

Celebrating an important repository of knowledge

French Institute of Pondicherry celebrating diamond jubilee next week

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PUDUCHERRY: The French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP), one of the important repositories of centuries-old knowledge and hub of collaborative academia, is celebrating its diamond jubilee next week.

What makes IFP unique vis-à-vis other research-focused institutions is that its inception was written into the historic Treaty of Cession of French Territories in India, which incidentally also sanctioned the French to have a Consulate in this former colonial outpost.

"This gives the institution a special place in the overseas network of 27 French research institutes spread across 34 countries," said Pierre Grard, IFP Director since 2012, whose previous stint here was as Head of the Ecology Department.

The IFP, the largest of the research institutes dependent on the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development (MAEDI), has scheduled celebrations on 18 and 19 November. A series of round tables is planned to mark the first day of the celebrations with eminent experts engaging in discussions relating to the research at the Institute, in the fields of Indology, Ecology and Social Sciences.

Unique collections

An open day on the second day will allow the general public to discover the IFP's unique collections and to interact with the researchers. This anniversary will also bear witness to 60 years of high-level scientific cooperation between France and India, the organisers said.

The IFP has four divisions, each of which has accumulated a significant body of work.

From a modest Indology

Department when it was founded in 1955 subsequent to the "de facto transfer agreement" of the French establishments in India, the IFP has evolved into the largest of the research institutes dependent on the French Minis-



A view of French Institute of Pondicherry, in Puducherry and (below) the palm-leaf manuscripts being preserved at the institute at a controlled temperature — PHOTOS: S.S. KUMAR

try of Foreign Affairs and International Development.

The Indology unit, which has worked in close cooperation with the city branch of the Paris-based 'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient,' offers a unique collaborative space for Western Indologists, primarily Sanskritists, to associate extensively with traditional Indian scholars (Pandits) employed by the Institute.

The Indology Department also houses a rich collection of manuscripts and photographs; the manuscript collection is the largest in the world of texts of the Saiva Siddhanta, the Hindu religious tradition that flourished in South India for more than ten centuries.

The repository includes 8,400 bundles (classified as "Memory of the World" by UNESCO), and the most important available collection of photographs (1,50,000) on the religious art and architecture of the south.

Among the department's pioneering work in recent times was the documentation of Jain temple sites across Tamil Nadu.

The IFP's scientific section, which was added within years of formation and which later turned into an ecology division, specialises broadly in research on the palynology (study of pollen), bioclimatology, and biogeography of plant communities in India and south-east Asia, with a large number of projects concentrated in the Western Ghats.

The continuous forest-monitoring plot on an extent of 10 ha. in the lowland moist evergreen forest at Uppangala with the cooperation of the Karnataka Forest Department, field studies to document the flora, fauna and soil diversity of the Western Ghats and pollen reference slides of nearly 15,500 plant species, mainly from tropical India, are among the important research engagements of this



division.

The IFP has also established a Social Sciences and a Geomatics division, both of which are doing outstanding research and raising the institution's stature.

While about 50 per cent of the IFP's Budget is funded by the French government, it has to source the other half from other agencies, including the

Department of Science, Technology and Environment and the University Grants Commission in India.

"As much as we like to look back with pride, in a changing and challenging environment for research institutions like ours all over the world, it becomes even more important to talk about the next sixty years," Mr. Grard said.

The occasion is ideal to both reassess our body of work and brace up for the challenges of the future

Pierre Grard, Director, French Institute of Pondicherry



The curious case of Indology and forensics

M. DINESH VARMA

PUDUCHERRY: As occupants of discrete worlds, Indology and forensics seldom find common ground, and rarer still do they make common cause.

When the French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP) launched an Indology research division, it could only have expected visits from historians, scholars and students.

By no stretch could anyone imagine that one day the research house would host a team of ace crime investigators prowling on an international ring of art thieves, smugglers and impresarios.

In September, 2014, the IFP was assisting sleuths from the US Department of Homeland Security seeking to establish evidence relating to a series of thefts of temple idols that had been smuggled abroad and eventually showcased at reputed galleries.

The Homeland Security team was at the IFP to identify the provenance of idols seized from international antique smuggler Subash Chandra Kapoor by running a match against the IFP's vast photo-library of religious art and architecture of south India. The team shared with the Indology Department at least 50 photographs of various idols they had recovered from Subhash Chandra Kapoor's art gallery and



Endangered temple art at Kallalagar Temple in Madurai, which is being documented by French Institute of Pondicherry on Thursday

— PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT
other art museums in the U.S. The samples provided by U.S. investigators included the photographs of the idols of Narthana Sambandar, Lord Muruga, Vinayaka, Vishnu Durgai and a bronze statue of Buddha, which are under their custody.

The samples were cross-matched with the photo archives to verify the provenance of the smuggled idols.

In the past too, the institute has helped the Idol Theft Wing police of Tamil Nadu to identify bronze idols reported missing from the Sripuranthan and Suthamalli temples in Ariyalur district. The photographs provided by the institute, which has been documenting temples, helped the investigators trace a smuggled stone idol of Lord Arthanareeswarar and a bronze idol of Lord Nataraja to the National Gallery of Australia. Both idols were subsequently handed over by former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott to India.