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THE TIMES OF INDIA

Festival to keep alive Pondy's heritage

TNN | Feb 19, 2015, 05.07 AM IST

PUDUCHERRY: Heritage has always been Puducherry's calling card, it's unique selling point apart from its eclectic mix of sun, sand and spirituality. And now a three-day festival organised by a clutch of city-based NGOs is planning to bring alive the Union territory's built heritage through a series of programmes, seminars and performances. The Pondicherry Heritage Festival, scheduled to be held on February 28 - March 1, "seeks to explore the various facets of the city's culture-its spiritual heritage, its contribution to the world of letters, art and music, its role in the country's maritime trade, traditional and contemporary crafts, its coastline and natural environment" among others, said Ashok Panda, co-convener, Intach, one of the organisers of the heritage fest.

A first for Puducherry, the organisers - People for Pondicherry's Heritage, PondyCAN, Alliance Francaise, Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient, Institut Francaise de Pondicherry, the tourism and culture department of the Puducherry government apart from Intach - want to make the heritage fest a yearly affair incorporating natural and gastronomic heritage from next year.

"A good 60% of the tourists who come to Puducherry are interested in its heritage so a better preserved city could draw more tourists and become an economic asset," said Olivier Litvine, director, Alliance Francaise. The festival will offer the public the unique opportunity to access many heritage buildings which are private properties.

As many as 14-15 heritage locations and buildings will be used as venues for performances, discussions and exhibitions. The performances include a sitar recital by local artist Soham Munim, a parade of drummers from Auroville-based Svaram, a musical performance by Auroville-based Adishakti among others.

The venues are spread across the city from the Alliance Francaise auditorium at Suffren Street, Gratitude Heritage Guest House on Romain Rolland Street, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Library at St Martin Street, Institut Francaise de Pondichery on Saint Louis Street, Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient on Dumas Street, Cluny Embroidery on Romain Rolland Street to the Academy House

north of the old distillery. Both the Puducherry chief minister and the French ambassador to India will be part of the inauguration ceremony.

Puducherry's famed reputation as a heritage city took a beating when the nearly two-centuries-old Marie building collapsed a couple of months ago.

However the government has now taken an in principle decision not to demolish its heritage buildings and every year a couple of government-owned heritage structures would be restored. Intach is already working on the Subramania Bharati Museum and has submitted a proposal to the Centre to include Puducherry as one of India's heritage and smart cities.