People for Pondicherry Heritage, a civilian initiative, breathes life into the city’s past. PARSHATHY J. NATH listens as members discuss its future
It sounded like an explosion. The people of Puducherry wondered what hit their city on that beautiful rainy afternoon of November 29, 2014. Children covered their ears and grown-ups left their lunch midway to peep out of windows.

The 146-year-old *The Mairie*, built by the French, had collapsed. Walls buckled in and the roof came crashing down. It didn’t take the Government much time to raze the structure to the ground, thus wiping off the final vestiges of the history of that space. However this collapse triggered another response as well. A group of heritage lovers quickly formed a collective called People for Pondicherry Heritage (PPH) in a bid to ensure this never happened again.

At Gratitude Heritage, an iconic old building with vibrant yellow walls, the PPH core team recalls the day *The Mairie* fell. “There was a lot of sentimental value to that building. It was iconic,” says Yoo-mi Lee. The campaign, which demanded preservation of historical structures in the city, also mooted the idea of a Pondicherry Heritage Festival to bring people from all walks — culture, history, craft, music, dance and arts — on one platform. The festival, now preparing for its third edition, is an effort of PPH, Pondy Citizen’s Action Network (PondyCAN) and INTACH Pondicherry.

A Change.org petition and a Facebook post triggered the initial meet-up, says Sunaina Mandeen, co-founder of PondyCAN. “When I walked into Gratitude, where the first meet was held, there were about 35 people there. I didn’t even know many of them. The idea to start a collective sprung up, and we decided to call ourselves the People for Pondicherry Heritage, because that’s what we work for.”

On December 7, around 3,000 people gathered at the beach for a candle-lit tribute to *The Mairie*. “They came with flowers. People wrote their feelings and comments on a banner on a wall. The building meant much to all of us,” says Mandeen.

PPH ran a second event in the same month, where everyone with a heritage property was asked to light a lamp in front of their houses. Soon came the suggestion to start a heritage festival. The inaugural edition was held in February 2015. Gandhi Thidal, an open ground at the beach, became the
Therukoothu dancers, musicians from Svaram in Auroville, and local craftsmen gathered here; actress Revathi also turned up. Heritage centres such as Cluny Embroidery Centre and the Aurobindo Ashram Library became a centre for Odissi dance, and a discussion on the spiritual heritage of the city.

For some, the festival was personal. Natesa Iyer, another member, presented his father’s love-filled poem for Puducherry. “A few days before the inauguration of the festival, he passed away,” he recalls. The poems of Subramania Bharati and strains of Svaram musicians filled the air.

PPH has not limited itself to just the urban spaces in Puducherry, but has also spread to bio-regions defined by their natural heritage value. The highlight of this year’s festival is a tour to the village of Bahour, a 30-minute drive from the city. Visitors will explore its historical connection to the Chola kingdom and architecture on the concluding day. They will also get a glimpse of village life and spend stime by the scenic Bahour lake.

PPH is a volunteer-driven movement, supported by like-minded heritage buffs from all fields. Each contributes their bit, sometimes as cash or as accommodation for artistes or a meal. “We do not raise any money or have sponsorship. If we run out of cash, we chip in ourselves,” says Mandeen. INTACH Delhi and the Government of Puducherry have been supporting them financially. The idea is to celebrate the city’s heritage, says Mandeen. “If you destroy that heritage, you kill it for the next generation. At the end of the day, we are stewards.”

Programmes spring up in the last moment through suggestions and discussions. And, the schedule changes till the end of the day, laughs Yoo-mi. “It is flexible. We do not have firm schedules.” Bitasta Samantaray, another member, compares PPH to a baby. “It is a movement that evolves according to the shapes we choose.” PPH’s doors are open to anyone who shares the passion. This is the challenge of a volunteer-driven movement, says Mandeen. “I do not believe in structures. This is the modern way of doing things; deciding through consensus. And, we are great optimists. If one venue does not work out, there
will be an alternative.”

(Pondicherry Heritage Festival is on till February 26. The schedule of the festival, is available at pondicherryheritagefestival.org)

Three heritage spaces reimagined

Calve College

I Repurposed as a school for children

I A space for music concerts and theatre

I Courtyard as a relaxation space
Old Distillery

- A public sanctuary
- A creative space to inspire visitors.
- A Human Unity Park, working as a window to world culture

Old Port area (150 acres)

- A cultural convention centre.
- Sailing possibilities.
- Turn the old pier into a diving centre.
The Mairie: Where it all began

Built in 1870-71, it was a symbol of French colonial power.

It housed the Mayor of Puducherry, Municipal Council and the Registry

Former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru gave a speech here.

Bahour

It is the rice bowl of Puducherry.

The main tourist attraction is the Mulanatha Swamy Temple, an Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) site.

The lake is home to several migratory birds.

The water tanks, built by the Cholas, serve as lifelines for many farmers and urban residents.

The ground water level has depleted over the years, thanks to water-intensive industries.
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