

WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

# MADRAS

## MUSINGS

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## Water *pandhals* or space markers?

You can safely trust our political outfits to be innovative when it comes to circumventing the law. With the administration being forced by the High Court to come down heavily on the erection of banners and cutouts, the parties needed some other method of cornering public spaces. The recent summer has seen a spate of politically sponsored water-dispensing facilities, all of them hogging the few remaining public footpaths and street corners. This is a new menace under the garb of social service that ought to be nipped in the bud before it becomes a bigger issue.

Come to think of it, the recent summer was hardly a severe one. Moreover, with the present dispensation selling packaged water at heavily subsidised rates, where is the need for these water-dispensing facilities? And yet they have come up all over the city. They

are all thatch structures which, incidentally, are not allowed by law, after the Kumbakonam school fire a few years ago. All of them carry the images of their favoured leaders and have bunting strung across the street thereby menacing two-wheeler riders as well. Songs praising the

• By  
**A Special  
Correspondent**

leader are played over a public address system every afternoon. There is yet another common feature among all of them – not one really dispenses any water. The only sign of such an activity is an empty water dispenser with not an attendant in sight. And yet, each one of them is declared open with much fanfare, an important party func-

tionary doing the honours. Since when did temporary structures merit such prominence?

The goal, it is clear, is something other than the serving of water to the thirsty. That becomes evident now when summer is on the wane and yet there is no sign of these pavilions being removed. These have in effect become permanent structures that are protected by the political hoods of the locality with the administration either indifferent or simply helpless to do away with them.

Past history will tell us that this is exactly the way we ruined our city by erecting large advertisement hoardings. Many were classified as temporary, came up on street corners and footpaths and most had political patronage. When they began growing out of control in terms of

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## Changed rules will threaten beaches

(By A Special Correspondent)

The Central Government has pulled the plug on the only protection that our city's coast had – norms governing building in areas that qualify as Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) II. According to the existing rules, all construction within 500 metres of the sea was disallowed. Now, thanks to intense lobbying by the real estate industry and continued representations by the State Government, this has been relaxed, with a few conditions attached. The builders are jubilant, but as to what it portends for the city is a matter of concern.

The new regulations applicable to Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Odisha, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Gujarat remove all restrictions on CRZ II areas. Mumbai city and Goa had already lobbied hard for the change and had succeeded in getting the regulations affecting them removed in 2011. That gave a fillip to all other coastal states to fight for the same rights. They will now be subject to the same regulations as the rest of the city to which they belong. There will be no limits on heights of the structures and these can also

have basement and stilt-based car parking facilities. The Government has, however, stipulated that the floor space index (FSI) for these constructions will be based on the rules prevailing in 1991 – this, it is argued, will be sufficient to protect the areas from rampant over-construction. In addition, all buildings coming up on CRZ II areas will have to compulsorily recycle wastewater.

You only need to look around you to speculate on what will happen to these areas in a few years. In a city where

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## Know your Fort better



The Assembly and Secretariat.

• The most frequently photographed feature of Fort St George is the Assembly building. It dominates the Fort's frontage and is strikingly beautiful. It is, sadly, completely out of bounds for the casual visitor, housing as it does the offices of the Chief Minister, the State Cabinet, the Legislative Assembly and the ministries. Compared to the rest of the Fort, this edifice is of relatively recent provenance, having been constructed in its present shape in 1910 and subsequently added to. But its core is very old, almost as old as Fort St George.

Among the first structures to be built in 1640 by Andrew Cogan was what he termed the "Tower in the midst of the Fort". This was finished before he left Madras in 1643. It housed the civil establishment of the Fort, while the military disposed itself below the curtain walls. According to Dr. Fryer, who left an account of the Fort in 1673, this central tower, a domed edifice rather like a Mughal tomb, was the Governor's House. Later accounts speak of it as a flat-roofed building and H. D. Love in his *Vestiges of Old Madras* dismisses the domed depiction as "untrustworthy".

It appears to have been multi-functional, for it "contained offices, reception rooms, a dining hall, a chapel and accommodation for the Writers." An earlier write-up, dated January 6, 1664, refers to this building as the 'Mansion Howse' and has it as the residence of the Agent (later designated Governor) and the second, third and fourth members of his Council. It also housed a "very beautiful Chappell for Divine Service, and Convenient Lodgings for the Minister, as also a faire dineing-roome and Celler."

Dr. Fryer does not mention it, but Hiram Bingham, in his biography of Elihu Yale, notes that even a year earlier to Fryer's description, the building was in need of repair. All sources agree that by 1677 the walls of this building were tottering. Several Governors had added to the structure over the years. The additions had been made without any thought of the foundations and by 1688 *Fort House* had three floors with the Governor's Consultation Room on the top, all ready to collapse at short notice.

Action was finally taken in 1693 by Governor Nathaniel Higginson who, like Yale, was born in the colonial America. He was also the first Mayor of Madras. The building was emptied and all its effects transferred to *Jearsey House* on Charles Street within the Fort. Demolition was completed by April 1694 when orders

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# Are they space markers?

(Continued from page 1)

number and size, and after there were several accidents leading to fatalities, civic activists had to fight the menace, which took several years, culminating in a Supreme Court judgement that banned them all. We have had a few hoarding-free years, but a casual glance around the airport area will show you that they are coming back in ones and twos, slowly but steadily. The will to implement the law is always weak in our city.

The same screenplay will be enacted in the case of these illegal water-dispensing facilities. Each evening, it is commonplace to see several anti-social elements congregating in these thatch shelters. From here to a spurt in organised crime is but a

step. When confronted about this, some political leaders have argued that putting up water dispensers is an age-old Tamil custom. They cite the example of a prominent temple festival in Mylapore where such facilities come up each year on the day of the event. But what is forgotten is that they are also removed immediately thereafter, which is not the case with these politically motivated stalls.

The administration is, in the meanwhile, watching it all without any action being contemplated. They are obviously waiting for someone to file a public interest petition which, after following the usual tortuous routes, will finally result in a judgement that will necessitate taking steps.

## CHANGED RULES POSE A THREAT

(Continued from page 1)

FSI is consistently violated, and where the enforcement agencies prefer to look the other way, what is the guarantee that violations will not take place? What will prevent an area like MRC Nagar becoming another T Nagar? Nothing really. Violations are sadly the norm in Chennai's construction industry – a few extra feet of land per building may not amount to much individually, but collectively it can have very detrimental effect on the quality of life. But who is to realise that, especially when there are crores of rupees at stake?

We have in the recent past carried a story about how most of the gated communities and apartment complexes that have come up in the outskirts of the city lack water treatment plants, exploit groundwater and release untreated sewage into the public drains and water bodies. It is a well-known fact that the Buckingham Canal, no matter what be its condition within the city, was a pristine stream just outside of it until these housing communities came up along its side. That the

water body could have shrunk within a few years of these constructions indicates what havoc these builders can play when they indulge in violations of all sorts.

Lastly, the tsunami of 2004 appears to have receded from collective memory. The havoc it played on the coastal areas and the subsequent crash in demand for property along the beach needs to be recalled. How has a decade changed all that? Or are we imagining that such a disaster will never occur again? Ten years ago, we hardly had any coastal constructions and so the loss of life was low. What will be the outcome if high waves strike densely populated areas? And if such a tsunami is unlikely, why is the Government using that bogey for evicting the fisherfolk who are the original settlers in coastal areas? Is it to make way for the builders?

In the meanwhile, hurry up and go and take a look at the beach. Chances are that it may not last long and, before you know it, exclusive villas and highrise for the rich, and shanty towns for the poor that support the services to the former will soon close it all off.

# On Yoga Day

Did you yoga on International Yoga Day, Chief? You will be happy to know that *The Man from Madras Musings* did not, for he yogas on all other days like nobody's business and so decided to give it a miss on that day of days. Not so several others whom MMM knows. And they all did it in front of cameras. Some were of the still variety while others moved and by that MMM refers to the inability of most people to remain stationary while twisting their untrained bodies into knots.

The camera apparently was an integral part of the yoga. Of course, given the prevalent obesity, MMM is rather glad that those who yoga'd for the day, did so in suitable attire, for the ancients, who were

buildings? Would they bend over backwards to protect dilapidated but historic structures? Or would they continue as they are – tying themselves up into bureaucratic knots? The invitation revealed that none of the above was being contemplated. It was an exhibition of yoga as seen in sculptures and temple art. MMM did not visit it. He preferred to lie on his back and let his mind wander. That, in MMM's view, is the yoga of yogas.

The next day, even as MMM unrolled his yoga mat, he noticed that most of the ardent practitioners of the previous day had rolled up their mats forever. Several were calling up their doctors for unknitting themselves from the postures they had tried the previous day. Others com-

can attract more people to involve more in this event.

"Many people like me are more interested to involve actively for a social and environmental cause which will directly benefit people and city look.. Kindly Consider. I feel happy to share my feel to you, and you can make it last long."

MMM had visions of the Chief himself and sundry hangers-on (the lady who writes the occasional humour column in particular) going around arm-in-arm with the film actors. At strategic spots, the group would unlink hands and then get down to work – MMM digging, the Chief placing the sapling, sundry hangers-on clapping and the actor smiling and bowing as though he had done all the

## SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

rather fitter, did it in the almost altogether. Not so for our budding Sumo practitioners. Many garments were seen to be lifting up in postures of their own, resulting in men and women having their embonpoints exposed.

Now, where was MMM before he went midriff gazing? Ah yes, he was talking about the camera. Yes, that was deemed necessary because without that, how could all those in distant Chennai curry favour with the big boss up north? They had themselves recorded and the images and movies were duly uploaded on YouTube in the hope that the great leader would in an idle moment want to see these antics. A self-declared sage from down South came to our city to conduct mass breathing sessions in an open-air venue for benefit of an invited audience. His doppelganger rival, who has a double double prefix and usually hangs out in IT city flew to Edelweiss country to yoga there. A political hopeful who answers to a fairly junior army rank put up on the Internet his version of what he spoke of as 'yoha' which raised a number of hahas. In short, much energy was generated, everyone went around chanting Om and spoke of world peace. And they all did it on camera.

What intrigued MMM was an invitation from the Archaeological Survey of India to observe Yoga Day. Before opening the missive, MMM wondered as to how the Department proposed to yoga. Would the officials wrap themselves around the endangered

plained of backache. In MMM's considered view, the day after International Yoga Day ought to be declared International Aches and Pains Day.

### Madras Week (again)

"Tis that time of the year again – what *The Man from Madras Musings* terms as Daft Suggestions Fortnight". This usually comes about immediately after the Chief holds freth the first of at two press conferences announcing Madras Week. A whole host of "why don't you" emails immediately crop up, every man and woman wanting the Chief and immediate coterie to take up all kinds of impossible tasks. Mind you, they are all good suggestions but pretty nigh impossible to fulfil and the persons who come up with them invariably have no clue as to how to go about any of them anyway.

In this connection, MMM would like to quote *verbatim* from two of the emails received: "It's great to hear about the Chennai Week. In this moment, We not only think about Chennai memories, We should also try and restore its values and ambience. In this great moment we will try to make our city much greener by planting more trees. As Chennai is the less polluted among all metro cities we can make it least polluted. As I do not know you might have planned already about this. I request you to organise an event for planting trees as a part of the event. Kindly invite actors like Vivek who had planted 25 lakhs trees all over Tamil Nadu

hard work. And so on from sapling to sapling till the 25 lakh trees, or whatever the chosen number was, was completed. Come to think of it, why just 25 lakh, why not 376 lakh?

The other missive reads: "No other city in India has heritage and celebration like this. But do you know that Chennai city is the city with least green cover in India. What are you celebrating about? More street side shops occupied platform than any other metro in India. Less number of parks and less number of water bodies.

"Even Maylapore tank is surrounded by illegal platform shops. Traffic is getting worst day by day due to CMDA and Copn poor foresight and planning. Plan sanction is a piece of paper with no scantity. No malls, store, restatement need to follow rules. I don't know what you are celebrating about. If you are concerned, plant more trees and remove garbage on that day, rather than having a lame photo exhibition and chat forums. Sorry to have been blunt, as native of the city I feel we have to do much more than talking."

It takes all kinds to make up the city, does it not? The point about Madras Week is that it is everyone's festival. If these letter writers and others of their ilk feel something has to be celebrated or changed, it is up to them to do it. There is nothing to be achieved by sending emails to *Madras Musings* commanding the team to do things or whining about matters that don't change.

– MMM

### 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

## OUR READERS WRITE



### Water and sewerage

My article on the introduction of sewerage in Madras (MM, April 1st) contained a brief reference to Florence Nightingale. Readers may be curious to know what role she played.

Although she never visited India, she had a good idea of the situation through friends who had been to India. While Calcutta and Mumbai had got sewerage in the late 1860s, Madras did not. She was therefore keen that Madras too should get it.

When Ellis, the Chief Sanitary Commissioner of Madras, was on a visit to London, she took him round and familiarised him with its drainage system. In 1864, she got a Capt. Tulloch sent to Madras to prepare a sewerage plan for the city. The objections of Ellis to Tulloch's plan have been detailed in the article. Unfortunately, Ellis died in 1877. But (according to Sriram V.), Florence Nightingale lobbied hard with letters to

successive Governors of Madras and even to the British Prime Minister. It was only in 1881 that the then Viceroy, Lord Ripon, finally responded to her pleas and ordered that work on sewerage in Madras should start. Thus, the work was completed only two decades later!

It was mentioned in the article that Capt. Tulloch had the foresight that sewage should not be put into the city's waterways. Nightingale had the foresight to say that rainwater and sewage should never be mixed. Sadly, both are still happening. Many citizens have in recent times realised the value of harvesting rainwater to provide them greater water security and, hopefully, the coming days will see widespread practice of harvesting not only of terrace rainwater but also that falling on the open spaces around their buildings which will give them even more water security and reduced dependence on piped water.

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## The Sullivan trail

2015 marks three decades of my following the trail of John Sullivan, the founder of modern Nilgiris.

In June 1985, I set out on the trail after placing a bunch of flowers on the grave of Mrs. Sullivan and his daughter who are buried in St. Stephen's Church, Ooty. It was followed by a series of articles in various dailies and journals.

In 1991, we started a campaign to convert the ruins of Sullivan's first house in Kannerimukku village, Kotagiri, as a memorial. I petitioned the state and the district administration several times. Exhibitions were organised in Chennai and Ooty to build support.

In 2002, as part of the International Year of the Mountains, I led a group of trekkers on the same path that Sullivan took to reach the Nilgiris in 1819. The 'Discovery of Ooty March' took three days. That same year, Sullivan's Kannerimukku house was rebuilt as a heritage building.

In 2004 to mark the 150th death anniversary of Sullivan, we had a public procession and a meeting in Ooty followed by a photo exhibition at the British Council, Chennai.

In 2006 we took over the maintenance of the Kannerimukku bungalow and moved the Nilgiri Documentation Centre and the Nilgiri History Museum into it.

In June 2009, after a search lasting over a decade and aided by the internet, I located the grave of Sullivan at St. Laurence Church, Upton-cum-Chalvey in the UK and went there in July to pay our respects on behalf of the people of Nilgiris.

The Nilgiri Documentation Centre (NDC) and the Nilgiri History Museum (NHM) have functioned as a fitting tribute to John Sullivan from 2006 to 2015 educating visitors from all over India and abroad.

In March this year, we handed over the Sullivan Memorial to the district administration to continue its journey in a new avatar, but the NDC and the NHM continue in other premises.

Dharmalingam Venugopal  
Nilgiri Documentation Centre  
Kotagiri

## Citizens' green landmarks

Further to Dr. A. Raman's review of *Living Landmarks of Chennai* (MM, June 1st) I wish to offer two observations.

### • The Banyan tree at Theosophical Society

On his second tour of Australia, H.S. Olcott, founder-President of the Theosophical Society (TS), travelled via the Dutch East Indies, staying at the Hotel des Indies in Batavia (Djakarlanow). There, he saw a "monster banyan tree", one of the largest he had ever seen. This impression that he gave in his *Old Diary Leaves* made me verify if he had ever seen the Banyan tree in Adyar.

The founders of the TS acquired 28 acres called *Huddleston Garden* and moved in on December 19, 1882. When Annie Besant took charge as President soon after H.S. Olcott passed away in 1907, she acquired several adjacent properties to increase the holding of the TS to 263 acres and named them as *Blavatsky Gardens, Olcott Gardens, Besant Gardens, Besant Grove, Alsace Grove* and *Damodar Gardens*. The great Banyan tree was discovered only after some time, i.e. after *Blavatsky Gardens* was bought, as it was hidden in the deep jungle. Obviously neither Olcott nor Blavatsky was aware of the great banyan tree that became a part of the TS one day in the future.

Annie Besant gave her lectures titled 'In the twilight' in 1909. It is said that 3000 people congregated beneath the Banyan tree. It was here that she was honoured by Baden Powell who awarded her the 'Silver Wolf', the highest Scout honour. She even performed the wedding of the Principal of the Besant Theosophical College beneath the Banyan tree.

Annie Besant died in September 1933 and shortly afterwards G.S. Arundale started the Besant Memorial School at *Besant Gardens* and *Damodar Gardens*. The prayer hall itself was built below a cluster of mango trees, with Cudappa slabs laid for students to sit on, cross-legged, and the teachers had cement-slabbed

seating facing the students. Half the classes were held below the mango trees of *Damodar Gardens*.

The Diamond Jubilee Convention of the TS was conducted in 1935 by Arundale at the Banyan tree! Similarly, the inauguration of the Maria Montessori training course also took place beneath the beautiful tree on a calm December morning in 1940. Rukmini Devi went one step further by planting a Banyan sapling obtained from the TS tree in the 1950s at Kalakshetra and this is now a huge tree, with a prayer hall beneath it.

### • The Bo tree

I was sorry to learn that the Bo tree (Peepal, Tamil: *Arasu, Ficus religiosa*) has been missed out in *Living Landmarks of Chennai*. It has aesthetic value. Here is a write-up I did some time back to promote its leaf – greeting cards were made out of its leaf.

Emperor Ashoka took a cutting of the Sacred Bo tree under which Lord Buddha had attained enlightenment. He planted the sapling in a golden vessel and sent it through his daughter Sanghamitra to Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, where it still remains. Worship at this Bo tree has continued unbroken for 2300 years. In fact, this is the earliest historically documented tree and revered by over half the world's population.

The tree is also sacred to the Hindus and Sikhs. It is looked upon as an incarnation of Vishnu. The tree is also associated with the trinity – Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara. It is considered a dwelling place for these three Gods.

The tree is associated with most Shiva temples in South India.

An aqueous extract of the bark shows antibacterial activity. The tree has high medicinal value.

The decorated Peepal leaf featured here is considered a good luck charm. It is often used as a greeting 'card'.

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## Some ideas for Madras Week

Why am I interested in musicians who meet on a terrace in T'Nagar to jam on a weekend and musicians who head to Bay Leaf to listen to some retro and classic rock music?

I am not looking for talent.

I am trying to see how musicians can put their heads together to write songs on our city. And then put their hands to the instruments.

Koothu artistes are doing a lot of this sort. More so, after Tamil film makers turned to them for inspiration, ideas and curation as more and more films base their stories in Kasimedu and Royapuram.

It is that time of the year when a group of us start working on the annual Madras Week celebrations – held to celebrate the founding of this city of ours.

August 22 is Madras Day and our focus is on the August 16 to 23 period when we encourage everybody to host an event that celebrates Madras that is Chennai.

This is perhaps the largest of its kind of events that is voluntary, informal and starts from the grassroots. That it has remained so is gratifying.

We are keen to seek out busybodies and community heads who are not yet in the Madras Week spirit and are eager to kick off their own events.

Srividya who works with city NGOs is enthusiastic about planning a *mela* at a college campus which will star the city's earliest charities – showcase their history, the work they do and put on sale anything that people may want to buy or support.

• by  
**Vincent D'Souza**

Quizmaster Sumanth Raman hopes to curate a 'Best App for the City' contest and is keen to get one big time IT company which will not only offer a few great cash prizes but also spend on some promos to get all our smart geeks to work for this contest.

The neighbourhood social histories as an idea which has taken some root in Anna Nagar may well sprout in Puduket. People who used to live in the

four streets that make the west zone of this neighbourhood of Egmore and still carry fond memories of street cricket, Saint Anthony's festival, Christmas parties and tiled houses are eager to put old pictures, stories and records together.

So the call is going out to all of you who can curate an event that is about your area, your community, your line of activity – an event that banks on the past and looks at the future. An event that makes Madras what it is.

I am scheduled to meet a school HM and some fisherfolk leaders in Royapuram. To broach ideas, seek support, create venue partners...

Meanwhile, we are on FB (Madras Day), and at [www.themadrasday.in](http://www.themadrasday.in). Mail us at [themadrasday@gmail.com](mailto:themadrasday@gmail.com)

\* \* \*

One Madras Week event curated was a tour of the churches in San Thomè. It wasn't easy – one of the nuns gave us a mouthful when I led

(Continued on page 4)



# This is my own, my native Madras

I share the sentiments of N. Ram. I too would not, of my free will, live anywhere else in the world. Madras was my home for the first 25 years of my life. Marriage, my career, children, their education and their future have all made me a wanderer on foreign sands. But within me beats a Madras heart which is at peace only when I am back in the enveloping embrace of the city at regular, frequent intervals. In one of my recent visits to Madras, I picked up *A Madras Miscellany* by S. Muthiah and leafing through the pages I am experiencing an overpowering rush of nostalgia for all those days, months and years spent in the lap of this great city.

I have had a successful career as an architect in Bahrain and am currently an academic, teaching Management in a university in Sydney. But if someone were to ask me what has been the most satisfying achievement in my life, I would definitely pick the sporadic journalistic endeavours which I have engaged in over the years in Madras, 'The Gulf' and Sydney. All of this has been inspired by a spur of the moment's decision to enrol in a Diploma in Journalism course at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Madras, many, many years ago... and the tutelage of S. Muthiah and VPV Rajan, then the editor of *The Mail*.

What do I miss most living in a foreign country? I have brushed the question away with stock answers – the food, of course; having servants to do the housework; my family, my friends. These answers are no longer valid – every type of Indian grocery is available in

**"I was born in Madras and have lived in this most congenial of metropolises – this unhurried, cultured, mature, no-frills, surprisingly green, and progressive city by the sea – for all but three years of my life. I would not, of my free will, live anywhere else in India or the world."**

– N. Ram  
in the Foreword to  
*A Madras Miscellany*  
by S. Muthiah

Sydney and in fact a larger variety as we get merchandise from many cities in India; almost every suburb boasts of an Indian restaurant; I get cleaners to come in on a regular basis; family and friends are frequent visitors, and technology has eradicated distances. So what in reality do I miss about Madras?

Is it the city or the past? The line seems blurred as I note down the images that float in front of my eyes...

One of my earliest memories is of me as a very young child wetting my hands in the water that flowed from the tap. I would then tap a small amount of Gopal *palpodi* (tooth powder) into the cupped palm of my left hand. Dipping my right forefinger into the powder, I would proceed to clean my teeth examining my pink teeth in the mirror hanging on the wall mottled by black spots where the coating had been eaten up... as I write this, the tantalising taste of Gopal *palpodi* fills my being and I tell myself that when I am in Madras next I should investigate the history of the company – did they adapt and move into the toothpaste world or were they made extinct by the toothpaste companies?

Movies were (and still are) my passion. Living in Mylapore, my earliest memories are of our favourite haunts (more out of convenience than choice), 'Kamadhenu' in Luz and 'Kapali' in Mandaivalli. I believe both do not exist any more, taken over by real estate developers. The ticket price which seemed a big amount those days was a mere Rs. 2.50. It would get us the best seats in the house. But even the best seats could not keep out the strong stench of urine which would hang inside the hall. A

very innovative elder sister came up with a strategy – she would buy a whole bunch of *mallippoo* (jasmine flower strands) which she would distribute to all of us. We would all hold the flowers under our noses while watching Sivaji emote and MGR vanquish the baddies. Subsequently, with the Safires and Shanthis and Anands on Mount Road, our ventures expanded into better quality cinema experiences leading all the way to Kamal Haasan, Rajinikanth and K. Balachander days. Watching *Sound of Music*, *My Fair Lady*, *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Gone with the Wind* in these state-of-the-art cinemas was an out of the world experience. I can vividly recall the entire cinema filled with the scent of flowers as Omar Sharif threw the garland towards Peter O'Toole with the words 'Flowers for the victor'!

Eating out was a weekly extravagance with my father until he died when I was twelve years old. We would walk to Luz from our house in Mylapore to do our vegetable and other shopping, and this had become a ritual, walk into the restaurant 'Shanti Vihar' on Kutchery Road where he would buy me an ice cream and watch me eat it with relish. It had never occurred to me to question why he did not eat anything himself – I treated it as my birthright, but looking back, the patriarch of a large family had obviously been economising and I am filled with shame that I had been so inconsiderate.

Reminiscing about the past and about life in Madras will not be complete without referring to our shopping trips to Nalli Silks and Children's Corner in Luz, Colombo Stores on Kutchery Road and the hours of matching blouses to sarees at Rani Cut-piece Centre. Over the years we remained loyal to Luz shopping centre but the city had changed so much that we were compelled to do most of our shopping in T.Nagar. But our family still follows a tradition – the first saree for any wedding in the family has to be bought from Nalli Silks in Luz! The owner would reverently place the saree we purchased in front of the deity in the shop and hand it over to us after a small prayer.

Living in the proximity of Kapaleeswarar temple erased the Shiva-Vishnu divide for our family as we went there often to pray in spite of having Krishnaswamy as our surname and Balaji as our family deity. From our

open terrace, where we often slept on humid nights, we were woken up in the wee hours during the month of Margazhi to the strains of the songs belting out of the loudspeaker. Covering our ears with the pillows and softly cursing the loud music we would try to go back to sleep and eventually did as we got used to the early morning intrusion into our slumber. I would give anything in the world now to own and live in a home in Mylapore with an open terrace from which I can catch a glimpse of the temple *gopuram* and hear the *Margazhi matham* songs as the night slowly recedes and the sun's rays wake up the city.

We later moved into an old rented house on Edward Elliot's Road (subsequently called Dr. Radhakrishnan Salai) where we lived for many years and those were among the best years in my life. I am proud to say that I had neighbours who have subsequently become very famous – Parasaran, Senior, and Mohan

● by  
**Sheela Sree Kumar**

Parasaran (he was a small boy then), the father and son duo who both became Advocate-Generals. Mrs. Parasaran (or Saroja mami as we called her) reflected the life of the small community we lived in (made possible by the fact that our street ended in a dead end with a wall separating us from Judge Jambulinga Mudaliar Street). Her house was the first one to get a television and I remember how all of us would flock to her place to watch the weekly episode on *Ramayana*. Saroja mami and her daughter Rangam would spread mats on the floor for all of us and, best of all serve *prasadam* during the interval! She was such a generous woman with an incredible sense of humour – her best joke was her claim that her husband won all the court cases because the opposition could not understand what he was saying as he spoke so fast! She left the world a few years ago but her smile displaying her 'vetthalai' stained teeth is still fresh in my memory.

Other neighbours who are now well known are Usha Ramanathan who has carved a niche for herself as a Human Rights activist and lawyer based in Delhi, and her sister Sharada Ramanathan who has made a foray into the world of films with her debut directorial venture *Sringaram* and now her documentary on Indian classical dance *Natyanubhav*. Another famous neighbour was the dancer Chandralekha though at the

time we were not aware of her fame or prowess. Sadly I have to admit that the closed middle-class thinking of those days led to a feeling of uneasiness amongst the rest of us as we did not comprehend the bourgeois lifestyle she led with many people moving in and out of her house. She was very much a recluse and did not have much to do with the others living on the same street.

My middle-class background, and living in a fairly conservative family, resulted in two challenging experiences in my life in Madras. The first, when I was still in school (Rosary Matriculation) I had participated in an inter-school science competition. I won the second prize and my classmate won the third prize. Her father escorted us to the Awards ceremony which was at a posh venue – not very sure, but may have been the Gymkhana Club. There I met a German girl who was the recipient of the first prize and she was the first foreigner I had met in my life (if I discount the Italian Mother Teresa Xavier whom I had seen only in her nun's garments at school). I was all excited and scared and I can still relive the experience when delicious looking food was served on the plate in front of me and I struggled with my fork and knife. When I came back home late at night and had everyone giggle when my mother would heat up food for me. The second episode occurred when I was invited to attend a Lion's Club meeting to receive my award as the best IV year student from the School of Architecture – though more mature and worldly, the trepidation was still there to be amongst all those successful businessmen and I think of the experience every time I attend a Lion's Club meeting of which I am a member now.

Times and outlook have changed. Forks and knives are not alien any more. Unlike N. Ram, I cannot claim the privilege of having lived in Madras all my life. But I have those precious 25 years. No one can take those years away from me. Random thoughts pour in, evoking images, scents, voices, faces and emotions from the past – a past which definitely holds some of the best years of my life.

*Breathes there the man with soul  
so dead  
Who never to himself hath said,  
This is my own, my native land!  
Whose heart hath ne'er within him  
burned,  
As home his footsteps he hath  
turned  
From wandering on a foreign  
strand!*

– Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832)

## READABILITY PLEASE

### Dear Readers,

As letters from readers increase, we are receiving more and more **hand written** letters, many of them in a hand so small and illegible or large and scrawled as to be unreadable. Often this leads to our discarding a letter, particularly if some part of it is unreadable. If you wish us to consider your letter for publication, please type it with enough space between lines or write it using a medium hand, clearly dotting the 'i-s' and crossing the 't-s'.

Many readers also try to fill every square centimetre of a postcard space, making reading or editing impossible. Please help us to consider your letters more favourably by making them more legible for us.

– THE EDITOR

# TWO PAGES OF

# NOSTALGIA

## Two not out of steam

● Steam engines have always caught the imagination of the young and old alike. These locomotives were so awe-inspiring that their sheer presence made the drivers stars in their own right. The engine driver was revered as he was the interface between the passengers and the organisation. Old timers along the Tiruchirappalli-Villupuram stretch still vividly remember two such drivers, Gerard Vanhaltren (72) and Rudolph Jeremiah (73), superstars of Southern Railway's Tiruchi division for almost 35 years.

Tall and lanky Gerard Vanhaltren, a descendant of Dutch immigrants who came to India in the 18th Century and made Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu their home, joined the Railways as part of his family tradition. His grandfather, Aliek, was the driver of a Mail train in Tiruchi division, while father Alfred was a master technician at Tiruchi's Golden Rock Workshop. "That was the tradition. If you were born in a Railway colony, you joined the Railways as a fish takes to water. It was an unwritten rule," reminisces Vanhaltren, now leading a retired life at Crawford Colony in Tiruchi.

Once he completed schooling, Vanhaltren appeared for the Railway Service Commission Examination. "I was appointed as apprentice Fireman in September 1963 when I was nineteen. The training was really tough. You needed to be physically and mentally fit to undergo the gruelling schedules. But they helped me develop my willpower," narrates Vanhaltren.

He was promoted as shunting driver in 1968, underwent advanced training in diesel locomotives and successfully completed the tough LM-16 (Loco Mechanism) programme. "Only a hardy man could become a steam locomotive driver. These locos were open on all sides and you were exposed to the elements of nature; the scorching sun of the summer or the heavy downpours of the monsoon. You had to monitor all kinds of parameters while operating the steam locos – the water level in the boiler, the quantity of coal which had to be shoveled into the firebox, the speed of the train, signals and, of course, the

(By Kumar Chellappan)

gradients. It was thrilling because you had to think on your feet all the time and find solutions midway. You had to be an all-purpose man," recalls Vanhaltren, his skin still tanned by the heated furnace. "I can feel the coal dust in my mouth. And my lungs still have some sooty carbon content", he adds.

Steam loco drivers turn rough and tough because of the nature of the job and the temperature inside the engine. "There was no room for bantering and soliloquies while on duty. When we negotiated curves and gradients, our minds had to be at their sharpest and work in sync with



... and Rudolph Jeremiah, both remembering the past.

the engine. An eye on the water level, another eye on the quantity of coal and both eyes on the signal towers... That's how steam loco drivers worked," he relates.

Vanhaltren did not have a single accident in his 38-year career. "But there were occasional failures due to other factors. Once I was hauling a 1,000 tonne train on the Villupuram-Tiruchi route, known for its steep gradients. It was raining all the way from Villupuram. We have to maintain a particular level of water in the boiler. Any increase or decrease in the levels would melt the lead plugs which provide the heat to boil the water. We crossed Virudachalam at 10 in the night. The rainfall increased as we moved forward. The entire coal stock in the tender box got soaked. Once the required quantity of coal could not be fed to the fire box, the pressure started dropping. This resulted in the lowering of water level, fall in pressure and steam. The lead plug melted and the train came to a halt at the top of

the gradient. Meanwhile, the Rockfort Express for Chennai left Tiruchi at 10 p.m. and was on its way. The route was yet to be doubled. There was no way to communicate with the guard or with the nearest station," recounts Vanhaltren.

All of a sudden the train started moving back because of loss in pressure. Since there was no pressure, the brakes too could not be applied. But the train came to a halt as the momentum slowed and Vanhaltren took to his legs and made it to the nearest railway station. "Luckily for us, the station master of one of the halts which we were supposed to cross after Virudachalam noticed the delay in our ar-

rival and alerted all the nearest stations. The Rockfort Express was blocked at one of these. Normalcy could be restored only after the arrival of a relief engine from Virudachalam," he says.

Petharaj, a former station master, who was an ardent fan of Vanhaltren, remembers the incident with mixed feelings. "It was Ger's (as Vanhaltren is called by friends) presence of mind which saved the day. His devotion and dedication could be seen by the speed with which he made to the nearest station in the rain as there were no modern communication facilities."

The station master also remembers how daily commuters would ask him who was the engine driver for the day. "The moment I mentioned Vanhaltren, they would nod their heads in appreciation 'Today we will be on time,' they used to say."

Amalraj, a retired electrician of the Southern Railway, who is an avid buff of steam locomotives, explains the reason behind the expertise of Vanhaltren. "He



Gerard Vanhaltren ...

had magic fingers. The smoothness with which he brought the engine to life and gently took it forward was something to be experienced. There was no jerk or jolt and the ride was a smooth affair. Whether it was steam locos or diesel engines, Vanhaltren made a big difference," certifies Amalraj. And the man himself says of his art, "I treated the engine like a human, tender and soft."

\* \* \*

Life has not changed much for Rudolph Jeremiah who bade farewell to Indian Railways in 2000 after working for 28 years as a steam loco driver before switching to diesel engines. What is unique about Jeremiah is the kind of passengers who had boarded trains hauled by him. Jeremiah was in command of the Prime Minister's Special Train which took Jawaharlal Nehru from Villupuram to Neyveli for the commissioning of its thermal power plant in 1963.

Jeremiah, who joined the Railways as an apprentice fireman in 1962, followed the footsteps of his father Frederick who was a special engine driver with the Railways.

An engine driver's job was demanding, says Jeremiah. "After 12 hours of hard work in a steam loco, all that you want is a bath and sleep. You wake up all refreshed and energised for another grilling schedule," he adds. Like Vanhaltren, Jeremiah too almost had a soul connect with his engine. "The moment I entered my cabin, I would go into a trance. Nothing else crept into my mind. I became a part of the engine as much as the engine became a part of me," he relates.

Balasubramanian, his colleague and a shunting driver in Tiruchi, describes Jeremiah as a troubleshooter par excellence. "He used to attend to even major faults and repair works in the engine all by himself. I remember an incident which happened

at Mayiladuthurai. We were about to leave for Tiruchi when the Piston Gland Packing (PGP), which prevents the steam from escaping from the boiler, collapsed. Though Jeremiah approached the maintenance staff for help, they asked him to wait as they were attending to another job. So he tinkered with some instruments and got a new PGP ready in minutes.

"The train left the station on time and reached Tiruchi as per schedule. Had we waited for the maintenance staff to attend to the fault, we would have been delayed by at least three hours," recalls Balasubramanian.

Jeremiah, who has a passion for all kinds of electrical and mechanical instruments and gadgets, says he was honoured by the authorities the next day in Tiruchi. But the senior engineer told him, "We know your passion for punctuality and discipline and at times you may have to make some compromises."

Like Vanhaltren, Jeremiah too was very much in demand. "When passengers saw me, they would raise the thumb of the right hand as a sign of acknowledgment. Trains hauled by me never lost a single minute during running hours," remembers Jeremiah.

He regrets that the Railways has completely phased out steam engines from service. "I can understand they are not eco-friendly. But the steam locos are the one and only link we have with the earlier days of the pioneers. We could have maintained them in museums and have short runs for visitors as a piece of living heritage," he suggests.

These days, he and Vanhaltren keep memories alive by walking to the Tiruchirappalli Railway Junction museum to look at the exhibits and re-live their past. (Courtesy: *Anglos in the Wind*)



The rear of the Secretariat as it used to be (left) and the 1950s building (right) that hides it today.

## KNOW YOUR FORT BETTER

(Continued from page 1)

were given for the construction of a new Fort House "being 110 foot in length and 55 foot in breadth, to be built on the East side of the Fort at 18 foot distance from the Godown Wall and at equal distance from the North and South Walls."

The new building was ready by September 1695 and, to quote Love, "there exists satisfactory evidence that the middle portion" of the present Secretariat Building dates from this construction of 1694. By the 1750s, this building was referred to as the Great House. Its internal arrangements had remained unchanged for over six decades – the bombproof ground floor had offices, the first floor had the common dining facility referred to as the General Table, and the top floor had the Consultation Room and Governor's Quarters. In 1752, a storm caused serious damage to the building but it remained structurally sound, unlike its predecessor. Testimony to its strength was further evident when, during the French siege of the 1750s, *Fort House* was an important part of the successful defence. Officers and troops occupied the lowest floor and the roof was protected by laying bales of woollen cloth on it. A couple of shells did land on the terrace but no damage was sustained.

In the 1780s, with Governors of Madras by then happy to live outside the Fort, the building was appropriated for several other purposes. A minute in 1782 ordered the vacating of all the rooms in the building and decreed that the "Assistants in the two Secretaries Offices" would henceforth use these. This marks the beginning of the Secretariat in this building. In April the same year, extensive alterations were planned, under the supervision of Philip Stowey, Civil Architect. It began, as it invariably does in most heritage structures even today, with some repairs to the Council Chamber. That led to further discoveries of weakness and

the budget was revised first to 6,600 and later to 13,916 star pagodas. The work went on for six months and at the end of it, several features that we now recognise in the building were in place.

Chief among these is the verandah on the eastern side and a corresponding one on the west. The latter also had two short wings projecting to the west and two new flights of stairs, also on the western side. The two wings were further extended in 1825 when they projected north and south, bringing the Secretariat building to its present dimensions. By then, the structure was being referred to as Government Office. The building appears to have remained as it was for the next 90 years or so, apart from regular maintenance and repair. It must have been electrified early in the 20th Century for, Mrs. Penny in her book writes that "long after dark the lights in the Secretariat testify to the diligence of the hard-worked Under Secretaries."

In 1910, a new round of construction began. Madras had had a Legislative Council since 1862 and this had steadily expanded to include public representation of some sort by the early 1900s. A new Council Chamber was required as were offices for Secretarial use. The Secretariat acquired a second floor. A more important change was to the front – for since then it incorporated 32 black Charnockite or Pallavaram Gneiss columns into its façade.

These pillars, as we saw in the account relating to the Sea Gate, once formed an ornamental colonnade from the sea to the Fort. The space between had doubled up as a market place and a processional route. In 1746 the French made away with the pillars and these were returned to Madras in 1762. They were then erected in front of Fort House and the spaces in between were walled in to make a hall for official entertainments. The construction of Goldingham's splendid Banqueting Hall in 1802 at the instructions of Lord

Clive rendered the old building superfluous and it became a godown. In 1910, the then Governor, Sir Arthur Lawley, recommended that the building be dismantled and the best pillars out of the lot be incorporated into the new frontage of the Secretariat. According to Rao Sahib C.S. Srinivasachari's *History of the City of Madras* (1939), a plaque to this effect has been let into the wall of the Legislative Council (now Assembly) Chamber.

The building at present has a dual, or even triple, function. To the east is the magnificent Assembly chamber and to its rear are the secretarial areas. The top floor houses the offices of the ministers of the Tamil Nadu Government. It must be remembered that Madras/Tamil Nadu had a bicameral legislature from 1936 to the 1980s. The lower house or the Assembly became more powerful over a period of time and, after peregrinating to various places, eventually came to occupy the chamber of the upper house, or the Council, which by the 1960s was relegated to "a room by the side of the Assembly." In the 1980s, the Council was done away with and its chamber remains locked up. What is also forgotten is that the classic rear façade of the entire building is completely hidden from public view by, secretariat block that was built to the same dimensions behind it. If you enter this art-deco/modernist building and manage to walk deep into it, you can catch a glimpse of the original rear façade of the Secretariat building. It has survived intact.

What is also surprising is the sheer survival power of the *Fort House* that Higginson built. It has overcome war, vagaries of weather and a recent attempt at shifting the Secretariat and Assembly to Mount Road and carries on nevertheless. It has within it around 325 years of history and that is a record to be proud of.

– Sriram V.

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