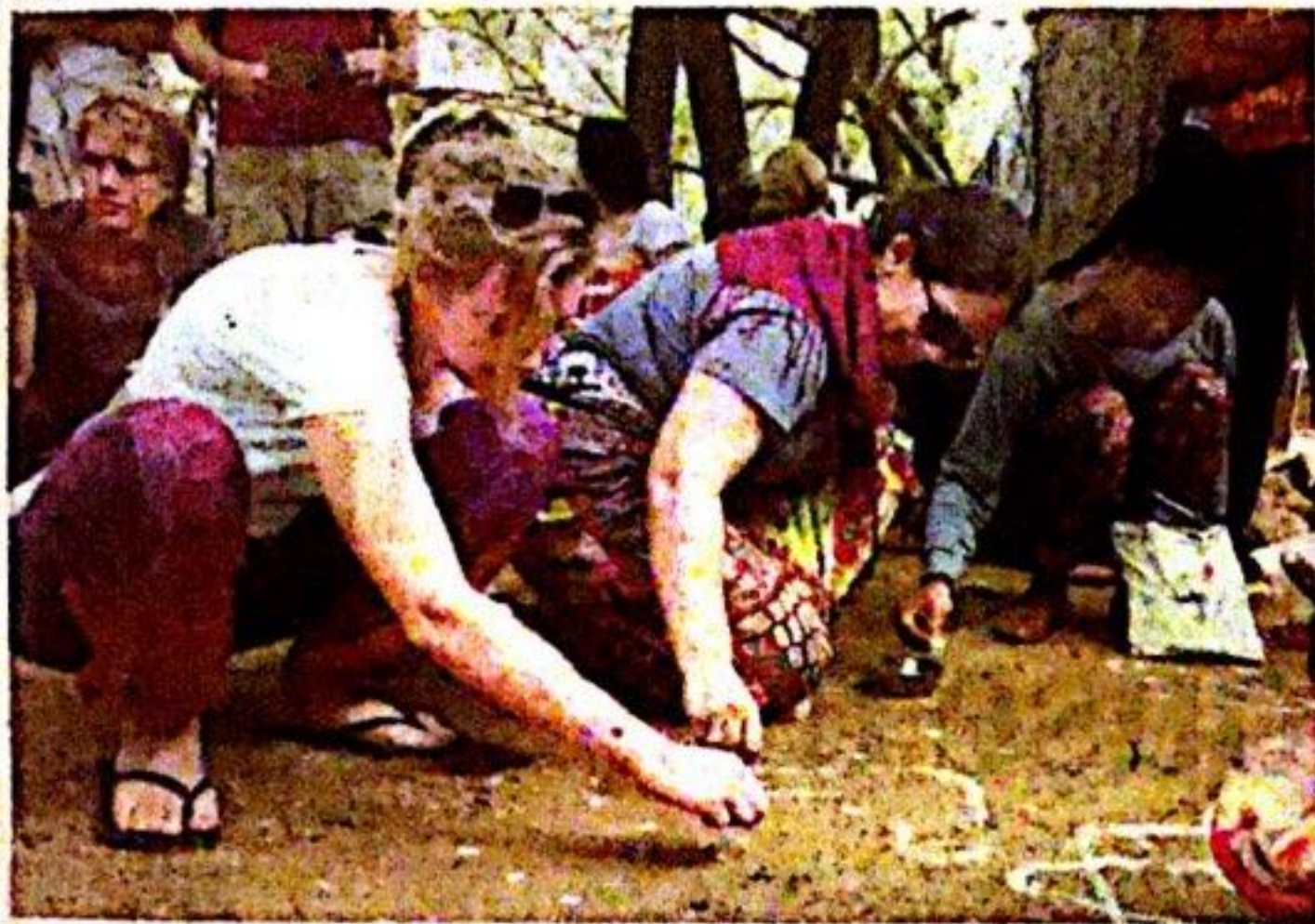


Tourists have a feel of villages

Alankuppam project is the government's first rural tourism project



Tourists participate in local activities as part of the programmes organised by Mohanam Cultural Centre. (Right) Jouhier Marta, Tascon-Mennetrier, and Loic Fremont, the delegation from Ille-et-Vilaine, at an interview with *The Hindu* in Puducherry.. - PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT, S.S.KUMAR

Annie Philip

PUDUCHERRY: For a few years now, the Union government has been looking at tapping rural tourism as a 'strategy for rural development,' considering its vast rural population and falling employment opportunities in the villages.

The Union Ministry of Tourism had launched the 'Explore Rural India' sub-brand in 2008 under its 'Incredible India' campaign aimed at extending the stay of tourists and providing livelihood opportunities to the local villagers. The idea is to help tourists experience village life by getting involved in routine rural activities and see firsthand the skills of the local people.

According to the description of the rural tourism scheme by the Union Ministry of Tourism, 'counter-urbanisation' and growing interest in heritage, culture and environmental consciousness have helped in the growth of rural tourism.

The Alankuppam village in Puducherry, close to Auroville, was among the places identified in 2011 by the Union Ministry of Tourism with potential for rural tou-

rism, for its expertise in crafts. Now, with the tie-up of the Puducherry government and the Ille-et-Vilaine (Brittany region, France) administration to develop the Alankuppam rural circuit under the 2nd call for Joint Indo-French Projects in Support of Decentralised Cooperation for the year 2015-16, this project marks the government's first rural tourism project in Puducherry.

The Ille-et-Vilaine administration has expertise in coastal and eco-friendly tourism and wants to exchange knowledge on this front with Puducherry.

Tascon-Mennetrier, councillor, vice-president of Ille-et-Vilaine, who headed the delegation on a visit here, said, "It has been often observed that tourism does not benefit the local community as they are not involved. It has also been seen as detrimental to the environment. In the projects we have taken up in Puducherry, we want to make sure that it is a bottom-up approach, and is eco-friendly. If the local community is involved, the project will be sustainable and it will also remove chances of

resentment."

The Chinna Veerampattinam Sustainable Eco-Tourism Project which has been funded by Ille-et-Vilaine uses this approach of 'integrated coastal zone management' according to Ms. Mennetrier.

The Alankuppam rural tourism circuit is aimed at extending the stay of tourists in Puducherry which has thus far been an average of around a day-and-a-half. Alankuppam and its neighbouring Sanjeevi Nagar villages are home to around a dozen units involved in making terracotta, ceramic, recycled paper, crochet and leather products.

The Mohanam Cultural Centre in Sanjeevi Nagar headed by P. Balasundaram has already been involved in linking artisans from the two villages in sharing expertise and providing them a platform to sell their products through ecotourism measures.

Mr. Balasundaram and his team will also be assisting Ille-et-Vilaine in the Alankuppam rural tourism circuit. "We are hoping to establish a village community rural heritage museum which imparts craft training

and takes tourists on visits to herbal gardens and other activities. The museum will be a living, breathing space which will play an important educational role and promote local handicrafts, and it will be run by self-help groups. This will bring revenue to the local community here," said Mr. Balasundaram.

"The government has been quite supportive in their interest and guidance for this project," he added. A steering committee with stakeholders will monitor the two-year Alankuppam project.

"The rural heritage museum will not just be for the promotion of handicrafts but also let tourists experience the rural way of life. Tourists will be able to relish local cuisine. We are also exploring the option of accommodation as part of this project," said Ms. Mennetrier.

Cooperation in the field of tourism services, training and exchange of good practices are also part of the agreement between Ille-et-Vilaine and Puducherry. "The main objective of this cooperation is to develop a strong partnership, exchange information and expertise," said Ms. Mennetrier.