



A cycle rickshaw on a street in Puducherry

PONDICHÉRY, MON AMOUR

Avid preservationist Kakoli Banerjee traces her ongoing journey in restoring the French town's rich heritage

I am in love, hopelessly and madly, with my city.

It is not always that your place of birth or where you grow up is your home. My first visit to Puducherry, in 2001 at the age of 36, was only for a couple of hours. I wasn't sure if it had anything to offer.

By the year 2007, circumstances prevailed and having bought a dilapidated Franco-Tamil house in the French precinct of the town, more by default than design, I was here to stay. My friend Jyoti Saikia and I spent three years restoring the house, which we call GRATITUDE, along with our dear departed friend and guide, Ajit Koujalgi, then convenor of the INTACH chapter of Puducherry.

By 2010, the city had become home. I can truly say that when you make a choice

as an adult to adopt a city as your own, a place where you do not have roots, you try to reach out and embrace all that it has to offer. In a (short) span of eight years, the unique mix of Franco-Tamil culture, the distinct yogic philosophy theorised by Sri Aurobindo and put into practice by the Mother, the city's proximity to Auroville with its rich global diaspora, and its ability to have retained a small-town flavour

gave me a deep sense of belonging. Here I must specifically mention the Mother, Mirra Alfassa, whom I consider my spiritual guide and mentor. Originally from France, she chose to make Puducherry her home in 1920 and collaborated with Sri Aurobindo in a fantastic, spiritual journey. She gave us a vision that became Auroville—a community close to Puducherry that brings together people from

Kakoli Banerjee





all over the world to create a city of the future. She came to be called the Mother because Sri Aurobindo recognised in her an embodiment of 'Shakti', the dynamic, creative force of Hindu philosophy.

To the world, Puducherry is also known as The French Riviera of the East, *La Côte d'Azur de l'Est*, for a reason. It was the

largest French colony in India, and even today there is a strong French influence, amply visible in the *mes* and French street names, imposing façades of Franco-Tamil architecture—the houses are typically nestled within walls, with a magnificent door that leads one to an inner garden or courtyard surrounded by columns and verandahs—and quaint bakeries and bouiques. Yet there is something distinctly Indian about the streetscapes as well. There is a chaotic juxtaposition of elements: Tamil wood pillars on the ground floor support stately French masonry pillars on the first. *Athangudi*-tiled floors are laid next to European black and white checked stone floors; dainty, vernacular frills of an eaves board run along with ornate cast iron railings on the balconies; lush tropical bougainvillea spreads over the walls, adding a Mediterranean touch.



(Clockwise from top left) Residents cycling through the town; Banerjee's home GRATITUDE; the Cluny Embroidery Centre; The Mairie in early 2014.

A vibrant mix of races, both residents and visitors, gives Puducherry a rare culture. The local Tamil and Creole population have adopted the French game of pétanque as their own. Every day at 5:00 PM, at one of the many pétanque grounds, one can see elderly Tamil gentlemen in their lungis rolling the *boules* towards the *cochonnet*. The local fishermen have also learnt how to navigate sailing boats in order to participate in the International Regatta off the coast.

By the time I settled in, Puducherry was on its way to becoming a little gem of a place with its well-restored heritage houses, and was rapidly being

later the municipality office, memorable to many couples because it housed the marriage registrar's office. The collapse of this building was subsequently attributed to years of neglect and lack of maintenance. This double blow was something that made many of us, residents of Puducherry, wake up to the fact that 'we' needed to do something to preserve the city's heritage. That is how my friends and I started the Puducherry Heritage Festival in the year 2015.

The fourth edition of the month-long Heritage Festival, which concluded on February 18 was to express our affection for our city. It is an event by the people and for the people. A visit during this time gives one the opportunity to see beautiful private houses and buildings, visit nearby rural areas, see our natural heritage up close, get access to world ▶





(From top) A colourful doorway with bougainvillea on Rue Suffren; a Franco-Tamil house with bright yellow walls, typical of Puducherry homes; the town's old post office.



class performances against the backdrop of beautiful architecture, participate in discussions and talks about history and culture, buy things made entirely in Puducherry, and more. The intention of the festival is not just to entertain but to educate young students and make them aware of the need to preserve.

Because of the efforts of the People for Puducherry's Heritage, as we named our collective, once again the town has started getting back its heritage. The Mairie is now being rebuilt in the image of the original. Several other public buildings like the Calve College and the Old Court are being restored. Puducherry has now started celebrating its heritage, which it inherited both from its colonial past and its Tamil origin

from Vedic times. It is this unique blend that defines and differentiates this former French town.

When visitors ask me, "So what can we do in Puducherry?" My reply usually is, "nothing". You just learn to be, practise the art of being a *flâneur*, the art of just walking the city to experience it, absorb the harmony of the streetscapes, enjoy a meal in a café, walk along the sea-front

Promenade, take a slow rickshaw ride or hire a bicycle to explore nothing in particular. If you must shop, I have three recommendations that are my favourites. Buy pottery. The Golden Bridge Pottery School started by Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith has given birth to an entire generation of very creative potters. Indulge in some exquisite Anglo-Indian/European embroidered linen at the Cluny Embroidery Centre, and finally, dig through the piles of antiques and furniture that are for sale because we simply cannot prevent the demolition of many private old houses. And if you want more, take home a bronze crafted in Kumbakonam with the lost wax method: A traditional technique where molten metal is poured into a wax mould, which is then melted away to reveal the finished product.

Having done all this, if you have an extra moment to spare, stand in front of another dilapidated building that needs to be restored and say a small prayer. ■