Celebrating an important repository of knowledge

French Institute of Pondicherry celebrating diamond jubilee next week

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

What makes IFP unique in comparison to 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 Grand, 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 (MAEID), 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 institutions dependent on the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development.

The Indology unit, which has worked in close cooperation with the city branch of the Paris-based "École française d'Études du Monde Orient," offers a unique collaborative space for Western Indologists, primarily French scholars (Pfund) employed by the Institute.

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

The repository includes 8,400 bundles classified as "Memory of the World" by UNESCO, and the most important areas of research include photographs of 150,000 plant species, mainly from tropical India, among the most important research areas of the Naive tradition.

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, especially broadly in research on the paleornology (study of pollen), bio-topology, 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 Uppanar 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 15,000 plant species, mainly from tropical India, are among the important research areas of this division.

The IFP has also established a Social Sciences and a Geosciences division, both of which are doing outstanding research and raising the institute'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. Grand said.

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

PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The curious case of Indology and forensics

M. Dinesh Varma

PURPOSE: 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.

But 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 impecunious.

In September 2014, the IFP was assisting sleuths from the US Department of Homeland Security in 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 Subhash Chandra Kapoor by running a match against the IFP's vast photo-library of religious art and architecture.

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

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