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 Trail

# Puducherry's Pre-Colonial Heritage



57 kms



Arikamedu Archeological Site

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

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

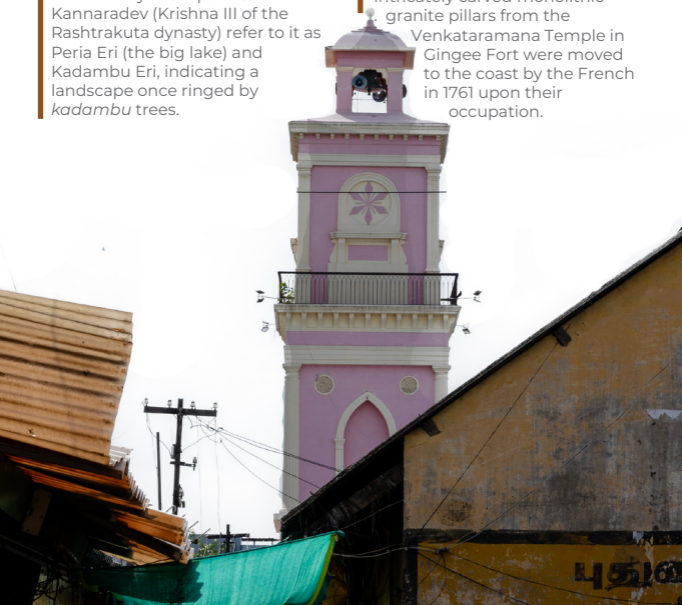
A prominent *eri* (man-made reservoir) dating to the Chola period, Bahour Eri—also known as Bahour Lake—is the second largest and perhaps the oldest irrigation lake in Puducherry. Inscriptions of Kannaradev (Krishna III of the Rashtrakuta dynasty) refer to it as Peria Eri (the big lake) and Kadambu Eri, indicating a landscape once ringed by *kadambu* trees.



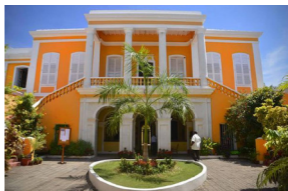
Engineered with earthen bunds and sluice systems to regulate monsoon waters, the *eri* sustained extensive paddy cultivation and anchored the agrarian economy of Bahour. It is also an important site for migratory and local species of birds.

## 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.



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.



## 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

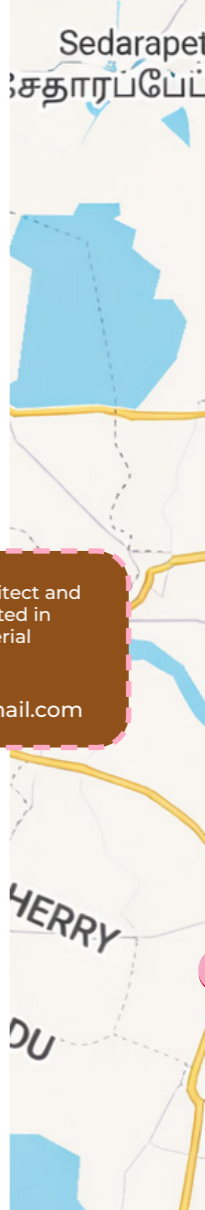


### Please Note:

- 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](mailto:sayali.athale@gmail.com)





### Within Boulevard Town

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## Ariyankuppam அரியாங்குப்பம்

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