

WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

MADRAS

MUSINGS

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"Helmets are being made compulsory... or are they?... Anyway, this new 'helmet' cut will serve the purpose, Sir!"

Top heavy

To helmet-up or not helmet-up... That is the question confronting all two-wheeler-using Chennaiites. First, a deadline was announced. Everyone rushed around getting equipped, and all those who had opted for helmet-dealing as a career choice were one happy bunch. Almost immediately afterwards came a ruling which stated that, well, it isn't really all that mandatory, you know, and transgressors will be treated with gentle sympathy. And so the dilemma. Obviously it makes firm sense to wear helmets. But it does call for a total change in attitude and approach. Essentially, a two-wheeler will now have to be treated as a means of transport for (hold your breath now at this brand new concept) Only Two People. Now, this is impossible in a country that has its own unique way of defining the number of people who can travel on a two-wheeler. And too many helmets spoil the ride, taking up too much room, clanging against each other, possibly knocking drivers and riders off the vehicle. Chennai weather does not help. Imagine the state of the head that has baked inside a helmet in this heat. There is no way "Helmet-hair" will make it as a fashion statement. But there's no denying the safety angle. Tough call. Choice is not always an ideal thing, you know.

Ranjitha Ashok

An appeal to the CM

To ensure Government House is saved & preserved

(By The Editor)

Dear Chief Minister, The past few days have seen a lot of news coverage on the proposal to build a new Assembly complex in the Omandur Ramaswami Reddiar Estate (formerly Government Estate). We had welcomed this as we, in *Madras Musings*, were of the view that Fort St. George ought to be made available to the public of the State as a World Heritage Site in which a lot of history has been enacted over the last 400 years, including the periods in which you have held office and guided the State's history.

We are glad that you have announced that *Rajaji Hall* will not be affected by the plans to build the new Secretariat and Assembly. However, what really concerns us is the decision taken to demolish the old MLAs' Hostel. It is in this connection that we would like to draw your attention to some of the building's history.

1. The name MLAs' Hostel is of recent creation. The building was originally the residence of the Governors of Madras Presidency till the time of Independence and was, therefore, the seat of power.

2. A building has existed here for well over 250 years. It was a property that belonged to a member of the Madeiros family, a name that probably got modified into Madras.

3. The building became the home of the Governors of Fort St. George when the then incumbent Saunders rented it from the owners in 1752. Since then many changes and alterations took place, bringing the house to its present shape.

4. There are many age-old trees that surround this old building, adding to its charm.

5. The building became the MLAs' hostel post-Independence, and when the new MLAs' hostel was built this building was abandoned.

6. It later became the Headquarters of the Police while the

(Continued on page 2)



Government House, kept bright and gleaming by the CBI, is one of the most historic buildings in Madras. This is a heritage building that must be saved.

The Madras High Court shows the way

(By A Special Correspondent)

At a time when most heritage and environmental issues in the State are given very low priority, the Madras High Court has shown a different, and welcome, way. The Chief Justice has appointed a Heritage Committee and an Environment Committee for the High Court premises, comprising judges, lawyers and law officers and they are producing results. Representatives of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, Tamil Nadu Chapter, are also members.

At a recent meeting, it is reliably learnt, the following decisions were taken:

- Demand for space is going up all the time in the premises and there is therefore pressure to put up new buildings. It was decided that the Heritage Committee, acting on INTACH-TN's inputs, would advise on where and in what style the new buildings are to come up.

- It may come as a surprise, but there is no toilet for litigants in the High Court. It has been decided to accept the offer of Rotary International to build and maintain a toilet for litigants in the premises.

- The Police Station on the

campus has only 2000 sq.ft. With police officers from all over the State coming here in increasing numbers with those in their custody, 4000 sq.ft. of space would appear to be needed. A new building on the campus in a style that will be architecturally integrated and will meet the needs of the police is to be built.

- The Government Law Officers' building at present is 11000 sq.ft. in extent. There is demand to increase this to over 30000 sq.ft. Space for such a building has been approved by the Heritage Committee and the Advocate General's Office has been requested to submit a design for a building that will meet their needs.

- The main building will be restored as it is and the restoration will be on the lines of what has been done at *Senate House*, with inputs from INTACH-TN.

- Flood lighting of the main High Court building is planned with Central Government assistance. When this is done, this building will be yet another public building of the city to be so illuminated, like *Senate House* and the DGP's office on the Marina.

- After the restoration of the High Court building, renovation of other important court premises across the State, such as those in Egmore and Trichy, will be taken up.

- A tree-planting and greening drive is to be launched on the campus.

It is but appropriate at this juncture to quote from what Lord Wenlock said when, on July 12, 1892, he declared the present High Court buildings open. The Governor declared that Madras "has reason to be proud of the habitation in which the administration of justice will be carried out. For beauty of design and for perfection of execution there is nothing or very little to be desired." The present plans once put into action will only serve to bring home this truth.

It is to be hoped that all these restorations will follow a uniform code as once existed for Police Stations in the country. *Madras Musings* also requests that while the restoration of the High Court is taken up, the premises of the Presidency Magistrate on Rajaji Salai and the Saidapet Court be also considered for immediate renovation.

Summer blues slow down city prosperty

The *Man from Madras Musings* remembers a comic that he had read when young that had a character called Gooly Gooly Witch who, as witches usually do, only delighted in bad news when she read the newspaper. She would have had plenty to chortle about had she been in Madras that is Chennai last week. The rising value of the Rupee against the Dollar is hitting the blue-eyed IT industry where it hurts the most. The almost 10% rise has crushed profit margins and there are many worried looks. According to some, however, this may not be such a bad thing. The grapevine has it that most IT companies, barring a few exceptions, have large numbers of surplus staff, who are kept on the rolls as cushions against sudden resignations. The sudden resignations occur because headhunters, under pressure for recruitment, poach and hire indiscriminately across the board, promising higher and higher salaries, thereby causing sudden vacancies. All this, according to the (sour?) grapevine, may not continue, with the necessity to tighten belts. And so, attention may once again shift to productivity rather than perquisites. At the other end of the spectrum was a small news item that the mango too has been affected by the rising rupee. But MMM thought that the seasonal fruit bowed only to Mother Nature.

If that was not a significant blow, the decision by the State Government to go slow on development of land on Old Mahabalipuram Road, was another. Apparently worried over the haphazard development of the place and concerned over the pressure on infrastructure, the Government has decided to slow things a bit. All this is worrying the real estate industry which, after the IT sector, must be the fastest growing segment in the city. If that was not enough, the news that Government is mulling over a tax on "land profits" (no,

MMM does not mean Capital Gains Tax) which it will euphemistically call "betterment levy" and which will be payable when the land is put to use, has all those investing in real estate now wondering over what further blows are there in store. It makes Job's problems look like a vacation by the seaside.

Hanging the helmet

The last few days have also provided much amusement to *The Man from Madras Musings*. The Government officially stated what was always its policy, namely that of going easy on any law. The helmet law is the first one over which it has come out in the open and stated that it intends to be lax. And judging by the reactions of our two-wheeler owners, who immediately doffed their helmets, you would not be incorrect in assuming that they wore helmets more out of fear of the police than out of any intention to protect their heads from injury.

What is to be done with the helmets that have been bought and are now lying around without any use? A leading Tamil weekly had several answers. A series of cartoons suggested the following:

- To paint masks on and amuse the children
- To hanging up in the balcony as a nest for sparrows
- To use as a wash basin after drilling a hole into the bottom
- To use as an indestructible pumpkin to ward off the evil eye.

It showed that humour is not quite dead in our city.

A clean Central

The Railways have declared Central Station to be a litterfree zone and have announced that anyone caught spitting, littering (and the rest) will be fined Rs. 100 on the spot. Having made this announcement, the Railways are now working out the meth-

odology of levying the fine. Yet another example of a law or rule coming into effect with no thought of how it will be implemented.

"Let there be cleanliness," said the Railways. "And there was litter," is sadly the answer. The authorities distributed leaflets as part of the programme and *The Man from Madras Musings* noticed that several who got them crumpled them up and threw them all over the place. Looking at it positively, however, the decision to implement mechanised cleaning is most welcome and MMM hopes that the tendering process for the contract does not take ages, adding more litter in the interim.

SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

All's well ...

Scene: A hot day in May on Mount Road. *The Man from Madras Musings* and several others are driving along sticking to their lanes to the best extent possible. Loud roar without. Enter MTC bus into the two-wheeler lane, driving at speeds far exceeding limits. Two-wheelers scatter hither and thither. The chaos spurs a policeman into action, and he, on his bike, appears to give a chase. MMM and the others follow, scarcely daring to breathe out of suspense as to end-result. Bus continues at breakneck speed, policeman follows valiantly. Meanwhile, the traffic lights at Spencer's are turning red. Tension mounts. Will bus stop? In case it does not, will policeman overtake it and bring it to a halt? Bus screeches to a halt after crossing the stop line and well over halfway across the road, thereby obstructing traffic considerably. Policeman catches up and

draws his bike next to bus on the side of the driver. He doffs his helmet. Smiles at the bus driver. They shake hands. Lights change. They move on leaving MMM and others looking at each other with a wild surmise. The 'all clear' is blown. Exeunt.

This is a greater mystery than any other that MMM has come across recently, possibly ranking on par with *The Man in the Iron Mask*. Were the two of them participating in a race and was the policeman, the gallant loser, congratulating the bus driver? Was the policeman, no doubt reflecting that the quality of mercy is not strained but droppeth, complimenting the bus driver for having (quite literally) seen the light and stopped, albeit a little late? Were they long-lost brothers who had accidentally met, as in films, and resolved to fade out into the sunset? If only Holmes had been with us.

The mobile menace

The *Man from Madras Musings* is quite used by now to hearing mobile phones ring during programmes where attendees are explicitly told to keep them on silent mode. But what was most amusing and/or irritating, depending on your outlook, was the Chief Guest at a programme attending to HIS call on the stage, even as someone was sonorously introducing him. "What?" bellowed the Chief Guest into the phone, "I am not the power of attorney-holder." This was faithfully picked up by the public address system and relayed to everyone present, thereby derailing all thought processes as imaginations worked overtime to identify what the conversation signified. The event, naturally, paled into insignificance and even the Chief Guest's speech was listened only with tepid interest. The topic remained the subject of conversation long after the CG had received his silver plaque and shawl and departed.

An overseas visitor with MMM remarked that it was a pity that the citizens of Chennai, while embracing new technology, did not accept the responsibilities and etiquette that went with it. In his office, the visitor remarked, it would be unthinkable for someone to hold up a meeting claiming to have received a phone call and that, according to the visitor, is what happens most of the time during his meetings in India. He does not understand the local language, said the visitor, but he was certain that most conversations and SMSs were about boiling the milk and taking the dog for a walk. MMM had to agree.

Loquacious 'invites'

Big Fat Weddings are not for Greeks only. Indians have them too, and South Indians more so. And if a wedding is fat, should the invitation not be matching it? *The Man from Madras Musings* recently received an invitation which was housed in three envelopes in three successive sizes. The smallest envelope being the innermost had the card and, when opened, it had this message:

We together with our parents take pleasure in inviting you to be

With us to shower love and wishes on the memorable

Occasion as we join hands in matrimony

And login into life of love

Truly your presence makes a difference

Adding more joy as we flutter Even we fly.

The last line obviously should have read "Even as we fly", but then the printer must have thought that one word less would not matter when there were so many already. MMM is sorely tempted to attend the wedding. Something tells him that the proceedings will be fraught with interest.

— MMM

AN APPEAL TO THE CM

(Continued from page 1)

HQ on the Marina was being beautifully restored, thanks to your intervention. When the Marina offices were made ready, most of the police offices moved there, barring a few that stayed back. They have maintained the building well and have made it a liveable, usable premises.

7. The building is an example of early Raj architecture and, given its historical importance, needs to be pre-

served. In addition, it is not in any way structurally weak and, therefore, demolishing it would be an unnecessary and expensive exercise.

8. May we, therefore, request that like the DGP Building on the Marina and the GPO which, even after a fire, was restored to its earlier condition, this building too be preserved.

9. It would send a strong signal out that Tamil Nadu cares for its heritage and its history and it will, as a consequence,

be a lasting tribute to your leadership and your passion for history.

We look forward to your considered and favourable intervention.

May we expect favourable action from you?

Thanking you,

Yours faithfully

The Editor
(on behalf of
the lovers of
Chennai's heritage)

A big 'Thank You' to 37 of you

We publish below the list of donors who have, between 16.5.07 and 15.6.07, added to the support Chennai Heritage and its voice, *Madras Musings*, have already received. We thank all of them for their support for the causes Chennai Heritage espouses.

— Chennai Heritage

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• The first part of a series of articles on the pluses and minuses of the draft Second Master Plan for Chennai.

One step forward ...

Planning is bringing the future into the present so that you can do something about it now.

— ALAN LAKEIN,
Time management guru

The Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) has published its draft Second Master Plan (SMP) for Chennai after a long gap of 30-odd years. The purpose of the Master Plan is to provide citizens a document that explains how the land in their city is currently being used and how it is proposed to be used. This draft SMP is the only legally mandated document that citizens can access and study to understand and be informed about whether the land area of the city is being utilised to meet their demands and needs. It is both a vision document and a strategy to get there. It is also one of the few opportunities available for citizens to voice their opinion on the programmes of the elected government.

A master plan is a land-use plan and the vision of the planning agency is articulated by a two-dimensional or three-dimensional spatial drawing which is then translated at ground level. Traditionally, planners have set themselves only economic and development goals, leaving the more important 'quality of life' issues to be achieved by mere spreading of population to desired

densities. Today, however, it is clear that any plan has to be based (and evaluated) on environmental norms to achieve sustainability. Coupled with this are the aspirations of different and differing sections of society for a better life in as short a period as possible. In our democratic set-up, the master plan, therefore, has also to be based and evaluated on equity.

The draft SMP is currently available on the CMDA's website for public comment. Printed copies (though priced) are also available with the CMDA. In a remarkable departure from previous draft master plan, the CMDA has worked hard to pro-actively share the document with groups of Chennai residents. There is both a 550-page full version of the SMP (with more tables, data and maps) and a simplified 70-page document for residents to access and comprehend.

● by **Bharath Jairaj**
Director
Citizen consumer and
civic Action Group (CAG)

Tamil translations of these versions have also been prepared. Significantly, the CMDA has organised a series of public meetings at various parts of the Chennai Metropolitan Area (CMA) where the SMP is being discussed with members of the public. This is aside from CMDA planners and officials attending meetings organised by Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) and professional bodies, such as the Institute of Architects, to explain the salient features of the draft SMP and elicit public comment.

Further, recognising that consulting residents of a city as large as Chennai on the draft SMP would require longer than the statutory period of 60 days, the CMDA had initially provided 90 days for public comment. However, even this period is likely to be further extended by 2-3 months (as publicly stated by the CMDA Vice-Chairman a few weeks ago) since the Tamil version was released only recently. All of this is in stark contrast to the earlier process adopted by the CMDA, when none of this was available or possible.

A second positive feature of the draft SMP is that it has identified several of the problems facing the city and their causes accurately. For instance, it rightly draws the link between the establishment of car manu-

facturing factories in and around Chennai city and the massive increase in the number of private cars in the city. The limited public transport options available for commuters and the consequent air pollution caused by the overuse of private cars is an extension of that link. Similarly, the link between the misuse of carriageway and pavements by utilities and consequent traffic jams is rightly identified. Some of the recommendations proposed in the draft SMP too follow this logical thread. For instance, the recommendation that sanitation be mandatorily provided in areas where only water supply is proposed to be provided, displays an understanding of the inseparable link between the supply of water and sanitation facilities – otherwise seen as two separate services provided by Metro-water. Similarly, the recommendation that 20 existing cremation grounds be converted to gasified crematoria to reduce air pollution and burning of firewood is wise.

For those riding the IT wave, the draft SMP cannot get better. In recognition of the "strategic role played by IT in Chennai's development", the draft SMP proposes plenty of offers and concessions to the IT sector. There are new roads – the IT corridor in particular – with its own specific water supply and sewerage scheme, new SEZs, new industrial estates in Sholinganallur and Perumbakkam, and even new towns for housing those working in the IT sector. In the chapter on social facilities, the draft SMP recommends new educational and vocational courses on IT and skill upgradation to create a 'well trained and adaptable workforce'. In fact, the draft SMP permits IT buildings in every zone of the city – irrespective of whether it is a primary residential zone or commercial zone or industrial zone. It may be pertinently asked if this is an equitable allocation of resources given that Chennai is not merely an IT town, but there can be no disagreement that for the burgeoning IT and IT-Enabled Services population, the draft SMP is as good as it gets.

There are other specific details of the draft SMP that are positive and progressive. The recommendation that an OSR (Open Space and Recreation) Fund be created and used for the protection and conservation of areas of recreation is particularly welcome. Under the existing rules, property

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● GASIFIER CREMATORIA

Far from people-friendly

As a chemical engineer and resident of Besant Nagar living near the cremation ground, I am highly concerned about the decision of the Chennai Corporation to install several gasifier crematoriums in Chennai city.

I feel this decision has been taken by the Corporation without taking into consideration the representations of residents of Besant Nagar about the present operation of the gasifier crematorium in Besant Nagar in total violation of environmental standards.

Residents of Besant Nagar, including myself, have filed a case in the Madras High Court requesting the High Court to direct the Chennai Corporation to stop operation of the cremation ground in Besant Nagar in view of the public health hazards that it causes. The court has admitted the case and the Bench, presided over by the Chief Justice, has already called for details from the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board and Chennai Corporation.

Originally, an electric crematorium was set up by the Corporation in Besant Nagar at a cost of several lakh rupees. It has for several years insisted that the electric crematorium was operating satisfactorily. Suddenly, it took a different tack and decided to construct a gasifier crematorium. It had not sought approval from the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board for the electric crematorium earlier nor has it for installing the gasifier crematorium in Besant Nagar or in other places.

The gasifier is operated using wood and the combustion is often incomplete, sending dense and black smoke into the atmosphere through the chimney. The smell is often nauseating. The gasifier crematorium has not improved the conditions that prevailed when the electric crematorium was used. The

● A reader's view

Corporation authorities ought to have carried out scientific and technological assessment about the performance of the gasifier in Besant Nagar, particularly from the point of view of atmospheric emission and environmental pollution, before deciding to install more gasifier crematoriums in the city. Nothing of the sort has been done and there has been no consultation with the local residents, amongst whom there are several experienced engineers and technologists who can talk knowledgeably on the subject and give useful suggestions.

The office of the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board has closed down several industries in the past, even in the small scale sector, for causing pollution which would have been less than one-third that the gasifier is causing in Besant Nagar. I am sure that the design and operating parameters of the gasifier crematorium in Besant Nagar would be straightaway rejected by any technical audit on several counts.

The Corporation should not be adamant in matters concerning public health and environment and there is no justification to rush with proposals for gasifier crematoria in other parts of Chennai without learning from the experience of the Besant Nagar crematorium. I feel that by taking steps to install several gasifiers in the city, the Corporation would not only be violating environmental standards all over Chennai, but would also be wasting several lakh rupees in the process.

N.S. Venkataraman
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Besant Nagar, Chennai 600 090

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

Our Addresses

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No personal visits or telephone calls, please. Letters received will be sent from these addresses every couple of days to the persons concerned and you will get an answer from them to your queries reasonably quickly. Strange as it may seem, if you adopt the 'snail mail' approach, we will be able to help you faster and disappoint you less.

THE EDITOR

CHENNAI'S LIKE THAT – TODAY!

RANJITHA ASHOK in this occasional series of articles takes a caustic look at Madras that is Chennai today.



Event-ful, that's what it is!

Chennai no longer has 'ceremonies', 'celebrations'...or that multipurpose, overused (and slightly unfortunate) word: 'Functions'.

Yes, Chennai now has only 'Events' – and there's a whole breed of entrepreneurs out there, whose considerable skills are all directed towards putting a party together and making it happen.

'Events' are the order of the day, judging from the number of announcements and the flood of invitations, all engaged in a competitive frenzy over who gets to be the most innovative.

Very exciting, and very Page Three – and things have just got that much tougher for that ubiquitous breed – The Socially-Inept.

For this singularly hapless lot, the very word 'Event' brings on that old, familiar attack of cold, clammy extremities, and a suffocating feeling of dread.

It's time for yet another (albeit updated) version of your famous Supreme Wall-Flower Act, and your favourite game of Avoid-The-Photographers. Your hands and feet swell to twice their size within minutes of your entering the venue. You find your hair is all wrong, your accessories ridiculously chosen, and you are almost always swimming against the dress-code tide, wearing bling when the washed out, muted look appears to be the norm, or going "soft nothing" colourwise when everyone around you is blatantly Peacock-y.

Always out of step, that's your problem. And there's no point telling yourself that Madam Put-On across the room used to consistently cheat in her Maths tests when you were in school with her, and was famous for grabbing

food from other people's tiffin-boxes.

She's conquered her hair and has had the courage to re-invent her wardrobe – that's all that matters, and not all your achievements, assuming you have any, will cut any ice here.

Meanwhile, harassed-looking bright young things dart about, speaking terse code into their walkie-talkies or ear-thingsies, with the intensity commonly associated with all those clever people who help launch space shuttles.

While you totally appreciate all the effort and really hard work, you can't help but notice that 'Events' and Age-groups tend to clash over certain basics.

Like light.

Some of us need more light, people. When you were still at an age when authorities gave you a long list of "Don't-you-dares", lack of light held promise, mystery and adventure.

Today, all this dim darkness merely creates unnecessary problems.

Your first act these days, naturally, is to find a corner and settle down. Squinting into the darkness, you identify an unoccupied spot. Ruthlessly brushing aside various pillars of society, artistes, theatre personalities, the odd movie star, and aspiring authors who are cluttering up your path, you surge ahead, lay claim to the space, and find yourself in the lap of the Chief Sponsor's spouse.

Embarrassing. Then, to add to your woes, you either end up looking right through close friends, who promptly begin to plot revenge and your social downfall - or spend 20 minutes disclosing intimate details of your physical ailments and subsequent treat-

ments to someone who, in a sudden flash of light, turns out to be a total stranger. This unfortunate soul then spends the rest of the evening propping up the bar, glaring at you from across the room and avoiding you like the plague.

If you can see at all, the general level of couture boggles your mind. Where in Chennai do these people pick up these itty-bitty clothes and ensembles?

Events-doers need to make up their minds – should their invitees talk, or spend the whole evening merely smiling at one another? It really doesn't matter which – we just need to know, that's all. Because, if even the mildest pretence at conversation has to be factored in, the music must be turned down. In all fairness, they do turn down the music at times – usually when you are in mid-yell.

Very difficult, yelling straight into the face of a Social Big-Wig, or even a yesteryear star, while choking over all that smoke they insist on whooshing about the area.

Another point to ponder – What is the role assigned for you at any 'Event'?

If you are left alone to be 'little brown mouse' to your heart's content – no issues. You can relax.

But heaven help you if you find yourself in 'Events' that demand participation – ghastly word. You are hit with a barrage of "Winning tickets stubs (or table numbers)", "Best dressed", "First on the floor", "Guess the...(whatver)", "Charades" ... and all those old memories of being lousy at even passing the parcel come rushing back.

(Continued on page 7)

• The AMBASSADOR is 50. And we seem to be forgetting it. But the UK has begun to look at it again. And two British-organised rallies in India featuring AMBASSADORS are being advertised there. The *Telegraph*, London's motoring supplement ran these two articles mainly in connection with these rallies – and the AMBASSADOR'S Golden Jubilee. This might not be strictly Madras – but the AMBASSADORS have been part of the lives of most of us in the city. And so we publish them to recall the Amby Age.

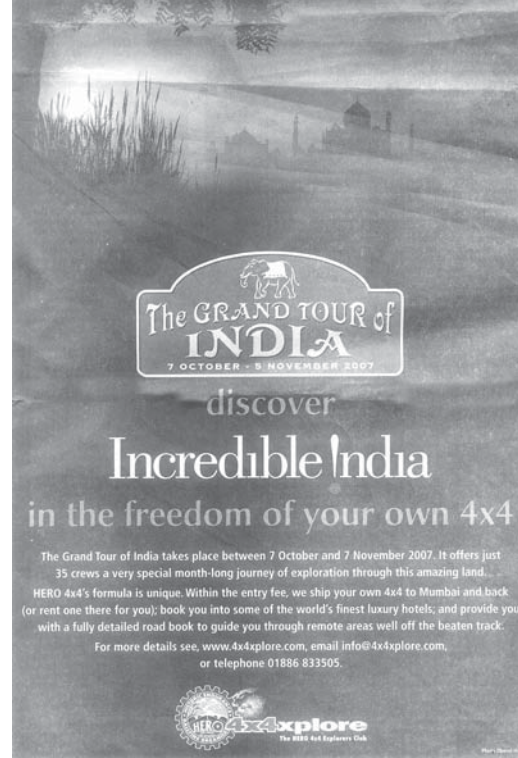
A jewel of India

On the road, the Hindustan Ambassador's theoretical top speed is 90 mph, but you would need the courage of a lion hunter to reach that dizzy pace. Besides, as the rear axle is pure 1949-vintage Morris, corners still need to be negotiated in a civilised manner. Acceleration is not exactly scintillating, either, and visibility is a further challenge to the Ambassador novice. The size of our well-fed, 21st-Century frames is not exactly in keeping with the interior of a car designed more than 50 years ago and you have to bend down to peer through the port hole-like windows. At least the occupants retain an upright military posture, thanks to the unyielding seats.

British-market Ambassadors, which are available via Merlin Garages of Carmarthenshire (prices start at £9,500), have a luxury European specification including a heater, ashtray, cloth upholstery and reclining front seats. And the latest models are fitted with the decadence of power-assisted steering. At the wheel, however, such modern conveniences do little to dispel the impression that you are travelling through a Harold Macmillan-era time-warp, with the BBC Light Programme burbling from the wireless and perhaps a hint of Wolseley police bell behind you. The Ambassador not only feels as though it is from another age, it is a time machine...

In the late 1950s, the British Motor Corporation was the fourth largest car maker in the world, with the docks of Tilbury and Southampton lined with export-model Morris Oxfords proudly bearing BMC's rosette logo. Fifty years later, when BMC's marques and factories are a fading memory, virtually the sole survivor of that era is the Hindustan Ambassador of Uttarpara – essentially a 1957 Morris Oxford Series III. The Ambassador is far from the only European car of a bygone age to survive in another part of the globe – Al Nassar of Egypt will gladly sell you a Fiat 131 Mirafiori, while Peugeot of Kenya still markets the 504. The Ambassador is by far the most popular, however.

Hindustan's first car was the 1942 Landmaster, which was based on the Morris Ten and tar-



The HERO 4x4 Explorers' Club India rally is scheduled for October-November 2007 and will feature 35 teams using 4x4s.



Karma Cabs, London, would appear to be behind this India rally, in October 2007, when participants will each get an Ambassador to drive in it.

• Andrew Roberts celebrates "a true time-machine"

prohibitively expensive, in order to protect its own motor industry, and so the Ambassador effortlessly dominated the middle-class motoring sector for decades. The Ambassador was far from the only example of this phenomenon – Standard Motors in Madras made the Gazel (aka a 1959 Triumph Herald) until 1977 while the Premier Padmini (1966 Fiat 1100) lasted until 2001 – but it certainly enjoyed the highest profile. It also negated the need for a Hindustan Oxford Farina and – to the silent thanks of thousands of Indian motorists – a Hindustan Marina.

For the next 23 years the Ambassador was Hindustan's sole product, receiving only minor facelifts throughout its

production run. By 1980, Hindustan augmented India's national car with the prestigious new Contessa (a 1972 Vauxhall Victor FE) but there were very few takers. Even the delights of an Indian-built Rover SD1 – albeit fitted with a four-cylinder Ferguson tractor engine – failed to topple the Ambassador from its iconic status as the transport of army officers, police chiefs and government ministers.

However, as the 1980s progressed, the government's restrictions on the car market were progressively liberalised, leading to the Suzuki-backed Maruti 800 dominating the Indian mass market. Hindustan commenced a concerted export drive, as far afield as Dubai (where it gained a reputation as a cheap delivery vehicle) and even Japan. By the 1990s, the BMC 1.5-litre engine (and the starting handle bracket) had been replaced by a 1.8-litre Isuzu unit, seat belts were fitted and the Morris-style central instrument panel was relocated to the right of the dashboard.

At the end of the decade, Hindustan launched its very welcome "millennium modernisation" programme. For 40 years

the Ambassador was still being made from extremely worn 1957 panel dies and even the introduction of servo-assisted front brakes was a further step towards modernity, but the big Hindustan retained much of its traditional appeal. Ventilation (and demisting) continued to be achieved via opening quarter lights in the front doors and most Ambassadors came with a bench front seat that can apparently carry four occupants "provided the driver is not too fat", in the words of a Hindustan spokesman. The Isuzu engine also meant the replacement of the steering column transmission with five-speed gearbox and a floor-mounted lever, albeit with an overdrive top gear that, on India's congested roads, will be reserved for very special occasions.

But how can the Ambassador survive in a country where even the Prime Minister has adopted a BMW as his official car, and where the new car market is dominated by the products of Japan or Italy?

Hindustan still sells Ambassadors in five-figure quantities. Soni Shrivastav, corporate communications manager, says: "The Ambassador is still a symbol of power in India." More than 25

(Continued on page 7)



A Karma cab in London – it's our Amby, believe it or not!

Go left at the elephant!

Motoring in India, we are told, is hair-raising. Main roads are slow, congested and dangerous, full of kamikaze truck and bus drivers, while secondary routes are hopelessly rough and crowded. Meanwhile, pedestrians, cyclists, cows, bullock carts, cycle rickshaws and tuk-tuks choke the city streets. True?

I have just returned from a 10,000-mile Indian drive, where I surveyed the route for October's Grand Tour of India, and there's more than a grain of truth, but the reality is more complex.

Certainly, city streets can be appalling and some of the busy national highways are difficult, but most towns have bypasses and bigger cities often have smooth-flowing ring roads. Dual carriageways link a number of major centres (complete with camel carts) and most main roads allow good progress to be made.

Even better, India is covered by a network of virtually empty, well-laid secondary roads. Sometimes the traffic is light enough for the locals to be able to dry their chillies and spices on the asphalt. Finding such roads is difficult, because the maps are awful, but we did discover one 7,500-kilometre (4,650-mile) route linking many superb sights.

Then there are the elephants, the occasional rock fall and spectacular abysses to enliven mountain driving. We even saw two men calmly painting a zebra crossing on a busy main road, with only a few stones for protection.

Indian road manners are different. Outside urban areas, there are very few private motorists. Humans and animals apart, traffic consists of trucks, buses, Jeep-type vehicles (usually trading as taxis) and chauffeur-driven cars. Most vehicles are in the hands of people who drive for a living, but they tend to be poor and uneducated and few will have passed a driving test.

The king of Indian roads is the truck driver. Big Tata and Ashok Leyland lorries dominate the main highways. With a few exceptions, most drive courteously and will wave you past when it's safe. Don't be surprised, however, to find a truck coming at you on your side of the road, usually overtaking another truck. Locals won't expect a Western driver, going a bit faster than the average Indian, to steam around a corner assuming his side of the road will be clear. It is the stately speed of traffic that makes Indian roads safer than they deserve to be.

Import duties are less prohibitive than hitherto, but most vehicles are still made in India. Ownership of small cars is growing fast, but motorcycles are the commonest means of transport – often graced by a female pillion riding side-saddle. The celebrated 350cc Enfield is still popular, along with the products of Hero Honda swarms of scooters.

The Indians' insatiable demand for travel far outstrips the design capacity of every available form of transport. Buses habitually carry passengers on the

roof rack, even at fairly high speed. We saw a tractor – no trailer – with 14 on board. Just as remarkable are the loads carried. Trucks can be terrifyingly overloaded, not to mention bullock and camel carts. Solo motorcycles habitually carry families of four, often with a small boy just behind the handlebars, but we saw one carrying two adults and two sheep.

We found congestion-evading routes into and out of almost every major city, but there are some really bad jams. If you tour India by car, leave it at your hotel and take a tuk-tuk, or auto-rickshaw, around the city centre. These little three-wheelers are cheap and manoeuvrable, the driver knows the way and is skilled at getting through the *mélée*.

Indian drivers can be very undisciplined. Red traffic lights are treated as advisory, going the long way round a roundabout to turn right is optional and people will pull out of side roads if they think you have time to stop for them. At level crossings, drivers in a hurry go down the wrong side and cause complete gridlock. You are supposed to use the left-hand carriageway on expressways – unless of course you want to get to a café on the other side. Above all, always expect the unexpected.

A good horn is a must. Everyone hoots all the time, especially in crowded streets. People expect you to announce your

presence and will walk straight out if you don't. Overtaking is a particular adventure, although it is easier once you get into the Indian mindset and oblige a vehicle coming the other way to slow down or pull over to let you through. They invariably do, with no sign of road rage. It helps that most Indian vehicles travel slowly by our standards – many trucks are officially limited to 40kph (25mph). Official speed limits are seldom posted or, indeed, obeyed.

Road signage varies from excellent to the erratic and downright eccentric. The Indians see no point in replacing an old sign if it is still serviceable, so there is a bewildering variety of styles in use. Many signs use English, but more are worded only in the local script. This is mostly Hindi, but southern states use the squiggly Dravidian and north-eastern states use Indic, which looks like Arabic. Few Indians from other regions, let alone foreigners, can read these, but the authorities' regional pride prevents them adopting English as standard, even if only as a substitute.

Indian roads at night are no place for the faint-hearted. Streets are often unlit, as is much of the traffic – not just carts drawn by bullocks or tractors, but buses and trucks too. But in daylight, once you pick up the local rules, driving is not particularly difficult or dangerous. It's a lot of fun and is much the best way of getting to some wonderfully obscure splendours that lie off the beaten track.

You should try it.

• by John Brown

(He was surveying the route for HERO 4x4 explore's Grand Tour of India adventure drive, which takes place from October 7th-November 7th.)

Quizzin' with Ram'nan

(Current Affairs questions are from the period May 16th to 31st. Questions 11 to 20 pertain to Tamil Nadu and Chennai.)

1. Name the new President and Prime Minister of France.
2. Who scored Chelsea's winner in the FA Cup final against Manchester United at the new Wembley Stadium on May 19th?
3. Why was Odyssey Marine Exploration in the news on May 18th?
4. Who recently became the second player in the history of professional football to score 1000 career goals?
5. Name the famous tea clipper, the last surviving preserved vessel of its kind, which caught fire in Greenwich on May 21st.
6. Who regained the UEFA Champions League crown recently?
7. Riyo Mori, the new Miss Universe, is from which Asian country?
8. At which stadium did India score its biggest ever Test win (by an innings and 239 runs) recently?
9. Name the Dera Sacha Sauda chief who recently apologised, after much public criticism, for 'imitating' Guru Gobind Singh.
10. Name the two veteran CPI (M) leaders from Kerala who were recently suspended by the Politburo of the party.

* * *

11. Name the new woman DMK candidate for the Rajya Sabha.
12. Which veteran actor is to play a Kathakali artiste in the Tamil film *Vambu Chandai*?
13. Where in the State is the nation's first handloom export zone (HEZ) scheduled to come up by October this year?
14. For which civic infrastructure project in the State has the World Bank sanctioned Rs. 1800 crore?
15. Where in the State is Thiruvalluvar University?
16. Which Tamil film was part of the Indian package at the prestigious Cannes film festival recently?
17. To primarily protect which animal was Kalakkad declared a sanctuary in 1976?
18. Which case, which led to the midnight arrest of DMK President M.Karunanidhi in 2001, has now been officially closed as a "mistake of fact"?
19. Name the two Districts in the State starting with the letter D.
20. One more on districts. Until 1996, Erode District was named as...?

(Answers on page 7)

Ceylonese charmer of Madras cinema

She wowed Tamil movie-goers in South India, Ceylon, the Federated Malay States, Burma and beyond. This Sri Lankan charmer of early Tamil cinema was Thavamani Devi. She brought sex appeal in liberal doses to Tamil cinema when it had none. She was the forerunner of all the silky seductive sirens of the silver screen, T.R. Rajakumari... Madhuri Devi... Anjali Devi... and their latter day sisters like 'Silk' Smitha and the rest.

She was abundantly endowed and her uninhibited style of acting, singing and dancing, her body language and more, mesmerised Tamil film audiences. During that puritanic period – the 1930s-1940s – she shocked many.

Sathi Ahalya (1937), *Vana Mohini* (1940), *Vidyapathi* (1946) and *Rajakumari* (1948) were her hit movies and are fondly remembered to this day. Some of the songs she sang, like *Ariyatheey En Manam...* (*Vana Mohini*), became super hits and are still hummed by many. Her melodious voice and singing talents won her the honorific 'Singalathu Kuyil' ('the Cuckoo of Sinhala') but K. Thavamani

Devi was from Jaffna. Her father was a wealthy and successful barrister in Ceylon and he and her mother encouraged her talent for song and dance and she moved to Madras, the cultural capital of India.

In Madras, she learnt Bharata Natyam and took lessons in Carnatic music. Her upper class, Westernised lifestyle, her exotic and stunning looks, her talents and her captivating charisma, made her the rage in the social and art circles of Madras.

No wonder Tamil film producers of the day took notice of her and one of them was the Salem-based South Indian movie mogul, T. R. Sundaram of Modern Theatres.

Sundaram launched *Sathi Ahalya* (1937) as his maiden venture for Modern Theatres and ever a talent scout he cast the Ceylonese newcomer, Thavamani Devi, as Ahalya. To introduce Thavamani Devi to the movie world, Sundaram organised a press meet. When the film journalists asked for her photograph for publication, she gave them one, which stunned them! It showed her in a swimsuit, leaning back languorously,

Thavamani Devi and M.K. Radha in *Vana Mohini*. (Courtesy: 'Film News' ANANDAN.)



throwing out a challenge at the wide wicked world! The picture created a sensation when published. Such a photo of a high-society Asian woman had never appeared in the Press in South India during the prudish 1930s!

Sathi Ahalya did well, but it was *Vana Mohini* (1940) that bestowed on Thavamani stardom.

A rehash of a Hollywood 'jungle' movie featuring the lovely Dorothy Lamour, Thavamani followed the Lamour style faithfully in *Vana Mohini*. She wore the same Hawaiian style sarong wrapped tightly round her torso, exposing her legs and much of her bosom. That was the first time such a costume had been worn in a Tamil movie and it contributed much to the film's success!

Now she began to insist on designing her costumes herself and also doing her own make-up and made it a condition of her contract! Something unheard of at that time in Indian cinema!

Vana Mohini also starred M.K. Radha and an elephant

named 'Chandru'. In the credit titles, the elephant got top billing in preference to Radha and Thavamani!

Beside Thavamani, Radha and 'Chandru', music was another major plus point in *Vana Mohini*. The film had ten songs and Thavamani sang many of them. One of them, *Ariyatheey En Manam...*, became a big hit and is still remembered and hummed by old-timers.

The music composer was Ram Chitalkar and, in later years, he would blossom forth as a living legend and icon of Indian film music under the name, 'C. Ramchandra'!

In 1940 too she played a role in Ellis Dungan's *Sakunthalai*, one of M.S.'s only four films. Thavamani, as Menaka, the celestial dancer and Sakunthalai's mother, almost stole the show from M.S. and G.N. Balasubramaniam in this musical extravaganza with her sensational dance number. The shapely, sensuous siren with her sultry looks was the rage of the day.

Another film in which Thavamani played the lead role was *Vedavathi* or *Seetha Jananam* (the birth of Seetha, Lord Rama's wife). She was Seetha. A footnote to Tamil film history is the fact that the then struggling actor, M.G. Ramachandran, also Ceylon-born, played a small part as Indrajit. This 1941 film is hardly remembered today.

Vidyapathi (1946) was a successful movie in which she was the vamp, a devadasi. In *Vidyapathi* Thavamani had song-and-dance numbers befitting her role (she was called 'Dasi Mohanambal' in the movie!). She also performed a 'tillating Western type' dance.

One song had English words along with Tamil, a novelty in the 1940s! Here goes the song...

Atho rendu (*there the two*)...
Black eyes!
Ennai parthu (*looking at me*)...
Once, twice!
Kannai chimitti (*winking!*)...
Dolly!
Kai katti (*with hands*)... Calls me!

*Is it true your eyes are blue?
I'll fall in love with you!
I will dance for you!*

(Continued on page 8)



June: The theatre workshop conducted by Koumarane Valavane will continue in June from 8 am to 12 noon. Limited number of seats only (20)! For further information, contact 9942809992 (at Alliance Francaise).

Till June 27: An exhibition of photographs by Nandini Valli. (at Alliance Francaise.)

June 21: Fete de la musique. The programme for the day is as follows:

3.30 pm-5 pm: Open house for young musicians.

5.30 pm: Show by *Yodhaka*, led by percussionist "Debruka" Siva. This is an experimental outfit that collates and absorbs musical traditions from all over the world and fuses it with indigenous rhythms.

7 pm: *Oikyotaam*, fronted by Bonnie Chakraborty, has developed a sound rooted in the rhythm and melody of folk music. The evening's performance will be a presentation of contemporary folk and an experiment with Indian classical form *Thumri*. (All at Alliance Francaise Auditorium.)

June 22: Performance by POGO Amazing Kids, keyboard player, Sathya. (At Oxford Bookstore, 6.30 pm.)

June 24: No Idea & Mademoiselle K: A celebration of music!

Hip-hop beats, or rock guitars, with Mademoiselle K who offers the sound of throaty, rocking vocals that know how to turn sensual. No Idea is a band that started in 2000 as a heavy metal/alternative rock outfit. No Idea won the Great Indian Rock Competition in 2005. (At Buck's Theatre, YMCA, 7.00 p.m.)

June 24: Akuatika, a one-day meeting, to mark the 4th anniversary of www.indianaquariumhobbyist.com – the web portal dedicated to popularising the aquarium hobby in India. Those interested in registering for *Akuatika* can do so through the website. There will be a nominal charge for attending the all-day programme. (From 9.00 am onwards at Hotel Checkers.)

June 30: Meet the Author of *Bhuj*. A slide show and interaction session with Azhar Tyabji on the

making of his book *Bhuj*, a study of the artistic, architectural, historical and civic-planning issues involved in rebuilding the city of Bhuj after it was destroyed by an earthquake in 2001 (at the Connemara, 7.00 pm).

June 30: Poster Making for Children: A course to wake up the artist in children. Print posters with any eco-friendly material of your choice and home-made dyes using screen printing techniques. Course includes materials, lunch and transport from DhakshinaChitra city office and back (at DakshinaChitra).

June 29 & 30, July 1: Flame of the Forest, inspired by Kalki Krishnamurti's epic novel *Sivakamiyin Sapatham*, the sculptures of Mamallapuram, and Mahendra Pallava's *Mattavilasa*. *Flame of the Forest* is an original play written and directed by Gowri Ramnarayan. It is set in 700 A.D. in Kanchi and Mamallapuram, the capital and the port city of the Pallava kings. It is produced by JustUs Repertory, which was established in 2005 by Dhritiman Chaterji, Gowri Ramnarayan, V Ramnarayan and others, in association with The Madras Players. (At the Museum Theatre, 7.15 pm. Also at 3.30 pm on June 30th.)

One step forward...

(Continued from page 3)

However, arguably the most significant aspect of the draft SMP is the blunt honesty of the CMDA in accepting its own limitations. It is obvious that the CMDA has very little influence on other government agencies and para-statal agencies that play important roles in Chennai. Therefore, the "strategies and actions" section accompanying every chapter in the draft SMP identifies specific concrete (!) projects in some cases while merely making some broad general suggestions – depending on the agency that they are addressed to.

The "recommendations" made to the Tamil Nadu Housing Board, the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board and Metrowater, in particular, are very different and appear more as mere requests than authoritative recommendations. Even at the various public meetings organised concerning the draft SMP, CMDA officials have underscored the "independence" of other government agencies and para-statal agencies to decide their own priorities and plans. In some instances, the CMDA has *verbatim* lifted sections of those documents and inserted them in the draft SMP in the hope that some uniformity in approach is achieved.

The CMDA has obviously been limited by the archaic data given by some of these agencies and by their rather traditional and conservative approach. In a rather clever manner, the CMDA makes this point by recommending a series of studies to update the data available and to develop new strategies to resolve age-old problems. For instance, on augmenting water supplies, the draft SMP recommends that Metrowater studies the potential of recycling wastewater. Similarly, on the health infrastructure in CMA, it recommends more data to understand delivery of health services to the poor, future requirements and, specifically, what (if any) the contribution by the private sector is. It recommends surveys and maps on flood-prone areas and other areas likely to be affected by floods, as well as development of special regulations for buildings and structures in seismic and other hazard zones. It also recommends an Environment Management Plan (EMP) be prepared for the CMA region including the identification of ecologically sensitive areas for conservation. All of these are necessary for the CMA and it is regrettable that the agencies involved have failed to implement these suggestions till date.

The CMDA, despite several inherent limitations, has finally put out the draft SMP, and the challenge now is for citizens to take the next steps with this document. All of us sharing the city know what the problems are and, instead of just sitting around and grumbling, we need to get involved and do something about it. The draft SMP provides one such opportunity to contribute to the process of enhancing the quality of life in Chennai.

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EVENT-FUL

(Continued from page 4)

No wonder therapists are a contented lot these days.

Some social situations are more nightmarish than others, though, however seamlessly 'event-ed' they may be. There is perhaps little to compare with the truly unique sense of inadequacy that can hit you whenever creativity, investment and a dash of social-statement-making come together.

Like at art auctions.

There you are, completely clueless, and totally betraying that fact by your eagerness to look and sound knowledgeable, and as if the thoughts you think are long, long thoughts. (Which really means you have to pretend that you weren't, earlier in the evening, laughing your head off at the umpteenth re-run of a sit-com that has long passed its sell-by-date.)

Talk about being up the creative creek without a paddle...literally, because you've just embarrassed yourself by scurrying away from those rather scarily arty-looking people at the entrance who asked you to "register" and get yourself a "paddle".

A fly is buzzing close to your face, but you are scared to swat at it, because you might just end up with a piece of creativity at a remarkable price, and you didn't even know there were that many zeros to a number.

But that's Chennai for you these days, changing her habits, getting herself a new look each day. And what can you do?

Nothing, except give in, and get with the whole programme.

After all, you don't want to be the only odd one out who just couldn't follow the piper, do you?

JEWEL OF INDIA

(Continued from page 5)

per cent of all Ambassadors are ordered by Indian government departments and, in 2007, with the option of a two-litre diesel engine, it remains the car of choice for the Indian army, many police forces and government ministers. When an assassination attempt was made on the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh in 2003, the mine failed to crush his Ambassador. "Had it been some ordinary car, the situation would have been worse," said the Home Minister.

There is also the ultimate-spec Ambassador Grand, launched in 2003. It features body-coloured bumpers, digital clock, child-proof door locks and optional extra airconditioning. Yet the standard Ambassador 1800 remains the most familiar sight on India's

roads, be it as a cream-liveried official car decked out with red flashing lights and a siren, or a well-used taxi cab containing anything up to 10 passengers. As Hindustan Motors notes, the Ambassador is robust enough to cope with India's varying road conditions and simple enough to be repaired by most mechanics.

In England the Ambassador is most associated with Notting Hill Gate-based Karma Cabs, which favours ornate interiors. British motorists might sneer from their BMWs as they witness such garish cars plying their trade, but they would do well to remember that the Ambassador has outlived the Mini. It is a survivor that has transcended its original purpose and found a new one. How many cars do that?

Answers to Quiz

1. Nicolas Sarkozy and François Fillon; 2. Didier Drogba; 3. It claimed to have mined what could be the richest shipwreck treasure in history (worth at least \$500 million); 4. Romario; 5. *Cutty Sark*; 6. AC Milan; 7. Japan; 8. Sher-e-Bangla Stadium, Dhaka; 9. Baba Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh; 10. The State's Chief Minister, V.S. Achuthanandan, and Pinarayi Vijayan.

* * *

11. Kanimozhi; 12. Sathyaraj; 13. Nagercoil; 14. For desilting and strengthening 5,000 irrigation tanks; 15. Vellore; 16. *Veyil*; 17. Lion-tailed macaques; 18. 'Mini-flyover-case'; 19. Dharmapuri and Dindigul; 20. Periyar District.

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If in the coming year Chennai Heritage receives repeated support from those of you who have already made contributions, and if many more supporters join the bandwagon, we will not only be able to keep *Madras Musings* going, but also be able to continue awareness-building exercises on on-going projects as well as undertake one or two more such exercises.

Therefore, please keep your contributions coming IN ADDITION TO YOUR SUBSCRIPTIONS. If, say, you send in a cheque for Rs.500, we will treat Rs.100 of it towards subscription to *Madras Musings* for 2006-07 and the remaining Rs.400 as contribution towards the causes Chennai Heritage espouses.

We look forward to all readers of *Madras Musings*, and those newcomers who want to receive copies, sending in their subscriptions. We are indeed sorry we can no longer remain a free mailer.

— The Editor

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NOSTALGIA

It was terrific fun — riding in Madras

Riding opens doors all over the world and this was certainly true when I went to live in Madras in the 1960s. Within three days of arrival it had been arranged for someone to pick me up to take me riding on the edge of the city. 5.30 in the morning wasn't a time I knew existed but that was when I had to get up. I had taken my own saddle and double bridle out with me and under the list of clothing recommended for the tropics, cotton jodhpurs because of the heat. And what heat. The temperature was so high and the humidity so intense that the horses could only be ridden from 6 to 7 a.m. after

which they had to return to their boxes shaded by "khus khus tatties", rush blinds which were splashed with water throughout the day.

The horses were hacked out by their syces to a small outdoor school, constructed in a patch of the jungle in the park surrounding Governor's House, while we drove out to meet them. On that first morning I was allocated a thoroughbred mare who had a soft mouth but danced sideways the whole time. Desperate to make a good

impression I ignored the perspiration running down my face, the hands so wet they could hardly hold the reins and the fact that my hair was stuck to my head under its hat. We trotted round the disused polo ground admiring the huge white Governor's House, his country retreat in the days of the British. We cantered down the rides between the banyan trees, monkeys swinging above us and little spotted chital deer leaping out in front of us. Afterwards we sat on the Riding Club verandah drinking milky South Indian coffee and watching the returning horses have a roll in the sand pit before being put back in their stables. For a girl from Cardiff I was in Paradise.

From then on I rode every single day — not going to bed at all if there had been a party the night before. We did troop drill on the polo ground, 20 of us trotting about wheeling left and right and often getting it wrong, crashing into our neighbour to the sound of "Your other left" bawled by our Club President, an eminent Indian lawyer. In the slightly cooler weather, during the festival of Pongal, we rode down the coast for a short holiday, hopping over little banks of the dried up paddy fields and seeing Indian village life at its rural heart. We camped among the casuarina trees on the beach overlooking the Bay of Bengal and went to sleep with the noise of the horses shuffling and snorting on their tethers. We ate fearsome prawn curry made by the head syce for supper, and breakfast on the fluffy rice idlis served all

over South India. We cantered on miles of sandy beach, the only other occupants being a few fishermen with their catamarans, and we swam the horses into the sea. We had a bit of bother with a pony who seemed to want to keep going to Singapore. It was all so exotic.

Back at the Riding Club, my BHS-qualified friend decided the children, who we taught in the late afternoons, should learn some stable management and be given a certificate at the end of it. The Indian club officials were horrified, no one went near the ponies in the stables as they bit and kicked anyone other than their own

for the Gymkhana Races, when the professional season ended about late March. A bit like running a point-to-point, but it was all on the flat. So, as far as the race-goers were concerned, the show went on as usual. The only difference was that it must have been very difficult to pick a winner as we were a motley bunch. There were two city Riding Clubs, the tea-planters, who brought their horses down by train from the hills, and the Madras Police. The handicapping was to have a staggered start, highly dangerous as we never managed to get everyone facing the same direction when the flag went down. The horses had to be led down as none of us jockeys could hold them and the syces hung on for grim death until the starter yelled "OFF". The various thoroughbreds, Arabs, Walers and Katiawars, bolted round the track until they ran out of steam and we perspiring riders managed to haul them up half way round the back straight for the second time.

The nice young man who took me riding on the first day was by now my husband and he had been lent a knock-kneed nag called *Frolic* by the Police, as it was the only horse anyone could find up to his weight. The race set off and as my beloved husband disappeared under the stands side, the steering having failed, we thought he had run off the track. But about 100 yards from the post he suddenly re-appeared, all on his own on the inside rail, the rest bunched on the outside. He won! We still have a handsome pair of silver tankards to prove it.

India has changed enormously since those days and that sort of life isn't possible any more, but on a recent return visit, reminiscing with our Indian friends, we all agreed it had been terrific fun while it lasted.

● by
JOSEPHINE FELTON

personal "boy". Why groom a pony when someone else would do it for you? We weren't having any of this, so we got a couple of the more amenable ones into the school, jumped on them and cantered them round for a few minutes. The ponies were so surprised that they stood like lambs while we initiated our charges in the delights of the hoofpick and body brush, the difference between withers and quarters and a few suggestions on feeding. Not that bales of Lucerne are delivered daily to a yard in England, but we felt it was part of the management lesson.

In order to finance the Club we were allowed to use Madras Racecourse and all its facilities

Ceylonese charmer

(Continued from page 6)

Thavamani wrote the English words herself, I was told.

Then came her most famous movie *Rajakumari* (1948). It was the directorial debut of another with Ceylon links, the Colombo-educated, successful writer-filmmaker, A.S.A. Sami. It also marked the debut as hero of M.G. Ramachandran. Thavamani was the vamp, the man-hungry queen!

In the film, she did sexy dances, one to seduce T.S. Balaiah and another to entice MGR! Both numbers were titillating and her costumes, designed by herself, left nothing to imagination! When she walked on to the set, Sami told her that the Censors would delete the entire scene! She refused to change or alter the dress and told the director, "Mr. Sami, my figure is natural...not fake or artificial like your actresses"

here...! What God gave me no man can hide!" After much arguments and counter-arguments between the actress, director and producers, she agreed to alter the costume. She sent for large sheets of thin white tissue paper and hastily cut out flowers which were stuffed into her cleavage! The Censors scissored away much of the footage, especially the close-ups of her heaving bosom!

Rajakumari was a big hit and established MGR as a box-office hero. It did not do much for Thavamani. Indeed, she began to slide. An extravagant lifestyle, advancing age, lack of discipline in her work, and other problems did not help her. Then she stunned her fans by taking saffron robes. That was not all. She married the priest of the famous Hindu temple in Rameswaram and moved to that holy town. She passed away in the late 1990s.

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