Taking history beyond the classroom

French Institute of Pondicherry ties up with PondyART Foundation to exhibit digital archive of Tamil agrarian history

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Interested in discovering the social history of a village life in the remote parts of the Tamil region while ambling along the sea side? Stop by the compound wall of the French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP) to combine learning and leisure.

In an attempt to bring the research from within the walls of academics to the general public, IFP has collaborated with PondyART Foundation to exhibit the Digital Archive of Tamil Agrarian History (1650-1950).

From individual households to institutions, the researchers of IFP have dug out private documents that shed light on the historical treasures of Tamil Nadu. The exhibits include documents recorded on paper, palm leaves and copper plates that reveal the socio-political and economic history of the region when new power structures and social identities were being forged both with

and against local traditional feudal systems and British colonial legislations.

‘Family documents’ Zoe Headley, Project Coordinator of Digital Archive of Tamil Agrarian History (1650-1950), says: “These archives are private family documents. We had to convince the house owners that we would carefully clean and digitise the old family papers and preserve them. It was a time consuming project.” The five-year project funded by the British Library’s Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) digitised information recorded on paper, palm leaves and copper plates, which are not available in the official archives. “These are of utmost important to the epigraphists and historians. The exhibition was to make the ideas, process and results of the research work accessible to wide public. It is designed in a way to convey the message even to those who do not know what a palm leaf or a copper document is,” she added.

Kasha Vande, co-founder of PondyArt Foundation, said that the project is about showcasing different aspects of life at that time. She added that the IFP has archived a large number of photographs too.

“We wanted to bring out the research work done in the institute and make it more attractive for the people to read,” she said.