CHAPTER – I

INTRODUCTION

The Union Territory of Pondicherry (recently renamed as Puducherry) consists of 4 coastal regions. They are Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam: formerly the territories of French regime. The area of Pondicherry is scattered over three different states in the country – Pondicherry, the capital of the UT is in Tamil Nadu, Karaikal region is embedded in the Nagappattinam and Tiruvarur Districts of Tamil Nadu, Mahe in the west coast of Kerala and Yanam is in Andhra Pradesh.

Pondicherry, the capital of the UT, also a Port city, is located 162 kms south of Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu and 22 kms north of Cuddalore, the Head quarter town of South Arcot district in Tamil Nadu. Pondicherry is surrounded by the Bay of Bengal in the east and by South Arcot district of Tamil Nadu from other three sides. The geographically and culturally disintegrated location of the regions of Puducherry makes it tetrahedral and no other state or union territory of India has this unique and distinct charm. The unique spiritual charm of the place is enhanced by the fact that it was the religious home of the great revolutionary, poet and Saint Sri Aurobindo and his disciple the Mother (Annusamy 2009: 5).

Before falling on the hands of the French, Puducherry was ruled by several dynasties of south and north such as Pallavas, Cholas, Pandya, the Vijayanagar Empire and the Sultan of Bijapur. As the French ruled India for almost 3 centuries, its culture has very much influenced Puducherry and its enclaves.

Puducherry being a union territory with three linguistically variable southern regions maintains five official languages. They are Malayalam of Mahe, Telugu of Yanam, Tamil of Puducherry and Karaikal, French, and English. Indeed it is astonishing that, there are about fifty five languages spoken all over the union territory of Puducherry. Among them, Tamil,
French, Telugu, Malayalam, Kanada, Oriya, Bengali, Hindi and English are much prominent.

As said by R. Padbanaban,

The residents of Puducherry socialize with each other beyond caste, creed and religion. Unlike the other regions of India, human values and human relationships are much respected here. Any stranger may feel at home here (Padbanaban 2002: 10).

Thanks to the French in Puducherry for having granted these heart rendering good qualities to the Puducherrrians through their policy of mix and match unlike the policy of divide and rule handled by the Britishers in the rest of India. Even today, in Puducherry each festival is an occasion of integrity cutting across the religious differences. During the occasion of Christmas, one may find almost all houses decorated with crib and star, and during Pongal sweet pongal is cooked in the mud pot at the entrance of all houses and joyfully distributed among the friends and relatives. Kalladan says that,

Never in the history of Puducherry till now, one may spot a religious and communal cult or riot. This is possible as the land and the natives of Puducherry are naturally the peace lovers (Kalladan 2005: 51).

This was the only base that attracted several noteworthy personalities like Sri Aurobindo, Bharathiyar, V.V.S. Ayer and Sankaradas Swamigal towards this peace loving land. More than what those scholars had benefited from Puducherry; Puducherry has benefited from their revolutionary thoughts and thought provoking writings. It is also a fact to be acknowledged that, that were the writings of those celebrities which tempted some natives of Puducherry to take pen in hand.
The French regime in Puducherry can be appreciated for having encouraged its scholars to actively involve themselves in translating the reputed Tamil literatures like Thirukural into French. As stated by Thillaivanam,

For the convenience of both the French administrators and the Tamil Speakers, a French Tamil dictionary also was compiled (Thillaivanam 2007: 30).

Till this day, here and there, some writings in French from Puducherry spring up amidst an enormous amount of writings in Tamil. Hence, it is evident that the literature of Puducherry has been cherishing from time to time from the early 20th century in the languages of Tamil and French.

As it is rightly said by various scholars, “Literature is the mirror of life.” In the same way, to know much about Puducherry’s rich culture and tradition down from its origin, the literary works produced by Puducherrians in various time spans should help a lot. As Literature from any region or country would naturally speak for the social, political and the cultural background of that particular location with all its due charm, this dissertation titled Puducherry Writings in English: A Historical and Critical Study makes an attempt to find out if the writings in English from Puducherry do any justice in upholding the charming distinct culture of Puducherry in any prescribed manner apart from introducing all the writers of English from Puducherry under the unified umbrella of Puducherry writers in English. In short, the present research tends to explore if the sense of Puducherryness is represented in any of the writings in English born out of the land of Puducherry.

Before plunging deep into the research over this topic, it is essential to learn as per the record by Kalladan, that the language of English was of no prominence in the French occupied territory of Puducherry until the entry of Sri Aurobindo in 1910 from remote Calcutta in order to escape the hands of the British colonizers. Undoubtedly, his arrival at
Puducherry opened a wider chance for the birth of enormous writings in English from this land in the later periods (Kalladan 2002: 69). As English based education was not much prominent in Puducherry in the early years, except a very few like Raja, Jayanti and Clement Lourdes, no native writer could have the flair for English writings. Celebrities such as Sri Nolini Kanta Gupta, Pavitra, A.B. Purani, Sri Dilip Kumar Roy, Champakkalal, Nirodbaran, K.D. Sethna, M. P. Pandit, Satprem, Prithwindra Mukherjee and R.Y. Deshpande who made Puducherry their second home following their fascination over the preachings of Sri Aurobindo, started to carve their writings in English in appreciation of his preachings and doctrines. Though none of those writings were creative in nature, the fact that those scholars made a paved a way for writings in English from Puducherry could never be denied. At present, some contemporary disciples of Sri Aurobindo such as Aju Mukhopadhyay, Manoj Das, Shyam Sunder Jhunjhunwala, Themis, Shyam Kumari, K.M. Shantha, Seema Devi and Ashalata Dash have produced an enormous amount of creative writings in English in addition to their hard core spiritual writings along with other few like B.V Selvaraj, M.L.Thangappa, Rita Nath Keshari, Maria Netto, S. Murali, Sujatha Vijayaragavan and Anusha who came over to Puducherry for their profession or for education, and a handful of natives like Jayanti, Clement Lourdes, P. Raja and B. Sankar.

As writings in Tamil and French had been produced in a large scale from Puducherry at the dawn of twentieth century, it would be unjust to look at the contribution of English to literature in Puducherry leaving aside the prior literature of other languages. In accordance with that, an attempt has been made to give a brief sketch about the contribution of other languages to Puducherry’s culture and literature over here. If literature is one side of a coin, culture is yet another side. Hence, culture and literature are inseparable and they both have to go hand in hand. Establishment of any distinct culture is determined by the history of that particular Country, Region or a territory. As rightly said by Padbanaban,
It goes without saying that the French regime in the union territory of Puducherry has made Puducherry’s charm a stand alone one in the international community (Padbanaban 2002: 35).

In this connection, before analyzing the culture and literature of Puducherry, it becomes vital to look into the rich history of Puducherry right from its origin. In order to meet this requirement, the second chapter of the dissertation titled History, Culture and Literature of Puducherry: an Overview begins its far stretching journey with briefing the ancient history of Puducherry from the early fourth century and moves on to the place of English in Puducherry pointing at the French influenced distinct culture and contribution of various languages to Puducherry’s culture and literature.

As chapter two following this introduction would accomplish the task of throwing light over the historical significance, cultural legacy and literary flair of Puducherry, the dissertation has further been classified into four chapters including that of summing up, facilitating the sequential flow of ideas.

Chapter three titled The Beginnings: A Historical Survey has been divided into 3 segments. While the first segment deals with the early active political involvement, life and spiritual activities of Sri Aurobindo in Puducherry from 1910 to 1950, the second segment sketches down the information about a number of disciples who thronged around Sri Aurobindo from across the nation and even abroad inspired by his thoughts on divine life and his philosophy of yoga. The third segment has been devoted to giving an overview of the establishment and mission of Auroville as a multicultural society envisaged by Mirra Richard: affectionately called as the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Though Sri Aurobindo has innumerable collection of creative writings in English to his credit, none of them had been crafted in Puducherry except his writings on divine life and philosophy of
yoga. More over, an enormous amount of research has already been done on his literary works from different angles by scholars across the globe. Hence the researcher does not intend to analyze the literary contribution of Sri Aurobindo in a broader sense apart from giving an extensive list of his publications. Though the disciples of Sri Aurobindo who opted Puducherry as their second native also wrote many of their writings in English from this land, all were spiritual in nature in appreciation of Sri Aurobindo’s thoughts and philosophy. As this dissertation has been mainly devoted to exploring the creative writings in English from Puducherry, this writings have not been covered under the ambit of Puducherry writings in English beyond a brief historical sketch of each disciple’s stay and activities in Puducherry, their connection with Sri Aurobindo Ashram and an over view of their writings. Prior to the critical study of each contemporary Puducherry writer’s renderings to each genre of English literature in Chapter V.

Chapter IV titled, The Contemporary Sprouts: A Historical Survey, introduces each contemporary Puducherry writer in English with an extensive biography and literary artifacts of each concerned.

As mentioned above the Chapter V titled, Puducherry Writings in English: A Critical Study, has been exclusively devoted to critically analyzing the contribution of each Writer to each genre of English literature such as short story, poetry, novel and autobiography. On going through the Chapter V, any one will be able to understand if any writer has done justice in echoing the distinct culture and tradition of Puducherry in any of their writings.

After a successful attempt of traveling along the significant history, unique and distinct culture, literary artifacts of each language and the appreciation of Puducherry creative writings in English, Chapter VI sums up the entire dissertation and finds out if Puducherry’s
significant history and cultural legacy is echoed in the creative writings in English except in the writings of Puducherry natives.

As the very title of the dissertation implies, the researcher does not intend to criticize or interpret the writings of any of the Puducherry writers in English. The true purpose is only to provide a historical cum critical overview of those writings with the special intention of exploring if the distinct culture and tradition is echoed in any of these writing. Undoubtedly, the researcher is certain that anyone with the taste for Puducherry writings in English would find more interesting stuffs in this dissertation.

Each chapter of this dissertation including that of introduction and summing up has been drafted in a tactful manner with great care, attention and patience. Hence, the researcher strongly feels that this dissertation will certainly receive its due recognition from the research academia.