

## 'Out through the door and in through the window?'

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**“Out Through the Door and in Through the Window”? Positioning Colonial Nostalgia for French India in Puducherry**

**Abstract**

The former French India has held a distinctive place in Metropolitan French discourses and sentiments of colonial nostalgia which have been subject to sustained analysis. French India is thus part of a larger body of research exploring colonial nostalgia both as a general phenomenon and in a specific regional context. However, the corresponding imaginaries in what after its decolonization became the Indian Union Territory of Puducherry have remained marginalized in research. Yet regardless of the frequently naturalized expectation that the colonial metropolises should be its natural habitat, colonial nostalgia is not something that only occurs among the former colonial powers, and colonial nostalgia is in fact expressed in many ways in present-day Puducherry. This ethnographic study shows that if we are to understand the production and roles of colonial nostalgia we need to analyze it not merely from the perspective of the former colonial powers, but also as it occurs in the former colonies. Indeed, we should question how separate such discourses, imaginaries and sentiments of colonial nostalgia are, and redirect our attention to interrogating how they interact and may be coproduced in a broader, often ambiguous post/colonial field where postcolonial interests in the former colony are equally at stake.

## Résumé

L'Inde française d'antan, a joué un rôle très particulier, et dans le discours de l'Hexagone concernant l'Inde, et au sein d'une sensibilité de nostalgie coloniale. Ces deux phénomènes ont déjà fait l'objet de maintes études scientifiques. L'Inde française fait donc partie d'un corpus de recherches plus important qui analyse la nostalgie coloniale et comme un acquis général et comme un fait lié à un contexte géographique bien localisé. Cependant, en matière de pistes de recherche, les imaginaires de Puducherry, comme ancienne colonie, restent marginalisés. Malgré l'idée reçue que l'Hexagone devrait être sa terre de souches, il s'avère que la nostalgie coloniale se pointe non seulement sur le sol des anciens pays colonisateurs, mais, en l'occurrence, elle se manifeste en plusieurs formes dans le Puducherry actuel. Cette enquête ethnographique montre que, pour éclairer la production de la nostalgie coloniale et les rôles qu'elle impose, il faudrait l'analyser, non seulement du point de vue des anciens pouvoirs coloniaux, mais également à travers sa manifestation actuelle dans les anciennes colonies. Il s'agit, en fait, de mettre en question la séparation entre ce discours, ces imaginaires et cette sensibilité de la nostalgie coloniale et de se refaire une idée concernant leur interaction et co-production dans une mentalité post/colonial plus large, et souvent plus ambiguë, où les nombreux partis pris postcoloniaux de l'ancienne colonie sont à l'ordre du jour.

**Keywords:** Puducherry – Pondicherry – French India – colonial nostalgia – postcolonial imaginaries

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## **Introduction**

In 2017 I, as an ethnographer investigating colonial heritage and postcolonial imaginaries in Puducherry, now a small union territory in southern India, but prior to its decolonization known rather grandiloquently as ‘French India’, was preparing my attendance at the annual official celebrations of Puducherry’s De Jure Transfer Day to India with some trepidation. Postcolonial relations between India and France have remained amiable after the diplomatically negotiated cession of the French territories to India (de facto in 1954, de jure in 1962), and European visitors to Puducherry, which is now a popular tourist destination, are generally politely received, and sometimes greeted in the streets of the capital with a “bonjour” signalling the widespread default assumption that a European visitor must be French. However, I was aware that the formal commemorations of the De Jure Transfer Day which I was about to attend were introduced as recently as 2015 as a concession by Puducherry’s government to an organization of highly vocal petitioners who were often referred to in the press as ‘freedom fighters’. I am not French, but I am European, and being visually identifiable as such I knew that the participants at the event would likely assume me to be French, and thus I wondered if my presence would draw their disapprobation. I half imagined myself being chased off the venue by elderly freedom fighters wielding sticks and shouting the equivalent of ‘good riddance’ in Tamil. However I was right only in one thing: As the sole European participant I did stand out, but evidently my presence perturbed no one. Noticing several participants at the event wearing badges in blue, white and red with the motto “Liberté, égalité, fraternité” was my first surprise. The second came when a man who turned out to be a leading member of the association that had so vocally demanded the De Jure Transfer Day to be formally commemorated by the Government of Puducherry approached me at the reception after the event and enthusiastically plied me with tea and snacks, professing his opinion that things had really been better in Puducherry under French rule. I have done research on heritage development in the region since 2007 (e.g. Jørgensen 2014, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021, forthcoming), and from past periods of fieldwork I knew of and expected to find nostalgia for various aspects of French colonialism, from architecture to language, in many quarters in Puducherry. After all, Puducherry derives a substantial part of its income from promoting the capital’s French heritage as its unique selling proposition on the tourism market (Jørgensen 2019) and owes its continued postcolonial existence as a separate union territory in India to identity claims predicated on almost 300 years of French rule (Annousamy 2005, Jørgensen 2018). Even the colonial name of the capital, Pondicherry, remains in frequent use both colloquially and in heritage and tourism discourses, referencing the French history in spite of an official change to the original Tamil name

Puducherry in 2006 for both the capital and the union territory, though also reflecting practical demands of present-day India where it is now the English version of the name rather than the French spelling and pronunciation, Pondichéry, that is used. Nevertheless, I had not expected to find colonial nostalgia amongst the proponents for celebrating an event commemorating the achievement of independence from the French, of all places. That merely goes to show how little I yet understood about the ways in which this multifarious and ambiguous sentiment and the claims associated with it were operating in the capital of the former French India. But what should one then make of commonplace statements issued by Indian residents with long-time roots in Puducherry that “the French rule was very good”, and wishes – less commonly professed, but nonetheless forcefully argued by a small minority, however disturbing this was to both Puducherry’s government and its French consulate (as well as to myself as an ethnographer), that “we are ready to invite French rule here [back], as it was done before”?

Metropolitan French discourses and sentiments of colonial nostalgia – both as a general phenomenon and specifically for French India – have been subject to sustained analysis (e.g. Magedera 2010, Ravi 2010, Marsh and Frith 2011, Marsh 2013), but the same certainly cannot be said for their counterparts in Puducherry as the former colony, which have remained marginalized and obscured from view.<sup>1</sup> However, here as in many other contexts, colonial nostalgia is manifestly not something that only occurs among the former colonial powers, regardless of the frequently naturalized expectation that the colonial metropolises should so to speak be its natural habitat (e.g. Lorcin 2013, Bissell 2005). This gap in where the analytical gaze has been directed begs renewed inquiry: If we are to understand the production and roles of colonial nostalgia we need to analyse it not merely from the perspective of the former colonial powers, but also as it occurs in the former colonies. Indeed, we should question how separate such discourses, imaginaries and sentiments of colonial nostalgia are, and redirect our attention to interrogating how they interact and may be coproduced in a broader post/colonial field. This study shifts the perspective of existing research by locating the production of colonial nostalgias for French India in Puducherry, the place around which they are produced, with the aim of exploring their roles and positionality, and the post/colonial dynamics through which they are created. While ethnographic investigation allows for elucidating a broad range of perspectives as they interact in Puducherry, the existing research on French colonial

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<sup>1</sup> A study conducted by the political scientist William Miles in the 1980s on the legacies of decolonisation in the former French India (Miles 1995) is the closest approximation in theme to the studies on metropolitan French colonial nostalgia for French India: While his study is not cast as an analysis of colonial nostalgia it does contain useful observations which I will draw on in the article.

nostalgia surrounding Puducherry provides a sounding board for how these intersect with more general metropolitan French discourses of colonial nostalgia, and with which implications.

The article is primarily based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Puducherry between July 2017 and January 2018, focused on the contemporary postcolonial cultural practices and imaginaries surrounding independence and the heritage of the French rule in Puducherry. Inevitably, the analysis is also informed by my longer history of research engagement in Puducherry, which I have visited at intervals for research on various aspects of post/colonial heritage development since 2007. The fieldwork entailed observations of daily cultural practices in the city of Puducherry as well as more formal commemorative events surrounding its history, such as those marking its decolonization. In order to provide a diversity of perspectives in-depth interviews as well as casual conversations were carried out with a range of residents in Puducherry's former colonial city centre, including varied age backgrounds (from the early twenties to the nineties), people with Indian as well as French citizenship, and those whose familial roots in Puducherry extend into the period of French rule as well as more recently arrived immigrants. To protect the confidences of my informants, they have been anonymized throughout in the article and will be referred to in general terms describing their background, such as their age, occupation and nationality when they are cited. But before I get to the analytical work of positioning the expressions of colonial nostalgia which occur in Puducherry, I must first present some theoretical context for the study.

### **Theorizing (Post)colonial Nostalgias**

At once much discussed and much maligned in scholarly debate, the status of a bad word clings to nostalgia with an overwhelming condescension that frequently brands nostalgia “neither useful nor relevant” or even “pathological, that is, [...] irrational and unreasonable” (Smith & Campbell 2017: 612, and see Boym 2003: xiv). This heated critique of nostalgia applies even more so in the context of histories of colonialism and imperialism where it might be read as not merely, at best, reactionary or futile, but at worst neocolonialist or deluded to the point of false consciousness (Rushdie 1991, Rosaldo 1993, Bissell 2005). Read as unwarranted rosy images of the past, a potentially dangerous outcome of conservatism and revisionist politics, or bad history pure and simple, in Lowenthal's memorable title phrase of one contribution to this debate (1989), ‘nostalgia tells it like it wasn't’. Indeed, even practices of nostalgia themselves have been impacted by such critical debates, for instance Rasch (2018: 148) has identified what she terms ‘postcolonial nostalgia’ – an ambiguous memory practice that in light of recent public critiques of nostalgia and colonialism alike “purports to have no patience with

nostalgia”, professes to postcolonial understandings and explicitly distances itself from identified evils of empire such as racial inequalities, “but at the same time still stages the allure of a lost colonial past”. Much critical debate has turned on scrutinizing expressions of nostalgia from the perspective of former colonizers, whether expressed in the form of national level imperial nostalgia for the hegemony and glory of lost empire, or in the form of a more intimate colonial nostalgia for the lived experience of colonial lifestyles (Lorcin 2013, see also Stoler & Strassler 2000, Walder 2010, Marsh & Frith 2011, Marsh 2013, Rasch 2018). In the specific context of Indian colonial history, a wave of ‘Raj nostalgia’ expressed in a wide range of popular media in the UK and across the Atlantic have been subject to intensive debate in which it has been associated with British anxieties over loss of empire and the growth of a multicultural postcolonial United Kingdom; a format of nostalgia not just strongly *en vogue* during the ideological conservatism of the 1980s under Thatcher, but making an appearance with renewed strength following Brexit (e.g. Rushdie 1991, Oliete-Aldea & Hodgkin 2015, Burton 2018). Equally, the loss of French empire and colonial territories has been analysed as subject to longstanding histories of nostalgic fantasies expressed in media as different as, inter alia, literature, film, and historiography, related both to contemporary contestations of power with the British as the significant and dominant ‘other’ of France in the colonial period, and to processing histories of decolonization and the ensuing postcolonial fractures in French society themselves (e.g. Magedera 2003 & 2010, Marsh & Frith 2011, Marsh 2013). Relating to more than just imaginaries and more than just the societies representing the former colonizers, equally the urge to relive empire nostalgically or preserve its traces in the context of (post)colonial heritage development and tourism has been analysed as a set of discourses and practices which bring Western expressions of colonial nostalgia back to the former colonies themselves (e.g. Teo 2001, Peleggi 2005, Hall & Tucker 2005, Buettner 2006, Jørgensen 2013 & 2019, Cheer & Reeves 2015).

There is an easy tendency to assume by default that expressions of colonial nostalgia lie squarely within the domain of the former colonial power, as when Lorcin (2013: 107) writes of imperial and colonial nostalgia that “[b]oth are, of course, manifestations of historical memory whose ‘memory excisions’ serve to occlude or diminish the histories of the lands and the people they once dominated and the manner in which that domination took place”. However, as amply demonstrated by my experiences in Puducherry, any such easy categorical distinction between practices and imaginaries amongst the former colonizers and formerly colonized is too simplistic (see also Walder 2010). Much more disturbing, and at the face of it counterintuitively, the point has been made that in the former colonies themselves the “boom



in colonial nostalgia is striking” (Werbner 1998: 1). From an initial scholarly gut reaction of embarrassment, disbelief or avoidance which for long has led to a lack of analysis of nostalgic statements in former colonies along with the social worlds and imaginaries that animate them (Bissell 2005: 216), a growing body of research across multiple disciplines is beginning to scrutinize what is at stake and what nostalgia means in the context of professing colonial nostalgia from within former colonies. This select body of studies has demonstrated the complexities of colonial nostalgias as perceived from the perspective of the former colonies, from urban Zanzibarians harkening back to the colonial period as a time when ‘things worked’, to Egyptians lamenting the felt loss of a cosmopolitan colonial culture, black South Africans longing for the moral certainties of life under the Apartheid system, the local ‘nostalgia craze’ surrounding Hong Kong’s colonial past following its transfer to China, and Israelis reminiscing fondly about the peaceful life under the British mandate (Bissell 2005, Dora 2006, Hickel 2015, Jones 2015, Bar-Yosef 2017).

What has emerged from these studies is very much the realization that nostalgias come in the plural, and that from the grounded perspective of social practice we need to exercise caution in viewing nostalgia as a uniform ‘thing’ or treating it as a blanket concept, instead refusing to take the term for granted or assume at the outset that we know what it means: not all nostalgias are the same, nor, as Bissel notes (2014: 217-19), do they point in similar directions. Nonetheless, some initial discussion is necessary to pin down this protean concept enough to render it of analytical value, lest it becomes too vague to serve any theoretical purpose. While both widely theorized and widespread in contemporary culture, the finding in the classic sociological effort of Davis (1979: 7) to grapple with the concept of nostalgia still holds true – that the concept is “susceptible to semantic vagueness, drift and ambiguity”. As Angé and Berliner note in their reflections on a recent renewed wave of scrutiny of nostalgia in the context of ethnographic research (2014: 2), the concept of nostalgia has a long history, and reviewing past literature on the subject in general would entail an unsurmountable task of delving into psychiatry, psychoanalysis, sociology, history, literary criticism, philosophy, cultural studies and ethnography. Briefly, the concept of nostalgia (from the Greek root terms *nostos*, return home, and *algia*, longing) first evolved in seventeenth century Europe where it was used to describe severe afflictions of homesickness as a strictly medical condition, but the nineteenth century saw nostalgia shed its clinical connotations and take on “the metaphorical meaning of longing for a lost place and, especially, a lost time” (Angé and Berliner 2014: 2, and see Boym 2001: 3-18, Davis 1979). This remains a central notion in present-day discourses on the concept; likewise it is frequently suggested that “nostalgia is a feature of what is loosely

called modernity” (Walder 2010: 10) – that is, a product of a notion of linear and irreversible time, as well as rapid changes in familiar social structures and fabrics which lead to an erosion of confidence in the present and a yearning for lost pasts, places and experiences (see also Bissell 2005, Angé and Berliner 2014). By implication, occupying “the uncertain zone between memory and history [...] [n]ot only is nostalgia deeply implied in the political life of people, it is part of their historical sense of themselves” (Walder 2010: 2-3). Davis (1979: 107) has likewise argued that nostalgic reactions can be traced to perceived threats to continuity of identity in the context of present uncertainties, fears and discontents. In the context of post/colonial societies with their both intimate, contested and ambiguous histories of relationships cutting across (former) colonizers and colonized (Walder 2010: 4), it is only natural to expect that discourses and practices of nostalgia should be anything but singular. As Bissel (2005: 216) argues:

Nostalgia is shaped by specific cultural concerns and struggles; and as with other forms of memory practice, it can only be understood in particular historical and spatial contexts. But nostalgia also operates with a crucial difference: rather than evoking commonality and continuity, it works as a mode of social memory by emphasising distance and disjuncture, utilizing those diacritics of modernity as a means of critically reframing the present.

In other words, nostalgia is not just about the past, but equally and crucially about the present and the future. As Boym points out (2001: xiv-xvi), nostalgia is both prospective and retrospective, it has a utopian dimension. Rather than being for the past itself, it may also be for futures lost - unrealized dreams of the past that did not come to pass. Likewise nostalgia is about sentiments (such as loss, desire or yearning), but it is also about more than that: It at once encompasses narratives, imaginaries, and embodiment in places and practices which may sometimes be proximate rather than distant (Blunt 2003). If it is about imagined visions of ‘yesterday’s self’, in the individual as well as the collective sense (Lorcin 2013: 98), then it is also about visions of where these selves are going, which includes a critical potential.

### **Indian Colonial Nostalgias: From Metropoles to Colonies**

For all the critical scrutiny of Raj nostalgia in the United Kingdom, the question of how colonial nostalgia might look like from Indian perspectives is less explored, although Blunt (2003) has done some interesting work on the short-lived attempt of a small minority of mixed-race Anglo-

Indians to carve out an independent space for themselves in the 1930s by setting up a settlement in Bihar to serve as an imagined homeland, promoted as a pastoral and nostalgic remnant of the British Raj firmly located in the motherland of India. Discussions of the increasingly ubiquitous nostalgic restaging of colonial remains in heritage tourism, where it is available also for Indian consumers, have broached questions that skim the surface of broader cultural concerns such as Bandyopadhyay's (2012: 1247): "Has the Indian people prevailed over its antipathy towards its past as a British colony?" He proceeds to ask: "Can we agree with Malcolm Muggeridge's, (1971) prophesy? 'The last Englishman would doubtless be an Indian. Long after the sun has set on the Empire, long after the sahibs had packed their colonial bags and headed home, the natives would cling to Raj remembrances.'" While no answer is forthcoming, the sentiment prompted by the question sits somewhere between the satirical and the uncanny: One cannot help asking – and doubting: is there really something to be nostalgic about? However, if we are to understand the present realities of colonial nostalgia the question would be the wrong one to ask. In many cases it may well be that even the colonial archives themselves reveal the idealized pasts evoked by people in the present as more imaginary than real, but as Bissel (2005: 218) emphasizes: "Rather than viewing nostalgia as poor history, we need to engage with it as a social practice that mobilizes various signs of the past (colonial and otherwise) in the context of contemporary struggles".

That 'French India', like the British Raj in the United Kingdom, has been the object of French imperial nostalgia is no secret (Magedera 2010, Ravi 2010, Dale 2011, Marsh 2011 & 2013). In fact, this nostalgia has long antecedents which predate the decolonization (de facto and de jure) of the territories in 1954/62: Although in the mid-eighteenth-century France seemed poised to establish an empire in India, the lost potential of which has since been much mourned and glorified in the exultation of later French colonial policy, the British eventually established their predominance on the subcontinent and curtailed the French to a handful of small, scattered settlements. Thus, as Marsh (2011: 1) remarks, French India was essentially 'lost' by France already by the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. To France, Pondicherry (as it then was) was already the symbol of colonial dreams of grandeur lost – a projected future of empire that had failed to arrive – when the British finally quit India in 1947. The decolonization of British India forced France to realize that hanging on to its territories in a newly independent India eager for the departure of the two remaining marginal colonial powers, France and Portugal, had become an untenable policy. This led France to negotiate a transfer of its territories to the Republic of India which, as far as any prospective nostalgia might be concerned, had its eyes on other pasts and other futures (fig. 1). The representations

of French India in what Magedera (2010: 331) calls “discourses of the non-real” – nostalgia, utopia and fantasy – in historiography, literature and other popular media has been well explored in recent decades, alongside similar representations of other French colonies. However, as one of the key proponents of this study of imaginaries in the metropole has noted, they have displayed a corresponding “lack of emphasis on how the end of French colonial rule was viewed by France’s former colonial subjects” (Marsh 2011: 6). Yet if the perspective from the metropole is important, then surely that from the former colony is no less so. Further, we need to critically question the extent to which nostalgic discourses in the context of metropole and former colony are separate and get beyond artificial binaries in favour of considering how they interact. This study makes the case for a perspective that considers the post/colonial dynamics in which such nostalgias are created, with a view to analyse how differently positioned ‘colonial nostalgias’ may intersect, partially overlap, and be coproduced involving conjunction, shared and divergent discourses and contestation alike.

The following discussion will explore what place colonial nostalgia has in Puducherry as, first, a marginal French colony in an India dominated by the British Empire, and then a decolonized union territory integrated into the Republic of India. Bissel (2005: 216) argues that “a truly ethnographic engagement with nostalgia requires that we acknowledge and seek to account for the multiple strands of remembrance, seeing how they coexist, combine and/or conflict”. That is also what I aim to do here: Through the words of my interlocutors in Puducherry I will attempt to tease out the expressions of nostalgia that can be found amongst many of the city’s residents, and interrogate the ways in which they are produced and positioned. This will show how the associated imaginaries and sentiments involve both consistent themes, contradictions and ambivalences that speak to the ‘historical sense of themselves’ (*pace* Walder 2010) expressed by people in the city of Puducherry. The questions of *what* people are nostalgic for, *who* express nostalgia, and *how*, will all be discussed here.

### **French Connections: The Position of Metropolitan French Colonial Nostalgia in Puducherry**

Expressions of colonial nostalgia were certainly recurrent during my fieldwork in Puducherry, and often in an overtly reflective manner where my interlocutors themselves brought up the term ‘nostalgia’ to characterize their own sentiments or those of others. Clearly, some of those nostalgias could be characterized as distinctively metropolitan imperial or colonial nostalgias originating in France and produced from the perspective of a former colonial power – conventional forms of nostalgia which few postcolonial critics or theorists would be surprised

to find (e.g. Lorcin 2013). As a metropolitan French expat acting as the head of one French institution in Puducherry explained in an interview:

Pondicherry is a *myth* for French people; [...] I think it is probably linked to a kind of nostalgia from our colonies, and even if the period has changed and the mentalities have changed, they are still this, you know, exotic far way country where *French* are represented; *that* is in the minds of French people. [...] India is attractive and Pondicherry is attractive because there is a kind of French touch to it although it's kind of tinges compared to the enormous size and wealth of India: Pondicherry is just a very, very small point. I had not the impression before coming, but now I'm in India I realize that it's very small.

One notes here not only a continued sentimental French attachment to the erstwhile colony and its 'Frenchness' but also an explicit experience of disjuncture between the imagined past and the present, myth and reality: Gaps inevitably emerge between the anticipated grandeur of the former capital of 'French India', and the realities of Puducherry as a small place set in contexts of much larger political importance: India at large. Clearly the sentiments of imperial and colonial nostalgia identified in research on French representations of Puducherry (e.g. Ravi 2010, Magedera 2010, Marsh 2011 & 2013) continue to make an imprint: The representational dualism and tension between a sense of grandeur and smallness echo a long history of the disproportionately large symbolic importance of Pondicherry to France as it was portrayed in colonial representations, and the reality of the place as a marginal colony constrained by the development in British India, an interlocutor and point of reference now replaced by the independent Republic of India. Representational continuities notwithstanding, however, postcolonial realities clearly have a tempering effect on expressions of metropolitan French nostalgia, as emphasized in the quote which professes a departure from colonial mindsets and relations with its distancing statement: 'the mentalities have changed'. As Rasch (2018) has observed, new moral imperatives in international postcolonial debate have rendered untempered colonial nostalgia questionable in many contexts – yet that does not mean that such nostalgias disappear, but rather that they mutate into new postcolonial forms. Walder (2010: 4) notes that what he terms 'postcolonial nostalgias' deal in ambiguities and dilemmas: "Not that empires as such ever end [...] but the European empires [...] have become memories, dreams – and nightmares." Correspondingly, he proposes to investigate "[h]ow, when and where we exhibit a yearning after those times, while acknowledging the problematic of that yearning"

(ibid.); and here, of course, the relationship with significant others in the former colonies is crucial, although the narratives of the latter have often been limited to circulation in their own national or regional communities as compared to more heavily mediatized colonial discourses (Kingsepp 2018: 3).

Pointing to tensions between French nostalgic expectations and the experiences of postcolonial realities, an Indian employee in another French institution in Puducherry explained:

There's still some nostalgics who think 'oh, you come to India, you can speak in French, everybody will understand you [when] you come to Pondicherry' [...]. That's not the case [...]. You'll see French elderly people saying 'oh yes, when I was in school I was reading [the names of the French territories in India] in my schoolbook: Pondicherry, Mahe, Chandernagore' [...]. I'm not so sure [...] if it is still in today's curriculum, but *most* elderly people, French people I have met, whether here or in France, have told me 'ahh, Pondichéry', this and that.

Notwithstanding conventional understandings that colonial nostalgia is a disturbing sentiment in postcolonial contexts (e.g. Bissell 2005, Walder 2010, Hickel 2015, Rasch 2018) there was little notion amongst my Indian interlocutors in Puducherry that present metropolitan French colonial nostalgia for French India, whether expressed as individual sentiments or as national endeavours, should appear either threatening or surprising. It was generally received with understanding and (in a few cases wryly bemused) acceptance. The postcolonial context here differs considerably from the more direct continuation of France playing a role as a power in the former French Africa (Lorcin 2013). Symptomatic of the distinct postcolonial context in which such French colonial nostalgia occurs in the case of Puducherry, the Indian interviewee cited above continued to characterize French nostalgia and current postcolonial relations with India as the position of a former colonial power that looked to a more promising past as providing what also theorists of nostalgia refer to as one of its classic functions – that as “a salve to a beleaguered nation” (Marsh 2013: 8). Here Puducherry was understood as a source, in part, of solace in the face of current problems in France, and in part a strategic means towards improving the future of France through collaboration on more equal terms with the former colony. As he posited with considerable confidence:

France really is in turmoil [...] so they just cannot drop a country like India. Definitely not. Most countries are trying to have *ties* with [...] those big countries, China, India [...]. The economies of most countries in the old continent, you know, it's slowing down [...] and in *that* sense their historical legacy [...] might turn out to be something helpful for them. [...] For India also, it's interesting [...] to have ties with France [...] but I guess India *knows* that it is in a position now where it can kind of dictate [...] its own terms.

Notably, this is not just an Indian sentiment, but one which registers in official French perspectives too. Thus, as Magedera observes (2010: 338), e.g. a report to the French senate in 1999 entitled *L'Inde en mouvement: une chance à saisir pour La France*, was pervaded by the metaphor of France as a straggler trying to catch up in economic terms, and several of my metropolitan French interlocutors voiced similar perspectives. When the French positions referred to here are important to consider also from a perspective located in Puducherry rather than in France, this is because French expressions of colonial nostalgia are very much present and visible in postcolonial Puducherry. This is the case not only because of its booming tourism industry which continues to draw French as well as other international visitors and brings Puducherry's general population into contact with these tourists, but also because France has retained an institutional presence in Puducherry as a direct outcome of the process of decolonization (fig. 2). In the following the distinct postcolonial ties between France and India and their impacts will be outlined.

### **Postcolonial Connections and Blurry Boundaries of 'Frenchness' in Puducherry**

Although the process of negotiating and completing the decolonization of French India was protracted, France did realize that its position as a colonial power in India had become untenable after the departure of the British in 1947. Decolonizing all of India was of great symbolic significance to India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who regarded the remaining colonial powers in India as historical anomalies to be corrected; but provided that France departed voluntarily, he was sympathetic to the idea of retaining a positive postcolonial relationship. As Nehru voiced it already in 1947 in an attempt to pave the way for France to agree on ceding its Indian territories, "Pondicherry is a window through which France and India could communicate. We will value this window onto France as a way of developing our cultural relations with that country" (cited in Weber 1997: xxi). For France its marginal territories in India had limited practical political and economic significance, but they remained subject to

considerable symbolic and sentimental investment as part of the notion of a ‘Greater France’ (Magedera 2010, Marsh 2011). The prospect of negotiating a cession of these territories to India in favour of retaining some measure of cultural influence and goodwill rather than risk being forced out (as Portugal was by intervention of the Indian army in 1961) prevailed in the French policy (Arpi 2005). This political conclusion was furthered, on Nehru’s part, by an economic blockade from 1949 to 1954, which reinforced to France the dependence of its scattered and isolated territories on the continued collaboration of India for the supply of goods and services as basic as rice, electricity and postal communication (Neogy 1997).

In 1954, when France had dealt with the more pressing issue of ratifying the independence of the former French Indochina after its defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the de facto transfer of the French territories to India took place. It was ratified de jure only in 1962, as France held off on setting further precedents for decolonization following the eruption of insurgency in Algeria which coincided with the de facto transfer of its Indian territories and made its legal ratification symbolically sensitive. Sandwiched between, and delayed by, the more momentous decolonization processes in French Indochina and Algeria, the protracted process of making political decisions about French India shows its marginal status as a colony in practical terms (Marsh 2011). At the same time, however, the French decolonization policy in Indochina as well as Algeria has become notorious for its oppressive character (Ikeda 2007: 569). In contrast the negotiated transfer of French India without recourse to armed confrontation emerged on the part of both France and India as a self-consciously promoted and mythologized success story of diplomacy and fraternity showing both countries in a favourable light (Marsh 2011: 4, Weber 1997: xx, Miles 1995: 57).

The treaty of cession resulted in the presence of several French cultural and educational institutions in postcolonial Puducherry, which led to continued connections with the French state and French expats working in Puducherry: Not only did the French *lycée* continue in operation as before, to this was also added the creation of a new French research institution, the French Institute of Pondicherry (from which later split a local branch of *École française d’Extrême-Orient*), and a French consulate.<sup>2</sup> The latter was intended to cater to a particular group of citizens who came into being as another significant result of the treaty, which allowed Puducherry’s population to choose freely between Indian and French citizenship at the point of the de jure cession. In spite of the doubts and anxieties about the future induced by such an

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<sup>2</sup> Puducherry also holds another institution which contributes to postcolonial cultural relations between France and Puducherry: *Alliance Française de Pondichéry*, created in 1889.



option in the context of decolonization, this led to 6,252 persons (around 2% of the population) opting to be French. This included varied backgrounds, from professionals in the service of the French colonial administration to army personnel, and it spanned from academics mindful of having opportunities in France or elsewhere in the French empire, to more disadvantaged members of lower castes who for want of better outlooks in Indian society were ready to take the chance that throwing in their lot with France would turn out a better opportunity (Miles 1995).

Today, a minority of Puducherrians of Tamil ethnic origin are therefore legally French citizens. While some of these have stayed in Puducherry, many have migrated to France in search of opportunities for further education and work, and while some (especially the younger generations) have settled permanently in France, others retain homes in both countries or have family members still resident in Puducherry, moving between them as a small, but distinctly visible floating population. As the French consulate informed me, around 6,500 such persons can be found living in Puducherry (predominantly in the capital itself) on an ongoing basis, and many more visit in July and August during the French summer holidays, as there is a substantially larger community in France, estimated to encompass as many as 100,000 persons (Magedera 2010: 338). These realities considerably blur the conceptual boundaries between those identifying with the former colonial power and the formerly colonized, or French and Indian identities and perspectives. Anyone resident in Puducherry before its decolonization – and by implication, also their descendants – could have been French citizens today, had they chosen to, and in terms of cultural identities and behaviours they are not necessarily different from those who did opt for French citizenship.

As far as Frenchness is concerned, current realities are that in Puducherry one might find everything from (albeit rare) perfectly Francophone and Francophile but still proudly Indian national citizens, to French citizens of Tamil ethnicity who display strong patriotism and ties with France – and French citizens with no first-hand knowledge of France, predominantly Tamil rather than French cultural habits, and even with limited or no ability to speak the French language – people who in cultural terms are very similar to the majority of original Tamil residents of Puducherry who chose Indian rather than French citizenship in 1962. One nowadays finds people who, while not particularly attached to France, profess regrets (ranging in sentiments from the distinctly rueful to humorous and only half serious statements) that their parents did not opt for French citizenship because it would have been a personal advantage. Irrespective of its variable cultural components, French nationality in Puducherry grew to be a prized asset after decolonization as the value of the Franc rose vis-à-

vis the Rupee and French citizens living in Puducherry found themselves able to travel internationally more freely than their Indian counterparts, and were eligible for the same pensions as their compatriots in metropolitan France. These are factors which in the context of India as a developing postcolonial country put the French originating in the colony at a distinct economic advantage that has remained very visible in Puducherry. Those Puducherrians who did not opt for French citizenship in 1962, and their descendants, thus clearly have the reality present that they, too, could have been French – and the knowledge that they might have derived particular benefits from this. As one of my local Indian interlocutors noted, a French Puducherrian woman needs no dowry to marry an Indian – her citizenship, from which children of her marriage can benefit, as can the spouse, provided that they pass a French nationality test, is dowry enough. Likewise the French consulate in Puducherry has struggled with postcolonial claims from a number of people who have attempted, on various pretexts, to make their case for French nationality after 1962 (Miles 1995: 49-51).

Puducherry has seen substantial postcolonial growth, and where the French territories in India in their entirety had a population of around 300,000 in 1951 (Marsh 2007: 30), in the 2011 census of India the metropolitan region of Puducherry alone accounted for 657,209 persons (Census of India 2011). Set against the realities of a much larger city, the makeup of which has changed considerably in the postcolonial period, the numbers of the Puducherrian French nationals may be small, but they nonetheless have a distinct and disproportionately large place in local imaginaries (Jørgensen 2021). Likewise, they have their own distinct sentiments of colonial nostalgia, often associated with histories of dislocation from Puducherry to France. This is hardly surprising – as Walder notes (2010: 9), nostalgia appears to have a particular appeal for people who have literally been displaced – but exploring the patterns that such expressions of nostalgia take in the context of Puducherry is important.

In the words of a councillor representing Puducherry's French in *l'Union des Français de l'étranger*, tellingly collapsing disjunctures in time and space into one nostalgic sentiment: “all original [French citizens of Tamil ethnicity] from Pondicherry, when we are in France, we are always dreaming about Pondicherry, because that *old* Pondicherry was a very good time”. Elaborating on the anxieties of a nostalgia associated with (albeit voluntary) dislocation and loss with threatens to become increasingly permanent, he explained:

My mother is there – I take care of my mother. She is 80 years old now, so all my brothers and sister come to the family's house [...] they are still staying one or two days in Pondicherry for nostalgia. [...] My son, he didn't [learn to] speak in Tamil,

and when he is coming in Pondicherry, he said it was very *boring*. He is coming today to my house because *I* am there. [...] Because we are talking Tamil, that is very easy for us *now* and *difficult* for my children or in the future because they didn't speak Tamil.

In other words, there are clearly experienced limits to the practical (as opposed to the more symbolic) 'Frenchness' of Puducherry – and the pervasiveness of French language and culture in Puducherry is lamented as diminishing. This development makes the continuation of personal and familial Indo-French connections increasingly tenuous, compounded by the corresponding gradual loss of Tamil language and culture on the part of younger generations of Frenchmen originating in Puducherry. While French was never the daily language of the majority of the population in French India, people in Puducherry being predominantly Tamil-speaking (Magedera 2003), French as the *lingua Franca* of administration and education did make an imprint (Annousamy 2005). Decolonization, and the ensuing replacement of French with English alongside regional languages for administrative and educational purposes has resulted in a general decline in the local use of the French language (see also Jørgensen 2018, Magedera 2003). This, however, was only one element of colonial nostalgia associated with Puducherry on the part of the French originating here: From the character of the Indo-French relationship to cultural practices and the urban environment of Puducherry, many features were subject to nostalgic attachment and a sense of loss, or threat of loss. On life in the city of Puducherry the councillor cited above professed: "It was better in the past".

The features emphasized in the nostalgia expressed by French citizens originating in Puducherry were clearly part of widely shared discourses about the past, present and future. Here, decolonization looms large in the postcolonial imaginaries surrounding Puducherry. Asked which was the most important historical event in Puducherry's history, one Puducherrian of French nationality but Tamil ethnicity, the owner of a small restaurant in the city, laughingly mused: "Maybe it is in 1954, I mean, it is not because that is [the year of] my birth here. It is also that [...] it is the borderline [...] which began a new era, and we are into the new era, but that *new* era has everything to do with the past." When exactly something is lost can be hard to pin down – clearly, the characteristics associated with the period of French rule in Puducherry did not disappear all at once, although Miles (1995: 27-29) notes concerns for "the sheer survival of French culture" in Puducherry in periodicals circulated among its French community already from the 1960s onwards. Although the *de facto* and *de jure* decolonization in 1954 and 1962 both constitute significant dates in engendering the changes for which

nostalgia are expressed, it is also evident that the time that is the object of nostalgic sentiments presents on a more sliding scale, depending also on the age of the people expressing it: To many, the Puducherry that they grew up in is the point of reference. Another Frenchman of Tamil ethnicity originating in Puducherry, an engineer in his fifties, explained the legacy of the French rule and the postcolonial development of Puducherry thus:

They [i.e. the people of Puducherry] were happy about the French people – they were working together. It was not like the rest of India which was ruled by British people. In Pondicherry still they are happy about the French – some even regret that they left. [...] Now it's a nightmare! [...] The pollution, the infrastructure – when I was young Pondicherry was calm, pollution free, a small family town. Now it is a city. Pondicherry is not made for so many people. [...] I grew up here, so I know Pondicherry well. I left Pondicherry when I was 15, so I don't need people to tell me what is Pondicherry. I saw the changes by my own. [...] When I was 5 years, there was *no* car in Pondicherry. Everyone used bike or [went] by walk, bicycle I mean, even not a motor bike, bicycle. So it was small, each other knows everyone in all the city, so it was really peaceful and no traffic jam, no pollution, no noise. Now even in a small road, you will have all these: noise, traffic, so many [motor]bikes, so many cars, it is impossible without proper infrastructure. [...] It is *crazy* to drive here. It is *impossible*; most of the roads are blocked by bad parking of bikes and cars. This is not *normal* for a developed country.

Realities in France as 'a developed country' (and speculations on what Puducherry might have been, had it remained French rather than joining the Republic of India) become implicit points of reference in such reflections. Here, clearly, not only histories of displacement and the sentiments of loss that they may bring, but also the postcolonial development of the city of Puducherry impact on the shape of colonial nostalgia; and indeed Puducherry has seen substantial changes after decolonization.

### **From French to British and Independent India: Postcolonial Imaginaries and Colonial Nostalgias**

The city centre and erstwhile capital of French India is around 2 square kilometres in size, but sits within a larger metropolitan region of Puducherry which spans 71,9 square kilometres. Puducherry has experienced a marked process of urbanization, as well as substantial population

growth through immigration from other parts of India following its integration into the Republic of India. As will be further explored in a later section, the outcomes of this include both processes of cultural change and change to the urban landscape, which feed into the patterns of nostalgia surrounding Puducherry. This further diversifies the positions from which the residents of the city approach its past: Those who arrived in the course of postcolonial migration do not have a direct link with historic experiences of the period of French rule; rather any memories of colonialism which they have pertain to the British empire. To many of these immigrants the French colonial connections in Puducherry have limited impact on their sense of historicity or on any sentimental attachments to their surroundings – indeed, these immigrants are rather part of a process of change that prompts the nostalgia of others. In the words of one of my interviewees with Indian nationality and family roots in Puducherry, “we ourselves feel that [...] we are strangers. [...] The natives are outnumbered”.

It is nonetheless remarkable that the city is pervaded by a vague and generalized sense of nostalgia surrounding the period of French rule. As a young woman, a student in her twenties who had grown up in Puducherry, living outside the original colonial city centre, explained: “we don’t know what is the history, but we feel it’s good”. A fellow student of hers from another Indian state, two months into her first stay in Puducherry, had picked up on the same theme. As she explained with reference to an Indian ‘us’, contrasting imagined experiences of French and British colonialism:

It’s very nice, now you can see Tamil people and French people here, living together. [...] They were not ruling us [as an empire], they were living with us, that’s it, so that’s why we can see the French traces nowadays. [...] The French people gave respect to the people, [...] that is what is lacking in the British part.

From the point of Indian postcolonial imaginaries no less than French post/colonial ones, perceptions of Puducherry’s French colonial past are thus inescapably locked in with those of a third, dominant interlocutor: the British. If France in its historiography and colonial popular culture on India has attempted to portray itself as a better colonial power than its significant other, the British (e.g. Marsh 2013: 76, 80, Frith 2011) then this dovetails with an Indian tradition of writing national history and identity up against the British as the empire against which independence was hard won.

Research on French metropolitan colonial nostalgia has – like some of my Indian interlocutors in Puducherry – remarked on the vague nostalgia, often disjoined from knowledge

about past or current realities, which attaches symbolic and sentimental value to the five former French territories in India: Pondicherry (as it then was), Karaikal, Mahe, Yanam and Chandernagore, with the capital as the most significant point of reference (Marsh 2013: 97-98). If the metropolitan French typically know little less about these territories than their names, which the elder of them were taught to recite in school as part of an educational policy originally established under the Third Republic (Marsh 2013: 77), then in certain respects this vagueness concerning details of the colonial history in French India, and an attendant nostalgia, is replicated in Puducherry. It is not that voices critical of French colonialism do not exist locally, but they are undoubtedly a minority. A few of my interlocutors in the city did note gaps between prevailing public images of the period of French rule and some of the primary research on it. For instance an employee of a local heritage conservation NGO noted to me the surprise he registered upon reading the incisive work of the historian Ajit Neogy on the decolonization of French India – a much more critical perspective than any he had come across in conversations with the city’s residents in the course of his work, he explained. A local tourist guide likewise took a (in his line of business rare) sceptical approach to the prevailing nostalgia: “they assume that just because the French allowed people in Pondicherry to become French [...] it was all rosy”.

After its integration into the Republic of India Puducherry follows the curriculum of the neighbouring, linguistically, ethnically and in many respects culturally similar state of Tamil Nadu. This implies that the colonial history taught in its schools concerns the British Empire, featuring details such as the development of Indian nationalism and the fight for independence led by figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. The available points of reference for local knowledge about the French colonial history are thus limited to encounters and imaginaries sparked by daily life – such as those prompted by Puducherry’s booming tourism industry which makes much of showcasing its French heritage as an asset to both domestic and international visitors (Jørgensen 2019), or direct experience and social memory on the part of those residents of the city, and their families, who experienced it.

In several respects this locates the presence of nostalgia for the French colonial period and its impacts most significantly in that smaller central part of the city which was the capital during French rule: This is where one finds an urban landscape in which both French and Tamil architecture reflects a colonial layout that draws strong touristic interest, which bespeaks one prominent form of what might be termed more commercial colonial nostalgia in the city (Jørgensen 2019); and indeed, a form of colonial nostalgia which has a common economic application internationally (e.g. Peleggi 2005, Dora 2006, Bandyopadhyay 2012, Cheer &

Reeves 2015). It is also where the city's remaining French institutions are located, and where associated French expat staff tend to be based. Further, as a centre of economic and administrative activity in the period of French rule this is where the local population had the most direct interaction with the French also in the past, and hence more distinct legacies of involvement and in some cases also economic benefits and power to be nostalgically invested in. As explained by a relative of one of the local municipal councillors who in 1954 voted to decide in favour of the French territories joining the Republic of India:

I don't think like people from downtown [...] would have fought against the French, because they *have* been living very closely, connected with French or they *have* some advantage with the French rule, like doing business, exports, doing some contracting works and all those things. [...] My aunt's husband, he is like 85, and he was studying in French medium and [...] he had very strong memories of French days, but he *never regrets* of Indian Independence and also did not regret about the French rule [...] – but *after* Indian Independence [from the British] things have changed, so many people would like to have their own liberty, so things were different *before* Indian Independence and *after* Indian Independence.

Conceivably, the interest in and perspectives on French colonialism may be (or have been) different outside the capital – e.g. from the point of perspective of residents in the countryside. Some of my Indian interlocutors who had lengthy family histories in the city suggested that people outside it might have been more interested in joining India than their counterparts in the capital, having been less closely engaged with the French. One claimed that “even during French time if you go beyond [...] people did not know whether they were governed by Paris or Delhi, and [yet] gradually those who are pretty old, they say ‘during French time it was better’”.

Direct engagement with rural perspectives have not fallen within the purview of my study which I therefore admit is capital-centric and does not purport to speak for the entire Union Territory of Puducherry. There are however some indications that the widespread colonial nostalgia which my study identified exists well beyond the confines of the city. In a study conducted in the late 1980s, Miles (1995: 69) interviewed elderly residents in the rice-cultivating communes that originally constituted the majority of the population in the French territories and found that those who had come of age in the 1950s professed a predominant recollection of sentiments against the merger with India. How anyone who was not polled at

the time perceived the question of joining the Republic of India in the 1950s is, of course, impossible to reconstruct with reliability three (or for that matter six) decades later, as dislocations of memory in light of postcolonial developments will inevitably play a role in present positions. It is worthwhile citing one of Miles' interlocutors, a horticulturalist from the village of Karayambuthur, who explained: "The elder people, especially the Freedom Fighters, are very disillusioned. They sincerely believed that independence (both for India and *with* India) would lead to a vastly improved life. But that has not been the case" (in Miles 1995:71). As I did decades later in the city amongst some of my interlocutors, Miles found the sentiment expressed in the countryside that "Even today people would vote to stay with France!" (ibid.) Even if the sentiments of colonial nostalgia in the rural and urban context seem to point in broadly similar directions, it is worth noting that the perspective of a disillusioned agriculturalist with no direct relationship with France is a different form of nostalgia from that expressed from the perspective of an urban elite with direct investments in the relationship with the French. As the president of the Association of Expatriates of the Former French Establishments of India presented the perspective of the French citizens created in 1962 to Miles (1995: 29): "we have become strangers in our own land from one day to the next, even though we represented the political, intellectual and cultural elite of these territories". Clearly, thus, colonial nostalgia in Puducherry can be arrived at from many different angles and with different motivations, from sentiments of frustrated hopes and expectations to sentiments of alienation and disenfranchisement, although they coincide in one thing: casting the French in India as a good colonial power.

It is not my objective here to assess whether France was a 'better' colonial power than the British in India, or for that matter whether it provided 'better' governance than the Government of India, but to explore how, and why, patterns of colonial nostalgia emerge. Here, it is an inescapable observation that references to the former British India loom large in positioning Puducherry and its French connections in local social imaginaries: At once as the worse colonial power against which France appears better, and as the catalyst of Puducherry's independence. In public discourse and education Great Britain, and not France, is portrayed as the significant other as far as adversarial colonial connections are concerned. It is perhaps hardly surprising that the French connections are predominantly perceived in a positive light, considering that both France and India officially portrayed decolonization as an amiable process that signified fraternal relations, that the city's tourism industry builds strongly on the French heritage as a unique selling point, and that postcolonial ties, such as the continued presence of French institutions and French citizens, notably those originating in Puducherry,



bespeak a continuing colonial nostalgia which in many respects blurs the boundaries between French and Indian positions. But what experiences engender nostalgia amongst those of the city's resident who have roots in French Puducherry but chose Indian citizenship; and how do these relate to differently positioned colonial nostalgias?

### **Longing for Colonial Pondicherry – a French Provincial Town in India**

That Puducherry, and life in it, is not what it had been, and that particular aspects of the past were in many respects sorely missed and their loss or deterioration mourned, was a recurrent sentiment amongst those of my Indian interlocutors whose personal or familial histories in the city extended into the period of French rule. Indeed, there were broad overlaps between their nostalgic discourses and those of their counterparts with French citizenship, growing out of histories of intimate connections with the city. As a tourism professional in his forties expressed it:

People who have been living in Pondicherry right from the French rule, *they* feel the difference. [...] We still have a lot of French [cultural] influence, but slowly it is fading away. [...] Migrants [...] stepped into Pondicherry after independence, so they really cannot appreciate what it *was* earlier and what is after the independence. [...] People coming from other cities started living here, earlier we used to be only Pondicherrians, we used to have the kind of typical mix of French and Indian attitude, but now people from Tamil Nadu and other states have stepped in, so they bring their culture [...]. So maybe optimist people will say [...] 'okay, again Pondicherry is changing its culture', maybe I sound very pessimist, but we have lost our identity to be honest. [...] Maybe if it goes like this [...] another 20-30 years, Pondicherry will be yet another town or city in India. [...] The old lifestyle has *gone* [...] We *used* to have such a relaxed and calm atmosphere.

That the impulse for change and associated sensations of loss is very much to do with Puducherry's decolonization was clear and explicitly commented upon. As a nonagenarian legal scholar born in the city explained:

At the time [i.e. 1954] the whole education practically was in French, the administration was in French, justice was in French [...]. Now everything has

become completely integrated; nothing French remains. [...] The Indian administration wanted to Indianize Pondicherry, and they have *succeeded*.

With a poignant sense of loss, a doctor in his seventies stated:

This was an arrangement by the French people and the Indian government. French people all decided to give up, [...] after Indochina's war defeat they wanted to leave the territory, understand? And we all were studying French. So we didn't know: in '54 I was studying French in the college [...], *then* [...] everything changed rapidly. People started coming from *outside* – migration, and the degrees, French degrees, lost their value, French doctors lost the value, everything was unsettled, the judiciary system totally was changed, everything was changed, [the] municipal system, [...] all the beautiful things disappeared, and there was rapid immigration, an expansion of the town in haphazard manner, no planning, nothing!

Two distinct components fuelling colonial nostalgia can be seen to come together here: One concerns cultural identity and fears for its loss or dilution in the context of integrating into the Republic of India; the other anxieties related to urban growth and fast-paced development, which impels concerns for the loss of familiar environments (fig. 3). I will deal with these in turn in the following.

In the context of colonial nostalgia it is worth highlighting that Puducherry's decolonization was an unusual process in international perspective: Not simply the outcome of a relationship between a colony and a colonial power, but of a triadic configuration between a colony, a subservient colonial power, and a large, newly independent nation state which had grown out of a different historical relationship with the subcontinent's dominant colonial power. From the perspective of the Republic of India the process was conceptualized and portrayed as a natural historical development; in effect, an appendix to the history of achieving independence from the British (Yechury 2015). Yet clearly, in Puducherry the process of decolonization and integration into the Republic of India presented itself with less than historical certainty and inevitability, and occasioned doubts, uncertainties and conflicting loyalties as only one of several possible futures (Miles 1995, Yechury 2015). Miles (1995: 64) goes so far as to posit that it was the economic pressure applied by India, rather than Indian national consciousness that proved decisive in bringing about the reversal of the elected officials of French India from a pro-French stance to support for merging with India, although

national sentiments and cultural identities were also contested in the context of decolonization. It is certainly noteworthy that the formal speech which was issued by the president of the representative assembly after the vote to join India contained no anticolonial sentiments, but rather emphasized dual cultural allegiances which signified strong ties with France, stating:

for us, that which France has accomplished here will be one of our most precious possessions [...]. [O]ur noble task is to love France. [...] This attitude towards France does not merit [...] heresy on the part of the government of Delhi. For we are above all Indians and have never stopped being so. VIVE LA FRANCE! JAI HIND! (Balasubramaniam, cited in Miles 1995: 79).

Since the decision on joining the Republic of India was made by Puducherry's elected officials without a general public vote it is even harder to tell what exactly the prevailing sentiment of the population may have been at the time than to attempt to pin down a single cause behind the decisions of their political representatives. Even if the preceding French assimilationist policies may have had their limitations in terms of how many colonial subjects they made identify as 'French' in any national sense, certainly the public debate surrounding the future of French India had involved multiple scenarios – from remaining a sovereign French territory to joining India outright, autonomy within a French overseas framework, or a condominium solution (Miles 1995: 73). The possible futures which eventually became roads not taken were not only present at the point of debating decolonization but may still linger in local social imaginaries. It is this complex historical field which gives rise to the profuse, and sometimes contradictory or ambivalent expressions of colonial nostalgia in Puducherry. As Boym (2001: xvi) emphasizes, “nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory”.

With Puducherry's integration into the Republic of India a range of cultural changes, such as the use of English instead of French as the lingua franca in public administration and education (alongside the regional language, Tamil) and the marked influx of immigrants from other parts of India has clearly sparked experiences of anxiety and displacement. Wider politics of identity and power factor in, too. Sentiments of cultural proximity and distance clearly do shift in this postcolonial environment, for while Puducherrians in general (including those who opted for French citizenship) take pride in their Tamil culture and attachment to French culture is unevenly distributed in practice, the process of decolonization and the continued administrative existence of Puducherry as a separate union territory has definitely also

propagated a sense of a distinctive identity of ‘original Puducherrians’ – those whose roots in the territory go back to the period of French rule. As explained by a young man in his twenties, a member of the organization mentioned in the introduction which has sometimes been dubbed ‘freedom fighters’ in the press, but who professed an, at first glance, surprising longing for the period of French rule:

We don’t like people who come from India and settling in Pondicherry [...]. They don’t know about Pondicherry, they don’t know the culture [...] and now they are ruling Pondicherry. About 10 legislative members are from Tamil Nadu, they are not natives of Pondicherry.

A descriptive concept for this sentiment – in politics and in daily life alike – would perhaps be the uncanny (in Freud’s original German terminology the *unheimlich*, literally the unhomely): the sensation of “being in place and ‘out of place’ simultaneously” which “may occur when one’s home is rendered somehow and in some sense unfamiliar” (Gelder and Jacobs 1995: 171). Particularly apt for contexts of postcolonial anxiety, Gelder and Jacobs note that the uncanny can connote crises of unsettled identity and sentiments of ownership where boundaries blur, making nostalgia (literally the longing for home) an understandable emotional response.

As several theorists highlight, discourses and sentiments of nostalgia are sparked by transition and discontinuity (e.g. Davis 1979, Boym 2001, Bissel 2005, Walder 2010, Hicel 2015); and here more than one significant process of large-scale social upheaval can leave its imprint, from the end of empires to processes of migration and developments associated with modernity, such as urban growth. Clearly, a classic component of nostalgia associated with the notion of irreversible changes and loss brought about by modernity is at stake among those of my Indian interlocutors who had longstanding roots in Puducherry. Huyssen’s (2000: 34) diagnosis seems apt:

One of modernity’s permanent laments concerns the loss of a better past, the memory of living in a securely circumscribed place, with a sense of stable boundaries and a place-bound culture with its regular flow of time and a core of permanent relations. Perhaps such days have always been a dream rather than a reality, a phantasmagoria of loss generated by modernity itself rather than its prehistory. But the dream does have staying power.

Processes of extensive urban growth, migration and cultural change as well as associated sociocultural and emotional impacts are, of course, common across postcolonial India, not least after the process of economic liberalization which occurred in the 1990s, and consequently some of the ailments associated with processes of modernization referred to above are far from unique to Puducherry. However, in Puducherry the process of modernization which my local interlocutors make so much note of, and which fuels nostalgias that at the outset appear related also to other factors than those strictly associated with French colonialism does, upon inspection, have a close link with colonial conditions and the process of decolonization.

In 1935 a popular French colonial novel, *Desordres a Pondichéry*, lamented the fate of the marginalized capital of French India: “picturesque and old-fashioned Pondicherry, which is cleverly trying to become modern and which can hardly succeed given the terrible handicap of isolation in the middle of present-day India which is entirely British” (Delamare, cited and translated in Ravi 2010: 386). French colonial representations repeatedly made much of the complaint that Puducherry “had a reputation of having a sleepy feel” (Dale 2011: 37). In a metropolitan French perspective on colonial history this image reflected nostalgia and regrets concerning the larger French Indian empire that could have been, but failed to be realized in contestation with the British. Here, ironically, the loss which prompted nostalgia was associated with the *absence* of modern development in Puducherry. Meanwhile it would appear that in *their* version of colonial nostalgia the Puducherrians nowadays lament the loss of the very condition that French metropolitan nostalgia lamented: that of a small-scale provincial town with a calm atmosphere and a manageable pace of development. There is an inescapable irony in this provincial image of colonial Pondicherry and its widespread local legacy of postcolonial yearning: Discursively, it appears to have become one of the most enduring legacies of the French colonial rule in Puducherry. Even if both the reality and the image of Puducherry’s provincialism was at the outset an outcome of a failed project of French empire in India that prompted discourses of metropolitan colonial nostalgia associated with a diminished present and a hoped-for future that failed to arrive, it is now one of the remaining, and paradoxically valued legacies of French colonial rule. So well entrenched was the colonial image of Puducherry couched in semantically overlapping terms such as ‘sleepy’, ‘tranquil’ and ‘peaceful’ that it was also successfully restaged politically at the very point of its decolonization in claims that there was no animosity towards France to detect among residents (Marsh 2007: 72-74). Exaggerated as those claims were (see e.g. Neogy 1997), the image nonetheless prevails in Puducherry today, where, for instance, one of my Indian interlocutors

claimed that theirs was “The *most peaceful decolonization in the world*, that’s why Pondicherry [...] comes to the annals of history”.

The notion of ‘sleepy Puducherry’ has lived on and been valued locally in both intimate contexts of daily life and in more official postcolonial representations of identity. Thus, one of the everyday practices associated with the period of French rule that several of my interlocutors lamented the loss of and considered part of their distinct culture included the habit of having siestas, unlike the more fast-paced modern lifestyle. Meanwhile a prominent context in which the notion of ‘sleepy Puducherry’ lives on is in the longstanding and very popular tagline used by Puducherry’s Department of Tourism for promoting the city as a tourist destination that appeals in the face of fast expanding Indian modernity: “Peaceful Puducherry – give time a break” (see Jørgensen 2019). That the changes sparked by postcolonial economic growth, urbanization and (ironically) increasing tourism development made themselves felt across a wide spectrum of local experiences was testified in the comments of even local shopkeepers from northern Indian states who established their businesses in Puducherry during the economic liberalization and tourism development that began to take shape in the 1990s. They, too, would often remark to me that the city had changed considerably and used to be much calmer and more quiet – qualities which they, too, valued and felt vaguely nostalgic about. French expats without roots in Puducherry echoed the same sentiment where they had experiences based on lengthy residence in the city. As a French journalist explained: “I don’t like Pondicherry much because I have seen it 40 years [...] ago; it was very peaceful, now it is [full of] so much traffic, but people who come for the first time, visitors, tourists, they love it.” Likewise the restaurant owner whom I have cited earlier commented on over a decade of increasing tourism: “more and more people want to come and visit Pondicherry [...]; when they think about Pondicherry [a distinct feature is that] it is smaller; [...] it is still a myth [...] a *holiday myth* in a provincial town”. The elderly Indian doctor cited above qualified his nostalgic sentiments of loss in context of the postcolonial urban development thus: “Of course, relatively speaking, definitely, in spite of all this nonsense, *still* Pondicherry is better than so many other [...] cities in India, there is no doubt about it. It is definitely calmer, quieter, [...] but *what* it was before and now - things have changed”. Tensions between what was felt to be lost from the past and what remained, and between what was held to constitute mythologized representations and reality, were thus prevalent as a shared discourse across a wide spectrum of voices in the city, prompting persistent reflections on what the city was, is, will be, ought to be and could have been in light of its colonial history, decolonization and postcolonial development.

### Colonial Nostalgia as Postcolonial Critique

After India's economic liberalization from the 1990s onwards, and increasingly in the new millennium, Puducherry is restaging its French heritage very prominently in a tourism industry that (interestingly, as far as expressions of colonial nostalgia are concerned) caters significantly more to domestic than foreign tourists (Jørgensen 2019). Yet even as the period of French rule is a positively charged point of reference and identity claims in both nostalgia and heritage development, the process of heritagization does not assuage a persistent sentiment that something has gone awry in the city's postcolonial development. As one local tourist guide in his twenties sarcastically commented to a group of primarily Indian tourists from neighbouring states on a walking tour of the city, while pointing out a ruined building that formerly served as the city's French town hall (fig. 4 a and b):

You can imagine the old town [during French rule]: the lighthouse was there, the pier was coming in; this was a *very* busy place, this was a *happening* place. [...] This is a heritage building and it's crying out for renovation as you can see it, but Pondicherry government is *notorious* for making renovations. The result of one such renovation is right behind you: *La mairie*, the town hall, and the structure [stood here] for about 144 years before the Pondicherry government decided to renovate it. Within days of beginning the renovation work, *huge* chunks of the building came tumbling down and just like that, in a matter of *few* minutes, a piece of Pondicherry's past was gone, and we are thinking of rebuilding the old plan, and we'll continue to think about it in the years to come. [...] They should've propped it [up] properly. They didn't. They expected the building would be much stronger, but it wasn't, and by then, it was too late. Everything was gone. [...] In the *most literal* sense, it has gone to the dogs. *Actually*, dogs live here now.

The remark reflects the two characteristic faces of colonial nostalgia as expressed by many of those Indian residents of the city who had family roots extending into the period of French rule: The colonial nostalgia facing backwards to what is remembered as the small-scale, well-ordered and manageable provincial life – aptly represented by the former French town hall, which the postcolonial city had outgrown long before it was scheduled for a restaging as an official heritage building – and the forward-facing postcolonial critique directed at the present government, be it the Government of Puducherry or the Government of India.

The flexibility of colonial nostalgia as a space of imagination is aptly illustrated by the fact that the colonial past may be represented by residents of the city by apparent opposites, as both ‘calm’ and ‘busy and happening’, and in both cases with positive connotations in terms of which it is differentiated from a postcolonial present which is subject to a readily apparent measure of dissatisfaction. Equally striking is the dual role of India as, at once, an emerging superpower on whose postcolonial toes France and metropolitan Frenchmen in Puducherry must take care not to step, or even must seek to catch up with – and as an imperfectly developing country that ought to take inspiration from forms of governance represented by France as a ‘good’ former colonial power. These paradoxes and ambiguities demonstrate the pervasive role of colonial nostalgia not simply as a form of social memory, but as an alternative critical space from which to interrogate what is experienced as insufficiencies of the present in postcolonial Puducherry; and here, too, widely shared discourses are apparent. As an Indian environmental activist and NGO leader in the city, born to parents who had immigrated to Puducherry from another Indian state, voiced it:

The thing is that we have nothing to boast about. They’ve only made the place worse [...] after independence. But there is nothing much different than any other place. This is what is happening everywhere. [...] You can’t say that ‘oh, we have post-independence – all this we have done’ but when you actually come, you see garbage lying around, chased by stray dogs. It will not make sense [...]. Thinking of [the] future, our politicians will never get into their heads.

In Puducherry, paradoxical though it may appear at first glance, thinking about the past through discourses and sentiments of colonial nostalgia is precisely that: a way of thinking about the future, based on the present, but with recourse to the past. As Boym (2001: xvi) makes it clear, nostalgia

is not always for the ancient regime or fallen empire but also for the unrealised dreams of the past and visions of the future that became obsolete. [...] Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future.



Unmitigated positive recollections of the period of French rule can easily be tempered or challenged by other sources. For instance Miles (1995: 34) recorded statements of a local army veteran who recalled less complimentary perspectives: “it is true that France had neglected Pondichéry, especially relative to the other colonies. When I grew up there was no electricity and no amenities”. Equally, the French rule did imply certain hierarchies of inequality which created ambiguities surrounding the status of the population and the extent to which they were French colonial subjects – or French citizens. For instance in 1873 the lawyer Ponnoutamby Pillai opposed a prohibition against Indian lawyers wearing shoes in the courtroom of Pondicherry (a practice intended to show deference), and when fined and held in contempt of the court for appearing in footwear, like a European, he had to take his case to the appeal court in Paris. When emerging victorious, he became known locally by the popular nickname *La Porte* for ‘opening the door’ to justice in context of ambivalent French colonial assimilation policies (Miles 1995: 8). How widely the less salutary aspects of the French rule are remembered locally varies; but it is worth noting that even while professing to nostalgic sentiments, some of my interlocutors who had roots in Puducherry that dated back to the period of French rule also acknowledged the more mixed realities of that rule. As one said, “there are good things they [i.e. the French] have done, bad things they have done, *no doubt*”. As Smith and Campbell note (2017: 606), nostalgia can be an ambivalent and contradictory emotion, which at the same time expresses both positive and negative sentiments about particular attachments to time and place.

Clearly, in most cases, the colonial nostalgia expressed in Puducherry does not equate with an actual wish for the French rule to return. Likewise Puducherry, with its relative insignificance in context of the current economic developments in the vast Indian Republic, is no longer a driving force in the postcolonial relationship between India and France (Miles 1995: 168). Nevertheless, due to the particular complexities and long-term impacts of the decolonization process, France has lingered as a significant part of the post/colonial imaginaries of Puducherry. For instance the ‘welfare mentality’ which has developed amongst the French of Puducherry (Miles 1995: 172), who on a par with their metropolitan French counterparts can expect benefits such as old age pension clearly has repercussions amongst some of those Puducherrians who gained Indian rather than French citizenship in 1962. They have before them the very tangible reality that a different turn in history – either in the choices made by their family, or concerning the future of French India at large – could have resulted in an entirely different present and future. This, in turn, opens an imaginary space in which the relationship with France, past and present, becomes a site from which to assess present

postcolonial realities and imagine things differently, sometimes radically so. As explained by one of the leading figures in the organization sometimes referred to as ‘freedom fighters’, he felt that a “sacrifice” of their French citizenship had been made by Puducherry’s population in joining India, and that in return it behoved India to take care of them with old age or “freedom fighter” pensions. As he stated:

After the French people left [...] we felt that we have lost a very good culture and very good government. [...] We are ready to invite French rule here, as it was done before, but the view is being seriously viewed by the local government [who think] that we are against India and Indian nationality and against the Indian constitution [...] but *we are not demanding separatism*, we are demanding ourselves to [be] take[n] care [of] by French government *or else* by government of India.

Tellingly, my research found that sentiments of nostalgia for the French rule in Puducherry could be expressed by a broad spectrum of those residents of the city whose families had roots in French India, from people who professed to staunch Indian nationalism to people who indicated a willingness to invite French rule back. Notwithstanding the generally positive outlook on the period of French rule, Puducherry’s independence and merger with India was often presented in my interviews as part of a natural historical process beyond dispute. To take two illustrative quotes expressed by some of my interlocutors with Indian citizenship, both of whom had come of age when the French territories joined India, “it was a thing which had to happen in the usual course”; “it is natural evolution. See, if you see the history, any country, gradually they have to get their Independence Day. [...] It’s all one phase, colonialism”. General public sentiments concerning the minority of Indian nationals originating in Puducherry that go so far as to argue for the benefits of a return to French rule were for the most part relaxed, but could run high amongst those old-time Puducherrians who presented themselves as Indian patriots. As one said, “They are people who [...] don’t know really the *value* of Independence; *they are idiots*. [...] There’s nothing like being in our own country, an independent country”. Nevertheless, there was much common ground in the nostalgia expressed by people at both ends of this spectrum. As the proud nationalist just cited – himself quite critical of the government, also in public – went on to tell me:

[The] municipality was very effective in French time, judiciary was very good. Now, you know, it’s all corrupt [...]. When [it] was a small town, it was very clean

in those days, now it is not, it is dirty, pollution is more, construction occurs without any planning.

If colonial nostalgia can sometimes be ambivalent, spanning acknowledgment of positive as well as negative sentiments related to the past, then too, clearly, postcolonial national pride can be ambivalent about the present, to the extent that colonial nostalgia retains a place in this context. What struck me was that the postcolonial ailments identified by those Puducherrians who extolled Indian independence as well as those who professed that they would rather see the return of French rule were so similar that they could have come from the same person: Litanies of lamentations regarding the impact of migration, unregulated construction, depletion of local water bodies and agricultural land, pollution, traffic, issues of public welfare and allegations of corruption; all contrasted explicitly with the period of French rule. The notion that things were better in the colonial past were much more than straightforward reflections of the past or rosy colonialist fantasies – they were harnessed, and sometimes very strategically, not just as forms of social memory but as a postcolonial critique which fed into pervasive debates about the development of present-day Puducherry.

## **Conclusion**

With the longstanding postcolonial concerns for the local survival of significant aspects of French culture, such as language, Puducherry may never have become quite the window onto France in India that Nehru's speeches or French strategies of decolonization anticipated. Nonetheless the French rule has shown a remarkable capacity to hang on in postcolonial imaginaries surrounding Puducherry. When I noted to a local tourism professional that the French consulate in Puducherry stood out on the celebration of Independence Days by lacking the universal illumination visible on Indian public buildings, he said that they could not very well be asked to celebrate, "because it is like literally kicking them out of the door and then inviting them through the window, so it doesn't look nice". Yet in the pervasive discourses of colonial nostalgia surrounding Puducherry, France may have left through the door of formal decolonization, but the windows of post/colonial imaginaries remain wide open. The appeal of colonial nostalgia for French India goes both ways in the imaginary spaces between the metropole and the former colony: If India was the best empire that France almost had, France was the best colonial power that India hardly had: French India became historically marginalized as a minor power on the Indian subcontinent early on, and that position not only had tangible outcomes lasting into the present such as Puducherry's provincial legacy and its

current union territory status, but also leaves ample space for nostalgic imaginaries. France in India has the dual benefits of looking good compared to the French colonial legacies in Algeria and Indochina – and in the Indian context against the British and the Portuguese. Due to the particular historical three-way relationship between Puducherry, France and what was formerly British India, and the ways in which Puducherry both integrated into the Republic of India and retained distinctive postcolonial relationships with France, including its minority of French citizens originating in India, the boundaries between (former) colonizers and (formerly) colonized continue to be subject to a blurriness which is reflected in multiple overlapping forms of colonial nostalgia. Here, relationships of historical distance and proximity with both India and France continue to be worked out and negotiated in Puducherry, often with a strategic point of reference in postcolonial Indian politics and development which have very little to do with the interests of the former colonial power. Thus, ironically, one hardly finds a position farther away from the most extreme format of colonial nostalgia in Puducherry than the city's French consulate, where a representative told me with some consternation regarding the postcolonial sensitivities implied that Puducherry held an "Indian group who advocates for French nationality [...] – they would like Pondicherry to come back to France [...]. But it's a very small minority and it's totally crazy, so we don't even answer when we are asked that!"

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## **Captions**

Figure 1: Map of India, showing the location of the four small and far-flung districts that constitute the Union Territory of Puducherry (map courtesy of INTACH Pondicherry). Another French territory, Chandernagore, located in the nationalist hotspot of West Bengal, joined India directly in 1951 after a separate vote.

Figure 2: A European visitor admires the French Institute of Pondicherry (photo by the author).

Figure 3: Yet another city in India? The urban growth of Puducherry and the attendant modern construction and traffic are factors which prompt nostalgia for a calmer provincial past associated with the period of French rule. Here Nehru Street, one of the city's main commercial streets (photo by the author).

Figure 4 a and b: After its collapse in 2014, which caused considerable public consternation in Puducherry, the ruins of the *mairie* were reduced to their foundations. At first the site was left visible, later a fence blocking the view was erected, providing details about the government's intention to reconstruct the building (photos by the author).