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Performing Independence in Puducherry: Commemorative Public Holidays and Postcolonial Imaginaries in the Former French India

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ABSTRACT

When India gained independence in 1947, its Independence Day ceremonies became a prototype setting the standard for marking and ritualising imperial withdrawal and achievement of sovereignty in former colonies across the world. Since then, much has been written on the cultural, social and political significances of the annually recurrent celebration of the postcolonial world's many Independence Days. If India has featured prominently in theorising the significance of the ritualised celebration of Independence Day and related national holidays, then this has been from a particular vantage point: That of independence from British rule. Yet this historical perspective far from exhausts the relevant field of post/colonial relations and imaginaries on India and its independence. Through an ethnographic analysis of public holidays commemorating independence, this article argues that investigating the celebration of independence in the former French India, the Union Territory of Puducherry, provides a contrapuntal perspective which can serve to decentre and reframe perspectives on Indian postcolonial imaginaries and understandings of independence. While refracted through the lens of the powerful narratives and ritual practice which surround decolonisation from the British empire, such holidays also constitute symbolic sites where minor histories remain in dialogue and tension with the major narrative on Indian national history and identity.

KEYWORDS

Puducherry; Pondicherry; French India; independence day; commemoration; postcolonial imaginaries; ritual performance

When India achieved its independence from Great Britain in 1947, its Independence Day ceremonies soon became a model; the prototype which came to set the standard for marking and ritualising imperial withdrawal and the achievement of sovereignty in former colonies across the world.¹ Since then, much has been written on the cultural, social and political significances of the annually

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recurrent celebration of the postcolonial world's many Independence Days and celebrations of related national days. If such celebrations may at first glance appear to many as superficial 'state-sponsored flummery' and 'tinsel ephemera', a whole raft of theoretically and socially significant processes have also been shown to turn on them in the growing body of literature: The construction, legitimation and contestation of imagined communities and national identities; the relationship between the postcolonial state and the citizens; constructions of post/colonial imaginaries and representations, emotions and relations; relations between everyday practice, ritualised commemoration and symbols; and the roles of popular and political perceptions, aesthetics, practices and performance in understanding independence, to mention but a few.²

If India has already provided much food for thought in theorising the significance of the ritualised celebration of Independence Day and related national holidays, then this has also been from a particular vantage point: That of independence from British rule.³ Yet this historical perspective far from exhausts the relevant field of post/colonial relations and imaginaries on India and its independence. If the British Empire was the dominant colonial context, then other parts of India were, after all, subject to the colonial power of France and Portugal even after the decolonisation of British India in 1947, and saw integration into the former British India only from the fifties and sixties, respectively. This article argues that investigating the celebration of independence in the former French India, the Union Territory of Puducherry, provides a contrapuntal perspective which can serve to decentre and reframe perspectives on Indian postcolonial imaginaries and understandings of independence. In the spontaneous, if tongue-in-cheek boast of a local tourist guide who was showing a group of Indian tourists the city of Puducherry in 2017: 'We the patriotic citizens of Pondicherry celebrate our independence on (...) three days: August 15, the national Independence Day, August 16, (...) the Transfer of Power Day, and November 1, Liberation Day. We're really the *most* liberated state in India'. This remark points at questions of how to deal with multiple colonial powers in present postcolonial imaginaries, and simultaneously hints at issues of commemorating the relationships with those erstwhile colonial powers, conceptualising and performing independence and postcolonial relations, and integrating culturally and politically in an Indian Republic that is shaped by quite different historical experiences. It is the cultural and social processes and experiences which shape these issues, and the theoretical insights that may be drawn from those that concern me here.

In a recent book on *Unsettling Utopia: The Making and Unmaking of French India* (2021), Namakkal has made the point that historians, both academic and popular, have tended to want 'to understand decolonisation as a completed event that took place in very specific times and places, a narrative that has overlooked the impossible messiness of colonial rule'.⁴ This, she argues, leaves no space to consider how colonial infrastructures continue to define the Indian

state, nor to properly understand the complicated past (and present) relationships that many people throughout the subcontinent have toward developing an Indian nationality. As she points out:

Constructing strong nationalist narratives was an important project for creating post-colonial national unity (...). After Indian independence in 1947, historians of India largely took to writing the history of independence as a teleological becoming of the secular Indian nation-state, a drama that required the British as an imperial foil for liberation to be possible.⁵

Part of Namakkal's project is to use the critical space afforded by 'minor history' analytically; 'to understand French India as a formation that challenged and challenges the closed borders of nationalist history'.⁶ History writing is, of course, one way in which post/colonial narratives are constructed and can be deconstructed, but it is far from the only avenue through which the critical space afforded by 'minor history' can be brought to bear to shed light on the production and perceptions of both 'minor' and 'major' histories, identities and spaces. In a similar sense, but from a decidedly ethnographic perspective taking its point of departure in the present, I am interested in interrogating the commemorative celebration of 'independence' in Puducherry as a setting where the master narrative on Indian national identity is continually constructed, coproduced and challenged. What implications does it have, in Puducherry's case, that this happens from the position of having been subject to French rather than British colonial rule? How does it reflect or refract the larger national framework of commemorating independence and thus producing Indian national identity from the perspective of historical narratives and experiences rooted in British colonialism? What can this tell us about the nature of 'independence', Indian national identity, postcolonial relations and the role of colonial memory and commemorative practices in constructing and negotiating these?

This article builds on the premise that there are certain symbolic spaces and practices which present themselves as apt lenses of refraction for exploring post/colonial imaginaries, however off-centre they may at first appear from everyday concerns. To take an example, Buettner has made excellent analytical use of focusing on postcolonial approaches to colonial cemeteries in India, arguing:

They act as a barometer that signals how the ex-colonized and ex-colonizers alike not only approach the physical relics and spaces of empire but also reassess the colonial era more generally, imparting them with a diverse range of meanings specific to a historical moment. After all, what spatial settings offer more apt post-colonial vantage points from which to contemplate a dead Raj than colonizers' graveyards?⁷

In a similar vein, what better barometer for approaches to the development of postcolonial imaginaries, identities and relations than the celebration of independence from colonial powers?

This article investigates the contemporary postcolonial imaginaries surrounding independence in Puducherry by focusing on the questions of how independence is performed in the celebration of holidays related to independence in Puducherry, and why – including what sort of postcolonial relationships and identities come to the fore in this process. The research is based on ethnographic fieldwork which was carried out in Puducherry between July 2017 and January 2018, featuring participant observation of events including India's Independence Day from the British on the 15th of August, Puducherry's Transfer Day on the 16th of August (marking the *de jure* cession of the French territories to India), its Liberation Day on the 1st of November (marking the *de facto* transfer of power over the French territories to India), and India's Republic Day on the 26th of January. The observations were complemented by in-depth interviews on experiences of the celebration of these holidays and the wider understandings of independence and post/colonial relations with members of the local population as well as Puducherry's public administration, along with academics and organisations which have been involved in the official recognition and promotion of these holidays. To provide a diversity of popular perspectives, formal interviews as well as a multitude of more casual conversations with residents of Puducherry were conducted with interlocutors characterised by varied backgrounds in terms of factors impacting on their personal and historical experience with Puducherry's history of French rule and decolonisation. Interviewees thus included both people whose families had a long-standing history of residence in Puducherry, dating back to the period of French rule, and more recent immigrants, mostly from other parts of India which were formerly subject to British rule. In terms of national identity, I sought out Indian as well as French citizens (the latter category including both French nationals of Tamil ethnicity originating in Puducherry, and French metropolitan expats). Finally the interviews covered the perspectives both of younger respondents aged from their early twenties and up, whose only personal frame of experience is the postcolonial period, and some who were old enough to remember colonial rule and decolonisation personally, the oldest interviewee being 90 years old.⁸ A final source of perspectives on the performance and perception of independence in Puducherry is analysis of the coverage of official commemorative events in local news media, tourism promotion and official speeches. While targeted data collection for this research was carried out in a specific and limited period, the analysis is inevitably also informed by a much longer history of research engagement in Puducherry, which I have visited to do ethnographic research on its colonial heritage and postcolonial development along with other colonial legacies in the immediate region since 2007.⁹

In the following, I will first reflect more in depth on theoretical perspectives which inform my understanding of performing independence as well as the context of commemorating independence in India; and then present the

empirical context of the study through a brief introduction to postcolonial Puducherry and its history. Then follows an in-depth analysis, first of the politics of commemorating independence in Puducherry seen through the lens of the recognition of its official commemorative holidays; then of the postcolonial imaginaries and statements of independence implied in official and public discourse surrounding such holidays, and finally a discussion of the public impact of their celebration. Throughout I will explore the tensions between the contrapuntal references of these celebrations to British as well as French colonial experiences and postcolonial realities in Puducherry.

Performing Independence: The Theoretical Context

Independence brings together material processes, such as the construction and naturalisation of national landscapes, symbols and maps; and events, including the celebration of national days and the commemoration of national heroes, which fuse different spatial and historical scales, making it a central aspect of national metanarratives as well as the conditions of the consent of citizens as reproducers of such narratives.¹⁰ Out of these elements, national holidays such as Independence Day are ‘unstable signifiers’ which differ from more naturalised elements of what Billig has called ‘banal nationalism’, such as the omnipresent use of national symbols on currency and stamps, the recurrent maps in news and weather forecasts, or national flags in décor and advertising¹¹: While recurrent, they occur only once every year, and they are normally too intrusive in everyday life to pass unnoticed. At the same time, official explanations of their meaning often invite competing interpretations, making national days the object of symbolic struggle and capture.¹² Analysing the celebration of national holidays such as Independence Day can serve as a revealing lens of refraction for wider postcolonial imaginaries and relations, since ‘[i]ndependence (...) encompasses national symbols, meanings, collective memory and the everyday. It is a contestable and complex, emotionally laden idea (...) that can be mobilized in contradictory ways’.¹³ That also means that the observance of such state-sponsored rituals is riddled with contradictions, ambiguities and paradoxes which constitute fertile ground for analysis.¹⁴

Commemorations of independence and similar public national holidays are important because they serve as invented traditions or rituals for states to promote various agendas, including the naturalisation of certain imagined national communities and narratives and the legitimation of political power, and for citizens ‘not only to express and revise their historical understanding, but to assert their distinct social, cultural and political identities in public’.¹⁵ In this context it matters both theoretically and practically that making independence meaningful is a process of performativity. Different *forms* of performances, such as speeches, marches, public oaths of allegiance, and cultural performances such as dance routines are central to celebrations of national holidays such as

Independence Day. But more than this, the notion of performativity refers to a wider context of reiterative practice through which independence is brought into daily life through daily and annual rhythms such as national holidays, the use of national symbols, and the rhetoric of festive speeches.¹⁶ Not least, as Paasi has emphasised, “performative” necessarily means emergent and contingent’; but even so: ‘It is performance, generated in the moment of production, that allows people to believe that the national imaginary is real’.¹⁷

It does not necessarily follow that institutionalisation of a national holiday results in desired effects such as memory, civic education, identity construction, reverence or social action.¹⁸ Public holidays may at the outset aim to oppose the natural tendency to forget the past, and ‘[c]ollective memory, whose content holidays sustain, refers to the social distribution of beliefs, feelings, and moral judgments about the past’.¹⁹ Yet as Schwartz has emphasised, in actual practice some such national days turn out as ‘abortive holidays’ that refer to the past without inspiring any profound sense of meaning or engagement. Lofty purposes to the contrary, official holiday status may serve to orchestrate pleasure or historical amnesia, rather than forging identity and fostering virtues, as the practicing of such holidays may turn more on non-introspective leisure and commercialism, or may fail to inspire participation at all.²⁰ As Schwartz points out, ‘[h]olidays do not work, do not become “cultural performances” or “public events” (...) unless people somehow participate in them’.²¹

Understanding the Commemoration of Independence in India

The first ritualised celebrations of Independence from the British in India on the 15th of August 1947 have been thoroughly analysed, and shown to serve a range of both complementary and contradictory purposes. Not least of these was to present the case of India as the paradigm of successful decolonisation from the perspective of both India and Great Britain, and portraying a unity of purpose both within and between India and its departing colonial power, which depicted the transfer of power as uncontroversial and long-expected. This served toward downplaying any ensuing political crises or disagreements in both countries, while simultaneously portraying the event as a successful conclusion both to British colonial rule and to the Indian fight for independence.²² In their format, the Independence Day ceremonials drew not only on Indian cultural and ritual repertoires, such as the tradition of distributing sweets in public on auspicious dates, but also drew on a pre-existing British colonial tradition of using ceremonial occasions – such as imperial marches or the *durbars* which the British had themselves borrowed from Indian courtly gatherings – for the purpose of giving empire an apparent order, unity and purpose that it never acquired in real life.²³ Ironically the Indian state was thereby selectively perpetuating colonial traditions in the very act of celebrating decolonisation.

As an annually recurrent phenomenon rather than as original historical events, both Independence Day and its close cousin on the list of Indian public holidays, Republic Day, which commemorates the date on which India's constitution came into effect on the 26th of January 1950, have also been subject to theoretical reflections which both build and expand on the pioneering reflections of Owen and Masselos. In particular these analyses have focused on the role of such celebrations in 'nationalising the public' and 'seeing the state' as a legitimate and unifying agent which underpins India's vast cultural diversity; a topic on which Roy, a political scientist, has been a particularly prolific writer.²⁴ Roy has primarily focused on the perspective of state-directed nationalism in her work, as well as analysing how this perspective has been appropriated in commercial discourse; as she writes, her interest is in how 'the Indian nation is "stated"'; a project which she analyses in detail.²⁵ If she does point to the need for public participation and co-production in the resulting postcolonial imaginaries, she is less detailed on citizen perspectives, contestation and competing imaginaries, and more attuned to interrogating 'the project of forming an abstract public'.²⁶ Here, she points to the importance of highly scripted celebrations in the capital being replicated through the hosting of similar (though not identical) commemorations across the country in state and union territory capitals, district headquarters, towns and villages, as a centralised and staged opportunity to encounter and pledge allegiance to the state.²⁷ The great anniversaries of India's independence from the British, such as the 50 years anniversary in 1997, have also occasioned a spate of reflections on the implications of independence and its ritualised commemoration and celebration.²⁸ These contributions have turned on historicising the role which India's Independence Day celebrations have had in an international and national perspective, and on exploring the iconography of Independence Days and their dual meaning as beginnings of nascent states and endings to the imperial power.

In India itself, media attention and reflection are as much a part of the ritual celebration of these holidays as the official parades which are the *pièce de résistance* of the celebrations, as each year (but especially larger anniversaries) sees a spate of news features that discuss both the current celebrations and the history of India's independence and take stock of the achievements of the postcolonial nation.²⁹ The official celebration of these national holidays inevitably also results in media reports that show ongoing symbolic struggles and fissures in the Indian nation. For instance, a recurrent controversy revolves around the use of songs on national holidays: Given the histories of political tensions between Hindus and Muslims in India, much is made of the religiously motivated refusal of some Muslims to sing *Vande Mātaram* (Mother, I bow to thee), a national song which is historically associated with the independence movement, but which refers to India as a 'Mother Goddess' framed in Hinduism. Debates erupt recurrently in India's media surrounding official proposals that

the singing of the song be made mandatory at public institutions, and accusations being made that it signals a lack of patriotism to refuse to sing this song.³⁰ In much the same way the uses of other elements symbolising Indian national culture, from flags to official languages, recur in heated debates in the media.

Complementing such recurrent stories of overt tensions concerning the uses of highly charged national symbols, an equally recurrent feature in news reports from these public holidays is that citizens as well as officials have offended in treating the celebrations in a rather cavalier or mundane manner which indicates some disengagement with their lofty official purpose: e.g. that students who missed 'I-Day' celebrations on campus have been fined; that an officer had a case filed against him for insulting the national flag by speaking on his mobile phone as it was hoisted during the Independence Day programme; or that government officials have been reprimanded for failing to attend the Independence Day tea party hosted at the official residence of the Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry.³¹ Indeed, concerns about whether the Indians are 'patriotic enough', as well as questions of whether, how, and to which extent the state and its institutions should act to address this, occur almost as ritualistically in the Indian media as does the pageantry associated with celebrations of national holidays like Independence Day.³² Rushdie has made the claim that Indians 'have always been less susceptible to anniversary-itis than Westerners', and notes that in Delhi the Independence Day and Republic Day parades alike have been largely ignored by locals.³³ Rushdie's observation of how large numbers of an apparently unimpressed audience simply got up and walked away during Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's Independence Day speech in the 40-year-anniversary of 1987, however, speaks as much to the ritual role of such events and their contestation in connecting the postcolonial state and its citizens, as to any general sense of disengagement or disenchantment with 'anniversary-itis'.

A striking initial conclusion would seem to be that in India, Independence Day and related celebrations are at once of the utmost importance – and not particularly significant. Increasingly mundane approaches to ritualised commemorations of Independence in some quarters may, of course, also be a function of growing confidence in the very independence that is celebrated, as the independence of an increasingly mature nation may be taken more and more for granted by its citizenry. However, Independence Day and related celebrations are more than just the official parades and speeches, which some citizens may well disengage with: inescapably, they do connect with wider postcolonial imaginaries and relations, and even the increasingly rampant commercialisation of such events and their basic role as a day off mark some form of public participation in the production of a special meaning for that which is sought to be commemorated.³⁴ As Billig's concept of banal nationalism alerts us to, just because something may appear banal and submerged in mundane activities does not mean that it is not a very active force in shaping the perceptions of a nation.³⁵

Postcolonial Puducherry: A Brief Introduction

The Union Territory of Puducherry covers four geographically disparate enclaves which came into French possession from 1668 onwards, as France established trading settlements on the coasts of India to participate in the lucrative East India trade which attracted multiple European powers in the seventeenth century. The chief of these settlements, Puducherry (known as Pondichéry in French and Pondicherry in English) was established on the east coast of South India in 1673. The French soon grew to be the main rivals of the British in the contest for colonial power, and came very close to establishing empire in India in the mid-eighteenth century. As the British secured their domination following a series of conflicts, the French were allowed to remain as a marginal colonial power in India, with territories covering just 508 square miles of the vast subcontinent. It was the decolonisation of British India in 1947 which prompted the cession of the French territories. With Prime Minister Nehru's continued quest to unite India and relegate its remaining and more marginal colonial powers: France and Portugal, to history by any means necessary, France realised that retaining its Indian territories had become untenable. Though much invested in sentimental and symbolic notions of a 'Greater France', France had little direct economic or political interest in retaining 'French India', and preferred to depart with a degree of cultural influence and political goodwill intact, rather than risk being forced out through military intervention, as Portugal was in 1961. A *de facto* transfer of the French territories was slowly negotiated to take place on the 1st of November 1954; and based on their history of almost 300 years of French rule, these enclaves remained a political and administrative entity in the form of a union territory, rather than being merged with adjacent states formerly ruled by the British. The *de jure* ratification of the treaty of cession was only accomplished in 1962, when political obstacles caused by a French reluctance to set precedents amidst ongoing independence struggles in French Indochina and Algeria were cleared. Subsequent relations between France and India have remained amiable, and in spite of postcolonial social and cultural change in the territories, such as the decreasing importance of the French language, symbolic anti-French sentiments and policies have not featured significantly after independence.³⁶ It was only in 2006 that the name of the union territory officially reverted from the French-derived 'Pondicherry' to 'Puducherry', the precolonial Tamil name of its capital city; and Puducherry's French colonial heritage is heavily emphasised by its government as a unique selling point on both the domestic and international tourism market, with significant impact on its economy.³⁷

Both France and India have subsequently emphasised their negotiation of the process of decolonisation as a success story of political maturity and positive mutual relations, bringing to mind the similar narrative take on the

decolonisation of British India.³⁸ In terms of postcolonial relations, a key difference, however, remains. As Cannadine has emphasised, ‘the residual influence of the former colonial power’ soon dwindled after independence in the case of the former British India.³⁹ In Puducherry France has retained a notable continued presence, which was a direct outcome of the process of decolonisation. The treaty of cession ensured the continuation in Puducherry of a French educational institution, the *lycee* (a state-funded secondary school), as well as the creation of a new French research institution, the French Institute of Pondicherry, and a French consulate. Additionally, it allowed Puducherry’s population to choose freely between Indian and French citizenship at the point of the *de jure* cession, which led to around 2 per cent of the population opting to be French, in spite of the uncertainties for the future which this occasioned in the face of decolonisation.⁴⁰ Today, a minority of Puducherrians of Tamil ethnic origin, some living in Puducherry and some having migrated to France, are therefore legally French citizens.

With decolonisation being a comparatively recent historic event, both French rule and the achievement of independence remain in the living memory of a part of Puducherry’s population. However, the present population also includes large numbers of people who have migrated to Puducherry from other parts of India in the postcolonial period, and who bring with them different experiences and relations to the colonial past. Puducherry’s separate historical experiences notwithstanding, as an inevitable part of its postcolonial integration into the Republic of India, it celebrates India’s official public holidays, including Independence Day on the 15th of August. As with the celebration of Republic Day on the 26th of January, this is a major official holiday that occasions great state-sponsored public performances (at which also invited French dignitaries participate in Puducherry, to signal cordial postcolonial relations). On a smaller scale (since this is not to do with its centralised and heavily subsidised ritual integration into the rest of India), Puducherry has also instituted local public holidays and associated public performances to commemorate the achievement of its independence from France, in the guise of the ‘De Jure Transfer Day’ on the 16th of August, and ‘Liberation Day’ on the 1st of November.⁴¹ This makes for a complex situation, in which Puducherry has to straddle its integration into the former British India with its particular postcolonial imaginaries and commemorative practices concerning independence; the specific histories and related commemorative efforts of Puducherry itself; and along with this also ongoing postcolonial relations with France. The ritualised performances and politics of commemorating independence in Puducherry is thus a rich field for investigating postcolonial imaginaries.

Where Puducherry becomes particularly important for understanding social imaginaries surrounding independence in India is in the contrapuntal perspectives which it can provide as a former French colony now integrated into an India constituted and conceptualised against British colonial histories and

experiences. As Namakkal has argued with reference to theorising the inextricable relationship between major and minor history, '[t]here is no major without a minor, no belonging without exclusion (...): The minor (...) can be many things, but at root it must be part of the major, not [merely] marginal to it'.⁴² A useful way of approaching this theoretically is the notion of contrapuntalism. Edward Said has launched the concept of contrapuntal perspective as more than just comparison. Rather, the focus is on intertwined and overlapping histories: 'we must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its own particular agenda and pace of development, (...) its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting together'.⁴³ While this approach was formulated as a strategy for studying the history of imperialism as the cumulative result of discourses and practices produced on multiple, both hegemonic and marginal, counterpoints 'sounding together',⁴⁴ then equally it has a potential in understanding postcolonial imaginaries and practices surrounding independence, as it allows us to conceptualise postcolonial relations and imaginaries as both connected and fragmented.

The Politics of Commemorating Independence in Puducherry

Commemorating Puducherry's achievement of independence from France is, inescapably, a process embroiled in complex postcolonial politics. Ever since its integration into the Indian Republic, and indeed, as a conscious ritual means towards promoting this integration, Puducherry has celebrated India's Independence Day and Republic Day. The celebrations of official commemorative holidays associated with Puducherry's own independence is, however, largely a much more recent phenomenon, which turns on both internal politics in Puducherry, the union territory's relationship with the Government of India, and its relationship with France. While both the 1st of November 1954 (the date of de facto transfer of power from France to India) and the 16th of August 1962 (the date of the de jure transfer) were subject to celebrations when they occurred, these dates would subsequently, certainly for a good many years, appear to qualify as 'abortive holidays' that substantially failed to serve commemorative efforts. The date of the de facto transfer day lost any official symbolic significance after 1962 when the de jure transfer of power occurred, and was not recognised as a public holiday until developments in the new millennium, which will be discussed later, created a demand for this. When Puducherry's decolonisation was formally completed in 1962 the De Jure Transfer Day, as it remains officially known, was elevated to the status of an annually recurrent public holiday, conveniently placed back-to-back with Independence Day. However, Puducherry's De Jure Transfer Day saw little by way of the extensive annually recurrent commemorative practices, such as the parades and speeches that characterise Independence Day both in Puducherry and across the rest of

India. The legacy of independence and memorialisation of colonial experience that was promoted was, consequently, primarily that of India at large – against the experience of British imperialism. Accounts on Puducherry's De Jure Transfer Day will therefore variously claim that it has been celebrated since 1962 (as did e.g. *the Times of India* on August 17, 2014), and, as *the News Minute* had it on August 18, 2016, that 'the day has never been officially celebrated by the government' – commentary which, of course, depends on what one defines as properly celebrating an official holiday.⁴⁵

It is, however, not surprising that the observance of De Jure Transfer Day has been eclipsed by the celebration of Independence Day in practice. As Yechury has pointed out in an analysis of the political debate preceding Puducherry's decolonisation, '[a]bsorbing and silencing alternative colonial memories was a way of imposing a singular "idea of India"'.⁴⁶ Puducherry's integration into the Indian republic was the primary agenda of both the local and the central government following decolonisation,⁴⁷ in addition to which there were the sensitivities of the remaining French minority community and French institutions in the territory to consider when it came to the politics of commemorating the turning events in Puducherry's history. Conversely, how French institutions in Puducherry should relate to commemorating this legacy in the context of ongoing postcolonial relations has been a subtle balancing act between valuing Puducherry's French connections and acknowledging its independence and status as an unquestioned part of the Indian Republic. To date, some reluctance to strain postcolonial relations by making a grand spectacle out of commemorating Puducherry's independence from France continues to register. As a representative at Puducherry's French consulate explained in an interview:

It is politically a bit delicate. Of course, it is – we don't do anything, and we haven't been doing it for example after 50 years; 2012 could have been the year to commemorate together with the Indian people, but we didn't, and that has been strange between '54 and '62 here. (...) [T]he Indian flag is already there and the French were still in the place, and we should go but we were here and it lasted for so long. You know, maybe (...) '62 is not the good date, I don't know, but I think that if it has not been done there was the reason, that it is like Independence Day for the Indian. Of course, we are invited to the Independence Day, it's normal, but it was independence for all India, but [there's] also independence from France. So, who is to commemorate?

With two different historical dates as potential candidates of its own for 'Independence Days' the situation in Puducherry does, undeniably, get complicated above and beyond the question of who should commemorate the events, and how. In effect, the very nature of independence, and the question of when it is achieved, itself becomes a complicated question, which lies submerged beneath the management of postcolonial relations and questions of what and how to commemorate concerning the departure of France as a colonial power in India.

In this context it is worth analysing what the name of the 'De Jure Transfer Day' as a longstanding official holiday marking the decolonisation of French India communicates about postcolonial relations between Puducherry, India at large, and France. At the face of it, the terminology appears both factual and descriptive to the point of tedious technicality, with its emphasis on legal circumstances. It appears much less symbolically charged than a potentially more emotive term such as 'independence'. Certainly, in this way of framing the holiday there is very little of the powerful affective rhetoric from Nehru's famous narrative of a 'tryst with destiny' that hailed the achievement of independence from the British in 1947. This, however, far from means that the name of Puducherry's De Jure Transfer Day does not carry significant symbolic meaning. In an analysis of how British media reported on India's independence in 1947, Kaul has observed how the term 'transfer of power' was widely used to signal the event as peaceful, orderly, a source of pride and a sign of benign relations; even a fulfilment of the British colonial mission, noting e.g. as did *the Guardian*, that 'freedom by a voluntary transfer of power was unique in history'.⁴⁸ The term 'transfer' was, thus, used to emphasise independence as a peaceful and friendly transmission; and the choice of a similar terminology to designate the official holiday in Puducherry must be read in the same light. The name at once communicates benign postcolonial relations between India and France, and symbolically relegates Puducherry's integration into the Indian Republic to the status of a legal technicality; in effect a local appendage to a grander historical event of independence that had already occurred on the 15th of August 1947.

Although the 15th of August has consistently been the date that was subject to the ritualised commemorative events surrounding independence in Puducherry, featuring elements such as political speeches and parades, it would be wrong to say that the 16th of August has not also seen some form of celebration in recent decades. Since 1987, Puducherry has celebrated the annually recurrent 'Fete de Pondicherry', the festival of Puducherry, which is organised by the Government of Puducherry, and coincides with two official public holidays – Independence Day and De Jure Transfer Day. The festival features a programme of cultural pageantry centred on traditional music and dance practices from across India, and stages these in central public spaces across the territory's four constituent parts. It takes advantage of the fact that troupes of dance artists from multiple states across India will already be present in Puducherry for the celebration of the Independence Day parade, which takes place with financial support from the Government of India. Characteristically, where the arrangement of the Independence Day celebrations (as well as those for Republic Day) are the responsibility of the local Department of Information, which here as elsewhere across India handles the strict official protocol on these events, the Fete de Pondicherry is organised by Puducherry's Department of Art and Culture. Representatives at this department explained in an interview

that the event serves ‘mainly to attract tourists, and then our own people get to get a celebration’, whereas they emphasised that the celebrations surrounding Independence Day and Republic Day ‘belong to the nation, other things are festivals of Pondicherry’. The framing of the ‘Fete de Pondicherry’ is, therefore, festive, but far from being overtly commemorative of Puducherry’s decolonisation, even as the name itself signposts Puducherry’s French colonial past.

In 2014 the Government of Puducherry added a new public holiday to its calendar: It issued official notification that the 1st of November was henceforth to be celebrated as Puducherry’s ‘Liberation Day’. This government initiative was a response to agitation for the day to be recognised and celebrated as an official holiday. A small, but very vocal organisation called ‘French India Puducherry Pradesa Viduthalai Kaala Makkal Nala Narpani Iyakkam’ (‘French India Puducherry Territory Liberation People’s Welfare Movement’, hereafter FIPPVKMNNI), had been making demands to this effect. Created in 2004, the Golden Jubilee year of Puducherry’s de facto transfer to the Indian Republic, FIPPVKMNNI had since then been active in submitting petitions and staging recurrent public protests, its founding members going to the length of fasting and getting arrested on several occasions. The demands of FIPPVKMNNI included official recognition and celebration of the 1st of November as an official holiday, as well as more comprehensive commemorative celebrations of the existing public holiday that marks the de jure transfer on the 16th of August – but also the creation of special welfare pensions for the original residents of Puducherry who had opted to join the Indian Republic on its decolonisation rather than choose French citizenship.⁴⁹ Eventually the Government of Puducherry agreed to appoint a committee to deliberate on the issue of institutionalising an official holiday on the 1st of November. The committee, which was formed in December 2013, found in favour of the proposal, based on the historical importance of this date to Puducherry, framed in the context of the local historical experience and cultural identity. A member of the committee stated in an interview:

[To people from] Pondicherry – the most important day for them, as far as colonialism was concerned, is the Liberation Day. They were not much concerned by the 15th of August, nor by the 26th of January. For them what they have lived is the Liberation Day, that is to say, the departure of the French. (...) There was the merger, the problems related to the merger, and then after some time they felt more Pondicherrians than before and wanted their own day of liberty and they found that the 1st of November was ignored, practically, so they pressed the government to declare it as a holiday. (...) [N]othing happened after; the de jure transfer was only a formality. (...) [T]he Pondicherry population now, two thirds of it consist of persons who have migrated after the merger from the rest of India; they do not feel concerned. It is only the original population, and even then, there are very *few* who have witnessed the real transfer day; most of them have passed away. But their heirs are there. (...) [I]t is enough for making the government act that there are some prominent people who go and ask the Chief Minister. It does not cost much to the government to yield.⁵⁰

In declaring this public holiday, the Government of Puducherry showed that it acknowledged the specifics and importance of Puducherry's historical experience associated with French rule, but it also evaded any discussion of the more troublesome claims for pensions. Yet at the same time the event enabled FIPPVKMNNI to claim a symbolic victory that their voice had been heard; an immediate outcome that satisfied everyone concerned.

With the recommendation to institutionalise a holiday on the 1st of November came inevitable considerations on what to call it. The chair of the committee explained:

Some members [of the committee] wanted it to be called the Independence Day; [but] then it was found that it was not real independence because Pondicherry has not become an entirely free state [in law by then]; it has only got liberated from the French administration, that it was more appropriate to call it Liberation Day, or Merger Day. Finally it is [declared as] the Liberation Day because it is accepted by the government.

Unlike the legal terminology focused on *de jure* and *de facto* transfers of power, a term such as 'liberation' appears more tailored towards carrying immediate emotional appeal and signposting independence as a more spectacular and coveted achievement. At a first glance, the term 'liberation' may also appear to hint at a more antagonistic perspective on colonial relations, and, consequently, some remaining postcolonial tensions. In actual practice the term is, however, flexible enough to be used in a manner that is very consistent with the symbolic meaning of positive postcolonial relations that is carried in the name of the *De Jure Transfer Day*. Thus, for instance, when Liberation Day was declared a public holiday by the Government of Puducherry, *the Times of India* reported that this was the date on which 'The French government came forward to liberate the territory', thus leaving plenty of scope for the erstwhile colonial power to be portrayed in a benign light.⁵¹

FIPPVKMNNI had in fact demanded another name for the new public holiday. The general secretary of the organisation explained in an interview: 'We intend that November 1 is the Independence Day and August 16 is the Republic Day of Pondicherry. That has to be declared by the government. (...) We are not concerned about August 15th or January 26th, that all belongs to the Indian and British [relationship]'. Behind this demand for parallel names is clearly an intention of elevating Puducherry's local commemorative holidays and the history behind them to the same level of symbolic importance as the 15th of August and the 26th of January. Similarly, of course, the government's refusal to comply signifies that the two sets of holidays are qualitatively different in terms of the importance of what they commemorate. The same sentiment is reflected in FIPPVKMNNI's demand that the 16th of August and the 1st of November should be celebrated with a level of pomp and

circumstance to match Independence Day and Republic Day. The Government of Puducherry did in fact agree to make more of these celebrations, and thus *the Deccan Chronicle* could report that ‘Government decided to recognise November 1 as Liberation Day and organise celebrations on the lines of Independence Day and Republic Day’.⁵² While the Government of Puducherry has not organised celebrations on the same grand scale as these national holidays, from 2014 onwards it did in fact organise annual parades and speeches for Liberation Day, as well as institutionalising a smaller commemorative function with speeches and musical performances on the De Jure Transfer Day.⁵³ But the official recognition of public holidays is one thing, and their performance another: to which purposes and with which effects have these commemorative functions and the associated rhetoric and postcolonial imaginaries then been used? When I, as a European often assumed by default by Puducherrians to be from France, first attended the official commemoration of the De Jure Transfer Day in 2017, I did wonder in advance if I would feel any animosity from the attendants who – so I assumed – celebrated the departure of the French. I was stumped, instead, to be approached at the function by sympathetic members of FIPPVKMNNI who carried badges with the text ‘*liberté, égalité, fraternité*’, and declared to me that they wished the French had never left Puducherry!⁵⁴

It has been pointed out that Independence Day celebrations can mobilise public sentiment and feelings of national belonging not *in spite of*, but *because* they allow for competing visions both of the past and of present politics, while appealing to a better future.⁵⁵ The at the face of it somewhat contradictory commemorative policies which surround Puducherry’s three national days related to independence from colonial powers should similarly be seen in light of the fact that nations frequently commemorate precisely those historical moments and periods that are abstract and relatively vague, and thus sufficiently multivalent to accommodate different, even critical and competing interpretations.⁵⁶ Indeed, this continuing multivalence in Independence Days could be seen to be institutionalised already at the celebration of their first instance, at the very point of decolonisation: After all, Independence Days in the classic model that was created in India in 1947 not only combine the symbolic and ceremonial repertoires of both the newly independent countries and the departing colonial powers, but also served at once to triumphantly celebrate the sovereignty of the newly independent nation, and bolster the dignity and prestige of the departing colonial power, making events of decolonisation only hesitantly agreed to appear to be the inevitable outcome of longstanding policy.⁵⁷ In the case of Puducherry, the complex politics of commemorating independence which have been outlined above do pose some wider questions about what sorts of postcolonial imaginaries are involved in this process of commemoration, and it is to these that I turn in the following.

Stating Independence and Postcolonial Imaginaries – the Contrapuntal Position of Puducherry

While the ways in which they are practiced and debated can reflect an extraordinarily wide range of interests and imaginaries, the very existence of public holidays is a matter of government decisions, and correspondingly, their celebration reflects official state agendas. The public political speeches which are held in Puducherry on the occasions of Republic Day, Independence Day, De Jure Transfer Day and Liberation Day all address – and indeed, attempt to create – particular postcolonial imaginaries and perceptions of independence in Puducherry. How well they succeed in this is a question which, for the moment, I will leave aside, as I first turn to analysing the functions and discourses that are brought to bear in these official representations. But first some necessary background: As a union territory, Puducherry does not have the more extensive level of political independence that a state does vis-à-vis the Union Government of India. While, like a state, Puducherry does have its own legislative assembly and a cabinet of ministers, it also has a closer relationship with the union government, which is politically represented directly in Puducherry by a Lieutenant Governor who resides in the former palace of the Governor General of French India. Republic Day speeches are held by the Lieutenant Governor, whereas Independence Day speeches, and those related to Liberation Day and De Jure Transfer Day as Puducherry's more local commemorative holidays, are held by Puducherry's Chief Minister. Where Chief Ministers are elected locally and thus, unlike the Lieutenant Governors, generally have a Tamil cultural background and always perform their speeches in Tamil, which is a local official language in Puducherry, Republic Day speeches are performed in English, an official language of India at large.⁵⁸

The conventions for speeches on Republic Day and Independence Day are broadly speaking similar, and those expressed in Puducherry reflect what can be found elsewhere in India: A shorter formulaic framework of celebratory remarks that addresses the overtly commemorative purpose of each holiday serves to wrap up a lengthier contemporary political address that showcases the current objectives, challenges and achievements of the government, while drawing on a well-established rhetoric of independence and freedom struggle, transposed onto current political issues.⁵⁹ Masselos has noted that already by 1948, in the speeches of India's Prime Minister '[t]he British had ceased to have any relevance', whereas '[w]hat was relevant was what had happened to the new nation and how all its people could work towards making it better and more successful'.⁶⁰ A dominant and recurrent rhetoric, as identified also by Roy in her analysis of the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of India's independence, is that 'the process of becoming national [is] depicted in terms of a "struggle" (...) [in which] nationalist leaders like Gandhi, Nehru' and many others, as well as 'thousands of unknown, unsung and unwept

heroes (...) have sacrificed so that the “republican idea and framework could come into being”; for the sake of Independence’.⁶¹ Here, notably, although the freedom struggle before 1947 is recalled, the remembrance of past sacrifices for independence is called upon in order to inspire the citizens to repeat this act as part of a continued national struggle for development. The message is to respond to any ‘failures of the state to deliver the promised goods’ by bearing present challenges, such as economic hardships or political instability, with quiet fortitude and good faith.⁶² As Masselos also notes, a key legacy of the independence struggle for the national rhetoric is the embedded message of unity in the continued process of nation building.⁶³ If Great Britain as an erstwhile colonial power soon lost its political relevance following India’s independence in 1947,⁶⁴ the experience of British colonialism and the fight for independence from it has nonetheless served to rhetorically frame the notion of national unity which is expressed in the celebration of public holidays that commemorate achievement of independence. However, the question of how other colonial experiences and legacies are addressed and fit into this framework have hitherto been left unexplored in research; posing the question of how the postcolonial imaginaries in Puducherry fit into this larger national framework. In the following I will look at the contents and rhetoric of the official speeches given on Independence Day, De Jure Transfer Day, Liberation Day and Republic Day in Puducherry to investigate this issue.

A key difference that becomes readily apparent across the official speeches given on the four public holidays that are, broadly speaking, associated with independence in Puducherry is that if Great Britain has lost its political relevance in the former British India, the same is not the case for France and the French colonial legacy in postcolonial Puducherry. Recurrent statements point out that Puducherry has a booming tourism economy based, to a considerable extent, on the architectural and cultural heritage from the period of French rule; that the culture developed during this period constitutes a special identity in Puducherry which now contributes to the cultural diversity of India; and that the Government of Puducherry engages in regular collaboration with France on a range of public projects, such as infrastructure and Smart City development. There are sound practical reasons for these references. French heritage has become a unique selling point in Puducherry’s growing tourism, which has developed into one of the key drivers of its economy, catering to a large domestic as well as international market.⁶⁵ More than this, Puducherry’s continued existence as a separate political and administrative entity is predicated on the French colonial legacy, which prompts associated identity politics to underpin it. Indeed, when the Union Government of India proposed in the late 1970s that the union territory of Puducherry should be dissolved and the geographically disparate territories that constitute it should be merged with their linguistically and ethnically similar neighbouring states, strong local protests erupted and militated against this, and since then Puducherry’s French

history and associated cultural legacies have provided a renewed political currency as the *raison d'être* for the union territory.⁶⁶ A tangible legacy of postcolonial relations with France is also present in Puducherry in the guise of several local French institutions and a floating minority population of French citizens (primarily of Tamil ethnic origin); and that a territory of Puducherry's (in an Indian context) fairly small size has a French consulate is predicated entirely on the French colonial history: No other foreign countries have diplomatic representation here, as they all naturally gravitate towards larger cities in adjacent states. Indian as well as French interviewees observed to me time and again, that while they did not see much of a colonial legacy in the current relationship between France and India at large, there was certainly a prominent legacy in Puducherry itself. All of these circumstances act against the French legacy losing its continued relevance in postcolonial Puducherry, and cause it to crop up in speeches that commemorate independence in Puducherry: Thus, while it may appear ironical at the outset, especially compared with the situation in the former British India, commemorating the end of French rule in Puducherry is indelibly associated with restating the enduring postcolonial legacy of the French colonial period; especially so in the speeches made by Puducherry's Chief Ministers, who speak from more of a local perspective compared to its Lieutenant Governors. But how are these particular post/colonial relations then inscribed in the overarching national master narrative about Indian unity and implicitly British colonial experience that constitute the genre of such political speeches? As I will show in the following this is a contrapuntal case characterised by mirroring discourses as well as striking rhetorical clashes, and a delicate balancing act in the portrayal of colonial legacies and independence.

The political speeches made across the multiple holidays in Puducherry that commemorate independence do carefully inscribe themselves both in the same rhetorical conventions and historical narrative frameworks as those made in the rest of India on Independence Day. An excerpt from Chief Minister N. Rangaswamy's speech on the occasion of Puducherry's Liberation Day in 2014 can serve to illustrate the narratives that are put forward:

This is the day when the dreams of countless freedom fighters came true. It was on this day in the year 1954 that the French territories (...) regained their independence.⁶⁷ The Indian tricolour was hoisted for the first time atop the Governor's Palace. We are celebrating here today, with all our enthusiasm, to mark that occasion. (...) We have gained this independence due to the sacrifices made by countless freedom fighters. It is our duty to remember their sacrifices and offer our respects to them. Bound by our sense of unity and the feeling that we all are Indians, we celebrate the country's Independence Day, the day India gained its independence from British rule. Even though the rest of India gained its independence in the year 1947, we continued to remain under French rule. French India had gained its independence due to the protests by our freedom fighters and with the help of the Indian government. Our fight for independence has its own unique story. Many

groups of people, including students, farmers, lawyers, workers and political leaders fought against French rule in Puducherry. (...) National leaders like Mahatma Gandhi [and] Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru (...) guided the protesters in their fight against the French Government, and extended timely help, directly and indirectly.⁶⁸

The narrative that this speech, and others like it, propagates, is one intended to underpin a postcolonial imaginary according to which it was natural for Puducherry to join the historical process already under way in the rest of India of demanding, and achieving, independence from colonial powers, as well as joining the newly independent Indian Republic following 1947, and identifying with the same aspirations and founding fathers of the nation that the rest of the country celebrates. Nonetheless, the debate and negotiation of Puducherry's decolonisation occurred in an unusual triadic configuration: not just between a colony and a colonial power, but between a colony, 'a subservient colonial power and a post-colonial nation-state', the outcome of which, at the time, there would have been nothing certain or natural about.⁶⁹ Out of a past process of decolonisation which at the time in Puducherry was characterised by uncertainties, doubts and conflicting loyalties, is thus projected unity and inevitability. While Puducherry's separate historical experience, and hence, its difference from the rest of India, is highlighted in political speeches, this difference is ultimately folded into a master narrative of a larger pattern of national unity, perpetuating a discursive pattern which Yechury has already identified from India's discourse concerning the decolonisation of Puducherry.

Emotionally charged terms referring to 'sacrifice', 'fight' and 'struggle' for the sake of independence recur in the commemorative speeches made in Puducherry, very consonant with how the achievement of independence from the British have been codified in India: Puducherry is, in effect, closely mirroring the rhetoric of a well-established national master narrative. Nonetheless the very same speeches are also apt to emphasise narratives on colonialism which immediately serve to defuse some of the apparent antagonism towards the erstwhile colonial power. As expressed, for instance, in the speech by Chief Minister V. Narayanaswamy on Puducherry's De Jure Transfer Day in 2017:

There are strong connections between the French Government and the Indian Government, especially in Puducherry. In the fields of education and training, and for the development of Puducherry (...) the French government continues to assist (...) even to this day. We must remember it on this occasion. We didn't have the oppressive British rule environment here in Puducherry.⁷⁰

Even if the end of French rule in Puducherry is commemorated and independence is celebrated, and that on several occasions throughout the year, the French colonial legacy is thus, somewhat paradoxically, embraced enthusiastically on the very same occasions, in a way that one would certainly not see for British colonial legacies, prompting a lingering sentiment that while the fight

for freedom should be saluted, the French colonial rule wasn't that bad after all. In Puducherry France, as a marginal colonial power in India, thus gets to enjoy a privileged contrapuntal postcolonial legacy where it is imagined quintessentially as the better counterpart to the British, the imperial power against which India at large has constructed its overarching narrative as an independent, post-colonial nation. France is even, to a certain degree, enjoying the repute of a 'good colonial power', to the varying (but surprisingly pervasive) extent that people in Puducherry are prepared to entertain such a conception.⁷¹

Quite apart from being a political concession to pressure from some highly vocal elements of the public in Puducherry, the recent official recognition and celebrations of Liberation Day and De Jure Transfer Day as public commemorative holidays paradoxically appears tailored to perform the function of emphasising the French historical and cultural identity of Puducherry, as much as its political independence from France and its unity with the rest of India. Indeed, I did observe a tendency that the political speeches on these two days were more explicit in historicising the events which they were commemorating, compared to Independence Day and Republic Day. No doubt this is also because historical awareness of the former amongst the greater public, even in Puducherry itself, with its large proportion of immigrants, cannot be taken for granted in the way that awareness concerning the historical background of the latter can. There is certainly also a symbolic commemorative element to be observed here in the celebration of Liberation Day as a public holiday being institutionalised on the 60th anniversary of Puducherry's de facto transfer day. The event was commemorated through a public holiday at the cusp of passing from living memory; but why now, after all these years, if not for reasons that are internal to postcolonial politics in Puducherry and India rather than pertaining to colonial or postcolonial relationships with France?

'Independence' appears as a surprisingly multivalent concept in the way that the term is applied in the political speeches in Puducherry. A clear example of how much the ritualised commemorations of Puducherry's historical achievement of independence address internal postcolonial Indian politics, rather than colonial history, can be found in the speeches of N. Rangaswamy, who was Puducherry's Chief Minister in 2011–16. One of his political objectives, stated in more than one speech during both Independence Day and Liberation Day celebrations, was that of achieving statehood for Puducherry, which would grant its local government greater powers vis-à-vis the Union Government of India.⁷² As his Liberation Day speech in 2015 argued, after its initial formulaic framing in celebrations of Indian unity and independence from colonial powers:

Although Puducherry has been liberated, the fact remains that we are still not completely free. We are forced to seek the approval of the central government for each and

every thing, since we are a union territory. We shall be truly independent only when we attain statehood.⁷³

The rituals that are ostensibly commemorating independence from British and French colonial powers alike thus tie in with the construction of postcolonial imaginaries in which ‘independence’ is a highly unstable signifier and one that appears as a moving target in the postcolonial context, rather than a state already comfortably achieved and subject to annual ritual confirmation.

Adding to the complications of these political debates are the arguments of FIPPVKMNNI, who use discussions on the same commemorative holidays to challenge both the Union Government of India and the Government of Puducherry from below. FIPPVKMNNI expresses disgruntlement because they feel that forces external to Puducherry play too large a role in shaping current political developments, not least in terms of welfare provisions as compared to the attractive old age pensions that Puducherry’s French citizens are entitled to, and they insist on cultural, legal and pecuniary recognition of the special identity of the original Puducherrians. In interviews members of FIPPVKMNNI make the complicated claims, at once, of being patriots: ‘we don’t want to leave India – we love India; this is our mother’, of representing Puducherry’s ‘true freedom fighters’, and insisting that if dual French-Indian citizenship (something which the Indian constitution prohibits) cannot be offered *post factum* to all those original citizens of Puducherry who demonstrated their patriotism by opting to be Indian in 1962, then ‘we are of the opinion that French rule is better’! Commemorating Puducherry’s independence with a point of departure in this agenda frames its local commemorative holidays in a way which is massively different from Independence Day on the 15th of August: It seeks proximity to, rather than distance from, the erstwhile colonial power, and rather than emphasising unity it insists on the continued historical and cultural specificity of Puducherry vis-à-vis the rest of India. As one of the members of FIPPVKMNNI claimed: ‘By celebrating November 1 and August 16, we are (...) reviving the French-Indian ties’.⁷⁴

How much do these complicated debates, rhetorics and imaginaries related to the commemoration of independence register with the wider public of Puducherry, though? Amongst the members of the expert committee that deliberated on declaring Liberation Day an official holiday there was a general sentiment that the day did reflect histories of continued importance to at least the segment of the population that had associations with the territory prior to its decolonisation. Nonetheless, when asked if he attended the annual celebration of the holiday that is arranged by the Government of Puducherry, or indeed those on, for instance, Independence Day, one committee member was quite dismissive:

The Pondicherry government celebrates; some people go and attend, but otherwise actually it is not taken very seriously. (...) There will be some march, (...) people

will go and then they will garland the [political] leaders (...). The common people, for them actually it is one more day. One more *holiday* of course! (...) I don't go, because politicians will come and blabber – why should I go? (...) Of course they will refer about the independence and regard of that day, and then they will (...) *use* that occasion for talking about their achievements of the government, 'this is what we have done – and [what the] central government is preventing us from doing'.

Tellingly, when I interviewed one of Puducherry's residents, a British immigrant living in Puducherry with his French metropolitan expat wife, and asked him why he thought that the 1st of November had recently been declared a public holiday after so many years without commemoration, he replied: 'There's a reason for that. What was the reason for that? There's a reason, I can't remember what it was. (...) Honestly – I mean, for me it was the 16th [of August]. It's a bit connected, it's all political. I've got no idea'. When asked in a follow-up interview, the young tourist guide, born and bred in Puducherry, whom I cited in the introduction for his tongue-in-cheek claim that with its three annual celebrations of independence from colonial powers, Puducherry is 'really the most liberated state in India' focused not on patriotism or postcolonial imaginaries, but on practicalities, with his rhetorical question: 'Now, if you had the option to choose between one day's holiday and three days, what would you choose?' As statements such as these show, the political discussions and rhetoric regarding postcolonial imaginaries and relations in the context of independence do not necessarily register very prominently, and may fail to appear as particularly important to matters of everyday life amongst much of Puducherry's citizenry. But that still leaves the question of how Puducherry's multitude of public holidays celebrating independence work in social and cultural practice, and with which effects – and it is to this issue that I turn in the following.

Performing Independence in Puducherry

If India's Independence Day is formally a one-day event in the calendar of national holidays, a brief but noticeable interruption in the proceedings of everyday affairs, then it is also something more: an extended performance or a season of sorts, which in terms of its impact on various forms of social practice and public discourse extends over several weeks every year. Well ahead of the actual official celebration on the 15th of August, schools and other institutions will commence practice for the march-past which is to take place at the stadium with as close an approximation of military precision as possible, with the best marchers being awarded much sought-after prizes. Passing through the streets of Puducherry in the vicinity of its many educational institutions one will thus encounter uniformed students being drilled in marching by their teachers for weeks ahead of the actual event. Correspondingly, the closer the official date gets, the more the news will gradually swell with the annually recurring

notices of how e.g. the police is getting ready to handle security and traffic challenges associated with the celebrations, or how various contingents of the police and armed forces practice for the parade. Last, but not least, the inevitable torrent of holiday offers and commercials will increasingly fill the media, marrying the discourse and celebration of independence with the most assorted commercial messages, promoting everything from mobile phones to toilet seats and Independence Day dance parties, all advertisements dressed up in the saffron, white and green national colours of India: 'This Independence Day, get freedom from old home appliances and revamp with new ones', etc.⁷⁵ One does not need to go to Puducherry's Indira Gandhi Stadium to attend the annual parade and political speeches for Independence Day in order to participate in the celebrations; indeed, they are hard to escape even if you wanted to. Independence Day is ubiquitous in the urban landscape: On the day shops put out flags and balloons in the national colours and hand out sweets to customers, cafes provide free paper flag pins that one can put on the shirt, tourism advertisements reference the celebrations as the very thing to see in the city just now, food vendors throng the streets to cater to the holiday crowds, enterprising children attempt to sell home-made drawings of the Indian flag to passers-by at extortionate prices, and Puducherry's entire city centre with all its public buildings, monuments and its central park is ablaze with festive lighting that puts any Tivoli to shame and draws appreciative crowds busying themselves with taking selfies. If you missed the Chief Minister's speech at the stadium in the early morning, loudspeakers are mounted on Puducherry's popular seaside promenade to broadcast it throughout the day to anyone who cares to listen, although precious few seem to pay attention.

The political staging of the celebration in the stadium is ensured some level of public participation because the families of e.g. those children from the city's schools who march will attend, and many public servants are obliged to attend in a representative capacity. From observation, nonetheless, the stadium never does fill to capacity and significantly higher interest is dedicated to those elements of the celebration that feature the march-past of police, armed forces, educational institutions (all cheered by relatives and colleagues) and the cultural pageant of dance troupes from across India which ritually underpins the message of unity in diversity and the legitimacy of the Union Government as the force which holds this diversity together.⁷⁶ Many participants at the stadium may well chat amongst themselves or whisk out their mobile phones for alternative entertainment during the speeches that briefly historicise the event and extensively showcase current political claims, but even allowing for this relative lack of engagement and for the annual, themselves almost ritual critical discussions in news media on whether the historicity and importance of the event is understood by the citizenry, and whether Indians are 'patriotic enough', the event works as far as ensuring substantial public participation is

concerned: The city is abuzz with people who attend its wider display of celebratory activities, and complete strangers can be seen to address each other in public with wishes of ‘Happy Independence Day!’ For Republic Day, in spite of some minor differences in the ritualisation of the day, such as who provides the official speech, much of the same scenery repeats itself, on the same magnitude.

The term ‘routine’ frequently occurred in the way that Puducherry’s residents talked about these celebrations. This was often by way of comment on what the speakers felt to be an absence of nationalistic fervour and decreasing sentiments of engagement in the historical importance of these dates; but as Billig’s work on nationalism alerts us to, just because something appears to be part of a banal routine does not mean that it does not work: to the contrary, its very taken-for-grantedness may have profound social effects.⁷⁷ One middle aged tourism professional working in Puducherry explained his sentiments on Independence Day as one of ‘going through the motions’ of flag hoisting, eating sweets, school parades etc:

To be honest (...) the [celebratory] agenda remains the same for a long, long time, but the quality (...) changed. Earlier I think most of the locals used to participate, but now it is thinning down. (...) Maybe it is routine, like nothing *new* is happening. (...) Maybe [people at the age of] 80+ (...) had a glimpse of pre-independence and the [achievement of] Indian independence (...) [but] after 20–30 years I think there will *hardly* be any people who can share [this] (...). I think that slowly those things will be fading away, except in the movies or documentaries, or some clippings [in the news] will remind us, but I think people have (...) started forgetting our independence. They forgot the pains the freedom fighters *went through* to have this nation freed.

The *celebration* of Independence Day itself, however, remains taken for granted (as indeed does the fact of Indian independence) even if its historical importance may be partly obscured to some. As an elderly local doctor commented, ‘*It is just a routine*, Independence Day, like another festival, Diwali or anything’ – but the very fact that no one would forego the celebration of the Hindu festival of lights referred to here also speaks to the continued cultural efficacy of the Independence Day celebrations as an official holiday that does what it is intended to: Namely to underpin the ritual integration of Puducherry into the rest of India through extensive public participation.

What then of the celebration of Puducherry’s locally distinctive ‘Independence Days’: De Jure Transfer Day and Liberation Day? To begin with the former, the annual celebration of the cultural festival *Fete de Pondicherry*, which overlaps with both De Jure Transfer Day and Independence Day in effect merges the two holidays into one, as far as any substantial public participation is concerned. Not only that: While alluding in name to Puducherry’s historic and cultural ‘Frenchness’, the *Fete de Pondicherry* in effect extends the intended ritual impact of Independence Day. The festival takes place in central locations across Puducherry’s disparate territories, and features a



Figure 1. National unity in diversity on display as dance troupes from different Indian states, present in Puducherry for the Independence Day parade, line up on Puducherry's promenade in front of a monument to Mahatma Gandhi to commence fete de Pondicherry. Photo by the author, 2017.

continuing cultural programme of distinctive traditional dance troupes from states across India – the very same groups that participate in the Independence Day parade to signal India's naturalised national image of unity in diversity (Figure 1).⁷⁸ In the city of Puducherry the very well-attended programme takes place on a central square, *Gandhi Thidal*, where references to the founding fathers of the Republic of India, set first and foremost in the historical context of British colonial experience, are an inescapable frame: the stage for the performances is set in front of a statue of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and behind the audience on the square, across Puducherry's seaside promenade, looms what Puducherry's Department of Tourism claims to be Asia's largest statue of Mahatma Gandhi.⁷⁹ The setting itself and the cultural programme, with its emphasis on Pan-Indian unity in diversity carries strong symbolic connotations, easy to follow even for those who might ostensibly just have come to enjoy a well-executed dance programme. 'Katakali – from Kerala' one elderly man standing next to me in the crowd explained, beaming with pride and satisfaction at the dance that was being performed on stage as we chatted: 'this is Indian culture!' he continued, speaking into, and thus confirming a well-established Indian national narrative.

By contrast, the overtly commemorative celebration of the De Jure Transfer Day has very little public participation, which could lead to it being considered an abortive holiday, as far as its impact on Puducherry's public in terms of recollecting the achievement of independence from the French rule is concerned. Since 2014, an annual formal event featuring a political speech and a



Figure 2. The official commemoration of Puducherry's Transfer Day in the village of Kizhoor is a small-scale event. Here the audience awaits the commencement of the programme. Photo by the author, 2017.

brief musical programme is held on De Jure Transfer Day in Puducherry's furthest rural commune, in the village of Kizhoor, which was where the members of Puducherry's Representative Assembly and Municipal Councils voted in favour of joining India in 1954.⁸⁰ The historical and symbolic importance of the place notwithstanding, its remoteness from the city of Puducherry effectively precludes substantial public participation: indeed, it was chosen for that very quality as a site to conduct the referendum, because the issue was contentious and generated considerable anxiety in Puducherry at the time. While advertisements with invitations from Puducherry's Government for the public to join the event are printed in local newspapers, in the same way as they are for Independence Day, Liberation Day and Republic Day, participation in the De Jure Transfer Day commemorative event numbers in the hundreds at most, and primarily includes curious villagers from Kizhoor, and members of FIPPVKMNNI who remain eager to press their agenda (Figure 2). Unlike the Independence Day speech, the De Jure Transfer Day speech is not broadcast on Puducherry's promenade, and the event is thus very easy for the city's residents to miss altogether. In effect, this holiday has retained its legacy of unclear commemorative functions and dedicated celebration, as it sits uncomfortably between being accorded some level of governmental and public attention as a commemorative event, and being ignored for most practical purposes. No doubt the ambiguity of having two local 'Independence Days', and the prospect of, as it were, competing with India's Independence Day for public attention for the De Jure Transfer Day, further complicates the question of how and where to make a commemorative effort, for with its many 'Independence Days'



Figure 3. Puducherry's Liberation Day celebrations in many respects emulate the format (if not the scale) of India's grander Independence Day celebrations. Here the Chief Minister of Puducherry and other dignitaries preside over a cultural performance which is part of the programme. Photo by the author, 2017.

Puducherry is unusually steeped in ritualisation of their importance, and in determining which postcolonial imaginaries they speak into.

The celebration of Liberation Day that is arranged by Puducherry's government presents somewhat like a miniature version of Independence Day (Figure 3). The parade takes place on Puducherry's seaside promenade and the elements, if not the scale, of the celebration remain similar: Flag hoisting, playing of the national anthem, a speech by the Chief Minister, a march-past with uniformed representatives from police, armed forces and school children, and cultural entertainment in the form of music and dance troupes, albeit more locally oriented and not at the wide scale of national representativity aimed for in the display of unity in diversity presented on Independence Day. While it is not accorded the same level of rigorous security checks as Independence Day and Republic Day (events of national importance which across the country are subject to high security as potential targets of terrorism), the event is dignified by international attention, as Puducherry's French consul will be among the guests of honour. Much like on Independence Day, Puducherry's public buildings and monuments will be subject to festive illumination in the evening, but the holiday crowd which partakes in this is smaller. In part there are local postcolonial sensitivities to consider in the reception of this

holiday. The metropolitan French with whom I discussed the celebrations generally seemed unperturbed by them, but one French pensioner of Tamil ethnicity explained to me that whereas he had no reservations about celebrating Independence Day or Republic Day – as he emphasised by way of common values, France itself has a Republic Day, Bastille Day – the French originating in Puducherry did not necessarily feel altogether comfortable with Puducherry's two holidays commemorating independence from France. As he framed it, 'French people do not celebrate these two dates, they didn't want it, the 16th of August and 1st of November. It's not a French feast day'. Conversely, when informed that I had travelled to India to do research on the celebration of Liberation Day, many other Puducherrians registered surprise that I had not come all this way to investigate something 'important'. This official holiday and its celebration is new, and not as well embedded in public expectations and habitus as celebrations of Independence Day and Republic Day, which registers in how Puducherrians approach it. Most local people appear willing to give the celebrations a look if they come by, but they do not go out of their way to participate. As several people suggested, it was but yet another holiday. Whether Liberation Day will emerge in the future as something more substantial than a watered-down local equivalent of Independence Day remains to be seen, although it appears doubtful, given that the Government of Puducherry not only has fewer resources to allocate for such celebrations than does the Union Government, but also a continued need to balance the simultaneous orchestration of its integration into the Republic of India with its claims on the distinctive colonial past that it owes its continued existence.

Conclusion

In her quest to recognise a wider range of social imaginaries and forces which have shaped the struggles surrounding India's decolonisation, and thus challenge the simplified, yet both academically and more widely popular view on history which has it that 'the modern Indian state is a postcolonial state founded on an ethos of anticolonial nationalism', Namakkal notes that:

Widely remembered and celebrated historical events often serve a political purpose that is in the service of whoever is doing the remembering; memorialisation is a powerful tool in the maintenance of nations and states.⁸¹

This critical statement is certainly correct as far as it goes; notably it holds true for a highly influential tradition of nationalist history writing on India. Equally, however, a readjustment of the analytical lens to interrogating the politics and practice of recognising and celebrating historical events as public holidays provides a privileged perspective onto alternative memories and imaginaries, and not only onto the dominant narratives of the nation state. The question of 'whoever is doing the remembering', what they remember and what they

forget or chose to ignore, and how, is central to understanding those identities and imaginaries of the Indian nation and its constituent parts – here Puducherry – that are produced through the celebration of commemorative holidays surrounding independence. This realisation turns on some of the critical functions which officially celebrated public holidays such as Independence Day have been shown to play in a rich body of theoretical literature which highlights their role in not just the nation state's dissemination of particular politically motivated historical narratives, but also in the wider public construction of post/colonial imaginaries, including the production, legitimation and contestation of national identities and imagined communities as well as the relationship between the postcolonial state and the citizens.⁸²

In the case of Puducherry, a contrapuntal analysis allows for conceptualising the post/colonial imaginaries and relations that emerge in constructions of Indian national identity with a point of departure in British as well as French colonial experience as at once intimately connected and fragmented. The experience of French rule and decolonisation in Puducherry was certainly distinctive; yet following its integration into the Republic of India, commemorations of independence in Puducherry inevitably get refracted through the lens of the powerful established narratives and ritual practice which surround decolonisation from the British empire and the associated master narrative on Indian national identity which this fed into. Nevertheless a critical investigation of Puducherry's many 'Independence Days' also shows their recognition and celebration as symbolic sites where 'minor histories' remain in tension and dialogue with, and even in some measure disrupt the major narrative on Indian national history and identity.

While, as Yechury argues, the Indian nationalist perspective in debates on Puducherry's decolonisation and erstwhile integration into the Republic of India was part of a process of nation-building in which alternative colonial memories were sought to be silenced and absorbed as a way of imposing a singular 'idea of India' over dissident voices and alternative imaginaries, it is evident that those alternative colonial memories and imaginaries have far from been suppressed.⁸³ Rather, they continue to be an active force that makes its imprint on both politics, ritual commemorative practices and local identities, even as the *de facto* integration of Puducherry into the Republic of India is now nearing its 70-year anniversary. The central concept of Indian 'unity in diversity', which underpins the nation state and very much comes to the fore in celebrations of both Independence Day and Republic Day, did eventually make what appears to be an almost universally accepted imprint on postcolonial social imaginaries in Puducherry. Nevertheless the existence of more hybrid identities arising from a distinctive colonial experience also break with the established nationalist framework for imagining postcolonial India. Postcolonial Puducherry still proudly makes claims on its French colonial heritage, even in the very holidays that commemorate its independence,

and though the idea is anathema from the point of perspective of the very constitution of India, which prohibits dual citizenship, there are still residents with Indian nationality originating in the former French Puducherry who regret that after the decolonisation of Puducherry they have Indian, rather than French citizenship, and ask questions such as: why should it not be possible to be both Indian *and* French? Although this is a minority perspective, and one which finds absolutely no traction with the governments of either France, India or Puducherry, there are even those who, as one member of FIPPVKMNNI, go as far as to state that ‘we are ready to invite French rule here, as it was done before’. As the same person elaborated:

After the French (...) left here, (...) we felt that we have lost a very good culture and very good government. If at all we know the actual facts during that period (...) we will *not* have given our option to go with the Indian government, we will definitely be with the French government. But now it is too late. (...) [T]he view is being seriously viewed by the local government [who think] that we are against India and Indian nationality and against the Indian constitution. (...) The French Consulate (...) have not treated us in good way, not even replied. (...) We don't know why they are hesitating to take us again.

Identity, social memory and postcolonial relations thus continue to be complex issues in Puducherry, and conceptions of what Puducherry's independence entails remain subject to (more or less successful) negotiations. In terms of such social imaginaries, as well as in terms of the strong and generally positively received postcolonial diplomatic and cultural presence of France in Puducherry, the decolonisation of Puducherry presents itself as both a less final historic event than the notion of ‘independence’ at first appears to signify, and as something significantly different from being merely an appendage to the national master narrative based on the history of India's achievement of independence from the British.

The politically heated and annually repeated discussions in the media for each of India's Independence and Republic Days on whether Indians are ‘patriotic enough’ and whether they understand the significance and value of independence turn on not just the state-sponsored practice of ritualised commemoration, but also on repeated criticisms that the public is forgetting important history. With India having recently celebrated the 75th anniversary of independence from the British, lived memories of British colonial rule and the achievement of independence are most definitely receding, and with the UK having played a limited practical role in the postcolonial development of the Republic of India, it is perhaps less than surprising that the Indian public may increasingly take that independence for granted in favour of directing their attention onto more current issues. Still, as a public ritual of integration, Independence Days and Republic Days do work: If far from everyone actively seeks out the more explicitly commemorative and narrative elements of these commemorations such as the political speeches and flag hoistings on such

public holidays, then certainly as a pervasive cultural practice that permeates public spaces and even private homes across the nation in a myriad ways, some as banal yet ubiquitous as the annual torrents of celebratory 'I Day' commercials clad in national colours, ensures that the message of Indian unity in diversity is repeatedly brought home to the public. 'We love India' stated even the member of FIPPVKMNNI who professed a wish to have the French government back – and indeed the association wanted the local public holidays which they clamoured for having recognised to be made in the very image of India's Independence Day.

Given the continued postcolonial presence of France in Puducherry, France as a former colonial power is not likely to lose its local practical relevance in the way that Great Britain did in India. Still, that does not mean that memories and identities associated with the history of French rule are immutable. If the fears associated with 'not properly remembering independence' in the former British India are those of forgetting the meaning of the hard won independence, the local fears in Puducherry are the reverse: That memories of the distinctiveness arising out of the history of French colonial rule should be diluted due to the passage of time after the integration into the Republic of India. That pressure to ensure official recognition and celebration of Puducherry's two local 'Independence Days'; De Jure Transfer Day and Liberation Day, has been applied by local activists at the cusp of the experience of French rule passing from living memory, with Liberation Day becoming institutionalised as a public holiday on the 60th anniversary of the original *de facto* transfer, is thus significant. It undoubtedly reflects an attempt both to elevate the local historical identities and experiences arising out of French colonial rule to something resembling the same level of importance as those associated with British rule in India, and to fix those histories and identities more permanently on an official political and commemorative agenda, and by extension, in public memory. Perhaps the 60-year anniversary of an event with some remaining postcolonial sensitivity represents a functional historical balancing point between addressing local fears that crucial historic memories and identities in Puducherry are at risk of being lost in a sea of Indian unity, and fears on the part of the Indian government that too much focus on local historical distinctiveness anywhere in India may invite fragmentation of the sought-after unity of the Republic of India. The complete set of 'Independence Days' practices in Puducherry are, in this sense, attempts at an ongoing public negotiation of historical forgetting and commemoration, cultural as well as political unity and fragmentation, connectedness and distance, which draw together Puducherry and the Republic of India as well as France – with Great Britain as an overarching 'colonial other' and frame of historic reference.

While much of Puducherry's population, in their often fairly relaxed approach to its many holidays commemorating independence appear to regard official celebrations of independence (be it from Great Britain or from

France) as displays of what Cannadine has satirised as ‘state-sponsored flummery’, it is nonetheless clear that these holidays do play a role in the construction and negotiation of distinct postcolonial imaginaries. Puducherry’s contrapuntal position in imagining independence vis-à-vis the larger Republic of India and its predominantly British colonial experience clearly emerges as a driving force in these negotiations. Compelled, at once, to demonstrate its unity with the rest of India and its distinct cultural and political identity predicated on a history of French colonialism, Puducherry is steeped in a series of ritualised events which posit ‘independence’ as a trope that can signify a range of different things, and which is appropriated strategically by actors at multiple levels to negotiate postcolonial relationships from a contemporary and decidedly postcolonial perspective.

If India’s independence (implicitly and by default: *from the British*) appears entirely taken for granted by its citizenry, and is ritually confirmed as such on Independence Day each year, Puducherry’s particular position also showcases ‘independence’ as much more than a comfortable and unquestionable fact – indeed, as something much more like a process, which is both incomplete and contested. The rhetoric and ritual displays of Puducherry’s independence *from France* have India’s independence from Great Britain, with its firmly established associated discourse and historical experience as an inescapable frame of reference that confirms its integration into a larger, naturalised national narrative; nonetheless in this very process of mirroring, cracks in the image simultaneously emerge. Puducherry’s continued claim to a distinct ‘French’ cultural and historical identity appears permissible because the French are posited in explicit opposition to the British as a not only marginal, but also less oppressive, even benign, colonial power. By comparison, Narendra Modi, who has been India’s Prime Minister since 2014, has referred to the British rule as ‘several centuries of slavery’, and most recently his speech on the occasion of India’s 75th Independence Day in 2022 poses British empire as India’s great (indeed only) colonial ‘other’ with his statement that ‘the country emerged from the shackles of the treacherous British rule’.⁸⁴

Puducherry’s particular process of decolonisation, with the continued cultural and political relations with France that have been its enduring legacy, is itself a circumstance that militates against depicting French colonialism in Puducherry in harsh terms, as continued postcolonial relations and sensitivities remain at stake in the portrayal of its decolonisation. Thus, France eventually *did* achieve a modicum of the postcolonial soft power that it aimed for, when the independence of British India forced a decolonisation of French India. Indeed, French colonial rule has even emerged as a figure that, depending on the perspective of the speaker, can be called upon in political arguments about the extent to which the state – in the guise of both the Government of India and that of Puducherry, is perceived to deliver, or fail to deliver, ‘the promised goods’ of independence and postcolonial development. From a

Chief Minister rhetorically questioning Puducherry's 'real independence' on Liberation Day to self-proclaimed 'true freedom fighters' going as far as to wish the French back, the question of what 'independence' means reflects as much back on ways of imagining, and engaging critically with, the postcolonial state of India and Puducherry's position in it, as on the former colonial power.

Are the celebrations of Puducherry's many 'independence days' then truly 'important' – or not that much, as some of those interlocutors who had no particular political agenda to press in the matter suggested? They certainly place themselves in a wider field of the ritual orchestration of memory and, gradually, forgetting of India's independence and attendant constructions of national narratives and identities, in which public participation in general remains much discussed and fought over. If the celebration of Independence Days and 'anniversary-itis' does not strike everyone as important to the public in an Indian context, it nonetheless remains a hot topic. In Puducherry, the cultural programmes and general festivities associated with Independence Day as well as Republic Day do provide the ritualised centripetal pull of events which inspire public sentiments of belonging to India, which are efficient, and hence important, in their very taken-for-grantedness. Conversely, Puducherry's more local celebrations of independence from France, their more limited levels of public participation notwithstanding, are important in the political sense of acting as loci of contestation on postcolonial development and identities that turn on Puducherry's French past. Depending on the perspective, the celebration of all these holidays might thus appear both 'important' and 'not very much so'. Indeed, as Paasi has also observed, 'independence' is a notion that can be seen to bridge the hot/banal divide in nationalism, effectively merging them in discourse and practice, as it 'combines these nationalism forms (in politics, culture and media) in routinized and latent but also at times very salient ways'.⁸⁵

If public holidays commemorating independence remain both fought over and taken for granted or even ignored in India, then surely this hinges on the state of the very postcolonial imaginaries which they are intended to promote and express. In this sense, the celebration of independence from colonial powers does serve as a useful barometer for the state and continuing development of postcolonial imaginaries, identities and relations. Importantly, these have associations with both major and minor histories within India which have a continued relevance and need to be teased out analytically. The issues arising out of experiences with French colonialism are but one instance. If the case of celebrating independence in the former French Puducherry provides a distinctive perspective and historical experience, then surely alternative memories, narratives and identities are also at stake in other places with an alternative colonial history across India, such as the formerly Portuguese Goa, and former princely states such as Hyderabad, not to mention still hotly contested territories such as Jammu and Kashmir. Even within the context of those parts of India which emerged out of a historical

experience of British colonialism important structural legacies of colonialism which are worth interrogating further remain in the ways in which the Indian nation and its independence is imagined – such as the histories of communalist tensions between Hindus and Muslims, which continue to impact strongly on both Indian national politics and show up in recriminations for lack of ‘patriotism’ directed at Muslims who do not sing *Vande Mātaram* to celebrate Independence Day. If we look to these various sites of minor histories and contestation through the analytical lens of the continued practice of independence day celebrations, more complex and challenging imaginaries on post/colonial India and independence might emerge; less teleological and final in their readings of national history and identity, but therefore also more reflective of the diversity of India’s lived postcolonial realities.

Notes

1. Cannadine, “Introduction”.
2. Cannadine, “Introduction,” 651. Other research includes Masselos, “The Magic Touch of Being Free”; Owen, “More Than a Transfer of Power”; Kong and Yeo, “National Day parades in Singapore”; Rushdie, “India at Five-O”; Roy, “Nation and Institution”; Khan, “The Ending of an Empire”; Williams et al., “The Midnight Hour”; Pype, “The drama(s) of Independence Day”; Willems, “Zimbabwe Will Never be a Colony Again”; Becker and Lentz, “The Politics and Aesthetics of Commemoration”; Gibbs, “Uhuru na Kenyatta”; and Paasi, “Dancing on the Graves”.
3. E.g. Masselos, “The Magic Touch of Being Free”; Owen, “More Than a Transfer of Power”; Rushdie, “India at Five-O”; Roy, “Nation and Institution,” “Seeing a State,” and “Marching in Time”; Cannadine, “Introduction”; and Khan, “The Ending of an Empire”.
4. Namakkal, *Unsettling Utopia*, 5.
5. *Ibid.*, 19.
6. *Ibid.*, 22, 20.
7. Buettner, “Cemeteries, Public Memory and Raj Nostalgia,” 7.
8. For ease of their subsequent use in English-language publications, the vast majority of interviews for the project were conducted directly in English, which following Puducherry’s integration into the Republic of India after decolonisation is one of the official languages used here alongside Tamil and the increasingly less frequently spoken French. English is widely spoken and understood locally, especially in the capital city which has several English medium educational institutions, a substantial tourism industry, and a population that is to a considerable extent composed of more recent immigrants from other parts of India, in many of which other languages than Tamil are used, but where English is also – as in all of India – an official language. In the postcolonial period English has thus achieved a role as *lingua franca* in Puducherry which far exceeds the significance that French ever had here. A few interviewees who felt more comfortable expressing themselves in Tamil were supported in the interviews by peers of their own choosing who were conversant in English, and the recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed and professionally translated.
9. E.g. Jørgensen, *Whose History?*, “Challenges in Preserving and Presenting Colonial French Heritage”; “Between Marginality and Universality”; “Postcolonial Perspectives

- on Colonial Heritage Tourism”; “A Post/Colonial *Lieu de mémoire* in India”; “Positioning Colonial Nostalgia for French India in Puducherry”; and “Puducherry as Palimpsest”.
10. Paasi, “Dancing on the Graves,” 22.
 11. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.
 12. Becker and Lentz, “The Politics and Aesthetics of Commemoration,” 3.
 13. Paasi, “Dancing on the Graves,” 22.
 14. Cannadine, “Introduction,” 257.
 15. Travers, “Remembering and (Mostly) Forgetting,” 290.
 16. Paasi, “Dancing on the Graves,” 27.
 17. *Ibid.*, 5.
 18. Dennis, *Red, White and Blue Letter Days*.
 19. Schwartz, “Collective Memory and Abortive Commemoration,” 76.
 20. Dennis, *Red, White and Blue Letter Days*, 258.
 21. Schwartz, “Collective Memory and Abortive Commemoration,” 102.
 22. Masselos, “‘The Magic Touch of Being Free’”; Owen, “‘More Than a Transfer of Power’”; Cannadine, “Introduction”.
 23. Owen, “‘More Than a Transfer of Power’,” 425.
 24. Roy, “Nation and Institution”; “Seeing a State”; “Marching in Time”.
 25. Roy, “Nation and Institution,” 265.
 26. Roy, “Seeing a state,” 202.
 27. Roy, “Marching in Time,” 72.
 28. Rushdie, “India at Five-O”; Roy, “Nation and Institution”; Williams et al., “‘The Midnight Hour’”; Cannadine, “Introduction”; Kaul, “‘At the Stroke of the Midnight Hour’”; and Khan, “The Ending of an Empire”.
 29. Masselos, “‘The Magic Touch of Being Free’,” 48; Roy, “Seeing a State,” 215–16.
 30. E.g. “Do Not Sing National Song on I-Day: Cleric Asks Madrasas to Defy Yogi Government Order.” *Hindustan Times*, August 13, 2017. Accessed January 22, 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/cleric-dumps-yogi-govt-s-order-asks-madrasas-to-not-sing-national-song-on-independence-day/story-XPnYGyT55NC5TIPBHPsIPN.html>.
 31. “Students Who Missed I – Day Celebrations Fined.” *The Hindu*, August 20, 2017, 3; “Case Filed Against Medical Officer for Insulting Nat’l Flag.” *The Times of India*, August 18, 2017, 1; “Bedi Pulls Up Officers Who Skipped I-Day Celebrations.” *The Times of India*, August 17, 2017, 2.
 32. E.g. “Mandatory Patriotism.” *Deccan Chronicle*, July 27, 2017. Accessed January 22, 2020. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/opinion/dc-comment/270717/mandatory-patriotism.html>.
 33. Rushdie, “India at Five-O,” n.p.
 34. Roy, “Seeing a State”.
 35. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.
 36. Jørgensen, “Between Marginality and Universality”.
 37. *Ibid.*, I use the present official name, Puducherry, throughout. However, both the official Tamil and the Europeanised names of the capital city remain in popular use amongst residents as well as visitors, as it is reflected in some of the quotes in this article.
 38. E.g. Cannadine, “Introduction”.
 39. *Ibid.*, 657.
 40. Miles, *Imperial Burdens*.
 41. To add to the bewildering number of national holidays relating to Puducherry’s colonial history and independence, Puducherry’s French population continues to

- celebrate the French national day, Bastille Day (14th of July) with official participation from Puducherry's government; I will not discuss that here, but see Jørgensen, "A Post/colonial Lieu de mémoire in India".
42. Namakkal, *Unsettling Utopia*, 23.
 43. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 36.
 44. O'Callaghan, "Contrapuntal Urbanisms," 1930–31.
 45. "Puducherry Celebrates Second Independence Day." *The Times of India*, August 17, 2014. Accessed June 3, 2020. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/puducherry/Puducherry-celebrates-second-Independence-Day/articleshow/40321018.cms>; P. Mathew. "Liberated from France 55 Years Ago, Puducherry Celebrates 'De Jure Day' for the First Time Ever." *The News Minute*, August 18, 2016. Accessed June 3, 2020. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/liberated-france-55-years-ago-puducherry-celebrates-de-jure-day-first-time-ever-48445>.
 46. Yechury "Imagining India," 1165.
 47. Annousamy, *L'intermède français en Inde*.
 48. Quoted in Kaul, "'At the Stroke of the Midnight Hour,'" 680.
 49. Ilango, ND. For further analysis of the demands and sentiments of the association, see also Jørgensen, "Positioning Colonial Nostalgia for French India in Puducherry".
 50. Here as elsewhere, I use italics in citations from interviews to stress where the speakers themselves put particular emphasis on a word by way of their intonation.
 51. "Puducherry Celebrates Second Independence Day." *The Times of India*, August 17, 2014.
 52. "Puducherry and Its 'Independence Days'." *Deccan Chronicle*, August 16, 2018. Accessed January 22, 2020. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/160818/puducherry-and-its-independence-days.html>.
 53. A symbolic inequality in the supposed significance of these events appears evident from their organisational setup: The celebrations are organised by Puducherry's Department of Art and Culture, and are hence relegated to a more generic 'cultural' domain, whereas the Department of Information, as explained on its webpage, is conventionally the body that is charged with tasks of national importance in public relations, such as "[o]rganizing solemn occasions like the Independence day, Republic Day and Swearing in ceremonies" (Accessed December 2, 2020. <https://itestweb.in/pty1/information-publicity>).
 54. Expressions of colonial nostalgia and their role in the production of postcolonial imaginaries and discourses amongst differently positioned members of Puducherry's populace is the subject of a separate article; see Jørgensen, "Positioning Colonial Nostalgia for French India in Puducherry".
 55. Becker and Lentz, "The Politics and Aesthetics of Commemoration," 4.
 56. Ibid.
 57. Masselos, "'The Magic Touch of Being Free'"; Owen, "'More Than a Transfer of Power'"; Cannadine, "Introduction".
 58. The political speeches for Republic Day, Independence Day and Liberation Day were published on the website of Puducherry's Department of Information (then at <https://info.puducherry.gov.in/speeches.htm>), from which, during my fieldwork in 2017–18 I downloaded all of the speeches which I found available from 2014 onwards. Those speeches are currently not available online after more recent changes on the department's webpage. Speeches for the De Jure Transfer Day are not published in writing, but I did an audiorecording of the speech in 2017. I used a professional translation agency to translate speeches made in Tamil for analysis.
 59. Masselos, "'The Magic Touch of Being Free'"; Roy, "Nation and Institution".

60. Masselos, “The Magic Touch of Being Free,” 47.
61. Roy, “Nation and Institution,” 260.
62. Ibid.
63. Masselos, “The Magic Touch of Being Free,” 50–51.
64. Cf. Masselos, “The Magic Touch of Being Free”; Cannadine, “Introduction”.
65. Jørgensen, “Between Marginality and Universality”
66. Annasamy, *L’intermède français en Inde*.
67. Notwithstanding the formal name of Liberation Day and the discussion on terminology among the members of the government committee that deliberated on the institutionalisation of this public holiday, the Tamil terms for ‘liberation’ (*viduthalai*) and ‘independence’ (*sundadiram*) – which are very close in terms of their meanings and both refer to freedom from colonial rule – are normally used fairly interchangeably on these occasions as well as in daily parlance, both by politicians and in the general public. Ironically, in view of the English language as itself a British colonial legacy that is now applied in a former French colony, the discussion on what to call the holiday appears to turn more on what to name the day in English (an official language of all of India) than what to call it in Tamil (an official local language in Puducherry and in the adjacent state of Tamil Nadu).
68. Rangaswamy, [Speech on the Occasion of Puducherry Liberation Day, 1 November 2014], 1–2 (translated into English by Avitra translation agency).
69. Yechury, “Imagining India,” 1150; see also Arpi, *Pondicherry: The Last Months*; Neogy, *Decolonisation of French India*.
70. Narayanaswamy, 2017 (translated into English from audiorecording by Avitra translation agency).
71. See also Jørgensen, “Positioning Colonial Nostalgia for French India in Puducherry”; “Challenges in Preserving and Presenting Colonial French Heritage”; and “Between Marginality and Universality”.
72. The same policy was later, thus far without success, pursued by his successor from the opposition, Chief Minister V. Narayanasamy: A formal request for statehood from Puducherry’s Legislative Assembly has been rejected by the Union Government of India, e.g. on 24 July 2019 *The Indian Express* reported “Puducherry’s statehood demand rejected again”.
73. Rangaswamy, [Puducherry Liberation Day Speech, 1 November 2015], 14 (translated into English by Avitra translation agency).
74. France does not prohibit dual citizenship, but it has been keen to avoid further claims on French citizenship in Puducherry after 1962, if nothing else then as an administrative and financial problem. The French consulate in Puducherry studiously avoids all engagement with FIPPVKMNNI and its claims, which they perceive to be fundamentally at odds with the requirements for respectful postcolonial relations between France and India.
75. The cited sample is a Girias Advertisement printed in *the Deccan Chronicle* on Independence Day, 2017. Republic Day is subject to a similar commercialisation, whereas, tellingly for the lesser or more contested symbolic weight of these dates, there is no such thing as a ‘Liberation Day’ or ‘De Jure Transfer Day’ commercial advertisement, even locally in Puducherry.
76. Cf. Roy, “Nation and Institution”; “Seeing a state”; “Marching in Time”.
77. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.
78. Roy, “Marching in Time”.
79. See Accessed December 2, 2020. <http://www.pondyrtourism.in/iconics-innerpage.php?id=49&district=Puducherry&category=196>. This might have been correct

when the statue was erected in 1965; however, larger ones have been erected at India's Parliament in Delhi (1993) and in Patna (2013). Nonetheless the statement still illustrates a demonstrative claim to patriotism by the Government of Puducherry.

80. Yechury, "Imagining India," 1161–65.
81. Namakkal, *Unsettling Utopia*, 5, 21.
82. E.g. Cannadine, "Introduction," 651; Masselos, "'The Magic Touch of Being Free'"; Owen, "'More Than a Transfer of Power'"; Kong and Yeo, "National Day Parades in Singapore"; Rushdie, "India at Five-O"; Roy, "Nation and Institution"; Khan, "The Ending of an Empire"; Williams et al., "'The Midnight Hour'"; Pype, "The Drama(s) of Independence Day"; Willems, "'Zimbabwe Will Never be a Colony Again'"; Becker and Lentz, "The Politics and Aesthetics of Commemoration"; Gibbs, "Uhuru na Kenyatta"; and Paasi, "Dancing on the Graves".
83. Yechury, "Imagining India," 1165.
84. The (unpaginated) English language translation from Hindi provided here is from the Times of India, and is available on <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/full-text-of-pm-modis-independence-day-speech-2022-article-93572730> (Accessed February 16, 2023).
85. Paasi, "Dancing on the Graves," 22.

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