

In Search of Lost Fort in Puducherry

P. Ravitchandirane

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Tagore Government Arts and Science College, Puducherry, India;
perravi0805@gmail.com

Abstract

The fort and the fortified walled town that had never been seen before on the Indian East coast was in Puducherry during the early phase of French rule. Francois Martin had planned the town Pondichery and strengthened its defences. He constructed a great star-shaped fort called Fort St. Louis named after Louis XIV, after the plan of Vauban for the Tournai fort, was viewed as far stronger and all the way more secure and hoped that no one can destroy it. On August 25, 1706, the fort was inaugurated and then in 1745, the whole town was encircled with a fortified wall and moat. Between 1761 and 1770 the whole French town, fort and the fortified walls were razed down by the British army. Now the remains of the unconquered fort and town walls are not found anywhere in modern Puducherry. Jean Deloche made a major study to trace the early French Puducherry using records and maps. In January 2018, a team of History students from Tagore Government Arts and Science College under the direction of the author unearthed a part of the architecture of the lost fort in the heart of modern Puducherry town. This paper brings out a comprehensive summary of the archaeological fieldwork in search of French fort and fortified wall which encircled early Puducherry.

Keywords: Augsburg, Aye, Berenike, Coote, Fort Barlong, François Martin, Jean Deloche, Labernadie, Lally, Law De Lauriston, Megalithic, Podouke, Quseir Al-Qadim, Ryswick, Tournai, Vauban

1. Introduction : The Historical Background

Two major glories in Puducherry¹ history are; an ancient seaport² and a highly defended star-shaped French fort at the east coast in the town which was encircled with rampart walls, moat and hedges. Today the ancient seaport and late medieval French fort are not present. However, the ancient seaport was found at Arikamedu³, a ruined mound located four km south of modern Puducherry whereas the late medieval French fort remains only in records.

1.1 The Geological Setting before the Creation of Puducherry Town

Though the early human habitation of Puducherry region is however traced from the pre and protohistoric

times even before the advent of Europeans, the presently located Puducherry town has no human habitation and is filled with high Sand Dunes, Lagoons and Ponds. From the mouth of the river Ariyankuppam to the north, behind the dunes, there was a belt of grassy slopes and swampy lowlands where the water from the cliffs seems to form miniature canyon in the Red soil hills in the marshy land. The rainwater from the red hills gets stagnated in the valley between red hills and dunes (Figure 1). This stagnated water flow as a stream (Uppanaar) along the dune and mound along the north-south and merges with the delta of River Gingee's northern outlet called river Ariyankuppam.

The Gingee River, named as Varaganathi near Tiruvakkarai in the west of Puducherry, is called as *Sangaraparni* near Villenour in the middle of Pondicherry and the two outlets are named as River Ariyankuppam in



Figure 1. Drawing shows the view of Puducherry town region before the arrival of European companies. View from Bay of Bengal against west. (Drawing by Ravitchandirane P).

the north and River Chunnabar in the south. Geo-physical setting in Puducherry made the ancient settlement dated to 3rd century BCE, at the south and west of present town Puducherry.

1.2 The Early Settlements before the French Town Puducherry

The protohistoric age megalithic people in 500 BCE, settled at the red soil hills, located at the north and west of Puducherry region, did cattle rearing and food gathering near the forest in the west of Puducherry⁴. In 300 BCE, the Iron Age megalithic group made their habitation at the east bank (Arikamedu) of the river Ariyankuppam, had trade with nearby hamlets, eastern coast and other parts of South India⁵. They were good at stonework like bead making, metal works and textiles. Settlement on the river outlet as well as the beach made it easy to transport their commodities to other centres and import the raw materials for their stone and glass beads which had very high demand among megalithic people. Indian Eastern coast trade led them to make contact with long maritime trade with Hellenistic–Roman trade.

The maritime trade with the western world developed Arikamedu as an Industrial seaport city. The commodities from Arikamedu were exported to the Roman realm through the Red seaports such as Berenike and Quseir al-Qadim⁶. Many Iron age rural habitation like Kodathur along the river banks of Gingee river (also called river Sangaraparani) and Kotaimedu on Pamabi river bank (an

outlet of river south Pennar) in the Puducherry region became the sub towns of Arikamedu⁷.

After the fall of Roman trade in 600 CE, Arikamedu started to lose its economy very slowly and it became a small hamlet in 1200 CE. During the medieval age, new urban habitations were established in the fertile regions at west and southwest of the present Puducherry town. Many early Iron Age habitations in the north and North-West existed as medieval age rural habitations.

During the medieval age, the new semi-urban centres like Bahur and Tribhuvani were becoming educational and agricultural centres of Chola's political hub and a new coastal town Manapattu⁸, located south, developed its trade relation with Islamic countries and China. In 1300 CE, the weakness of Pandyas, the succeeding power of Chola, opened the doors for Sultans invasions which were soon subdued by newly grown Vijayanagar. The tragedy of Talaikota battle in 1565 made Puducherry pass over to the hands of Gingee/Tanjore Nayaks and later to Nawabs.

However, the present Puducherry town region is with dunes, logons, ponds and tanks along the coast and marshy lands at the west. Perhaps there are some human presence passing over this coastal and dunes logons for trade or to reach other villages/hamlets nearby.

2. Establishment of European Power

Most historians conclude that Puducherry (Pondicherry) was derived from *Podoukê* of Greek form from Ptolemy's

Geography. There is, however, no evidence other than the linguistic relation. Puducherry is nothing but a newly created settlement by the Portuguese in the early 17th century over the dunes along the beach. The people came and settled in a new town. Nearby these dunes along the beach there were several medieval and late medieval hamlets which were discussed previously.

2.1 The Source of Portuguese in Puducherry

We do not have many sources on the Portuguese who might be the first European who made their settlement for the trade over the beach of present Puducherry. In 1936, Labernadie M.V. published a monograph on *Le vieux Pondicherry* and from that it is known that the first French sailors of Saint Louis, a vessel of the Compagnie de Saint-Mala, landed on the Puducherry beach in 1617. Jean Pépin, an agent of the company, found a brick building (possibly a fort) which was left unused by the Portuguese⁹. He collected some cotton cloths from Puducherry¹⁰. It shows that the Portuguese already came here and built a fort/ storehouse and established a small hamlet to manufacture and collect the textiles from Puducherry or villages near Puducherry. There are no sources of their period of stay, but they possibly quit the land due to lack of sufficient commodities for their trade. It could be that the Portuguese quit the brick buildings well before 1617. However, after Pépin, French ships did

not drop their anchors on this coast until Francois Martin took over the company.

2.2 Puducherry before the French

In 1616, Danish King Christian IV created the Danish East India Company for trade with India and Ceylon. Danish ships arrived in Tharangambadi in 1620 and rented the land from Tanjore Nayak¹¹. There were records of that Danish presence in Puducherry. Puducherry was captured by Dutch in 1693 and gave it to the French 1699. It seems that the Danish East India Company held Puducherry between 1693 and 1699.

Based on the above sources, Puducherry before the establishment of the French company in 1673 was not urbanized like other European trade centres. The hamlet possibly was not with any shape or regularity. There were some native quarters of the small settlement in the western and eastern parts with occupation like weaving hamlets possibly at the north, agriculture villages at the west and fishing communities along the coast (fishing village Verampatinam possibly existed in 1500 CE).

3. French Power in Puducherry

After Colbert founded the Compagnie des Indes Orientales in 1664¹², the French East India Company planned to establish a factory. In 1673, Bellanger de

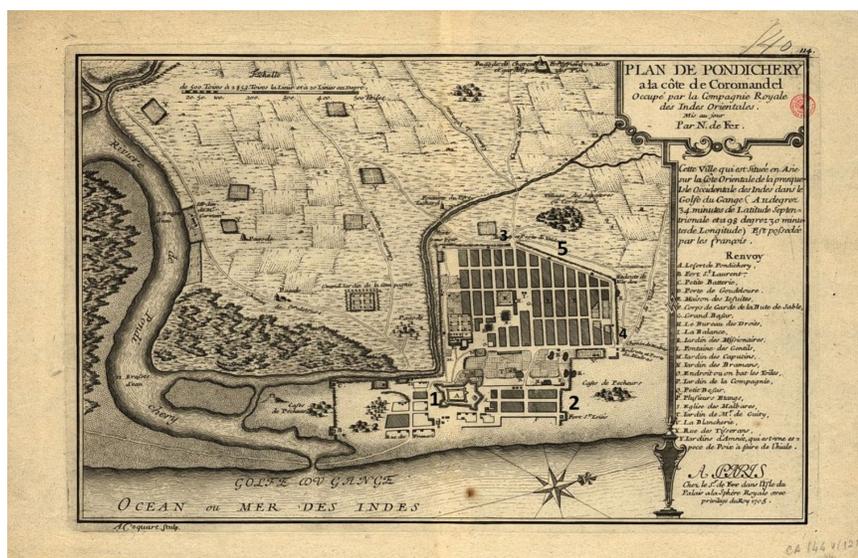


Figure 2. Puducherry in 1699, after Dutch records. Key: 1. Rectangular fort (Le fort Barlong), 2. Brick towers and wooden fencing, 3 and 4. Entrances into the town and 5. Hedges and fencing with embankment (after Pierre Bourdat, 1995).

l'Espinary was granted the enterprise to Pondichery by Sher Khan Lodi. The settlement of the French was in 1674 which gave way to factories and fort on the Indian east coast. The French had factories in Surat on the Indian West coast and acquired Puducherry on the Coromandel Coast. The French were the last settlers on the Indian East coast and it was not easy for them to make their settlement because the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British made their holdings on the Coromandel Coast¹³.

In 1674 Francois Martin, the first Governor, began transforming the beach dunes into a major fort town with a rampart and, in time, it became the premier French settlement in India¹⁴. In 1686, Francois Martin first made a town plan with regular streets, trading centres, ports and fort. Sher Khan Lodi permitted him to use his men and made the town in his provinces. Khan gave more land to encourage the production of the export articles¹⁵. The town and the native villages, located in the western and northern part of the town, were encircled with hedges, brick or wooden towers (Figure 2). He invited the native people, artisans and trades to settle in the new town¹⁶. The Indian population was mostly in thatch-roof huts and some in regular brick houses. Streets lead to bazaars and there were roadside petty shops. The town was divided into two parts, the western and eastern part of the town and a few Frenchmen resided in brick houses to the east of the fort¹⁷.

4. Early French Fort Le Fort Barlong

Francois Martin built a rectangular fort called "Le fort Barlong" in bricks close to the beach at the east¹⁸. The fort was rectangular in shape with four round towers at its four corners. A moat-like embankment was excavated on the outer side settlement. The water to the moat was possibly from the stream Uppar (Uppanar), flooding from marshland and red hill cliffs in the west were channelled along the south of the new town (Figure 2). Inside the fort were main buildings like the Director's house and his office, factories and storehouses.

The English and Dutch wanted to suppress the French domination in India. So they joined with the native powers and waged wars with the French. After the formation of the League of Augsburg, Dutch occupied Puducherry

in 1692. However, between 1693 and 1699, the Dutch developed the defence of the settlement and enlarged the western part of town. They removed the Jesuits church and repaired some parts in the fort. They extended a platform around the fort wall. At the boundaries they made fencing and brick towers mounted with cannons¹⁹. After the Treaty of Ryswick in 1699, Puducherry was returned to the French Company.

Meantime, in 1690, English East India Company got Cuddalore fort from the Gengi Nayaks and named it St. David Fort. The fort was located on the mouth of River Gadilam, 40 km south of Puducherry. It added more threat to Puducherry. François Martin wanted to strengthen Puducherry as a very strong fortress town. He paid greater attention to build a strong fort with fortified walls and improve the redoubts made by the Dutch early around the native's settlement.

5. St. Louis Fort and Fortified Urbanized Puducherry

In 1702, François Martin started to construct the fort of Saint Louis in the name of King Louis XIV. Dowood Khan, the first Nawab of Carnatic, granted him a small village called Kalapet, located north of Puducherry, to supply timber from the forest to construct the fort and houses²⁰. The Nawab also denoted Ozhukarai, Murungappakkam, Olandai, Pakkamudiyannpet and Kavuvadikkuppam villages locating around Puducherry²¹. Jean Deloche in his *Origins of the Urban Development of Pondicherry* according to Seventeenth Century Dutch Plans explained the distribution of the different communities in the layout of new rectangular blocks of houses in the south part. Francois Martin did not make any note on the village names that he rented or owned for the French company around Puducherry. Based on the documents of Dutch, Jean Deloche concluded that the Puducherry was a roughly semi-circular area of land extending from Kottakuppam to Ariyankuppam river²².

The fort was completed in 1706. During the opening ceremony on 25th August, 1706 Father Tachard said that the fort was going to be the stronghold of Christian Religion and the foundation of the French empire in India²³.

6. Puducherry Highly Secured Town on East Coast

After the death of Martin, Lenoir and Dumas enlarged the town in an oval shape. All the streets were designed as straight ones and cutting each other at right angles. Permission was granted to build houses. In 1728,

Puducherry became a majestic town to live²⁴. In the 1740s Duplex made Puducherry a powerful political hub in the Deccan²⁵. Joseph Duplex, son of a wealthy farmer-general and a Director of the company, became head of the factory of Chandarnagore in 1730 and was Governor of Puducherry in 1742. In South India, Duplex made a series of wars to establish French supremacy. He

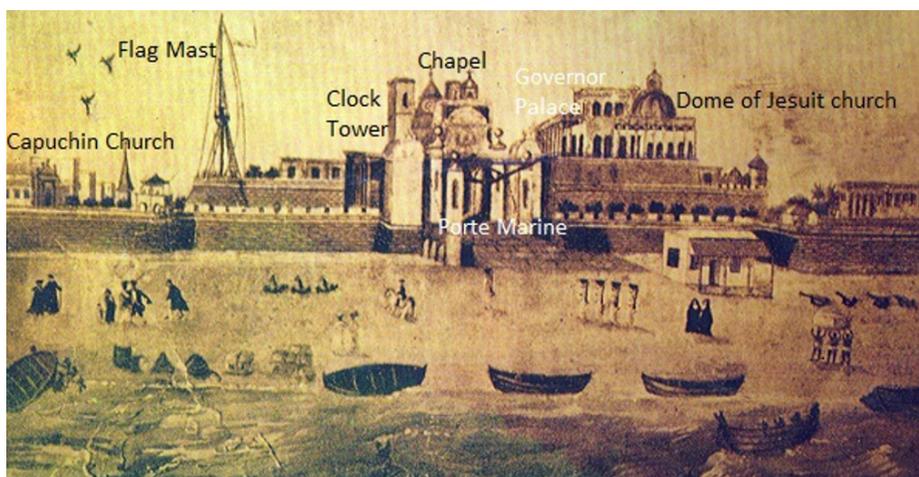


Figure 3. Puducherry fort in 1750, view from the sea. (after Pierre Bourdat, 1995).

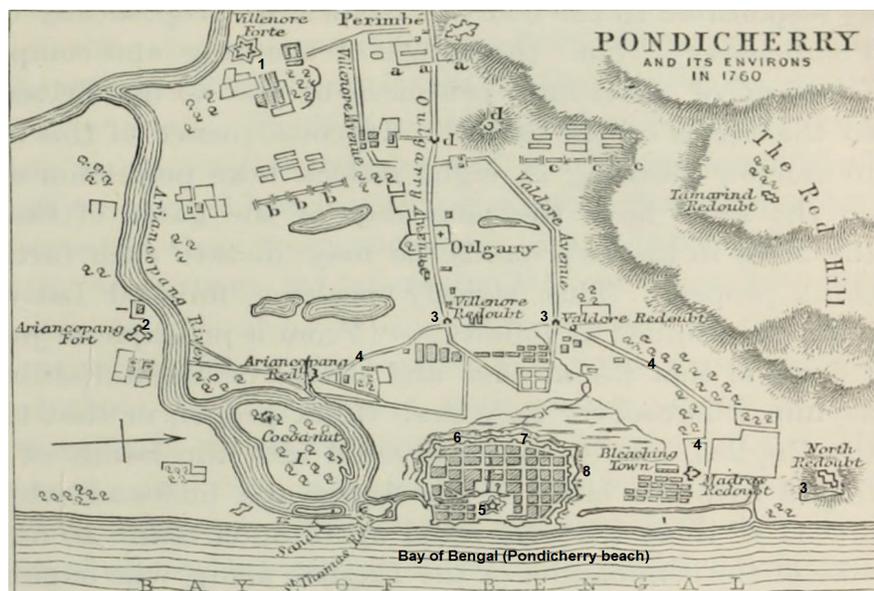


Figure 4. Puducherry and its defence before the siege of Pondichéry. key. 1. Fort Villenour, 2. Fort Ariyankupam, 3. Redoubt, towers mounted with canons, 4. Hedges and walls encircling a distance of a km from the town, 5. St. Louis Fort, 6. Villenour gate, 7. Valudaur gate and 8. Madras gate (after Henry Beveridge).

wanted to make Puducherry an unconquered and highly defended town in Deccan.

Between 1730 and 1750 Puducherry became the best-fortified fort town on the Indian East coast and it was having an impressive look from the sea (Figure 3). All three sides of the town were covered with land by a moat and glacis and a rampart wall flanked with bastions, parapets and a huge moat. The East was fully covered with sea and defended with a thick fort wall (present beach road is on this wall) mounted with 100 cannons.

There were three strong gates, named Madras Gate at the north, Valudaur Gate at the west and Villianur Gate at the southwest to enter the town. In addition to these defences, they built two more small forts one at Ariyankuppam and another one at Villianur away from the fortified town (Figure 4). At the distance of one km or more from the town walls and gates, he made fencing with a hedge of thorny plants, coconut and palms trees and redoubt sketched from the sea and was for about 10 km in a curve around the town at the distance of one km to the west and south. The fencing and brick wall redoubts ended at the river Ariyankupam in the south (Figure 4). The hedge line fencing and trees were created to slow down the forwarding enemy forces. Dupleix completed this defence work between 1742 and 1750. This type of fencing around the natives villages beyond the town was made by the Dutch²⁶, possibly Dupleix made it stronger than early.

After completing the fortification all around the town, Duplex constructed a Marine gate at the eastern side (Figure 3). He placed the commemorative plaque in 1745. However, after the demolition of the fort by English in 1760, it was discovered in 1921 and placed in the Bharathi park monument now called by locals as Aye mandapa. The inscription is in Latin and stating that

“..in response to the petition of the inhabitants of Pondicherry in the year 1745, for the security as well as for the improvement, the citadel and its maritime ramparts were founded, constructed and completed in the name and under the reign of the king of France Louis XV, and in the name of Compagnie des Indes, by the ever-vigilant governor Joseph Francois Dupleix”²⁷

7. End of the French Power in Deccan

In the beginning, the position of Carnatic wars was much

made silver lines to Dupleix, however, after 1750 the war had given many serious obstacles to the French. They started to lose many cities and forts. The war made the French company lose the resources and it was not easy to compensate. In 1754, M. Godeheu, a director of the French company, asked Dupleix to resign.

Lally, the commander-in-chief of French forces, made a siege of fort St. David and Madras when he took the charges, but the financial condition was not good. He started to lose the battles one after one. However, he had a hope that Puducherry was highly protected by the sea and the land. There were many forts such as Alambari, Permukal at north near Marakanam and in west forts like Valudhaur, Villyanoor and in south Ariyankuppam fort near Puducherry. Cotte, the English commander, marched from Chettpet on 26th February 1760 and reached Tindivanum after the battle of Wandiwash. He planned to destroy the supporting forts before the siege of Puducherry.

7.1 Siege of Puducherry

Coote moved to Permacoil (Perumukal) fort located between Tindivanm and Marakanam. The fort was destroyed and Coote got wounded. He asked Major Monson to siege Alumpara fort in March 1760. After destroying the supporting forts of Puducherry, Coote moved his army to siege Puducherry. His first attack was on Valudhaur fort located 20 km West of Puducherry and then he encamped at Perimbi Red hills. Meanwhile Admiral Stevens commanded the navy squadron and blocked the Puducherry sea coast. After the monsoon, the gun fire was opened against Puducherry. In 1761, Puducherry was destroyed.

All the spectacular royal and religious monuments and the fort wall were destroyed during the siege of Puducherry by the British forces in 1761. The lofty structures like clock towers, Governor Palace, chapels, domed Jesuits church and flag mast in the St. Louis fort were no longer to remain. The high secured defendable town was seized and razed down. The Saint Louis fort was left with rubbles. The rampart, fence and redoubt and small forts in the Puducherry region at Ariyankumpam, Viliyanor and Valudahur were destroyed.

In 1765, Law de Lauriston got back Puducherry from English and hardly found buildings and houses. It was very difficult to lay out even the outlines of Puducherry. The debris was cleared and new houses were built on the

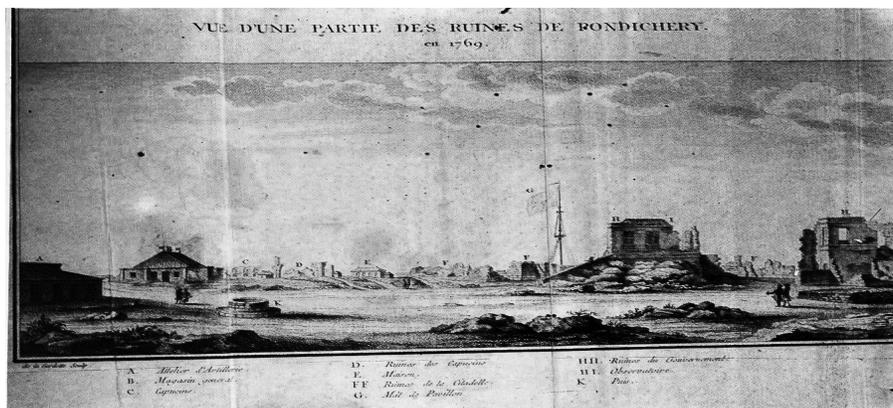


Figure 5a. Drawing of Le Gentil, depicting the remains inside the St. Louis Fort in 1768.



Figure 5b. Drawing of John MI Lean, depicting the outside view of St. Louis Fort in 1762.

old foundation. In 1768, Le Gentil visited Puducherry and made description and drawings of the fort debris (Figures 5a and b).

Law de Lauriston planned to renovate the fortification of the town and rebuilt the fort; however, it was postponed to get financial support from France. He started the repair works in the town fortification which was not fully destroyed by the English. In 1778, the English attacked Puducherry again and destroyed the fortification wall around the town. Almost after the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1815, Puducherry was given back to France.

French rebuilt the new Puducherry town over the old town without any rampart or fort.

8. Traces of Fortification

Almost after 200 years, the town is rapidly enlarged and new buildings raised over the old remains. The first survey was made by us on the town topography. It is not easy to excavate and locate the early remains of fortification. Every part of the town is fully occupied by houses and public buildings. It is also very difficult to study the foundation



Figure 6. Google image shows the Gate of Villenour traces. Brook from red hills, now as drainage, once supplied the water to the moat for the fortification. Black line drawn here to show the Bastion shape.

trenches for the new building in the town. Archaeology in Puducherry is a scary subject and people are feared that the Government would acquire the lands. They did not even allow to see their new house foundation trenches in the town.

The study collected the old maps and drawings which are used to relocate the fortification wall in present Google maps (remote sensor images). The survey found the gate of Villeyanour (Bastion de Villenour) though the fort wall remains on the surface. The shape of the Bastion is found in a triangle shape (Figure 6). A photo of 1980 from the sea against the backside of the Park Guest House illustrates the Bastion de Saint Laurent (Figure 7)²⁸. Now this Bastion is filled with boulders.

9. Excavations of Louis Fort²⁹

The survey made it possible to find the remains of the Louis fort in late 2017 after the publications of Jean Delosh. The permission was granted from the Commissioner of Puducherry for only ten days to do the excavation work in the Public Park named Bharathi. The park is located close to the beach and just opposite to the Raj Bhawan (Governor Residence). It is an attractive center for tourists and has the legendary story of an Aye (lady) after a domed French monument located in the center of the park. The Government made the park very attractive with granite slab paved path and built a compound wall all around the four quarters of it.

10. Excavation at the Royal Gate

The objective of the excavation is not to unearth the fort and its edifices but to find the remains below the park to know its exact location. It is a primary excavation to

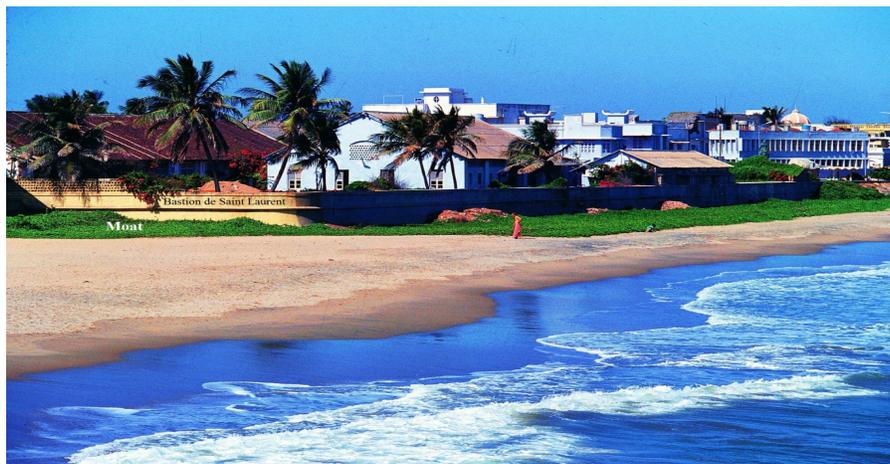


Figure 7. View of the Reaming part of the Bastion de Saint Laurent.

make further investigation on the lost fort. The work of Jean Deloche is our main source for our study and also Le Gentil's drawing on the interior view of the fort leading from the Royal Gate. The excavation is first planned to locate the Royal entrance of the fort.

10.1 Trenchers and Findings

A trench measures five by five meters only was planned to find out the part of the fort. Jean Deloche mentioned that the early French fort Le fort Barlong was possibly in between the South-West and the South-East quarters and the northern half of the Louis fort was possibly in the South part of the park. The remaining portions of the fort are below the buildings like Union Bank, Hospitals and Hotels, residential houses and Government offices south and west of the Park. The only option is at the South-East quarter of the Bharathi Park and it is the only place we conclude location for the Royal gate north wall. A temple in the park is exactly on the north part of the Royal entrance. The newly constructed compound wall of the temple extends north and east by 20 meters. The temple is paved with cement floor. We have no option but to dig out a trench at the royal gate. Trench 'A' is marked ten meters from the south wall of the temple Balaji in the Park (Figure 8).

10.2 Trench A with Trash

It is the place where the park authority has not had any gardening work but dumped organic trash. A five by five

meters trench was first marked and removed the deposits. After removing the Red clay deposit that was deposited by the Park for gardening purposes, the modern trash like plastic wastes were found. Further deep we found another kind of trash, mostly medical waste. The medical wastes include bottles, white painted metal basins, glass syringes, ampoule and vial and other objects dated to the 1970s. It seems, between 1970 and 1980, that the medical waste possibly from the General Hospital next to the park might be buried here in a depth of two meters.

10.3 Trench B and its Extension

The second trench is planned to the north of the temple. The place is very narrow, about 3 meters wide between the Temple compound wall and Park walking path paved with granite slab. Trench B (2 meters by 1.5 meters) was marked and excavated. A cement concrete path was exposed which was built in 1980 in the park by the Government of Puducherry. Further down to the cement path, a brick-paved path was exposed which was laid by the French in 1920.

In 1815, the French designed a new town plan without any fortification and fort when they got back Puducherry from the English East India Company. The northern part of the fort area was made as a parade ground and the southern part was given to the French officials, public and used for Government buildings. At the center of the parade ground, they made a domed monument with four pairs of pillars which were later named as Aye mandapa after the



Figure 8. Location of trenches. Key. 1. Trench 'A', 2. Balaji temple in the park 3. Trench 'B' and its extension. (Photo by Mr.Vinaik Sai).



Figure 9. Trench 'B' with remains of St Louis fort floor (photo by Mr. Vinayak Sai). Key. 1. Cement path made in 1970s, 2. Bricks paved street by French in 1900 and 3. The remains of the St. Louis Fort floor.



Figure 10. Remains of French Fort wall in Trench 'B' east extension. Key. 1. Cement path of the Park in 1970s. 2. French brick paved street leading to Aye mandapa in the center of park. 3. Remains of fort wall. 4. Grey soil deposits deposited and levelled the ground. 5. Spoil trench, made in later period, and 6. Spoil trench of a later period damaged the remains of the fort wall.

local mythical stories. Brick paved streets were leading to Aye mandapa from all sides of the parade ground. The brick-paved French parade ground street was removed in the trench. Below the French parade brick-paved street, the fort floor got exposed in the excavation. The floor is in lime and brick fragments. It was not smooth and partly

damaged (Figure 9). The excavation further extended to the east of the trench B and found the French fort wall below the concrete path and Brick paved street. However, the fort wall was damaged by the later people. A spoil pit mark was noticed in the section at the east, possibly

made in recent times and a damaged fort wall remains (Figure 10).

11. Conclusion

Both the ancient seaport and the medieval French fort in Puducherry were now discovered through archaeological investigation. The early excavations at Arikamedu proved the existence of an ancient port through the Mediterranean findings. The inventions in the Bharathi Park now made it possible to see the remains of the Saint Louis fort. The location of Fort Ariyankupam is now identified on the Coudalore-Pondy road and Villenour fort is on the banks of river Sangaraparni. Archeological excavation now proved that the Louis Fort and its architectural remains are underneath the Bharathi Park.

12. References

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- 2.. An ancient industrial seaport city, now as an eroding mound locally named Arikamedu (in Tamil "Arika" means 'eroding' and "medu" means 'mound') located on the east bank of river Ariyankuppam just before the Bay of Bengal in the south of Puducherry was once eminent in the long-distance commerce between the Mediterranean world on one hand and the south Asian islands, Indian east coast and Sri Lanka on other hand during early Current era (for further study see Begley V, Francis P, Iravatham Mahadevan, Raman K.V, Sidebotham S.E, K. W Slane, and Wille E.L, eds., 'The Ancient Sea Port of Arikamedu: New Excavations and Researches 1989-1992', Vol. 1, Pondicherry, 1996; see also, Begley V, Francis P, Karashima N, Raman K.V, Sidebotham S., and Wille E.L, eds., *The Ancient Sea Port of Arikamedu: New Excavations and Researches 1989-1992*, Vol. 2, Paris, 2004.
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28. I thank the photographer and I regret that I could not find his name. I found this photo on the website of Puducherry photos. This photo is very helpful to us to locate the Bastion on the Southeast corner of the fort wall.
29. The Saint Louis Fort excavation was with the support of the Pondicherry Museum, Government of Puducherry. I thank the Park authorities and my special thanks to Mr. Ganasen, The Commissioner of Puducherry, Mr. KaliyaPerumal, the superintendent of Art and Culture, the Government of Puducherry, History students Mr. Sabri, Mr. Vinayak Sai, Mr. Vijaya Balan, and Miss. Yowarani from Tagore Government Arts and Science College, and the Bharathi Park authorities. Without their role and extra effort in the excavation is not possible.