune 12 km west of Pondicherry. Declared the first Bird Sanctuary in

Pondicherry in 2008, it is home to 20,000 wetland birds over 44 species. The extensive reed beds in the lake provide a good foraging and breeding site. An island has been created in the lake to harbour wetland birds. Fishery, once practised locally in the area, was discontinued after it became a sanctuary.

Bahour

Bahour is an older, shallow irrigation tank 20 km south of Pondicherry. Completely open and rich in submerged and floating aquatic plants, it attracts thousands of ducks, including large congregations of the wild duck called the Eurasian wigeon. Its exposed mudflats during February-March make it suitable for waders. Clumps of *Acacia nilotica* trees host colonies of little cormorants and egrets. Surveys have recorded 25,000 birds from 16

species. After March, when the migratory birds leave, the water is drained for fishing, with the income shared between the panchayat and local associations.

Kaliveli

Kaliveli (Kazhuveli), is a large brackish water estuary bordering Pondicherry. In 2023, over 22,000 birds from around 175 species were recorded. Declared a bird sanctuary in 2021, it received the prestigious Ramsar designation in 2024, a title endowed by the Ramsar Convention that seeks to conserve wetlands. The local communities that live along the large wetland harvest fish, shellfish, and reeds for their livelihood.

All three wetlands, which are dependent on rains from the winter monsoon, used to progressively dry up from January.



The Bahour tank is an Important Bird Area (IBA) as well as a historical irrigation system.
Photo by Joseph Rahul

However, after Kaliveli and Ossudu were dammed, there is water throughout the year and the mudflats that supported wading birds have disappeared. The impact of this alteration on the bird population is yet to be studied.

Coastal and Marine Ecosystems

Puducherry has a 48 km coastline that supports a large fishery sector, consisting of around one lakh fishermen and their families. Pondicherry is the administrative head of the fisheries management, but its contribution to fishery is low compared to the other enclaves.

Sandy beaches fringe the Pondicherry township. In the shallow sea before the continental shelf, both natural and artificial coral reefs can be found. Around 70 hard and soft coral species and many coral reef fishes have been documented. Sharks, whale sharks, and moray eels also visit, as do pods of dolphins and an occasional whale or two.

The beaches are also nesting sites for the Olive Ridley turtles (Vulnerable per the IUCN), which return annually between January to March to beaches in Narambai, Nallavadu, and Moorthikuppam. The nests are protected from predators—from dogs to poachers—in concert by the Puducherry Forest Department and local youth volunteers, which has led to the increase of nesting Olive Ridges over time.

The Pondicherry Botanical Garden

The Pondicherry Botanical Garden (Jardin Botanique), famously featured in the movie *Life of Pi*, spreads across 22 acres in central Pondicherry.

Established in 1826 by French botanists, around 800-900 plant species were grown and a collection of fossil plants was displayed here by 1829. The eminent botanist S.G. Perottet inaugurated the garden in 1831.



In 1954, when the French colonial administration seceded, the botanical garden was handed over to the Department of Agriculture. Every February, the Botanical Garden hosts an annual flower show and a farmer's festival.

Conservation of Biodiversity

Conserving the rich natural heritage of Pondicherry requires the involvement of several stakeholders. The Forest and Wildlife Department of the Puducherry Government manages the Ossudu bird sanctuary, undertakes reforestation and social forestry programmes, handles the marine turtle conservation programme, and conducts wildlife rescue and rehabilitation. Meanwhile, the Puducherry Government instituted an annual 61-day marine fishing ban to protect breeding fish stocks; between April 15 to June 14, mechanized boats are prohibited in the sea and financial aid is provided for affected fishers.

Educational institutes, like Pondicherry Central University and Tagore Government Arts and Science College, are also documenting and deciphering intact ecosystems.

Civil society actively participates in data generation, advocacy, and conservation. Beach cleanups, mangrove restoration, and awareness programmes are ongoing activities organised by local NGOs and government bodies, all working together towards the conservation of natural heritage in Pondicherry.

The long coastline supports a substantial population of fisherpeople. Photo by Joseph Rahul.



The Congress of Arboreal Legislators

Ari Gautier

Illustration by Jisha Unnikrishnan.



Fire-Station Banyan Tree was eager to reach the enchanting Coconut Island of Thengaithittu first. This meeting was too important for him to let the pretentious Auroville Banyan Tree win, especially since it thought it was the king of trees under the pretext of being next to the Matrimandir.

Fire-Station Banyan Tree made its way through the mangrove swamp and caught sight of the Kali Temple, overjoyed to find it deserted. He sped up without disturbing Thoongumoonji Maram, who was, as usual, asleep. The Samenea Saman tree, also known as the “sleeping tree” because it closes its leaves at night, was a prominent figure in the city of Pondicherry because of his presence in the Sacred Heart Church opposite the railway station. Once inside, Fire-Station Banyan Tree settled in front of the temple proudly.

The trees in the region followed a long-standing tradition: once every century, one specimen of tree was chosen to chair the Tree Congress—the earliest tree to arrive was granted that honor.

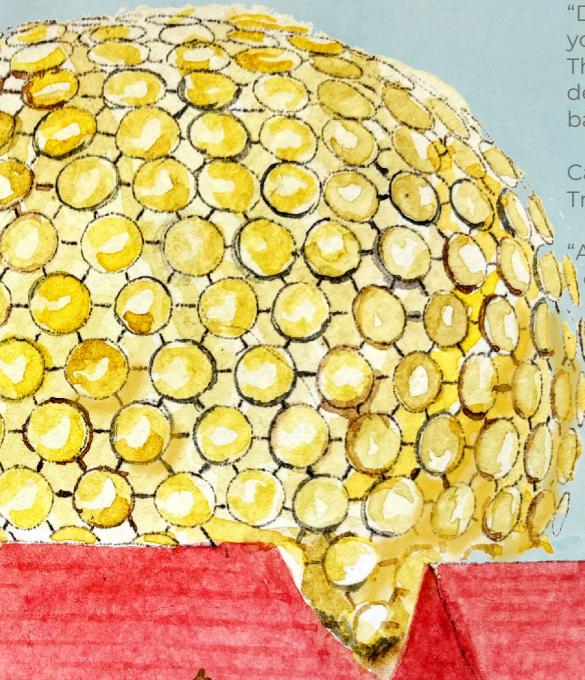



When the other trees arrived, they witnessed the eternal quarrel between the two banyan trees without surprise. Auroville Banyan, still dripping with sweat from his long journey, initiated hostilities. Claiming as usual that his community hailed from the Mio-pliocene era, he said, “I hail from the Thiruvakarai plateau, where ancient trees estimated to be 20 million years old flourish. We coexisted with trees that have turned into fossils. One of my ancestors remains there, serving as a timeless witness!”

Fire- Station Banyan mocked him: “Do you think I’m going to swallow your lies? That tree isn’t from Thiruvakarai; some river must have deposited your ancestor near the bank. Liar!”

Caught off-guard, Auroville Banyan Tree remained speechless.

“Also,” Fire-Station Banyan Tree continued, “your ancestors lived with wild dogs and mindless monkeys. Mine knew merchants from ancient Rome and Greece!”






“ Arab adventurers came to Arikamedu, once a large Buddhist and Jain center. You only need to see the old peepul tree *Ficus Religiosa* next to the old Jesuit school and the ancient statue of Buddha in Kakkayanthoppu to understand our religious past.”

“All these stories are about firangis. Mine at least takes place in this country,” Auroville Banyan Tree interrupted.

“Oii! The Muslim Bade Saibu Siddhar achieved self-realization under a Bakula tree; Vannara Paradesi became a Siddhar under a Bilba tree,” Fire Station Banyan retorted. “Besides, I’m the one who saw the abandoned chapter of this city’s history. Look around: these buildings were warehouses. Indentured labourers would wait there to sail to the Caribbean, the Mascarene Islands, and Fiji Islands to harvest sugar cane!”

“ Fool! Do you know Kaduveli Siddhar? He achieved Jiva Samadhi under the peepul tree in Irumbai temple.




You're not the only one with a pious presence. And we have the Iron Age burial mounds. In Kuylapalayam, we have tools dating back to the Neolithic and Megalithic..."

Auroville Banyan switched then to playing the victim, trying to win the sympathy of his peers. "My siblings were victims of ecocide...I witnessed their deaths...I still hear their cries of anguish and pain. Those foreign executioners enlisted local loggers to cut us down. Using our own brothers to kill us. That man Francois Martin secured land in Pondicherry—he claimed to be a trader, but proclaimed himself ruler of the place, with the intent of transforming the fishing village into a town..."

"You've been unmasked!" Fire-Station Banyan Tree exclaimed. "For a long time, I suspected that you were a decolonizer! Now I'm certain."

"I don't have such pretensions." Auroville Banyan Tree resumed its tale,

“ But Pondicherry was already an established town with coexisting communities. I ask you: have you ever heard of a small fishing village anywhere in India with three large temples, two mosques, and a Muslim cemetery? Of course not....”



"Barbarian! You and your tribe lack any understanding of civilization. You Cro-Magnon! Now that you've run out of arguments, you want to play the part of the wronged one?" Fire-Station Banyan wanted to show off.

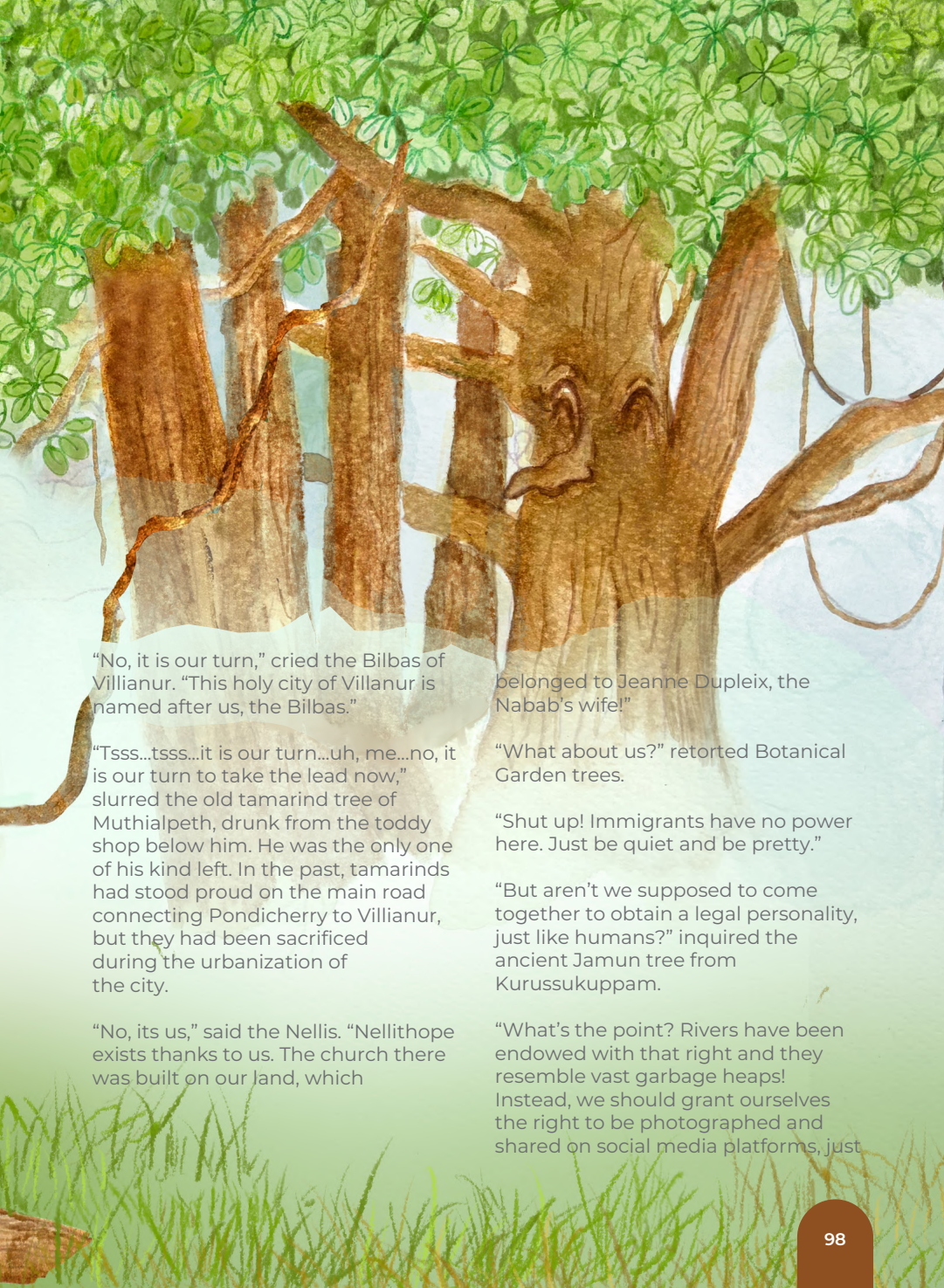
"I'm just pointing it out." Auroville Banyan took offense. "This area, known as "Vedapuri" in ancient times, witnessed the stewardship of the South Indian dynasties—the Pallavas, Cholas, and Pandyas—who contributed to its ecological diversity! We have a rich relationship with Pondicherry's pre-colonial history—"

"Here we go again with the arm-chair historian," Fire-Station Banyan feigned boredom.

"The *Kovil Kaadugal*, the sacred groves and temple landscapes, constituted spiritual infrastructure long before European arrival," Auroville Banyan did not let itself be paused. "These sites are direct ecological links to our pre-colonial past. In fact, my great-grand-father Sivaranthagam Banyan Tree is the most adored in the region..."

"Silence, you two! Your juvenile squabbling is exhausting. I am the eldest! In any case, we now need to decide who will be the next leader." It was the ancient *Ficus Religiosa*, oldest of them all, fondly known as the elephant-headed tree of VOC Nagar due to its trunk's resemblance to an elephant's trunk. The residents had quickly started worshipping him as a reincarnation of Ganesha the god, but now that his trunk is damaged, the trees no longer pay him attention.

"We," cried the Moringas of Murungapakkam, "We may not have your stature, but we feed an entire population."



"No, it is our turn," cried the Bilbas of Villianur. "This holy city of Villanur is named after us, the Bilbas."

"Tsss...tsss...it is our turn...uh, me...no, it is our turn to take the lead now," slurred the old tamarind tree of Muthialpeth, drunk from the toddy shop below him. He was the only one of his kind left. In the past, tamarinds had stood proud on the main road connecting Pondicherry to Villianur, but they had been sacrificed during the urbanization of the city.

"No, its us," said the Nellis. "Nellithope exists thanks to us. The church there was built on our land, which

belonged to Jeanne Dupleix, the Nabab's wife!"

"What about us?" retorted Botanical Garden trees.

"Shut up! Immigrants have no power here. Just be quiet and be pretty."

"But aren't we supposed to come together to obtain a legal personality, just like humans?" inquired the ancient Jamun tree from Kurussukuppam.

"What's the point? Rivers have been endowed with that right and they resemble vast garbage heaps! Instead, we should grant ourselves the right to be photographed and shared on social media platforms, just

like those colonial mansions, traditional Tamil houses, and other crap that tourists post. I am tired of being overlooked—that's the fix!" Auroville Banyan's eyes widened at the Fire-Station Banyan's self-centered words, which silenced the whole crowd.



Fire- Station Banyan was awakened by the excited voice of Thoongumoonji Maram. "Look, your wish has been granted! Someone tagged you on Instagram!"

Fire-Station Banyan logged onto Instagram immediately, only to find no images of himself. He scrutinized every photograph, even the one he was tagged in, but nothing. Instead, he only saw firefighters calmly smoking cigarettes in front of the station.





● Irumbai Temple
● Auroville

● Kurussukuppam

● Nellipthope
● Muthialpeth
● Bharati Park

● Villianur

● Odiyampattu
● Fire Station

● Murungapakkam
● Thengaithittu

● Kakayanthoppu



INDIA

● PUDUCHERRY

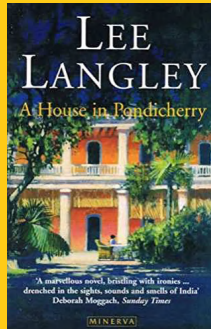
City Reads

Mostly fictional accounts set in and around Pondicherry.

***A House in Pondicherry* (1995)**

Lee Langley, published by Vintage, Penguin Random House

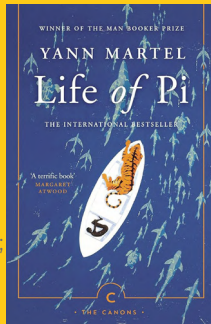
A richly textured novel that evokes the history of Pondicherry through the experiences of a family across generations, weaving personal memory with the city's colonial and postcolonial transformations.



***Life of Pi* (2001)**

Yann Martel, published by Cannongate

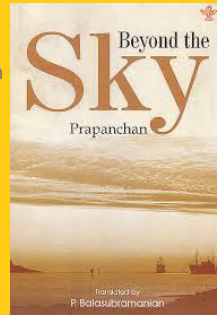
A celebrated philosophical adventure about a young Indian boy stranded at sea with a Bengal tiger; the beginning of the book is set in Pondicherry. It captures themes of belief, survival, and narrative imagination.



***Beyond the Sky (Vanam Vasappadum)* (2010)**

Prapanchan, translator P. Balasubramanian, published by Sahitya Akademi

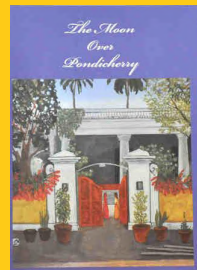
A novel centred on Pondicherry during the mid-eighteenth-century, blending historical fact and fiction through the diary of Anandarangam Pillai, a key colonial figure. Widely regarded as a landmark in Tamil historical fiction, the novel received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1995.



***The Moon Over Pondicherry* (2020)**

Sunayana Panda, published by Panda Creative World

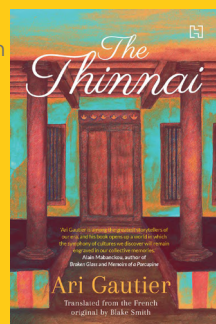
A contemporary novel set in Pondicherry that blends romance with reflections on identity, place, and the pull of memory against the backdrop of the city's unique cultural mix.



***The Thinnai* (2021)**

Ari Gautier, translated by Blake Smith, published by Hachette India

A literary exploration of life in a fishing village in Pondicherry, the book reflects on courtyard culture, thresholds, and everyday domestic spaces that are central to Tamil urban experience.

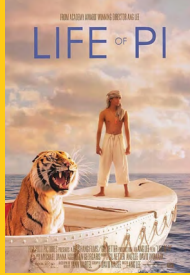


City in Films

With its distinctive streets, coastline, and layered past, Pondicherry has been a memorable setting for films in different languages and styles.

Life of Pi (2012, English)

The most internationally recognised film linked to Pondicherry. The protagonist Pi grows up here, and several early scenes were shot in the city, capturing its coastal setting and urban spaces.



Madras to Pondicherry (1966, Tamil)

A popular classic that centres on a journey from Chennai to Pondicherry. Though light in tone, it firmly places Pondicherry as a destination and narrative anchor.



Pondicherry (2022, Marathi)

A contemporary film shot entirely in Pondicherry, using the city's streets, colours and architecture as an integral visual presence in a relationship-driven story.



Two Flags (2018, Documentary, English)

A documentary exploring the lives of Tamil residents of Puducherry who hold or aspire to French citizenship. It offers a perspective on postcolonial identity and belonging in the city.



Pondichéry, dernier comptoir des Indes (1997, French)

Set in October 1954, at the moment when the French were leaving Pondicherry, the film follows a young European born in India who undertakes a personal journey during this period of political transition.



Craft Encounters

For a city of its size, Pondicherry has an unusual density of craft traditions. This list offers visitors a sneak peek into it. The workshops we will be visiting are spread across the city, so the best way to get around would be to rent a bicycle from a shop on Mission Street.

Please note that prior appointment is required to visit several of the workshops.

Sri Aurobindo Handmade Paper Factory



Established in 1959 with the help of the Government Khadi and Village Industries Commission, the Ashram Paper factory produces a variety of handmade papers. A tour of the factory is possible via prior inquiry at info@sriaurobindopaper.com.

Location: Sardar Vallabbhai Patel Salai, Kuruchikuppam.

Days: Monday - Sunday

Timings: 9:30 am - 12:30 pm & 1:30-5:30 pm (Monday - Saturday)
10am - 2pm (Sunday)

Cluny Embroidery Centre

Run by the sisters of St Joseph of Cluny, this embroidery centre was established in 1829 as a social venture to provide orphaned girls and destitute women an



opportunity to earn their livelihood. Today, it hosts 30 local women.

Location: Rue Romain Rolland, Hotel Lagrenée de Mezieres.

Days: Tuesday to Saturday

Timings: 9 am - 12 pm, 2 pm - 5 pm

Golden Bridge Pottery



Golden Bridge Pottery, established in 1971 by Deborah Smith and Ray Meeker with the blessing of the Mother, began a tradition of crafting glazed stoneware. 'Pondicherry pottery', characterised by earthy glazes and beautiful functional forms, emerged as a craft tradition here. Visits with prior appointment through email at goldenbridgepottery@gmail.com.

Location: Thottakkal Main Road Mudaliarpet, JVS Nagar, Karamanikuppam.

Days: Monday - Saturday

Timings: 19 am - 12 pm, 1 pm - 5 pm

Villianur Pottery



Villianur's terracotta pottery, which received a Geographical Indication (GI) tag in 2011, is famous for Ayyanar horses and drishti-bomma masks. The workshop of master craftsman V.K. Munusamy offers a look at the process and products.

Location: Near the Sri Kasi Vishvanathar Temple, Odhiampet, Villianur.

Days: Monday - Saturday

Timings: 10:30 am - 4:30 pm

Arts & Crafts Village



The Art and Craft Village is a government-supported initiative to promote and sustain regional handicrafts. The village hosts live crafts demonstrations and stalls that display local artisan products such as terracotta, leather goods, and pottery.

Location: Murungapakkam.

Days: Monday - Sunday

Timings: 10:00 am - 5:30 pm

City Offbeat

Beyond its familiar streets, Pondicherry and its surroundings hold many unusual sites shaped by local history, belief, and landscape.

Sivaranthagam Banyan Tree



A site of local religious significance, this banyan tree shelters the Ponni Amman Temple and spreads across an acre. The grove and temple have long been cared for by a lady called Maheshwari. It gained international attention after featuring in the film *Life of Pi*.

Location: Big Banyan Tree, Sivaranthagam.

Days: All days

Timings: 24 hrs open

Police Museum, French Town



A small, distinctive museum showcasing the evolution of law enforcement from the French colonial period to the present day. Established

in 1992, it displays a range of uniforms, vintage firearms, and other equipment used by the Puducherry police along with archival documents and portraits.

Location: Dumas St, French Town.

Days: Tuesday to Saturday

Timings: 10 am–1 pm, 2–6 pm

National Fossil Wood Park



Located 30–35 km from Puducherry, this 247-acre park preserves one of India's most significant collections of petrified wood. The trunks of nearly 200 fossilised tree trunks dating to the Mio-Pliocene period (around 20 million years ago), are in the park — with a small section accessible to visitors.

Location: Thiruvakkarai, Villupuram, Tamil Nadu

Days: Sunday to Saturday

Timings: 9 am - 6 pm

Kizhoor Monument

This marble monument, erected in 1972, commemorates the pivotal moment on 18 October 1954 when representatives from French-ruled enclaves (Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam) voted in favour of merging with the Indian Union.

Location: Kizhoor.

Timings: 24 hrs open, all days



Azhagu Muthu Ayyanar Temple



Located 20 km from Puducherry, this temple is called the “Temple of Dolls.” It is known for the thousands of terracotta figurines left there as votive offerings by devotees, who commission handmade figures depicting soldiers, doctors, lawyers, and other human forms to seek divine intervention.

Location: Thennampakkam, Tamil Nadu

Timings: 24 hrs open, all days

STORIES





Through the French and Tamil Quarters - A Tale of Two Towns



2.6 kms



Notre-Dame des Anges Church

Photos by Joseph Rahul
Illustrations by Jisha Unnikrishnan



01. Notre-Dame des-Anges Church
02. Town Hall
03. Bharathi Park
04. Sri Aurobindo Ashram
05. French Consulate
06. Golconde Dormitory
07. Calve College
08. Bharathiyar Memorial Museum
09. Eswaran Koil

Sri Varadaraja

Perumal Temple

ஸ்ரீ வரதராஜ

பெருமாள் கோயில்

HERITAGE TOWN

ஹெரிடேஜ்

டவுன்

Sri Aurobindo Ashram

ஸ்ரீ அரவிந்தா

ஆசிரமம்

Puducherry

Beach

புதுச்சேரி

கடற்கரை

Rock Beach

Bharathi Park

Puducherry

பாரதி

பூங்கா

WHITE TOWN

Our Lady of

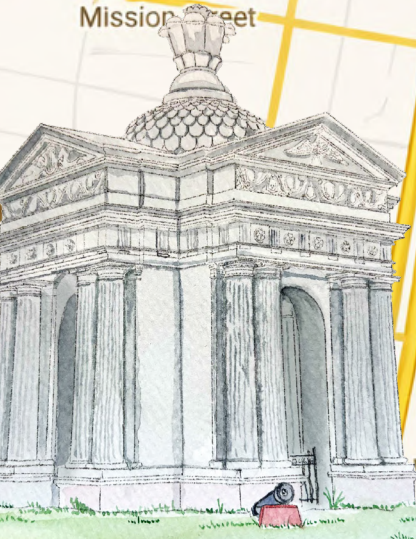
Angels Church

Kushals Fashion

ry - Mission Str...

Kushals in

Mission Street



Puducherry's charm lies in the seamless coexistence of contrasts — of French façades and Tamil courtyards, of bougainvillea-laced avenues and bustling bazaars, of colonial heritage and local spirit. This walk invites you to trace the city's layered history through its twin quarters: the stately French Town with its mustard-yellow villas, churches, quiet avenues in shades of grey, pink, and blue; and the Tamil Quarter, alive with sounds of temple bells, traditional verandahs, markets, and eateries.

Starting by the sea at the Notre Dame Des Anges Church, the trail moves through past colonial landmarks like the restored Town Hall building and consulate building, and cultural institutions such as the French Institute of Pondicherry — before crossing into the Tamil Quarter, where narrow lanes reveal courtyards, hidden shrines, and traditional homes. Together, these spaces tell the story of Puducherry as a crossroads of trade, culture, and identity — where the French vision of urban design met the Tamil way of life, creating a city unlike any other in India.



1 Notre-Dame des-Anges Church (Our Lady of Angels Church)

Built in 1855, this Greco-Roman style church with soft pink and cream tones stands as one of Puducherry's most iconic landmarks. Facing the Bay of Bengal, its interiors and stained-glass windows create a tranquil start to the trail. The church reflects the deep French Catholic influence that shaped the early colonial fabric of the city.

It is the only church in Pondicherry that offers Mass in three languages — French, Tamil, and English. The church is also known as 'Dumas church,' being located on Dumas street, and 'Kaps Kovil,' named after the Capuchin friars who initiated its construction. Interestingly, 'Kovil' or 'Koil' is the Tamil term for a temple.

2 Town Hall (Mairie / Hôtel de Ville)



The Town Hall is an elegant colonial structure that once served as the administrative heart of French India. Though it required restoration after storm damage in 2014, it continues to represent the spirit of civic governance and Franco-Indian legacy. This stop introduces the

civic and political dimension of Puducherry's colonial era, being the site of the first democratic exercise in India between 1871 and 1900, much before general elections were held in British India.

3 Bharathi Park



The lush green core of the French Quarter, once reserved for Europeans and used as a parade ground until the 1940s, is now a democratic public space. Surrounded by historic buildings, the park's layout still echoes the geometric urban design introduced by the French. At its centre is the Aayi Mandapam, a white pavilion housing a bust of a *devadasi* (a temple dancer married to God) named Aayi. Built under the reign of Napoleon III, it commemorates Aayi's act of demolishing her own house for the construction of a water reservoir.

4 Sri Aurobindo Ashram

Established by Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, the ashram represents Puducherry's spiritual renaissance. A quiet visit here introduces the city's post-colonial transformation — from

a French outpost to a spiritual center drawing seekers from around the world. The building also houses the samadhi of Sri Aurobindo and Mira Alfassa 'The Mother,' open to visitors. The ashram has several affiliated buildings across the heritage town, including workshops, guest houses, factories, and a printing press, recognisable by their typical grey hue.



5 French Consulate (Rue Romain Rolland)

Still functioning as the diplomatic representation of France, the Consulate building retains its historic charm. Its yellow façade and quiet courtyards adjacent to the shore embody the continued relationship between Puducherry and France, both cultural and emotional. Allocated to the French



government in 1956, the building itself is about three centuries old and has managed to retain some of its original features and character. Every year on July 14, which is the French National Day, the consulate hosts celebrations marked by fireworks at the beach promenade.

6 Golconde Dormitory



Golconde is India's first reinforced concrete building, designed in 1940 by Antonin Raymond under the guidance of The Mother. It is an architectural gem that blends modernist design with the spiritual philosophy of simplicity and harmony. Completed in 1945, it is a modernist building that predates the more well-known landmarks of modernist architecture in Ahmedabad and Chandigarh.

7 Calve College

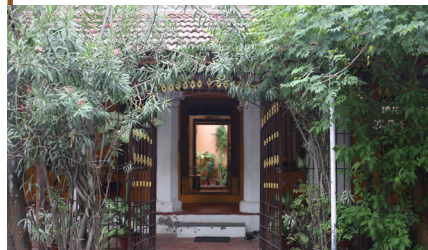
Founded in the nineteenth-century by Calve Suppraya Chettiar, this educational institution became a crucial space for social reform and learning in colonial Puducherry. The building's Indo-French architecture highlights the blend of two cultures even in the field of education. The school was

damaged considerably in 2011 because of Cyclone Thane. After being marked unsafe in 2014, the building was shut for ten years for restoration under the guidance of the INTACH Puducherry, only welcoming students back in 2024. The tainted glass windows above its doorways are a distinctive feature.



8 Bharathiyar Memorial Museum

Once home to poet and freedom fighter Subramania Bharathi, this museum celebrates his literary legacy and revolutionary ideas. His ten year stay in Puducherry marked a turning point in modern Tamil thought, adding a powerful nationalistic layer to the

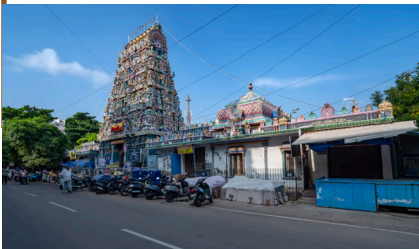


city's story. Bestowed the title 'Bharathi' for his poetry, having been a pioneer of modern Tamil poetry, Bharathi was also active as a journalist across newspapers like *Swadesamitran* and *The Hindu* as well as a social reformer, speaking

against issues like gender and caste discrimination. The museum displays some of Bharathi's original writings and photographs from his life.

9 Eswaran Koil (Varadaraja Perumal Temple)

This Tamil temple marks a transition from the serene charm of colonial buildings to the vibrant and lively everyday of Puducherry. The temple's colorful *gopuram* (a monumental entrance tower), rituals, and morning chants bring alive the deep rooted local traditions that coexist alongside French elegance. While the temple was first built under the Cholas in the eleventh-century, it saw significant damage in the tripartite wars between the French, the British, and local rulers. Significantly rebuilt in the eighteenth-century, some parts of the temple have pillars, arches and motifs borrowed from French architectural vocabulary and combined with Vaishnavite imagery and symbolism.



Please Note:

- Photography is allowed (in the interior and exterior buildings).
- Wear comfortable clothes, footwear, and carry a hat/umbrella along with a bottle of water.

- It is recommended that you do the trail in the early morning, as the roads tend to get busy, and the weather becomes less enjoyable later in the day.
- Kindly respect the cultural and religious significance/sentiments of the spaces as conveyed by the walk leader.

Puviarasan S is the founder of Outdoor Being, a travel collective that blends exploration, learning, and community. With a background in conservation, experiential education, and rural development, he believes that conscious travel can connect people and places in meaningful ways. A Gandhi Fellow, he is also a recipient of the Jane Goodall Templeton Prize for India (2024).

Email: puvi@outdoorbeing.in



Puducherry's Pre-Colonial Heritage



57 kms



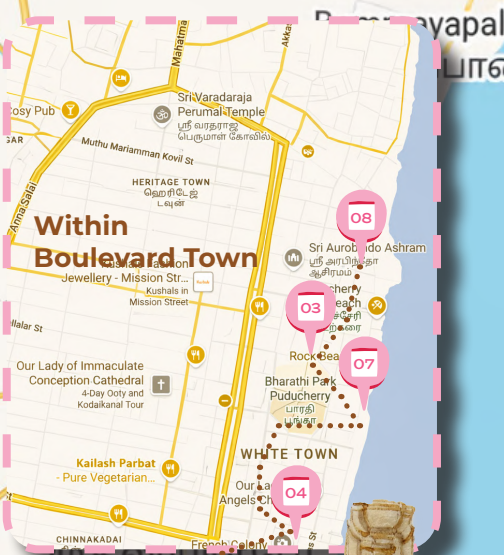
Arikamedu Archeological Site

Photos by Joseph Rahul and Wikimedia Commons.
Illustrations by Jisha Unnikrishnan.

Sedarapet

- 01. Arikamedu Archeological Site
- 02. Ancient Buddha statues at Kakkayanthoppu
- 03. Pondicherry Government Museum
- 04. Bronze Casting Historical Craft
- 05. Chola-era Temples at Villianur
- 06. Bahour Tank
- 07. Gingee Columns at Gandhi Thidal
- 08. Palm Leaf Manuscripts at the French Institute of Pondicherry

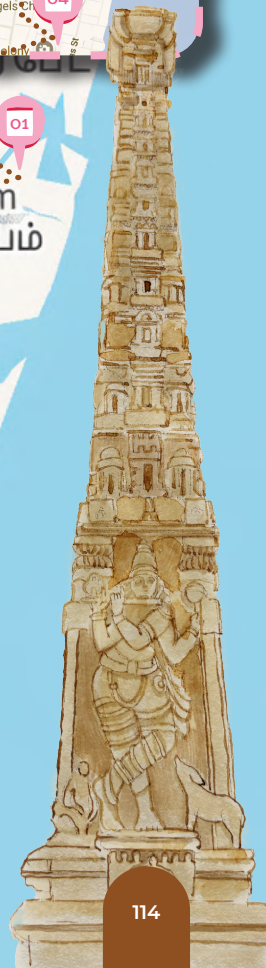
**Within
Boulevard Town**



Ariyakuppam
அரியாங்குப்பம்

PUDUCHERRY
TAMIL NADU

Bahour
பாசூர்



This heritage trail explores Puducherry beyond its well-known colonial façade, tracing a landscape that existed long before the arrival of European powers. Visiting pre-modern sites ranging from archaeological remains and religious structures to architectural and artistic traditions of the medieval period, the trail begins at Arikamedu. Passing through the villages of Ariyankuppam, Villianur, and Bahour, it moves across sites associated with trade, religion, agriculture, and craftwork, before ending in the heritage precinct of Puducherry.

By moving through these places, the trail challenges the notion that the city's history begins with the French. Instead, it situates Puducherry within a deeper cultural and ecological landscape shaped by Tamil society long before colonial rule.

1 Arikamedu Archeological Site

The archeological site of Arikamedu, situated about 4 km south of Pondicherry along the Ariyankuppam River, once functioned as a seasonal port and an important centre of Indo-Roman trade. Excavations led by Mortimer Wheeler in 1945 and Jean-Marie Casal between 1947–50 revealed Roman amphorae, Arretine ware, lamps, glassware, beads, and gems,



while later research by Vimala Begley (1989–92) showed that the settlement lasted up to the eighth-century CE.

Remarkably, Arikamedu is the only site in India where pottery inscriptions in four languages, Prakrit, Tamil, Old Sinhalese, and Latin have been unearthed. Archaeological remains include a large oblong brick structure probably used as a warehouse, two adjoining tanks with inlets and outlets for water, interpreted as dyeing vats for muslin textiles.

Today, Arikamedu is part of India's tentative UNESCO World Heritage list under the nomination Silk Road sites.

2 Ancient Buddha statues at Kakkayanthoppu

At Ariyankuppam in Puducherry stands an ancient Buddha statue dating to around the twelfth-century CE. The name Ariyankuppam can be translated as “the place of the noble ones,” which in the South Indian context may allude to the presence of a Buddhist monastic community in the past. A 1960 paper by P. R. Srinivasan records two Buddha images in the Pondicherry region: one at Arikamedu (Ariyankuppam) and another at Karadikuppam, possibly present-day Karuvadikuppam.



The Ariyankuppam statue, about five feet tall, is now housed in a recently constructed Brahma-Rishi Temple. While the temple priest worships the image as Brahma-Rishi, local residents recognise it as a statue of the Buddha.

3 Pondicherry Government Museum



The museum houses archaeological finds from Arikamedu and an important collection of Chola bronzes and stone sculptures from the region. These objects anchor the city within wider South Indian temple networks and artistic traditions dating from the Pallava and Chola periods.

The bronzes, especially images of Nataraja and other deities, demonstrate the technical sophistication of metal casting and the centrality of portable icons in precolonial worship.

4 Bronze Casting Historical Craft

Lost-wax bronze casting is a method that has, since the ninth-century, been used to make images of Hindu mythological figures and deities. Historically centered around the town of Swamimalai in Tamil Nadu, bronze casting was also widely practiced around Pondicherry. Due to its difficulty and intense demands on the body, it is not widely practiced anymore — Vasanth and Bharath are the sole remaining bronze-casting craftsmen in Pondicherry, with a showroom in the French Town. You can visit their workshop with a prior appointment.



5 Chola-era Temples at Villianur

There are two Chola era (ninth to twelfth-century) temples in the Villianur commune. The Thirukameeswarar Temple dedicated to Shiva originated in the Chola period, with additions made under the Vijayanagara and Nayak



rulers. The presiding deity, Thirukameeswarar, is enshrined in *lingam* form, and the temple follows the axial Dravidian layout with a sanctum (*garbhagraha*), *ardhamandapa*, and pillared halls.

The Varadaraja Perumal Temple, dedicated to Vishnu, reflects Vaishnavite presence in medieval Villianur. The temple houses Varadaraja Perumal with consorts Sridevi and Bhudevi, and its architecture bears traces of Chola workmanship with later renovations.

6 Bahour Tank

A prominent *eri* (man-made reservoir) dating to the Chola period, Bahour Eri — also known as Bahour Lake — is the second largest and perhaps the oldest irrigation lake in Puducherry. Inscriptions of Kannaradev (Krishna III of the Rashtrakuta dynasty) refer to it as Peria Eri (the big lake) and Kadambu Eri, indicating a landscape once ringed by *kadambu* trees. Engineered with earthen bunds and sluice systems to regulate monsoon waters, the *eri* sustained extensive paddy cultivation and anchored the agrarian economy of Bahour. It is also an important site for migratory and local species of birds.



7 Gingee Columns at Gandhi Thidal

Around the Gandhi statue, where the old pier was once located, stand tall stone columns believed to have belonged to the temple and fort at Senji (Gingee). These sixteenth-century, intricately carved monolithic granite pillars from the Venkataramana Temple in Gingee Fort were moved to the coast by the French in 1761 upon their occupation. They feature carvings related to Hindu mythology, including of Krishna lifting Mount Govardhan and the Gopika Vastrapaharanam (Krishna with the *gopis*). They once surrounded and supported the statue of the French Governor Dupleix. Their reuse reveals how precolonial material culture was displaced, appropriated, and recontextualized within colonial building projects.



8 Palm Leaf Manuscripts at the French Institute of Pondicherry



The French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP) holds one of the largest collections of *Saiva Siddhanta* palm-leaf manuscripts in the world. Of the almost 8500 palm leaf manuscripts at the IFP, a majority are written in Sanskrit in the Grantha script, with a small number in Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Nandinagari, and Tigalari scripts. These manuscripts from the eighth and ninth-centuries were inscribed using a stylus onto dried palm leaves. Ink was then rubbed over the surface, settling into the fine cuts and making the script legible.

Recognised by UNESCO, this collection was inscribed in the 'Memory of the World' Register for its outstanding value in 2005. IFP's permanent exhibition displays samples of its collections, including palm leaf manuscripts.

Please Note:

- Photography is allowed (in the interior and exterior buildings).
- Since the distance between the points is considerable, it is recommended that visitors hire a car to visit them all.
- Wear comfortable clothes, footwear, and carry a hat/umbrella along with a bottle of water.
- It is a full day trail, so it is recommended that you head out early in the day.
- Kindly respect the cultural and religious significance/sentiments of the spaces.

Sayali Athale is an architect and heritage researcher interested in building heritage and material practices.

Email: sayali.athale@gmail.com

Team

Curator

Sayali Athale

Contributors

Aneesh Raghavan
Ananya Jahanara Kabir
Ari Gautier
Ashok Panda
Bharathapriya R
Christine Mueller
Deepa S Reddy
Ganesan T
Gobi G
Pankaj Vir Gupta
Pattabi Raman
Priya Davidar
Puviarasan S
Sayali Athale

Photographer

Joseph Rahul

Editor

Shree Thaarshini Sriraman

Designers

Kaustav Purkayastha
Farishta Anjirbag

Illustrator

Jisha Unnikrishnan

Project Mentor

Vaibhav Chauhan

Project Head

Meenakshi Vashisth

Project Coordinator

Adit Shankar

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