

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 2

Month: February

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:

R, Velvizhi., and Gujjeti Thirupathi. "Curating Tourism Experiences through Colonial Culinary Heritage: A Study of Traditional and Contemporary Practices in Pondicherry." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. S2, 2026, pp. 231–38.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS2-Feb.10218>

# Curating Tourism Experiences through Colonial Culinary Heritage: A Study of Traditional and Contemporary Practices in Pondicherry

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## Abstract

*Pondicherry, a former French colony, is today recognized as a vibrant yet serene destination, offering a distinctive blend of colonial charm, spiritual heritage, and scenic beaches. Despite its growing importance as a tourist destination, the Union Territory remains at a nascent stage in harnessing its full potential in culinary tourism. With its rich French colonial legacy, the presence of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and deep-rooted Tamil heritage, Pondicherry presents a unique and layered culinary landscape. However, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to critically analyze these culinary traditions for the strategic promotion of culinary tourism.*

*This study aims to analyze the traditional and lived practices of Pondicherry's colonial culinary heritage and examine how these can be curated and positioned for culinary tourism development. Guided by an Interpretivist paradigm, the research adopts a qualitative, exploratory case study approach. Data were collected through participant observation in domestic households and commercial kitchens along with secondary data like archival cookbooks, restaurant menus, tourism promotional materials, Google Ratings for Restaurants and YouTube content highlighting Pondicherry's culinary offerings.*

*Thematic content analysis and descriptive analysis were employed to examine how colonial culinary heritage is transformed and represented, as well as to understand the culinary tourism trend and tourist preferences. Drawing insights from Postcolonial Theory and experience economy theory, the study seeks to propose curated culinary tourism experiences that offer diverse and meaningful engagements. The expected outcomes include creation of different tourism experiences through cultural interpretation centres, food festivals, Culinary Heritage walks, Home based Cooking classes and workshops, host family dining or dining in historic settings to support culinary tourism promotion. The study is expected to contribute to tourism scholarship by linking culinary heritage with experiential tourism and heritage preservation within a postcolonial urban context.*

**Keywords:** Colonial Culinary Heritage, Culinary Tourism, Postcolonial Theory, Experience Economy, Qualitative Case Study, Culinary Tourism Experience.

## **Introduction**

The use of the phrase Global South which was used to represent the development and cultural difference between the North and South countries has today shifted towards geopolitical relations of power. There also many other perspectives to view and understand this term. In the context of post-colonialism and from the perspective of academicians and scholars who either originate or reside in the Global South region, it can be understood as those regions closely tied to various interpretations of decolonization. It includes the list of powers or countries that started and followed Non-alignment Movement (NAM) (Benedicte Bull & Dan Banik). India being founding member of NAM along with Yugoslavia, Egypt, Ghana and Indonesia in 1961, focused on sovereignty, decolonization, and development by avoiding alignment with US or Soviet blocs during the Cold War.

Pondicherry, a former colony of France enclaved in the state of Tami Nadu along with other French Indian territories got merged with India through a de facto transfer of governance during 1954 while de jure transfer of sovereignty of France to India was signed in 1956 and only on August 16, 1962 India and France exchanged the instruments of ratification under which France ceded to India full sovereignty over the territories it held. During the negotiation, strangely, instead of declining the proposal of French Government for the continuance of French language and culture in Pondicherry, the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru assured quite clearly that the Union Territory will be maintained as the centre of that language and culture. This approach of the then Prime Minister was attributed to a major reason which is the existence of two strong sentiments among the people of Pondicherry, viz. the sentiment of India as a motherland to which they were attracted, and another sentiment of attachment to France as a result of many hundreds of years of union with France and French culture. Hence though the policy of newly formed Indian Government wanted a united India without any foreign bases or extra-territorial rights, they also do not to want to come in the way of the variety of India and the cultural autonomy of its different regions. Therefore they accepted the proposal of the French Government.

Owing to the political and historical background of the continuity of French culture in Pondicherry, detailed above, Pondicherry today is revered as “Window of French Culture” and has been attracting many tourists for its post-colonial charm, spiritual blend and quaint beaches. Despite receiving higher tourist arrivals, the duration of stay of tourists lasts only for shorter period ranging from 1-3 nights as it is seen as week-end destination. Hence this study proposes to identify and develop potential outcomes that facilitate the creation of distinctive tourism experiences through a systematic analysis of the colonial culinary heritage and associated cultural practices prevalent in Pondicherry.

## **Review of Literature**

### ***Post-colonial Phenomenon in India***

Author Lalchhanhima through her work attempted to showcase the aftermath effects of colonialism through the lens of different postcolonial theories. It focused on the issue of economic exploitation made through forced cultivation of cash crops, encouragement of feudal land practice and deindustrialization of India textiles. While education, linguistic and cultural hegemony was made through creating language hierarchies and elevating English as mark of status, alteration system of education to produce workers for colonial government and through cultural hybridity . Also restructuring of social institutions happened through mimicry of colonial style which reflected in functioning and administration of legal and bureaucratic institutions of India even today. The author also mentioned few effects that was advantageous for the country like unifying the country and solidifying the administration which was meant to benefit them in exploitation and infrastructure development.

### ***Post-colonial Impact on the Culture and Lifestyle of Pondicherry***

Author Raja has narrated in detail the post-colonial image of Pondicherry that has its deep roots from the culture in the form of printed communication especially patronizing newspaper, periodicals, journals, language which was explained in the section Romba Thanks Monsieur. While lifestyle of the French like the fashion, Gallic attitude towards religions, parade on New Year's Day, fascination for fashion has a deep impact on the social life of the people at Pondicherry today. In his book author Animesh Rai, have clearly narrated the intensity of cultural hybridity that is visible in Pondicherry through observation of local life and by conversing with the people residing here. The author clarified such hybridity is not dilution but a mixing at a given time and place where the elements brought into contact are not dissolved, and the phenomenon being called creolization that provides testimony to the cultural resilience of the people.

### ***Experience Economy***

According to Pine and Gilmore who are the pioneers in advocating the concept of experience economy focused on the experiential view of consumer behavior. They viewed the economic progression in four stages starting from the agrarian, industrial, service and experience. While the agrarian economy focused on the production of commodities through extracting and harvesting, the industrial economy focused on manufacturing in bulk and making inventories for long term usage. Service economy focused on delivering intangible benefits and experience economy focusing on creating memorable emotions and feeling that will impact for a longer duration.

### ***Experience Economy in Tourism***

A survey of literature on the study of tourism consumer behavior revealed that there is a trend towards study on hedonic consumption of tourism which is directly related to experiential aspects of tourism. Such aspects focus on the intrinsic value of 'feelings, fun, and fantasy' fostered by the experience as insisted by Hirschman and Holbrook.

### **The Realms of Experience**

Pine and Gilmore have put forward 4 Es - entertainment, educational, escapist and aesthetic or esthetic as four realms of consumer experience.



Figure 1. The 4Es of experience economy  
Source: Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 102

In the above figure the horizontal continuum indicates level of consumer participation in the activities in creating impactful experience while the vertical continuum indicates involvement level of consumer at the destination.

## Research Gap

From the review of literature on the direction of culinary tourism of Pondicherry and the influence of colonial culinary heritage on the culinary tourism, there remains an empirical gap as no scientific studies have been attempted in this dimension. Hence this study aims to bridge this gap through analyzing the traditional colonial culinary heritage and their contemporary practices in order to curate tourism experience for the destination. Such experience will enhance the popularity of the destination and will support the destination to become a long haul destination with more impactful experience.

## Scope of the Study

The study is intended to be performed on the secondary data in the form of printed documents, video content, text communication on the colonial literature, culinary tourism only.

## Objectives of the Study

1. To explore traditional Colonial Culinary Heritage and practices in Pondicherry
2. To understand the contemporary Colonial Culinary offerings to the tourists
3. To examine tourist culinary preference at Pondicherry destination
4. To curate tourism experience through Colonial Culinary Heritage

## Research Methodology

The study adopts an Interpretivist Approach through a qualitative exploratory case study of Pondicherry destination. An Interpretivist approach using secondary data involves analyzing existing texts, archives, transcripts, video contents to understand the subjective meanings, context, and, social constructions embedded within them along with perceiving the trends and preferences of the subjects studied.

## Research Method

*Phenomenology* method used to understand the world and context of the literature by analyzing the direct experiences reflected in the data is used to analyze books written on the colonial history. Hermeneutics which involves interpretation of texts to understand deeper and underlying meanings is utilized analyze data on contemporary culinary offerings. Descriptive analysis of secondary data by categorizing them.

To explore the traditional colonial culinary heritage, various cookbooks, historical books on colonial rule are examined. To understand the current offerings for the tourists, YouTube video content on culinary offers of Pondicherry are analyzed. To examine the tourist preference, Google ratings data are utilized. To curate tourism experience, the theory of experience economy is utilized along with the results of the three objectives.

## Results

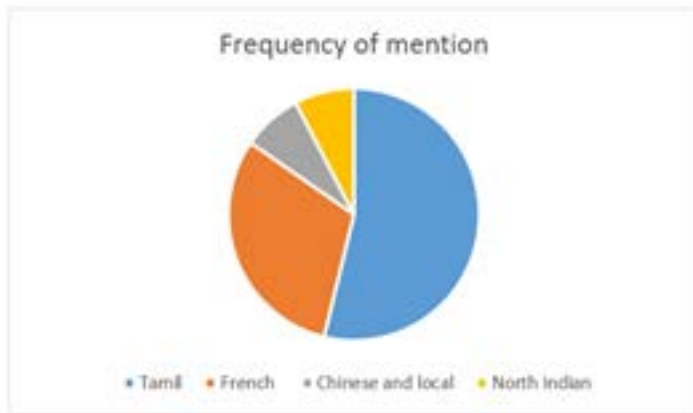
The review and critical analysis of the literature on the colonial culinary history of Pondicherry revealed the following information

The cultural hybridity happened in Pondicherry through three major assimilation stages that lead to 3 distinct form of colonial culinary culture. The stages are renoncants during 1881, soldats 1962 and after 1962 as an option for Tamil locals to opt for French citizenship. During these three stages cultural assimilation happened at different levels leading to evolution of

- Creole Cuisine – reflects deep association with French culinary practices, while the French aspects are dominant with some inclusions of local Tamil ingredients and practices.

- Vietnamese influence Creole Cuisine – reflects association with French and closer association with Vietnamese practices as it is practiced by the soldiers and their families who returned from Vietnam after serving French for the war.
- Pondicherry Cuisine- reflects significant association with French while the aspects of both the culture are equally blended.

**An Analysis of the Top 12 YouTube Food Vlogs on Pondicherry Revealed the Following Results**



**Figure 2 Type of Cuisine Mentioned by the Bloggers at Pondicherry**



**Figure 3 Type of Food Promoted by Bloggers for their Attractiveness**

**An Analysis of the Google Rating of Top 25 Eateries Revealed the Following Outputs**

**Table 1 Eateries and Cuisine Preferred by Tourists**

Sl. No	Restaurant Name	Google Rating	No. of Ratings	Cuisine
1	Villa Shanti	4.3	8600	Continental, North Indian, Italian, French
2	Velo Café & Le Velo Box	4.3	1900	Café, Continental
3	The Spot	4.7	2500	South Indian, Italian
4	The Indian Kaffe Express	3.9	2600	Café, North Indian, Continental
5	Surguru Spot	4	5300	Indian, Chinese

6	Sola Bistro & Bar	4.5	1000	European, Indian, Asian
7	Sicily's	4.1	3900	Italian, Continental
8	Rendezvous Café Restaurant	4.1	3500	Seafood, Mangalorean, Goan
9	Oh Pondi!	4.7	1300	Chettinad, Chinese
10	Mira	4.7	1700	Continental, North Indian, Italian
11	Madame Shanthès Café Restaurant	3.9	4300	Continental, Chinese, North Indian
12	Les Saveurs	4.3	2300	French, European
13	Le Petit Four	4.2	1000	Café, Bakery
14	Le Dupleix	4.2	3300	North Indian, French, Continental
15	La Villa	4.4	1000	Continental, Italian
16	La Tendance (by Le Club)	4	1000	Indian, Continental, Chinese
17	La Maison Rose	4.4	2000	Café, Continental
18	Kamatchi Biryani Veedu	4.1	7200	South Indian, Chinese
19	Hope Café	4.3	3400	Café, Continental
20	Hook Lounge	4.4	1500	North Indian, Chinese, Continental
21	Flaming Dragons Lounge & Nightlife	4.2	3300	Asian
22	Escape in	4.2	5500	North Indian, Continental, Chinese
23	Dilliwaala6	4.1	5100	North Indian, Chinese
24	Chitra's Pub & Kitchen	4.8	2300	Indian, Asian
25	Café Veloute	4.2	1400	French, Italian, North Indian, Thai, Sushi

### Interpretation and Inference

Figure 2 reveals that Pondicherry is a destination where tourists are recommended to try Tamil and French cuisine by the food bloggers. They showcase it based on their observation of the tourist's patronage to those cuisines and through personal experience. The inference from this result and interpretation is that the destination must focus enhancing culinary experience through French and Tamil cuisine or through such a cuisine that offers the essence of both the Tamil and French culinary aspects.

Figure 3 reveals that Pondicherry is recommended by the bloggers for snacks and street food followed by full course menu type of food. Hence the interpretation is that promoting interest snacks and street food from the French influenced Tamil cuisine will create a unique experience for the tourists. Also the preference towards full course type of food reveals that the tourists are inclined to experience unique culture through food.

Table 1 represents the preferences of the tourists which also matches with the bloggers views as they patronize French and Tamil cuisine while they prefer eat out spaces like café and laid down spaces.

Concluding inference and the for the objective 4 which is to curate tourism experience based on the above interpretation can lead to the following outcomes

- For the Entertainment realm which demands passive participation and mild involvement of tourists, snacks and beverages from the Pondicherry cuisine and Creole cuisine can be utilized to create such tourism experience in a café and night club ambience
- For the education realm, culinary interpretation centres, cooking classes and workshops can be established and designed to match the needs of different tourists
- For the aesthetic realm, culinary heritage walks can be combined along with architectural appreciation walks already promoted the department of Tourism and INTACH
- For the escapist realm, meet the people itineraries can be developed in association with practicing community which enables the tourists to delve deeper into the unique way of life and food of the practicing community of Pondicherry cuisine.

### **Suggestion and Recommendation**

Despite the fact that the tourism experience curated by the above mentioned ways will have a significant impact on the tourist's arrival and extension of the stay at the destination, the Public and private sectors responsible for developing and promoting these experiences must ensure that the authenticity of the experience is maintained through proper regulatory measures. Also they have to assure the practicing community of fair economic and social benefit by encouraging and distributing the resources efficiently.

### **Conclusion**

The main focus of this study lies in analyzing the market and utilizing the unique potential offered colonial culinary heritage practiced at the destination as the destination is already reaping benefits from the colonial architectural heritage. Nevertheless it has to be also ensured that glorifying the colonial past must not happen at any point of time, instead the focus must be on showcasing the resilience and endurance of the local Tamil community with the French culture. Such promotion will enhance already existing distinguished image and strengthen the destination in the minds of the tourists and can even become a soft branding asset.

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