

## **Holidays in a Holy Land: Spiritual Tourism in Placid Puducherry**

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**ABSTRACT:** *In the topical years, Tourism has gained colossal prominence and has been recognised and accepted by the nations across the globe as a constructive instrument in strengthening the economy of a country, generating employment opportunities, as a knowledge provider and the finest entertainer to the aspiring tourists. Though tourists are experiencing variegated forms of tourism, recent trends have shown an incredible response to the destinations which have spiritual potential thereby promoting spiritual, religious and or pilgrimage tourism. Every destination in the world offers unique amenities to the tourists and not all offer a spiritual experience. Spiritual journey in a destination impacts internally and brings in a sort of therapy there by giving an exultant experience to the tourists. One such destination that offers a soothing spiritual experience to the tourists is Puducherry which is a Union Territory in South India. This paper attempts to glean the richly found spiritual elements that foster tourism in the destination and assays the after effects of the spiritual experience of the touristssequelling a holistic therapy. This qualitative research comprises rich theoretical inputs from various historical and current sources, data collected through field visits and interviews from tourists.*

**Keywords:***Destination, Experience, Spiritual, Tourists, Tourism.*

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

From times immemorial, spiritual reasons have been playing a pivotal role in motivating people to travel which included visiting places that are significant spiritually [1].

*“Religiously or spiritually motivated travel has become widespread and popularised in recent decades, occupying an important segment of international Tourism...”[2]*

Generally, it is very much seen that, people fulfil their act of faith by visiting their desired spiritual places. For a Christian, it may be a visit to Vatican or Jerusalem, for a Muslim, a pilgrimage to Mecca and so on [3]. Tourists take up Spiritual journeys mainly to gain emotional release of stress due to a fast moving and a pressured life pattern [4]. In spiritual tourism, tourists visit places of religious importance without any religious compulsion, to experience and also grow spiritually [5]. It means, there exists a deep motivation behind this travel that is ‘experiencing the godliness from within’. At the same time these tourists may not be necessarily classified as ‘Pilgrim tourists’ as the motto is not only to visit the spiritual cites but also to enjoy the other activities. Moreover a pilgrim tourist goes with a well-planned itinerary which schedules many more journeys one after the other [6]. The concept of Spiritual Tourism sounds to be new but the phenomena of spiritual tours are quiet ancient [7]. It may be argued that though the phenomena exist right from the historical ages, the outcome of the experience will always be new, nourishing, refreshing and rejuvenating. This research identifies and showcases the spiritual diaspora of the destination sequelling spiritual tourism, where the tourists can experience and express the “act of faith”. Previous works carried out by various researchers pertain to certain other places. The research theme in this chosen geographical location is yet to be explored, thus makes the research a unique one and adds knowledge to the existing literature.

### **II. THE DESTINATION PUDUCHERRY**

India is a land of diverse culture, heritage and identity. India is blessed with a myriad tourist destinations and one such is *Puducherry*, a small hamlet in the southernmost part of the country and is also a Union Territory [8]. Puducherry dates back to 4<sup>th</sup> century AD where it was in the hands of the *Pallava* Kingdom. It was then ruled by the *Cholas* and later by the *Pandyas* in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Puducherry gained significance and became a noted place in the history only because of its connections with the French when the French East India company had set up a trading centre here in 1674 AD [9]. With its apt location facing Bay of Bengal which

served to be a good route for trade and commerce, a fertile soil and a natural beauty, attracted the French to settle here.

It is to be mentioned here that, apart from the French invasion, this small hamlet had been ruled by various kingdoms from time to time. A few to mention during Pre-Colonial period are the *Pallava* Dynasty (325 – 900 AD), *Chola* Dynasty (900-1279 AD), *Pandya* Dynasty (1279 – 1370 AD), *Vijayanagar* Empire (1370 – 1614 AD), Sultanate of Bijapur (1614 – 1638 AD). During the Colonial times, Puducherry experienced a variety of regimes. A few notable events include the Portuguese's setting up of a factory in 1523 AD, purchase of textiles by the Dutch in 1618 AD, Setting up of a factory by the Danes in 1624 AD, Settlement of the French for the very first time at 1674-1693 AD, the Dutch rule from 1693 – 1700 AD, the French rule from 1700 – 1761 AD, the British rule from 1778 – 1783 AD, the French rule from 1765 – 1778 AD, the British rule from 1778 – 1783 AD, the French rule from 1783 – 1793 AD, the British rule from 1793 – 1815 AD and finally the French rule from 1815 – 1954 AD [10].

These evidences are crystal clear in assaying the multi-faceted feature of Puducherry presenting varied Culture & Heritage. It could be even said that the emergence of different rules from time to time has moulded this Destination in a Colonial way. The buildings, town-planning schemes, the roads etc., are the best examples of the Colonial influence, which is now attracting tourists globally. With its rich history and an amazing cultural heritage, the destination is now a famous and an exotic tourism destination. One of the key elements to promote tourism in this destination is the presence of unique Spiritual centres.

### III. CENTRES OF SPIRITUAL IMPORTANCE

#### 1. Sri Aurobindo and the Ashram

*Sri Aurobindo* was born on 15 August 1872 in Kolkata, India. He rose up to be a great Professor, Poet, National activist and a Yogi. He was deeply inspired by the mystic heritage of India and took up the practice of yoga and on the other hand he began to give a bold new direction to the politics of the time, writing a series of newspaper articles. He was a great poet too. He also inspired secret revolutionary societies at several places across the country.

In the year 1910, April, he landed Puducherry where he started exploring the way for mankind's liberation from its bondage to ignorance through spiritual means [11]. He called Puducherry the '*Cave of Tapasya*' which means cave of meditation. Sri Aurobindo stayed in Puducherry for the rest of his life-for about forty years, which was very fruitful to the literary and the spiritual world as well. He devoted himself to the practice of *yoga*- a Vedic exercise which involves body, mind and soul. He emphasised more on Spiritual development of the inner being. His values and fathoming ideals attracted people from all over the world.

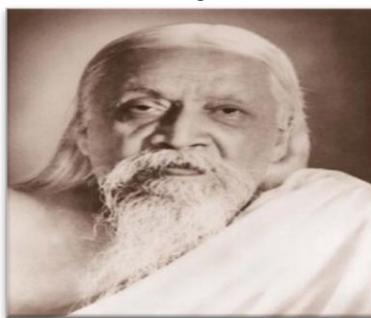


Figure 1: Sri Aurobindo

#### 2. Sri Aurobindo's Symbol

Sri Aurobindo represented his core values and ideologies through a symbol, which drenched people in the spiritual shower. He emphasised people to first understand the inner being and totally surrender to the nature or the supernatural power along with regular practice of *yoga*.

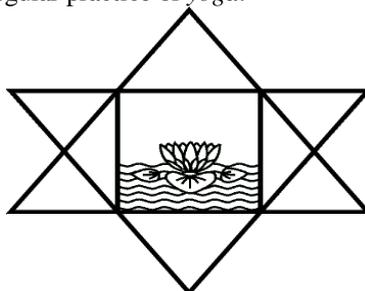


Figure 2: Sri Aurobindo's Symbol

Here, the descending triangle denotes “*Sat-Chit-Ānanda*”. ‘*Sat*’ represents the thing that truly is; existence; pure existence. ‘*Chit*’ is the pure consciousness; creative self-conscience; the essential consciousness of the spirit. ‘*Ānanda*’ is the secret delight which is the source of all forms of life. It is the divine bliss which comes from above. The ascending triangle signifies the aspiring answer from matter under the form of life, light and love. The junction of both – the central square – is the perfect manifestation having at its centre the ‘*Avatar of the Supreme* – the Lotus’. The water – inside the square – implies the multiplicity, the creation [12].

Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy and the yogic way of living attracted people from all over the globe. One such person who had the call for a spiritual mission at a very early age and who came in search of Sri Aurobindo was *Lady Mirra Alfassa*, who was later styled as *The Mother*. She was born on 21 February 1878 in Paris. She met Sri Aurobindo in Puducherry in 1914 and stayed till she left the earth on 17 November 1973. She collaborated with Sri Aurobindo and imbibed his philosophy and values. Slowly the place where they practiced *yoga* and meditation grew to be an *Ashram*, where people stayed there and experienced a unique spiritual meaning which transformed their lives. As rightly said by Robert N. Minor (1999)

*“He left an International movement of devotees and inquirers who read his works, sought to apply his teachings to one degree or another, and organised centers and ashrams to delve into and practise his teachings...”*[13]

After Sri Aurobindo’s demise on 5 December 1950, *The Mother* took complete charge of the *ashram* and nurtured the numerous souls who came to her, thirsting for light [14]. Presently, this ashram has taken a prominent position in the tourist’s map. Every tourist who visits Puducherry spends at least fifteen minutes on an average at the *ashram*. They meditate sitting around the place where Sri Aurobindo has been laid for an eternal rest.

### **3. The Mother and Auroville**

*Lady Mirra Alfassa* styled as *The Mother*, a true follower and a disciple of Sri Aurobindo founded the International township of Auroville in the year 1968 [15].

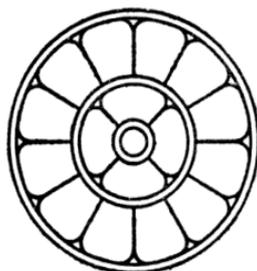


**Figure 3: The Mother – Mirra Alfassa**

Based on the values of Sri Aurobindo The Mother laid foundation for this spiritual centre and said

*“Greetings from Auroville to all men of goodwill. Are invited to Auroville all those who thirst for progress and aspire to a higher and truer life...”*

The Mother’s spiritual values revolve around understanding and surrendering oneself to the Divine Consciousness. Auroville aims at bringing in people with different walks of life and to promote actual Human Unity that can never be destroyed by any external forces [16]. To represent this feature, a centre called ‘*Matrimandir*’ was constructed, which was styled as ‘*No-man’s land*’ [17].



**Figure 4: The Mother’s Symbol**

'*Matrimandir*' showcases The Mother's symbol and has chambers representing each petal found in the symbol. Here, the central circle represents the Divine Consciousness and the four petals surrounding represents North, South, East and West which are respectively termed as *Maheshwari*, *Mahakali*, *Mahalakshmi* and *Mahasaraswati*. The petal facing south (*Maheshwari*) represents The Mother's inexhaustible compassion, sovereign majesty and all-ruling greatness. The petal facing North (*Mahakali*) denotes The Mother's splendid strength, passion, her overwhelming will, her impetuous swiftness and world-shaking force. The petal facing East (*Mahalakshmi*) expresses The Mother's deep secret of beauty, harmony, fine rhythm, her intricate and subtle opulence, her compelling attraction and captivating grace. The petal facing West (*Mahasaraswati*) represents her close and profound capacity of intimate knowledge, careful flawless work and exact perfection in all things.

#### **4. Church of our Lady of Angels**

This church is also known as *White chapel* and is being visited by all the tourists without fail. The *Eglise de Notre Dame desAnes* or the Church of our Lady of Angels was built in the year 1855 and was commissioned by *Napolean III*. The church has Greco Roman architecture and is based on the Notre Dame chapel in Paris. The two towers on either side of the main chapel house the church bells and the clock, which have been preserved since they were first installed. In the early days, the church was completely white inside and outside – giving it the name 'White Chapel'. Not only have these interesting facts attract the tourists but also the presence of God and the Divine atmosphere [18].

#### **5. Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus**

This church erected by the French Missionaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, is situated just at the vicinity of the Railway station and embraces the Gothic architecture. It displays precious and rare stained glass panels depicting events from the life of Christ [19].



**Figure 5: Church Facade captured on 03.09.2011 at the site**

#### **6. Sri ManakulaVinayagar Temple**

Even before the French could come and occupy Puducherry, this temple was in existence i.e. before 1666. Forty different forms of *Ganesha* are portrayed on the walls. This temple has a small shrine dedicated to *Lord Murugan* who is the younger brother of *Ganesha*. Hundreds of Tourists visit this temple. Historical records reveal that this temple was constructed by The Cholas in 12<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.[20]. Few other temples to mention are Kamakshi Amman Temple, Navagraha Temple, VaradarajaPerumal Temple, Vedapureeswarar Temple etc.,



**Figure 6: Temple Façade – captured on 03.09.2011**

## **7. Meeran Mosque**

This mosque is very popular and is 350 years old. Tourists can witness the Gothic Islam architecture in it. It was built by the Nawab of Arcot. The dome has four lofty pillars below it. The pillars are supported by Meerhath and Meember. There is a bronze Kallasas in the top of the Façade minaret and the graves of Meeran and Mullah, who had built the mosque can also be seen. The other mosque which is equally famous is the Kuthbha mosque.

## **IV. INFERENCES AND OBSERVATIONS**

The study clearly exhibits that this Destination is rich in Religious as well as Spiritual centres and because of which the place is popular and attracts more tourists, which agrees with the research statement made by Russel (1999) [21]. A tourist who is looking for a holistic therapy is sure to go rewarded with rich spiritual fullness. In one hand the temples, churches and mosques serve to fulfil the religious 'act of faith' and attract tourists. On the other hand Ashram and Auroville act as a common platform for the rejuvenation of body, mind, soul and self-actualisation, thus making the Destination very unique from others. Mrs. Simmy, a 70 year old resident, was inspired by the values and ideologies of the Ashram and made herself a permanent Ashramite 45 year ago itself [22]. For Victoria, a 25 years old Tourist from Australia, the most heartening experience was at the Auroville [23]. And the story goes on...

## **V. CONCLUSION**

This destination though potential in attracting spiritual tourists, has to improve on certain aspects as given below based on the research:

### **5.1 Spiritual Tour Packages**

The Department of Tourism and the Travel agents may design a special tour keeping in mind the Spiritual aspects of the destination. This package may cover all the religious and spiritual centres. Instead of promoting this year round, a separate season could be identified thereby reducing the impacts of mass tourism on the spiritual sites as suggested by Fish (et al) (1993) [24].

### **5.2 Spiritual Tour Guides**

Lack of trained guides has come to light. Many tourists have expressed that due to lack of guides they were mis-guided several times. Here, a spiritual guide should be well trained in such a way that he/she would be able to explain the importance of the religious centres, a sound knowledge of the architectural features and its relevance and so on.

### **5.3 Information/Display boards**

Ample information should be given on the boards so that Tourists would help themselves in understanding the significance.

### **5.4 Spiritual counselling centres**

Tourists seek to visit religious centres or carry out a pilgrimage to a place in order to relieve themselves from stress [25]. Hence, if counselling centres would be established in the premises of Ashram or Auroville or other sacred centres, the tourists would be free to share the issue with the counsellor. The counsellor may then suggest an appropriate rejuvenation programme for betterment.

### **5.5 Participation by the Local community**

The host community may be encouraged to actively contribute their skills and make possible livelihood by selling hand-made candles, incense, or anything that would motivate the tourists to buy. The stalls may be placed near the entrance of the centres so that the tourists can have a glance of what is being sold. The local seller should be given ample training to communicate with the tourists, which would enhance the image of the destination.



**Figure 7: A local resident selling hand made products like artefacts, wall hangings etc., being located just opposite to Sri ManakulaVinayagar Temple. Photo captured on 03.09.2011.**

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