

WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

# MADRAS MUSINGS

Vol. XXIII No. 22

March 1-15, 2014

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## Better times for Chepauk Palace? – One wing to be restored

(By The Editor)

At long last, work is to begin on the restoration of *Khalsa Mahal*, one of the two wings of historic Chepauk Palace. This is a little more than two years after it was gutted in a fire. The tardy beginning notwithstanding, it is a matter for cheer that the authorities have considered restoration as an alternative to demolition – something that they are more familiar with.

*Khalsa Mahal* was burnt down in January 2012 following a short circuit. The building was asking for it, as had been repeatedly pointed out in this publication. Shoddy maintenance, ad-hoc electric wiring, seepage of water due to arbitrary construction of toilets and the dumping of old files and wooden furniture, all of them contributed to a deadly combination that did its work thoroughly when the fire accident happened. The building has remained a mouldering ruin ever since, awaiting official action.

But there are some positive elements to the story. Barring a hasty announcement by a Minister in the immediate aftermath of the fire that the building would be demolished, the administration made it quite clear that it was interested in saving the structure. A committee of three experts was asked to study the possibility and, though this body did not have a single conservation architect in its composition, the final recommendation was for restoration, even if the terms for it were vague at best. This by itself was a marked departure from earlier incidents of fire in historic buildings – Moore Market, Spencer's and Gandhi Illam being three examples – where restoration was not even considered, despite pleas.

What was even more encouraging was that the Government in June 2012 decided that it wanted to make the restoration of *Khalsa Mahal* a model exercise, which would be the blueprint for such restorations in future. It was then said that the restoration, as and when it happened, would not be on the basis of the stifling PWD norms, where the rates and terms of contract were always based on new construction. It is not clear if that same generosity of spirit has survived and if the proposed restoration is on those lines. It has, however, now been announced that the work is to begin in the next few weeks. The task is being entrusted to a Mysore-based conservation architect, who has earlier worked on the restoration

(Continued on page 7)



Khalsa Mahal awaiting restoration!

## Legalising the illegal – will Court ruling stop it?

The saga of illegal constructions in the city continues. The latest twist in the story is the High Court of Madras striking down two Government Orders (GOs) passed in 2012. These were hastily passed to overcome the Supreme Court ruling of the same year which ordered the demolition of all illegal structures in the city constructed after July 27, 1999. The GOs sought to move the cut off date to July 1, 2007. The High Court, rightly interpreting this as giving legal sanction to a whole host of illegal buildings constructed in the interim, has come down heavily on the administration-builder nexus. But that does not mean that Chennai which, at a conservative estimate, has over 100,000 illegal buildings, is going to become free of them overnight.

The Consumer Action Group was the first to take this matter up seriously and bring it to the notice of the High Court. This was in 1999, when the Government declared a one-time amnesty to the violators whereby all defaults would be condoned after the payment of a fine. This by itself was questionable, as money can never

set right environmental wrongdoing, but what was ironic was that the Government repeatedly sought to extend the deadline for the amnesty. And when the High Court struck down the amnesty, the Government sought to issue an ordinance whereby a status quo would be maintained on all illegal structures. If this was not an

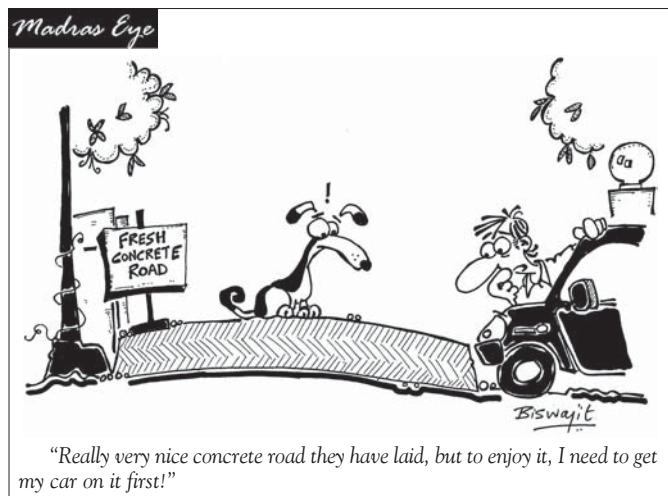
Despite several judgements by the High Court and the Supreme Court, all in favour of sealing and demolishing the illegal structures, no action has been taken under some pretext or the other. One of the most laughable excuses given by the Government has been that the interests of hawkers would be affected. This despite the fact that no judgement even mentioned hawkers, and violations were all by big names in business. Yet another argument was that those employed by the establishments operating from these illegal buildings would be thrown out of jobs. Whoever comes up with these excuses knows clearly the way our governments indulging in populist schemes work. There is also a fear that immediate action would further depress the recession-hit construction industry. Certainly, none in the administration would be willing to take decisive action on demolition, especially in an election year. It is reliably learnt that, even now, the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority is only contemplating legal advice on

• by A Special Correspondent

instance of Government protecting law-breaking builders, what else can be?

There has been a sense of satisfaction among activists that the Court has struck down the GOs and demanded action. But there is also a lurking and a very real fear that there will be very little action. As has come to light during the trial, there are strong links between the builders and the authorities. It is in the interests of these groups that such structures survive and more such are built. They are not concerned with long-term effects of such constructions on the environment and the populace.

(Continued on page 7)



# What's needed for urban renewal here ▼



George Town today – chaos everywhere.



To meet the challenges posed by the core areas of aging cities like Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai, planners have suggested two-prong approaches which include urban renewal and planned development of new towns in the periphery. These measures have to go hand-in-hand to achieve the desired results. Attempts are being made in Chennai to do this.

Chennai, the fourth largest metropolis in India, is of considerable economic importance. The foundation for Chennai, formerly known as Madras, was laid in 1639 by the English East India Company which constructed Fort St. George to expand its trade. Due to a lot of activity in and around the Fort and the development of the Port, Royapuram and the Railway, the growth around the Fort got accentuated.

To the north of the Fort, an area covering 5.5 sq. km – bound on the north by Old Jail Road, on the south by General Hospital Road, on the east by North Beach Road now known as Rajaji Salai, and on the west by Wall Tax Road, now VOC Road – is knit by narrow lanes and has become the home for numerous speciality markets such as cloth, gems, jewellery, other goods, banking, etc. Named after George, the Prince of Wales, George Town emerged as an area of high growth in trade, commerce and residential accommodation, leading to congestion.

George Town, due to historic reasons, has many heritage buildings, public institutions and commercial establishments. Though much of the character of George Town remains intact in the nature and variety of its streetscape, many of the old buildings are a constant target of large-scale commercialisation. The streets and lanes form a maze.

To relieve congestion, steps were taken to remove the wholesale markets from George Town to Koyambedu which has been developed in an area of 296 acres to house the wholesale traders of perishable goods, foodgrains, textiles and other basic amenities. The perishable goods market (flowers, vegetables and fruits) is in an extent of 51 acres in Koyambedu. Meanwhile, the CMDA and Chennai Corporation are struggling to evict the wholesale flower traders from Badrian Street, George Town.

While the foodgrain merchants have agreed to move out from George Town to Koyambedu, the textile merchants have not shown the same willingness to move to Koyambedu. Meanwhile, the CMDA has had to hand over about 75 acres of land earmarked for the textile shops to Metro Rail for its depot and terminal facilities. Hence it is unlikely that the textile shops will move from George Town.

(Continued on page 7)

## Short Menace Service

The Man from Madras Musings was a witness to the whole thing and so you can take it as being the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. MMM was in the driveway of a commercial building parking his car when he noticed a man walking down the drive, his attention completely riveted to his cell phone, which had just indicated that he had received a message. In the process of reading and replying to it, the man did not notice a car coming up the drive. The driver's attention was equally diverted to his own cell phone, through which he had just sent a message and was in the process of checking if he had a response.

The end result can be imagined. There was a screeching of wheels and the car came to a quick halt, narrowly missing the man who was walking and reading his messages. Which was all to the good, for if the car had not halted, the man's life would have come to a complete halt. The two, driver and pedestrian, looked daggers at each other for a moment and then burst out laughing. It transpired that they were sending messages to each other all the while! What was forgotten in all this was the fact that there could have been a near fatality that was luckily avoided. In the end, it was MMM's sang-froid that was affected.

There's a divinity that shapes our ends, wrote the bard, but to continue with that quote, MMM has to say that cell phone users in our city rough-hew the process quite a bit. Guardian angels of our citizens must be having a full time job rescuing their wards from sticky ends caused by the cell phones.

That said, MMM has been spending quite a bit of time pondering over the various people who use cell phones while they are on the go. There is one variety that uses what is called the hands-free. The equipment here is of two kinds, one is a pair of headphones and the other is a small electronic gadget that is worn on the ear like an ornament and goes by the name of blue tooth, by which MMM does not mean a poisoned denture. Either way, be it headphone or blue tooth, it keeps the user's ears eternally busy, though the hands may be free to do other things such as driving, and also sending messages. This variety of users gives us the impression of indulging in soliloquy, while they are in reality involved in a deep conversation, oblivious of everything else.

The next one is exclusive to the two-wheeler who is law-abiding to the extent of using a helmet. The shield for the skull is not so much used for protection as it is as a convenient receptacle for the cell phone, which snuggles up to

the ear. That way conversation can be carried on merrily.

The last variety is the worst of the lot. Both car and two-wheeler users belong to this group. They keep the phone between the shoulder and the tilted head in order to carry on conversing. The head is ever at an angle so that the world is seen from new perspectives. As for the body, particularly if it is on a two-wheeler, it is at a completely opposite angle. What with the two-wheeler by itself leaning in a different angle, such people give us a full understanding of what Picasso was all about. The only positive in this is that the user cannot send messages. MMM is, however, quite sure that technology will soon find a way out.

### SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

#### Indo-Saracenic joke

The powers-that-be are focussing on one end of the alimentary canal, ladling out food of quality at throwaway prices. At least that is what *The Man from Madras Musings* understands from a casual read of the newspapers and a more careful perusal of posters, banners and graffiti. Incomparable giver is how the brain behind the scheme is being hailed.

Be that as it may, and more power to the scheme, what MMM cavils about is the lack of attention to the other end of the digestive process. Food is in plenty, but what of the er...waste process? The populace, having eaten its fill, needs to ease itself too. In the absence of suitable facilities for this, it chooses to do so in full public view. The process, the remains and the odours are not giving our city a good image. And MMM who, as his faithful readership knows, has to at times take overseas visitors around to showcase the metropolis, is at a loss for words.

The other day, MMM was wandering around the George Town area. The hour was early and that district was not yet its bustling self. MMM and a young friend were busy clicking away on a camera and at the same time were careful enough to see what lay on the roads and which could not be trod underfoot. Having thus roamed around, MMM and friend came across a particularly busy thoroughfare, crowded not with pedestrians, vehicles and vendors but with men and children going about what can only be termed as early morning ablutions. Some waved at MMM and friend, while others having decided that it was best not to be photographed covered their faces, leaving other nether regions exposed. It was MMM who had to shut his eyes.

MMM's friend giggled and pointed at a building just behind the squatters. It was a free latrine. And yet not one of those on the road wanted to use it, such being its level of cleanliness. Obviously it had never been cleaned after inauguration.

It was a saddened MMM who walked along, focussing on the lovely Indo-Saracenic buildings that stood on either side. And then, at the rear of the General Post Office, MMM paused. He saw a set of human figurines carved on the wall. For some reason he had never observed them before. And then having looked carefully, MMM and companion broke out in smiles. These widened into grins and then peals of laughter, much to the surprise of the few passersby.

Robert Fellowes Chisholm, the architect, was evidently a man with a sense of humour. And it was obvious that the nuisance that MMM had complained about earlier in this tract existed even during that master designer's time. What else could be the meaning of this particular carving given the figurine's manner of sitting, the satisfied smile and, above all, what lies below?



#### Policing real estate?

The Man from Madras Musings saw this at a fairly upmarket neighbourhood and could not help wondering if the city's police was being taken for a ride. Ostensibly an advertisement for seat belt usage, it reads more like a sales pitch for a private developer!



– MMM

# An Indo-Ceylon dream of the 20th Century



The inauguration of the Pamban Bridge Indo-Ceylon rail connection on February 24, 1914 (MM, February 16th) served the Island nation well. By 1911, the plantation companies had 530,000 South Indian Tamil workers working in Ceylon. They had travelled from Tuticorin to Colombo and, earlier, from Thondi to the north Ceylon coast. The rail-ship link made possible easier travel for this labour, and for the development of more Rubber and Tea plantations. By 1963, Ceylon had a population of 1,123,000 South Indian Tamil workers, or 10.6% of the Island's population.

\* \* \*

The cyclone of December 22, 1964 lashed the entire sea facing side of Pamban Island which bore the brunt of the furious cyclone from the Gulf of Mannar. That the Rameswaram Temple complex, which faces the Palk Bay, was saved was a miracle. However, the good job done by the Indian Railways within three months enabled pilgrims and tourists to reach the temple and the lovely beach walking knee-deep in the still waters of the Bay.

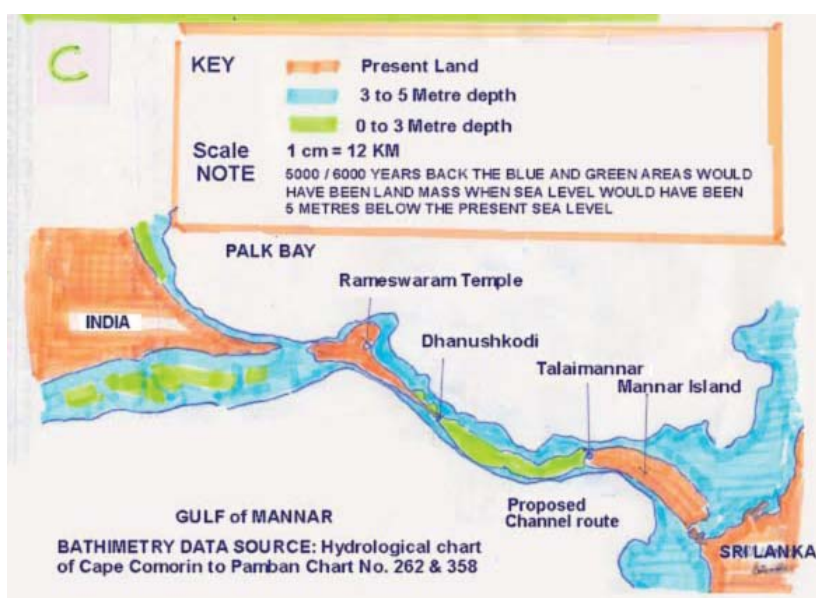
Geological evidence suggests that Adam's Bridge connected Pamban Island to Mannar Island in Ceylon. Pamban Island is 61.8 sq.km in extent and is about 70 to 80 km long and satellite images make it look like the head of a crane with its long beak, at the tip of which is located Dhanushkodi and the steamer pier, while the Pamban Bridge is located at the bird's neck connecting it to the mainland, and Rameswaram town is located at the eye of this bird's head. Rameswaram has a population of about 40,000 engaged in fishing and tourism.

The Tourism Development Corporation of India estimates 3000 tourists a day visit Rameswaram and on important festive occasions some 7,000 to 10,000 a day. This works out to more than a million a year, perhaps a record for a place with a 40,000 population.

About 75 per cent of Pamban Island is made up of white sand, 1-2 metres above sea level and the high ground is not more than 12 metres above sea level. I wonder if any effort has been made by the Forest Department to grow trees like casuarinas, which can tolerate such sandy tracts.

\* \* \*

With Dhanushkodi off the map of India, the steamer service connecting India



to Ceylon has also come to an end. But the Pamban Bridge now promotes pilgrimage and tourism to the world famous temple dedicated to Shiva and is associated with Lord Rama. Wikipedia says, "Temple records show that Rama's Bridge or Rama Setu was completely above sea level until it broke down due to an immense -cyclone in 1480 CE," and adds, "the temple was built by the Pandyan Dynasty in 12th Century, but was quite ancient and Tamil saints have worshipped from the 7th Century." Earlier to that it was housed in a hut. The ruler of Sri Lanka, Parakrama Bahu (1153-1186), contributed to the temple and was involved in the construction of the sanctum sanctorum of the temple, and at a later date the King of Jaffna Jayaveera (1380-1410) shipped stone blocks, from Trincomalee's famous temple region to renovate the Rameswaram temple.

\* \* \*

A tectonic map shows two submerged volcanoes. One of them is at 2000 m depth, some 200 km south of Kanniyakumari, and the other at 3000 m depth, 300 to 400 km east of Galle, Sri Lanka. The one near India erupted in 1938 and the one near Galle erupted in 1993.

How frequently do these volcanoes erupt? I do not know the situation at present, but the fact that pumice stones that float are even now found near Rameswaram indicates that they have been erupting for over thousands of years and this is also mentioned in the *Ramayana*. The cyclone may also have had an earthquake origin along with a volcanic one.

K.V.S. Krishna  
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## OUR READERS WRITE



### The brewers

In one of my very early responses to V. Sriram's well-informed notes on Madras street names recently, I had mentioned Thomas Honeywell, a pioneer brewer in the Madras Presidency. Most probably he did own a brewery in Madras prior to the 1900s. In 1872, he wanted to open a brewery in Madras. But the Board of Revenue did not encourage the proposal due to difficulties in sorting out customs tariff and excise levies on its production. Though what happened subsequently is not known, a further probe may yield more details.

Honeywell ran a very successful brewery business in the Nilgiris from as early as 1857, as referred to by Dr. A. Raman (MM, February 1st). However, the history of beer in the Nilgiris goes back to 1826 and its excellent malt was a 'hot' favourite of the European troops. Seven brewery companies once ex-

isted in the Nilgiris. The Badagas of the Nilgiris, however, made a huge success out of the English-introduced potato, cabbage, etc. (which propelled them into the economic enterprises of modern times). Casks of beer offered them no temptation.

Apropos Yeldham's Road in the same issue, the following information may be of some interest. According to church burial records, Yeldham's Road is said to be named after one Captain Richard Yeldham. He was Commissary of Musters, King's Troops, in Madras in 1800. In later years, he rose to become the Treasurer and Secretary to the Government Bank and died aged 68 years (1820). He lies buried in St. George's Cathedral Cemetery.

Yeldham was a great friend of Col. J.G. Scott, Commandant, Seringapatnam Garrison. Col. Scott's highly esteemed wife Caroline Isabella died in childbirth on April 19, 1817.

The mother and child lie buried in Seringapatnam cemetery. After their death, Col. Scott deserted his bungalow (with its famous piano) on the banks of the Kaveri. The story of the deserted house formed the subject of a poignant poem penned by Capt. Yeldham. Col. Scott was a fellow officer with Wellesley (later Duke of Wellington) and died as a Major-General in 1833 in London.

Rev. Philip K. Mulley  
 Anaihatti Road  
 Kotagiri 643 217  
 The Nilgiris

### Humour in S & S

In the past few issues Short 'N' Snappy column has become more enjoyable. MMM's sense of humour is more evident and it has invariably brought a smile to my weary face. But the February 16th issue really made me laugh aloud when MMM had to enter in the application form his 'correct father's name.' Please keep it up.

Dr. P.S. Venkateswaran  
 surgeonvenkat@yahoo.com

\* \* \*

I really loved the article by MMM in Short 'N' Snappy column of MM, February 16th. I had a very good laugh and the article reminded me of the now

forgotten magazine of Madras, *Aside*. Can't someone bring it out again?

C. B. Rameshkumaar  
 rameshkumaar57@yahoo.co.in

Editor's Note: Aren't we enough?

### Smile awhile

Although telegrams no longer exist, I wish they did. But they did cause poignant situations as in this instance. In

1965 when an Army officer was serving in the North, he was asked by his relatives wishing to visit him in winter how many blankets they should bring with them. He sent a telegram 'EIGHT'. His relatives received the telegram reading "Best Wishes for a Happy Married Life".

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## CHENNAI HERITAGE

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(Current Affairs questions are from the period February 1st to 15th. Questions 11 to 20 pertain to Chennai and Tamil Nadu.)

1. Name the new India-born CEO of Microsoft.
2. On February 1st, which Indian city became the first to get a monorail service?
3. Name the acclaimed actor and Oscar winner for his performance in *Capote* found dead on February 2nd.
4. February 7th was the centenary of the debut of which iconic film character?
5. Why has star SMSS J031300.36-670839.3, about 6000 light years from Earth, created a buzz in the world of astronomy?
6. Name the new President of the Indian Olympic Association?
7. Name the book by Wendy Doniger that has been banned by India as 'blasphemy'.
8. Which 21-year-old athletics record was broken by Frenchman Renaud Lavillenie in Donetsk on February 15th?
9. Which State has become the first and only one in the country to achieve 100 per cent sanitation?
10. Sushil Koirala is the new Prime Minister of which SAARC country?

\* \* \*

11. Which Chennai firm, known for its horological business, produced the 1939 mythological film *Vishnu Leela*?
12. Name the Englishman, known as the 'Father of the Indian Army', who raised the Madras Levies in Cuddalore in 1746.
13. Which Fort was the capital of the Madras Presidency between 1746 and 1752 when the French occupied Madras?
14. Which dam designed by Col. W.M. Ellis between 1925 and 1934 was the largest dam in the world at the time of its completion?
15. What was started and named after his son by Raghunandan Saran in September 1948 at Ennore?
16. s.s. *Gaelia* and s.s. *Lawoe* were the first two ships of which famous maritime company founded in the late 1906?
17. The 202-year-old Asiatic Society of Madras is now known by what name?
18. What 3½ mile structure was conceived by the Company's Chief Engineer John Call and built by Paul Benfield in the 1770s?
19. Which great literary figure's *samadhi* is at Nattarasankottai in Sivaganga District?
20. Whom did Madras beat to win its first Ranji Trophy in 1955?

(Answers on page 8)

## The Chitales of Chennai – Part I

# Designing landmarks pre-Independence

The Chitales have been leading architects in South India for the last 81 years. The present head of the firm, Srikrishna Laxman Chitale (Krish as he is popularly known), is also 81 years old because L.M. Chitale & Son, as it was known then, was founded in 1932, the year Krish was born. His father, Laxman Mahadeo Chitale, established himself as a freelance architect and Town Planner in Madras that year.

L.M. Chitale was born in Ratnagiri District, Maharashtra, in 1892 in a family of limited means. A bright boy from his early school days, Chitale discovered that he had an inborn gift for drawing, which impressed Sanjay Rao Gaekwad, the Maharaja of Baroda, who had established the Kala Bhavan Technical Institute, a school of arts and science, in Baroda. Chitale got a full scholarship to study there and he decided to opt for a draughtsman's course which offered good employment opportunities those days. Besides, the course offered him a stepping stone to do architecture. Dame luck was also in Chitale's favour, for he was noticed by H.V. Lanchester, a leading architect in England, who hired him as his Assistant to help him on the many projects that he was working on in India. When Lanchester sailed for Home in 1922, he took young Chitale with him.

Chitale enrolled himself as a student of the School of Architecture of London University and later studied Town Planning at the School of Town Planning of the same university. He also qualified as an Associate and, later, as a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

It was during his stay in England that Chitale discovered that he had a flair for writing too. While busy with his work as an architect, he also did a correspondence course in journalism. During his seven years in England, he wrote many articles which were published in journals both in India and England. Writing was to become his regular hobby in later years.

In depression-affected 1929, Chitale returned to India and joined the PWD, Madras, as an Assistant Consulting Architect (ACA). Though he performed well there, he soon realised that he could not become a Consulting Architect (CA) as the post was reserved for British officers.

By then he was married to Leelavathi from Tarapore near



The Life Insurance Corporation Building.

Bombay. Nevertheless, he decided to take the plunge, resigned from the Department, and established L.M. Chitale & Son, the first Indian architects' firm in South India, where the scene was dominated by British architects. That same year Chitale was blessed with a baby boy who was named Srikrishna.

No sooner had L.M. Chitale announced his new venture than clients came knocking at his door. His first big assign-

• by R.V. Rajan\*

ment was building the Administrative Building, Convocation Hall and Library at Annamalai University in Chidambaram. Impressed by the work, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan commissioned him to work on the buildings of Andhra University. Chitale became a friend of Dr. Radhakrishnan and later built his beautiful home *Girija* on Edward Elliot's Road, Mylapore.

Chitale's reputation as an architect who could build quality structures at low cost brought him assignments from several other universities.

But, meanwhile, he had designed the noteworthy Oriental Insurance Building on Armenian Street in George Town. It was the first multistorey building in Madras, having six floors, a basement, and a corner entrance and was constructed within 15 months, a record of sorts at the time. The windowless basement with special steel reinforcement, fully air-conditioned, was to serve as a vault for the safe deposit of valuables.



The Oriental Insurance Building.

This vault was later taken over by another enterprising business family of Madras – the Kotharis (D C & H C Kothari) – who founded South India's first safe deposit company under the name of Madras Safe Deposit Company Ltd.

When World War II broke out, Chitale was asked to lend his expertise to Government. He was appointed its Regional Camouflage Officer. The job involved rendering objects on earth less conspicuous to the enemy in the air through ingenious use of dummies, paints, nets and vegetation. Camouflaging helped objects to be distorted or concealed. He spread the message of civil defence not only through his writings but also through his talks called 'Lantern Lectures' – because he used a technology which was later adapted to project cinema slides in movie halls.

Chitale lost his wife Leelavathi in 1941 and was left with the responsibility of bringing up his 8-year-old son Krish as a single parent, which had its own impact on the boy's life. Immediately after the War, Chitale was back in business as an architect. During the following years he was to create buildings for several insurance companies, like National Insurance and Indian Mutual Insurance. His best known project was the 14-storey skyscraper that he, as associate architect, helped build for the Life Insurance Corporation of India on Mount Road. It is one of the important landmarks of the city. Work on it had started as the United India Insurance headquarters before

insurance was nationalised. Chitale also built several colleges, universities, cinema houses, government buildings, and monuments.

Some well-known buildings that he built after the War included the Ram Mohan Palace, Ernakulam, for the Maharaja of Cochin, temples for Masonic lodges, a monument for Poet Subramanila Bharati in Ettayapuram, the Central Leather Research Institute (CLRI), Adyar, and the Reserve Bank of India building in Nagpur.

While he was seriously pursuing his career, he dreamt of introducing architecture as a subject of study at the university level in Madras. This dream became a reality during his lifetime. He served as the Chairman of Board of Studies in Drawing and Architecture, University of Madras, during 1940-46, and also on the All India Board of Technical Studies in Architecture and Regional Planning.

Chitale was a visionary and had foreseen several things for the city which came true later. For his pioneering service as an architect and town planner, the Indian Government honoured him with Padma Shri award in 1957. Three years later, L.M. Chitale passed away at the age of 68. His son Srikrishna Laxman Chitale (S.L. Chitale) was left to carry forward the firm that had become Chitale & Son.

(To be concluded)

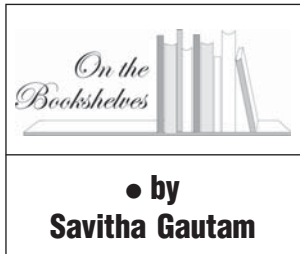
\* Feedback on rvrajan42@gmail.com

# Following medical trails & tigers' too

This year's 'The Hindu Lit For Life' fest was much more than being just a meeting place of word wizards and book lovers. It was about authorship, debates, issues and the general state of Indian publishing, as envisioned by the locals and visiting writers. Among those who came visiting, I pick two writers to write about today for personal reasons. One of them influenced me a lot with the compassion with which he treated the stricken when he wrote about the then terrifying disease called AIDS, while the other initiated me into the wonderful world of wildlife.

Among the word wizards who participated in the fest, standing out for his stature,

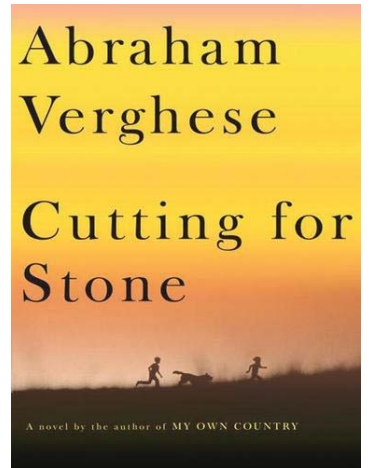
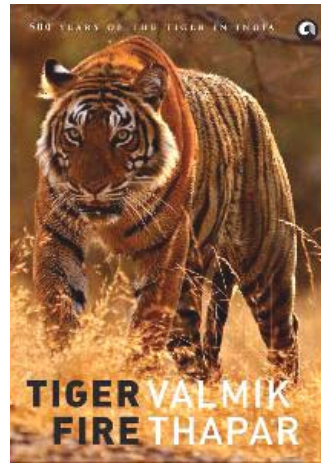
speech and strong connections to Chennai was Dr. Abraham Verghese, Professor for the Theory and Practice of Medicine at Stanford University Medical School and who



was dubbed 'The Human Whisperer'. He is an alumnus of Madras Medical College (he got his MBBS degree here).

Having been deeply affected by his first two books, *My Own Country* (where the AIDS stigma is broken down) and *My Tennis Partner* (another touching tale, this time of a drug user), it was a wonderful moment to meet and exchange a few words with him.

That led me to his first novel, *Cutting for Stone*, published a little while earlier. Semi-autobiographical, the story travels across cities and continents – Madras to Addis Ababa, Asia to Africa – to tell the tale of conjoined twins who are born to a nun and a doctor. The first several pages are dedicated to Sister Mary Joseph Praise and Dr. Thomas Stone, and to the birth of the boys. Us-



ing hardcore medical jargon and graphic descriptions, Verghese paints a realistic picture of hospitals and medical situations which are gripping and gruesome at the same time.

Like his earlier books, *Cutting For Stone* too draws you into the vortex of life and death, hope and despair, freshness and fatigue. And as the narrator's search for his father goes from page to page, you too are searching with Marion. Along the way, human emotions, strengths and weaknesses are laid bare for all to see and identify with. And that too in words that are strung together beautifully and seamlessly.

If you loved Verghese's earlier non-fiction works, you will love this one too. And if you have never read him before, try this.

A word of caution: Parts of this book are not really for the weak-hearted.

\* \* \*

Another speaker who left an impression, not just because who he was but what he stood for, was Valmik Thapar. His book *Tiger Fire: 500 Years of Tiger In India (Aleph)* is a must have for wildlife, especially tiger, lovers.

Arguably, the most magnificent predator to walk the earth, the tiger, has been the topic of much debate ever since its numbers have begun to dwindle over the recent decades. Feared, worshipped, admired, photographed and, of course, hunted, the animal has cap-

tered the imagination of humans since recorded history.

Who is better placed to helm this project than perhaps the world's foremost authority on the Indian tiger? Here, Thapar knits together personal accounts, myths, and stories from the past to come up with a comprehensive tome, complete with stunning photographs and illustrations.

The contents of the book range from Emperor Babur's encounter with the animal in the 16th Century to tales from naturalists, writers, photographers and tiger enthusiasts down the centuries, including François Bernier, Walter Campbell, Thomas Williamson, F.W. Champion, Kesri Singh, Jim Corbett, Hugh Allen, Richard Perry, Arjan Singh, George Schaller, Kenneth Anderson, M. Krishnan, Peter Jackson, Fateh Singh Rathore, Kim Sullivan, Tejbir Singh, Aisyal and Anjali Singh, Aditya 'Dicky' Singh, K. Ullas Karanth, Dharmendra Khandal and Dhritiman Mukherjee.

Culled from over a million words (both published and unpublished) on the animal and several thousand photographs, the accounts and pictures assembled show us the tiger in extraordinary and compelling detail.

Using his unequalled knowledge of wild tigers, derived from almost 40 years of observing them in their natural habitat, Thapar presents a lasting testimonial to an animal that has dazzled the human race.

## Better times for Chepauk?

(Continued from page 1)

of the Madras Club and Ripon Building.

There are bound to be great difficulties and challenges ahead. The work is going to be labour intensive and whether it will be possible to complete it within the specified one-year period is doubtful. It also makes you wonder at the ways of the bureaucracy – two years to decide on restoration and then

just a year to complete it! The contract has strict terms to use the existing materials as far as possible. How feasible this will be, given that most of it has survived as debris exposed to the elements for the past two years, is open to question. And it is to be hoped that restoration will be faithful to the spirit of such an exercise and not like what was done at the Madras GPO after a fire ravaged its central hall. That was a sham

restoration where the only cause for joy was that the structure was allowed to survive.

What is sad, however, is that there is no move to restore the other wing – *Humayun Mahal* – which is in a precarious condition after a roof collapse. Why does the Government not take up this also and give us a splendidly restored Chepauk Palace, a precinct that we can be justifiably proud of?

## RENEWAL OF GEORGE TOWN

(Continued from page 2)

As part of the dispersal strategy, the inter-city and inter-state express bus terminuses functioning at Broadway were shifted to a new terminus at Koyambedu in 2002. However, George Town still experiences congestion, mainly due to the non-cooperation of traders and lack of public participation.

The CMDA, expressing its vision in the Second Master

Plan to "make Chennai a prime metropolis which will become more livable, economically vibrant, environmentally sustainable and with better assets for the future generations", speaks for George Town too. Taking stock of the situation arising out of the efforts made to decongest George Town, the following items need to be planned:

1. A suitable urban renewable policy for sustaining the jobs and economy of those who live in George Town.
2. Rehabilitation of the poor.

This needs redevelopment of blighted areas in George Town.

3. Augment infrastructure in George Town.
4. Taking advantage of the high land value, attract the realtors to George Town for property development. The property owners in George Town will have to be persuaded to reconstitute their properties through joint ventures.
5. Efforts for conservation of heritage buildngs are needed.
6. Above all, public-private partnership for urban renewal programmes, both for infrastructure development and for housing, need to be undertaken.

Any city which denies/removes jobs and housing cannot thrive. (Courtesy: *Our Building and Construction*)

– K.R. Thooyavan

## Legalising the illegal

(Continued from page 1)

how to extricate itself from the mess. The question of outright compliance with the demolition orders has not even come up.

It cannot be denied that it is the common man/woman who suffers. Those who bear the brunt of such rampant illegality

are the residents of the neighbourhood, the shoppers who come to such buildings, and the employees who work there. They are all innocent people in good faith and, surely, it is not fair that they should pay for the misdemeanours of powerful vested interests. But that has been the way our city is run for several decades now, has it not?bore

### MADRAS MUSINGS ON THE WEB

To reach out to as many readers as possible who share our keen interest in Madras that is Chennai, and in response to requests from many well-wishers – especially from outside Chennai and abroad who receive their postal copies very late – for an online edition. *Madras Musings* is now on the web at [www.madrasmusings.com](http://www.madrasmusings.com)

– THE EDITOR

## • Nature Watch

# Nights out by Pulicat backwaters

*"Come, let us gather our nets from the shore and set our catamarans free,  
To capture the leaping wealth of the tide, for we are the kings of the sea!"*

— From *Coromandel Fishers* by Sarojini Naidu

In the winters of the mid-1960s, I used to spend a week at Pulicat every year with my Zoology students from Madras Christian College, doing field studies on the rich fisheries and rare biodiversity of the virgin Pulicat Lagoon. At nights, we used to sleep on the high and broad verandahs of the warehouse left behind by the Dutch in the 17th Century. While the students slept exhausted after a day's and late night's collection of prawns, crabs, fish and oysters, I lay awake to watch the panoramic midnight scenario play out on the backwaters.

I would muse about the Dutch days in Fort Geldria, protected by its moat, now dilapidated and reduced to heaps of

rubble, overgrown and choked with thick and thorny bushes of the *veli kathaam* (*Prosopis*), infested with snakes. I would think about the lives of those who lay buried in the 70 tombs of the Dutch cemetery. And I would try to recall the exciting history of the Dutch at Pulicat.

The old and antique lighthouse in front of the warehouse, but across the vast stretch of backwaters, would flash its beams rhythmically all through the night, glittering in the backwaters and revealing the silhouettes of the occasional fishermen manoeuvring their country boats and nets in the night. When the beam of the lighthouse passed over the beautiful tall palmyra trees and the sway-

ing casuarina groves around the fishing hamlets, and on the tall mausoleums in the Dutch cemetery, I would get glimpses of the kaleidoscopic panorama of the Pulicat backwaters at night. Packs of jackals would be hunting at the farther edge of the



Pulicat lighthouse and racing catamarans. (Courtesy: New Indian Express.)

• by **P.J. Sanjeeva Raj**  
(rajsanjeeva@gmail.com)

backwaters for 'ghost crabs', so called because of their huge size, weird appearance and emergence from their burrows on the shore only at night.

On a Full Moon night, the moon would rise early on the eastern horizon over the edge of the ocean far beyond the lighthouse, and as it rose to the level of the lighthouse beams, the unrivalled beauty of God's moon, between the silvery clouds above and the dark ocean below, excelling the beauty of the man-made lighthouse beams, it was an ecstasy to watch.

Huge sail-boats, 30-50 feet long, with heavy cargo of salt, rice bags, casuarina poles, lime shells and even cattle, plied slowly down the moon-lit backwaters, leading southwards on

the Buckingham Canal to Madras. The lone boatman at the helm of each boat would keep singing a melancholic boat song in the moonlight, occasionally yelling aloud to the other boatmen in the dark to guide them too. On the top of the mountainous cargo, in a small makeshift tent with a kerosene lamp, women would cook their midnight meal of rice and fish curry.

Lake fishermen anchored their *padagu* (plank boats) in the shallower backwaters to lay their traditional *suthu valai* (encircling net) at midnight for prawns that drifted along the high tide. Sea fishermen, on the other hand, kept landing their catches all through the night at the fish market, just opposite the Dutch cemetery.

In the stillness of the night, I

could hear the booming of the distant ocean, the howling of the jackals on the beach, the barking of the fighting village dogs all around and, occasionally, the quacking calls of the foraging sea gulls, night herons and egrets (*kokku*), flying low across the backwaters.

As the lighthouse switched off at the dawn, I would awaken from my sleepless trance and wake up my students, to get them ready for another day's hard field work by the Pulicat Lake, that would help achieve ecological and economic stability and prosperity in the Lagoon, for posterity.

Spending a night alone on the Pulicat backwaters was like drawing nearer to God.

As the American nature-poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson, writes in his essay on 'Nature': "When a man is alone .... he can feel himself being one with the nature, as a result of which he can also feel the presence of God with him and all around him."

## Answers to Quiz

1. Satya Nadella; 2. Mumbai; 3. Philip Seymour Hoffman; 4. Charlie Chaplin's *Little Tramp*; 5. It is being described as the oldest star ever observed, with its age being 13.7 billion years; 6. N. Ramachandran; 7. *The Hindus: An Alternative History*; 8. Sergey Bubka's pole vault world record; 9. Sikkim; 10. Nepal.

\* \* \*

11. P. Orr & Sons through its subsidiary Orr's Gramophones and Talkies Ltd.; 12. Stringer Lawrence; 13. Fort St. David in Cuddalore; 14. Mettur Dam; 15. Ashok Motors, the precursor to Ashok Leyland; 16. VOC's Swadeshi Steam Navigation Co. Ltd.; 17. Madras Literary Society; 18. The Wall (of Wall Tax Road fame); 19. Kamban; 20. Holkar.

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