

## Pondicherry – The French Connection

By Aurvi Sharma

She giggles shyly. Two front teeth are missing, the rest are stained red with betel-juice. She is wearing a white sari that is brown with dirt and fraying with age. I bend down and she pins up the gajra in my hair, a small garland made of jasmine flowers. I place 5 Rupees in her wrinkled, 75-years-old hands. She brings her palms together and bows. I feel ashamed. 5 Rupees is a denomination so small that its equivalent does not exist in Sterling.

I am in Pondicherry, situated on the Southeast coast of India. It's a curious town with a strong Tamilian culture hybridized with remnants of a French Colonial past. I buy a mineral water bottle which has poetry inscribed on the label, three languages talking about the charm of this small town. All the signboards are in English, Tamil and French. I see a honey complexioned policeman wearing a French toupee, giving directions to a man who has a mundu wrapped around his waist, both talking in Tamil.

I wake up at dawn and go to the beach to watch the sunrise. It is still dark and there is a nip in the air. The sea looks black and intimidating. Its foam is strangely luminescent in the darkness, like frayed lace of a robe. There is a boat lying on the sand, unclaimed. A group of ten fishermen approach the boat and push it through the sand towards the water. They are all shirtless, wearing only mundus. They eye me curiously, covertly. I am a misfit; a woman, wearing shorts, alone, trespassing on their early morning routine. I see sly smiles and hear a smattering of Tamil. Locker room talk, I presume, is a global phenomenon.

With a final heave and a collective cry of effort, the boat is in water. The fishermen jump in smoothly and sail away. There is the half darkness of the morning now, and I stare at the sea, surrounded by sand coloured crabs scabbling around, camouflaged and frantic. People start appearing in the distance. Elderly people out for a walk, supporting themselves on sticks, families with sleepy kids, honeymoon couples shyly holding hands. The women are decked in their wedding finery at this time of the day; sarees embroidered with gold, red and white bangles which go on till the elbows, heavy gold necklaces. It's an Indian thing.

More boats have appeared in the sea with tiny people in them. "We leave early morning every day for the sea and return only after it's dark," a fisherman had told me later. This is their livelihood, no Sundays for them. The sea has started getting red and I can see the blinding dazzle of the sun peeping from the edge. The sun grows bigger as it rises, finally a huge half-ball of fire dribbling at the horizon. Everyone falls still. It is mesmerizing. Give Time a Break proclaim the Pondicherry-tourism brochures, and I now know why.

I wander around the town during the day. The roads are wide, flanked by tall, colonial buildings built by the French. They are colonnades with huge French windows on the first floor. Clean and well looked after, they are all painted in shades of pristine white, cream or khaki.

I visit the Seagulls Resort that promises a boat ride through the backwaters. The resort is in a state of disrepair. There is a cheap Restaurant & Bar where men are drinking rum and coke at 11 in the morning. Women sit with them, looking jaded in their heavy silk sarees. Children are running all over, rowdy and screaming, ignored by their parents. The whole scene is depressing, like a boring Hindi art movie.

I hire a boat for myself and set sail. The boatman is friendly but speaks only Tamil. We try to have an unsuccessful conversation, gesticulating wildly. Finally we give up, passing each other an occasional smile. The scenery is beautiful with the shores thick with coconut trees. The boat swiftly cuts through the dark green water. The sun is hot, there is a light breeze, I feel perfectly content. When we return to the shore the boatman flashes me a white toothy grin and says "Good Bye Madam" with a strong Tamil accent. These are the only English words he knows. I am charmed.

In Pondicherry, I am enchanted, again and again, by this smile. A white flash of teeth offered by taxi drivers, shoppers, hawkers, cleaners, walkers, beggars, passersby and fishermen alike. It makes me buy wilting roses from a girl on the road. It makes me wear gajras in my hair. It makes me click eleven pictures of an eight-year old boy at the French War memorial. "I want photo," he said, and smiled the smile. And I did. I did.

I see people of various colours and nationalities milling about in Pondicherry. Every day I have a typical South-Indian meal of Dosa and Sambhar and top it off with a perfectly baked croissant at one of the French Bakeries. While eating, I hear smatterings of French and German puncturing the hum of Tamil.

It's my last day in Pondicherry. I go back to the old woman who sold me the gajra. I buy another one, pin it in my hair. I place the money in her hand and join my palms together. I bow. She touches my forehead with her fingers as if in blessing. I have come a full circle. I leave Pondicherry at peace with myself and the world.