

WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

# MADRAS

## MUSINGS

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## SARI could open up the State

It could well conjure up an extraordinary scene – a farmer in front of his desktop with his fingers on the keyboard, a village belle communicating the price of fish to her friend in another village, a cowherd blissfully talking on his mobile or a shepherd walking down the village road with a laptop in his hand. But, more seriously, it is about a food producer in a hill-station in Tamil Nadu being able to check spot market prices, an NGO in a district being able to access a network of primary health centres, or a remote village school benefiting from access to updated syllabi.

All this and more is likely, if Sustainable Access in Rural India (SARI), a project of Harvard University's Information Technologies Group, takes shape. SARI's initial goal is to establish viable markets for information and communication services in rural Tamil Nadu by inventing and deploying innovative technologies and business models.

According to a *Business World* report, SARI's earnest efforts have already begun. New telephone lines and Internet connections have been installed in 50 villages in North Madurai. Based on the experience in these villages, another 950 villages in Madurai District will be inter-connected for both voice and data services which, when it happens, will not only bring education, health services and development to the villager's doorstep but also, perhaps, make e-governance a reality. Such large-scale connectivity

would, in the long-run, yield considerable cost benefits and motivate local businessmen to effectively complement such projects – two other significant results.

SARI, a collaboration between Digital Nations Consortium (which includes the MIT Lab and Harvard's Center for International Development) and IIT, Madras, I-Gyan Foundation and NGOs, will need the Tamil Nadu Government's help and support in providing the necessary infrastructure.

ITG chose Tamil Nadu for its initial experiment with SARI because a recent Reserve Bank of India study on the growth of private sector corporate investments has placed Tamil Nadu at the top, with a share exceeding 24 per cent of such investments in the country. While Tamil Nadu seems to have overtaken Maharashtra as the country's most coveted investment destination, what has been significant is the fact that Tamil Nadu has been successful in attracting investment in infrastructure projects. The various industrial parks, not only in software, are testimony to this. Huge investment in the software sector has also come from major companies abroad. In terms of infrastructure and Internet connectivity, the State is far ahead of the rest. Tamil Nadu's rural networking system has also evolved over the years and in several places in the State, the rural-urban divide is almost non-existent. All this has contributed to ITG choosing Tamil Nadu for the SARI project.

• by  
**A Special Correspondent**



## Another open space under threat

Sometime ago, *Madras Musings* reported that the Kapaleeswarar Temple authorities wanted back the leased property where the Mylapore Club had long found a home. Now it is reported that the playground (above) of the P.S. Higher Secondary School which is leased from the Temple is being sought by the owners, no doubt for more profitable development of highrise. Not only would this be loss of yet another open space and water sink in one of the most crowded parts of the City but, as Reader N. Dharmeshwaran points out, what would Eton have been without its playing fields! P.S. School has had a veritable galaxy of alumni — academics, writers, industrialists, politicians, bureaucrats and sportsmen. It has given the State many a cricketer. Without a sports field, much of its contribution will be less. Does the Temple, in this context, really have to have its land back? (Photograph by RAJIND N CHRISTY.)

The *Business World* story quotes Colin Maclay, Deputy Director, ITG, as saying that Tamil Nadu has a good mix of challenges and opportunities as well as logistical support and established relationships. Maclay, himself, felt that Tamil Nadu was the best place to try the SARI experiment. Other positive factors were CID's past experience and relationship with the State Government and the bureaucracy, the high literacy rate and the relatively higher degree of decentralisation of power in the hands of the local administrators.

The SARI project is not about interconnectivity alone. The project is about enabling rural people to know their community needs better and finding ways to have these fulfilled. The experiment is also about providing scope for women to find employment, as kiosk operators, for example. In fact, women's cooperatives already play an important role in the

(Continued on page 6)

## The city tanks under study

— But is restoration likely?

(By A Staff Reporter)

Even as Rotary Main works on restoring another temple tank, this time in Nungambakkam, it is looking at several other tanks in the City. Helping it study the ground realities is an INTACH team which has begun taking a look (*MM*, July 1st) at 36 tanks in Chennai.

The study being undertaken is focussing on the following tanks:

Name of associated temple	Location
1. Thyagaraja Swamy Temple	Thiruvottiyur
2. Kalyana Venkatesa Perumal Temple	Kaladipet
3. Angala Parameswari Temple	Royapuram
4. Arunachaleswarar Temple	Tondiarpet
5. Kasiviswanatha Swamy Temple	Peddunaickenpet
6. Manneeswarar Temple	George Town
7. Krishnan Temple	Mannadi

(Continued on page 9)





## Quizzin' with Ram'nan

(Questions 1 to 12 are from the period July 1st to 15th. Questions 10 to 12 pertain to Chennai. Questions 13 to 20 relate to Tamil Nadu.)

1. Why was 'Kirangade Kannan' in the news on July 2nd?
2. The 30th death anniversary of which legendary rocker was observed with, amongst other things, a visit to his grave at Pere-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, on July 2nd?
3. What national feat did chess player Swati Ghatge achieve on July 9th?
4. What has the new gas discovery, made by Cairn Energy, in the Krishna-Godavari deep water block, been christened as?
5. Which city will host the 2008 Olympic Games?
6. Who is the sole bidder for Air India?
7. The birth centenary of the founder of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the forerunner of the BJP, and a freedom fighter was celebrated on July 6th. Name him.
8. Name the controversial web-based free music swapping facility that ended such operations on July 8th.
9. Simple. Who are the new Wimbledon champions in the singles section?

\* \* \*

10. Name the Commissioner of Chennai Corporation who has been in the news recently.
11. What was the previous avatar of the latest disco in town Klub 53?
12. From which reservoir was the Krishna water released to meet the city's water needs?
13. Who was the last Governor of Tamil Nadu to complete the full term of office?
14. Where in Tamil Nadu was the first and main settlement of the Dutch in India?
15. In which inaugural national-level athletic meet did Tamil Nadu win both the boys and girls team titles on July 4th?
16. Which famous educational institution of the State was founded by V. Rajam?
17. Name the fugitive, a native of Thiruvallur and wanted in connection with defrauding the Indian Bank of Rs. 468 crore, arrested by Interpol in Paris recently.
18. Name the one-man commission set up to inquire into allegations of police excesses committed during the former Chief Minister Karunanidhi's arrest.
19. What is the new nomenclature for the State's Fire Service Department?
20. Who is the new Chairman of the AIADMK Party?

(Answers on Page 9)

# Slum-dwellers' seek permanent safety

Thriving and growing Chennai slums also vanish in a matter of minutes. Walling families and a trail of horror left behind by slum fires have made the authorities sit up and wonder whether the accidents are part of sinister plans by gangsters and land grabbers. The whole question has to be viewed from the point of who benefits from a fire. Most migrant slum-dwellers are daily wage casual construction labourers, domestic help, or retailers. Slum families migrating to Chennai are not able to construct good shelters on their own but put up temporary huts near their workspots with cheap building materials susceptible to frequent fire accidents. Corporation rules ban building brick (*pucca*) houses in a slum. So, these houses have thatched roofs, and either thatch or mud walls. The best roofs are multi-layered (relatively) new thatch roofs, the poorest roofs those not even renewed recently. Some of the huts are covered haphazardly with cloth, plastic or canvas.

**Magnitude of fire accidents:** There have been about 40 major fire accidents in the city this year, which have left thousands of families homeless, many killed or orphaned and hundreds injured. Fire has caused slum dwellers loss of property amounting to nearly Rs.4.50 crores, all their possessions being destroyed in the fires.

A recent statistical count shows that 3,46,348 families (population 17,61,168) live in slums in Chennai Metropolitan area. Chennai has 36 per cent of its population living in slums and 50 per cent among them are in dense slum areas. These areas are devoid of any basic amenities and 2 or 3 families share a single hut. Of the slum population in Chennai, 36 per cent live on Government land, 32 per cent on private land, 13 per cent on the land belonging to the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB) and Tamil Nadu Housing Board. About 9 per cent live on land belonging to religious missions, another 8 per cent on land belonging to Corporation of Chennai. Only 2 per cent live on other categories of land.

**Reasons:** Many fires are genuine accidents. But there are several which look suspicious. Other reasons are political rivalry and internal feud.

A slum fire is also a strategy to evict slum-dwellers from slum areas. The frequent fires in certain slums have made the police suspect a bigger conspiracy.

## Service rendered

**Fire prevention:** Fire prevention is a basic function of the Fire Service Department. As fire accidents are likely to increase during summer, Deepavali etc. special propaganda work on these occasions among the vulnerable groups is undertaken. Audiovisual media are utilised to carry the message relating to fire safety methods.

**Outposts:** Fire Service Outposts have been opened in slums in Chennai to facilitate quicker operations in fighting fires. These outposts are provided with high capacity synthetic tanks or collapsible water tanks, portable fire pumps with hoses, wireless sets, and are manned round the clock. Each outpost has six men and they come in two shifts, morning and evening. The outposts have been provided with a tank, which can store 10,000 litres of water. Increasing the number of outposts to 36 would bring down the number of slum fires and make these areas free of fire accidents.

**Relief:** As one of the first steps after a fire, Government sends a medical team to the spot and provides round-the-clock treatment for the injured or affected. Immediately after a fire, the Chennai Collectorate provides relief of Rs.1,000, a saree and dhoti and five kg of rice for a family. Government provides food for the affected for five days, sets up mobile high-mast lights for them and even makes arrangements at a local school for their stay.

**Asbestos sheet roof housing with side walls:** An ambitious scheme has provided asbestos sheet to replace thatched roofs of hutments in slums more frequently affected by fire accidents. The scheme

has provided 42,000 poor families with such houses.

## Critical analysis

- The numerous fire accidents have made the authorities – the Police, the TNSCB, the Fire Service and the Chennai Corporation – take a closer look and fine-tune their systems. Each of the organisations has the wireless systems of the other services in its control room so that communication is instantaneous.
- Apart from routine patrol, special slum patrolling units have been formed to tackle the problem. Police personnel can advise slum-dwellers regularly to take precautions for preventing fire.
- Police should take stern action under the Goondas Act against those who cause slum fires. Fire accidents should be probed. While investigating the cause of a blaze anyone found responsible for the disaster should not be spared.
- As part of its intensified steps to check fire accidents, Government should order the manufacturers of crackers not to produce "rockets", sparks from which spell havoc on residential areas.
- Some people have rented out their huts in slums to others and in the event of a fire, there is no way for the tenants to benefit. The owner, who has the patta and other papers, gets the benefit of Government relief. He gets Rs.200 every month for hut accommodation. The tenant gets nothing.
- With the setting up of Police outposts in slum areas, the

number of calls, serious or otherwise, has come down. But slum fires are bound to repeat unless steps are taken to provide free access to fire tenders in slum areas. There are several slums in the city which do not provide access and which fall under the 'high fire risk' category. Fire-fighting equipment cannot reach these spots during emergencies, invariably leading to ugly situations. Fire service tenders arriving late to the spot, spark tension. The situation is worse, especially for rescue operations during the night hours, with no proper lighting equipment. There should be a scheme for making all slums accessible to fire tenders.

Slum-dwellers, while expressing anger over the delayed appearance of the fire fighting personnel, also point out that the water tanks positioned in front of slums are completely inoperable. In some colonies, slum leaders who have been instructed to operate the tanks in the event of a fire, merely stand by and watch as the pumps run dry and are destroyed in the fire. Local level youth groups should be mobilised and trained for fire service operations.

Use of 'asbestos roofing' has been banned in most developed countries as it is unhealthy and traps heat. Roofing should be made of palm leaves with a special coating. This would also prove to be a cheap alternative.

Slum-dwellers need a small concrete tenement or fire-proof roofing for each family. It is a long pending demand that has hitherto gone unanswered. Slum-dwellers want a permanent solution to this problem.

**K.Shanmugavelayutham**  
Co-ordinator  
Chennai Slum Dwellers  
Rights Movement

# SARI could open up the State

(Continued from Page 1)

SARI project — operators of all the existing kiosks are women. However, there is no doubt that in the days to come, Tamil Nadu women, backed by SARI, will assume more responsibility in education, health, economic development and social interaction.

With the State Government's assistance, ITG's SARI project might take off and Madurai could, perhaps, set an example for other districts in the State to follow. However, unlike cable television which has been a runaway success in rural Tamil Nadu, overtaking even telephone line connectivity, Internet and other sophis-

## NOSTALGIA

# HMG's only property outside the capital

**Cottingley**, the residence of the British Deputy High Commissioner, is one of the few colonial buildings which has not been affected by the haphazard growth of the metropolis. It stands a mute testimony to the grand style of living of the British bureaucrats of the early 20th Century. A utilitarian house, with no pretensions to architectural style, set in a vast expanse of land was a feature of the residences of top officials of the British Government in the early years of the last century. This would be evident in the many buildings of those years, including travellers' or inspection bungalows. Sterling Road, College Road, Harrington Road, Spur Tank Road, Haddow's Road and Nungambakkam High Road were full of buildings bearing names such as Cottingley, Unsworth, Sterling Castle, Anderson House, Huddows Gardens. Many of them have now been pulled down and replaced by characterless cement concrete buildings, often multi-residential.

For a few years in 70s, I was closely associated with the upkeep of Cottingley. Amongst a long line of Deputy High Commissioners, and Architects-Engineers of the Property Services Agency of HM Government responsible for the maintenance of the building, there was only one who felt that the building was a white elephant for maintenance, that it should be pulled down and rebuilt in modern style and that residential units for home-based officers should be built in the vast space that was being wasted and yet cost much to maintain. The other officers of the BHC dreaded the prospect of their Head of Office breathing down their necks even out of normal working hours. Fortunately, London did not accept the proposal and instead felt that no effort should be spared to preserve the building in its original (and added) form. And this has now been done.

The main building stands on about one ground (2400 square feet) of land, almost in the dead centre of a plot measuring a little over 40 grounds (2.2

acres). The combined area of both the ground floor and the first floor is about 3000 sq.ft. The ground floor comprises dining area, central hall, lounge, a study and wine storage room. A broad (12-foot wide) verandah runs along the front of the building and there is also a porch. The first floor has four bedrooms, a ladies' lounge, and a terrace over the porch.

The building is of lime-mortar. Cement concrete has been used dexterously for additions made to the original building, which will be discussed later. The ground floor ceiling is high,



The beautiful lawns of 'Cottingley', to the side of the main house.

reminding one that the *pinkah* must have been in use in its early years for keeping cool during summer. Verandahs ran all round the building. Except the front verandah, all others have since been demolished. The sheer spaciousness of the halls and the rooms is breathtaking. Once or twice requests had been received for use of the front of the building, including the driveway, for filming, but permission was not given.

The British Deputy High Commissions were set up from 16th August 1947 in Madras, Bombay and Calcutta. The Madras office was then in Rutland Gate, another colonial building. The first DHC was Sir Christopher Masterman, who was No.3 in the civil hierarchy after the Governor (Sir Archibald Nye) and the Chief Secretary (Mr. Scott Brown) in the departing government until the day before Independence. This was only a stopgap arrangement until the



'Cottingley' in all its restored splendour.

Dominions Office in Whitehall could post a career officer. During this transitional period, Cottingley was the residence of Justice Wadsworth, who was also preparing to go back home. When the building fell vacant, the Deputy High Commissioner's Administration Officer clinched a lease with the owner of the building for use as the residence of the incoming Deputy High Commissioner.

The owner of the building was M.R. Parthasarathy Naidu, a leading textile businessman of

the city and a wholesaler for Buckingham and Carnatic Mills and Binny Mills. A lease was entered into with him for 21 years on a rent of Rs. 250 per month which would be gradually increased at fixed periods. A decade or so later, Parthasarathy Naidu died. His creditors brought the property to a public auction. This writer, who was then in the British Information Services and whose work included scanning of language newspapers for British-slanted news, came across the auction advertisement and brought the matter to the notice of the higher authorities. Thereafter, within a very short period, negotiations with the creditors and heirs were successfully concluded by King and Partridge, Solicitors, and transfer of property took place. The price paid was around Rs. 3 lakh, of which about 75% was paid direct to the creditors and their release obtained. Record-wise, Cotting-

ley was the only real estate (property) of HMG in a city other than the capital of a country and I believe it still has that honour. The building as acquired then consisted of the ground floor surrounded by the verandahs and the first floor had only two spacious bedrooms with attached dressing room and bath. The attachment of a flush-type and bathtub toilet was a later addition as can be seen from the presence of a short flight of steps leading to it from the master bedroom. (This might have been altered now.) However, one gets the impression that in the early years the building had only 'thunder-box' toilet facilities.

The pinch for more modern facilities and bedrooms to accommodate children visiting parents during school vacations (summer and Christmas) began to be felt. Steadily additions and alterations were made converting the first floor to the plan described already. The study, the wine room and the laundry room on the ground floor are also later additions. The stately main gate of Cottingley, which is of wrought iron, was brought from the adjoining Cochin House (belonging to the Cochin royal family) which was being dismantled to accommodate the Asan Memorial School and a housing estate.

The writer's colleague, M. Krishnan, who was the Librarian delved into old books in Connemara Public Library and other places and established that the original building might have been built between 1908-1910. Only lime-mortar was used at the time. Damp proofing of the foundation was elementary. Damp crept up and the entire wall surfaces had to be replastered with cement, from time to time. The drought of the 70s led to the caking of the mud portion of the sub-soil and resultant subsidence. The building began to subside and gaps began to show on the walls. A small portion of the lounge on the ground floor caved in. It

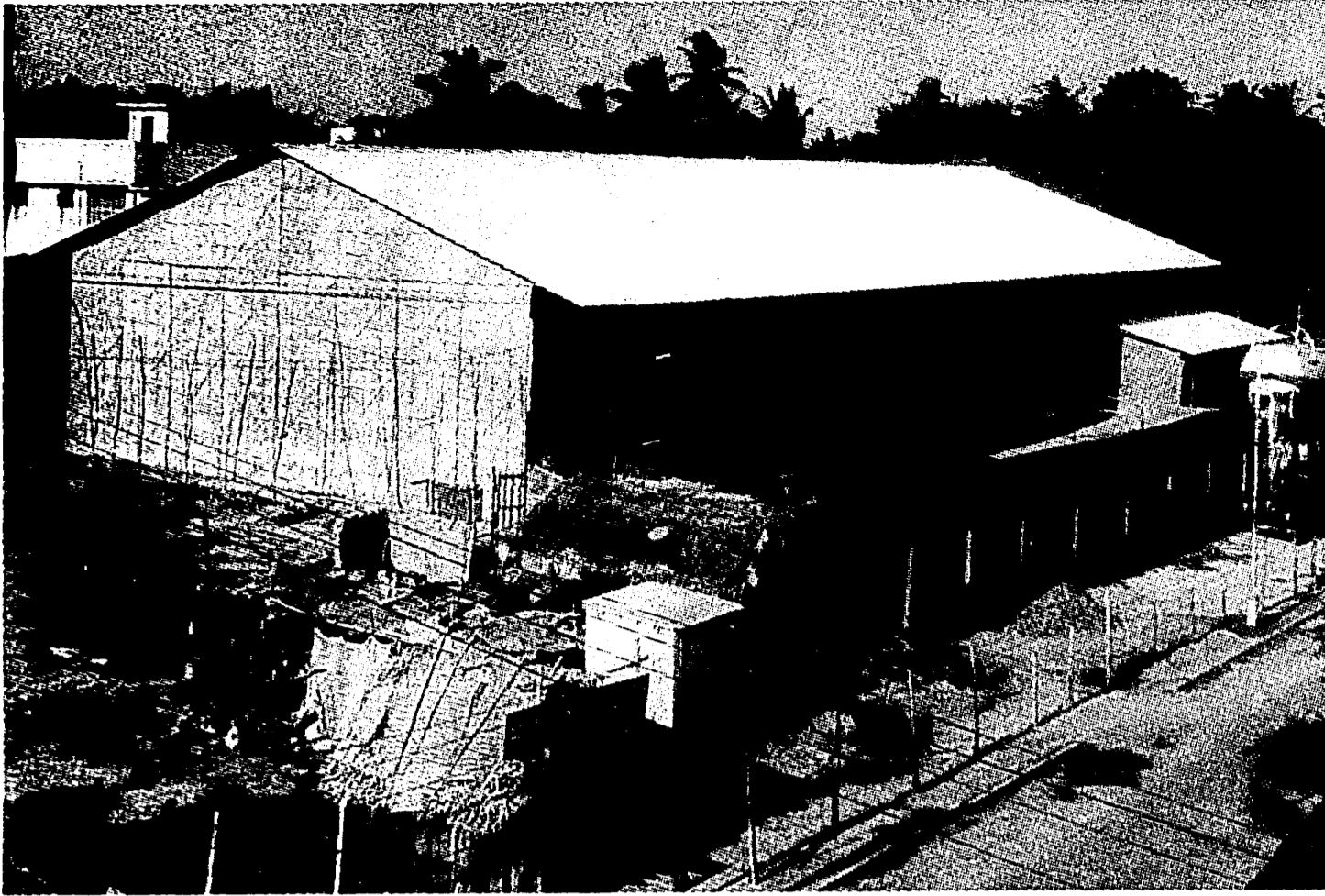
was then that the proposal to demolish and rebuild was aired, but fortunately for heritage lovers this was not accepted. Gunning of the cracks and boarding up the wall surface to present an aesthetic look was carried out preserving the original structure of the building.

More than the building itself, it is the lawn area that is one of the attractions of the building. The eastern lawn is gently sloping and is fringed with annuals. Its turf maintenance had to be met by the residents (governments do have peculiar rules). Ungrudgingly all of them took pride in keeping it lush and well-mowed. It could accommodate about 300 guests at the Queen's Birthday Reception and give ample room for circulation. A smaller lawn on the west used to be a tennis court. There is a somewhat wooded area in front of the building which had/had a sham rock-garden and a little pond. A young daughter of one of the DHCs reared terrapins in the pond. When some of the old trees were felled by storms and cyclones, it opened up a vista into the backyard of Lady Willingdon Nursing Home.

In the early months of their posting, wives of the DHCs used to feel dejected at their husbands being posted "to the back of beyond" and groused at having to keep such a capacious house in good trim, for leaving a residence in pristine condition is a diplomatic etiquette. But the Cottingley atmosphere would soon prevail over them and they would be loath to leave the place at the end of the posting. In which other diplomatic residence could they have such a choice of cosy nooks for their afternoon teas, hen parties and just chit-chat? Small groups could be entertained in airconditioned indoors or breezy outdoors. Those interested in flowers and fruits grew their own. When the children came for their vacations, there was plenty of space for them to

(Continued on page 8)





# Giving an old sabha a new look

Sri Krishna Gana Sabha in S.T.Nagar, long an integral part of the cultural heritage of Chennai, now has a new look. For decades, the *sabha* functioned from a thatched roof hall in a corner of what has now become a bustling shopping area. Now it's a brand new, aesthetically planned complex that was inaugurated by the *swamigals* of Kanchi Mutt.

now," says Yagnaraman who has remained KGS's Secretary for more than four decades. He is now perhaps the longest serving *sabha* Secretary!

Two men who have done much for the growth of KGS and now made it into a tastefully designed cultural centre are Nalli Kuppaswami Chetti, the textiles businessman and promoter of culture, and R.Yagnaraman, the *sabha's* secretary. For more than four decades, Yagnaraman has personally driven the fortunes of this *sabha*, providing stage for talented singers and dancers during the three festivals every year.

Following in the steps of his famous grandfather who had made a name for himself as a criminal lawyer in Andhra Pradesh, Yagnaraman became an advocate. But when he lost his father, Yagnaraman was forced to go back to tending agricultural land that the family possessed.

Yagnaraman has spent every day from the beginning of this year supervising the re-construction. "Everything I wanted to do has been accomplished

When he came back to Madras, it was the Sri Krishna Gana Sabha that beckoned him. Speaking of a *sabha* secretary's job he says, "It is not an easy one. There are many pressures on you. From artistes, from members, from *rasikas* who want free tickets." But he has managed KGS without having fingers pointed at him by such acts as not featuring at the *sabha* even his grand-daughter, who has excelled as a young vocalist under the tutelage of Lalgudi Jayaraman - (Courtesy: *Adyar Times*.)

Our OLD this fortnight is the Sri Krishna Gana Sabha's Hall, the 'Gana Vihar', while it was being built in 1954, with asbestos roofing and bamboo thattis. The OLD has been renovated and transformed into a modern auditorium, the 'Nalli Gana Vihar', a cost of Rs. 50 lakh, through the support of wellwishers of the sabha. The NEW is an elegant structure with tiled *smshades*, old Chettinad pillars, village lamps with electric bulbs inside them, and wooden icons on white-washed walls. A new home has also been provided for the sabha's Sangeetha Vidyalaya (below right) which offers training to about 150 students in Carnatic vocal music, veena, mridangam, and Bharata Natyam.

The sabha was founded by Sangeetha Kalanidhi Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, who became its first President, and his son Maharajapuram Santhanam, the first Secretary of the sabha and after whom the road is named.

## THE OLD...

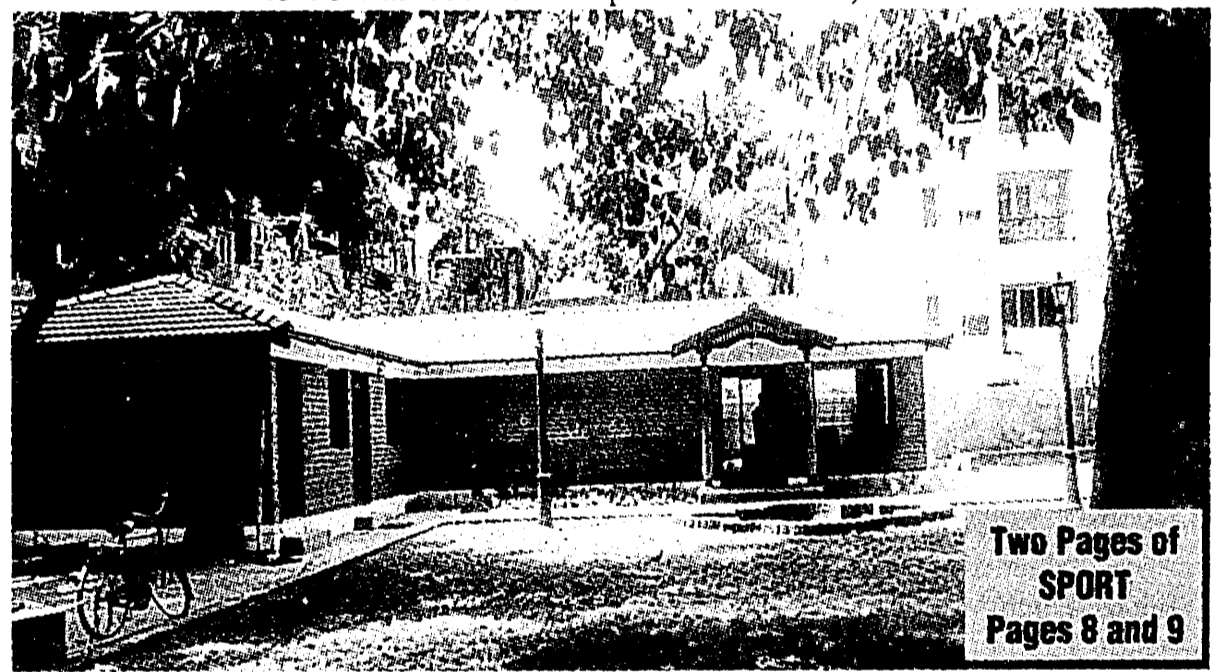
The sabha, founded to foster Classical Music, Dance and Drama, organises three major cultural festivals annually. The music festival, the 'Gokulashtami Sangeetha Utsavam' (Janmashtami) is from the first week of August to the first week of October and offers about 60 concerts and more than 250 artistes. On the inaugural day of the music season, the sabha honours a vidhwan with the title

'Sangeetha Choodamani' and a cash award of Rs. 25,000, a gold medallion, a scroll and a shawl. This was first instituted in 1974 and the first recipient was T.M. Thiyagarajan.

The sabha also conducts a 10-day Drama festival in April, 'Chitirai Nataka Vizha', and also honours an actor or actress with the title 'Nadiga Choodamani'. Instituted in 1992, the first recipient of the title was Poomam Viswanathan.

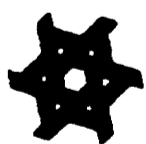
The sabha conducts its Art and Pongal Dance Festival and The All India Natya Kala Conference in December-January. The title 'Niritya Choodamani' being conferred at that time. It was instituted in 1974 with Dr. Padma Subramanyam the recipient. (Photographs by RAJIND N CHRISTY.)

## ...& THE NEW



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SPORT  
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