

WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

MADRAS MUSINGS

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"I'm starting to believe in the saying, 'The Known Devil's better than an Unknown Angel!'"

Absolute garbage

You have to admit things looked a little dicey a few days ago.

Piles of rubbish, representing the daily ebb and flow of life in a huge metropolis began...er...piling up – dotting street corners and roadsides, or just scattered around, pretending to be part of the general landscape.

The citizens watched with growing unease as battle lines were drawn between Those-who-were-there-before and the Now-we-are-in-charge brigade.

The former obviously felt that it was no longer their problem, and walked away, removing their bins in a marked gesture.

The second lot apparently fell short on equipment.

A bit remiss of them, don't you think?

You are reminded of one of the first rules of the school playground: Never put off the persons who own the sports equipment, because if they storm off, taking their bats/nets/rackets with them, guess who ends up at a loss.

Now, if the previous lot were up on popular music, they'd have gone around singing: "Don't you wish your garbage bins were in place like ours?"... following it up with triumphant guffaws like villains in old movies.

All very sad – when professionals face off.

Things have now begun to improve – or so we're told.

Good thing too.

Bit much if a coastal city began to use a sea of rubbish to compete with its watery neighbour.

Ranjitha Ashok

City going for green

Chennai has the maximum number of eco-friendly buildings in the country

(by Sriram V.)

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) is organising a Green Building Congress in the city from September 19th to 21st. Chennai playing host to the Congress would seem most appropriate as it has the most Green Buildings in the country – 15 out of India's 80 certified-as-Green-Buildings. "India is on the right path because the only platinum rated (top rank) building outside the USA is located in Hyderabad. There are 80 Green Buildings in India, with a built up space of 25 million square feet. Almost 85 companies have joined the IGBC," says S. Raghupathy, senior director, Confederation of Indian Industry - Godrej Green Business Centre.

The Green Buildings in Chennai are:

- Grundfos Pumps India Pvt Ltd.
- Vestas Wind Technology India Ltd.
- L&T EDRC 1
- Olympia Technology Park
- ABN Amro
- L&T & TC II building
- Turbo Energy Limited
- ETL BPO Park
- World Bank building
- Chennai Tech Park
- Rane Institute for Employee Development
- AMTI Tech Park
- RMZ Millennia Business Park
- Ashok Leyland Properties
- Sunhera Realty Pvt Ltd.

The concept is new and is still gaining ground and, so, the figures are not large. But the IGBC has set itself a target of 1000 buildings in the country by 2010.

Of Chennai's 15 Green Buildings, the Grundfos Pumps India Pvt. Ltd. office in the city has achieved gold rating, scoring 49 out of a maximum possible score of 62 points.

Internationally there are only 50 projects that have achieved gold ratings. The building claims to recycle 100% of its water and uses 40% less of potable water when compared to other structures of similar size. More than 75% of the building uses daylight and there is 28% energy saving when compared to conventional buildings. The office complex occupies 35,000 sq. ft. in a two acre plot. More such green buildings are in the offing in the city. The concept is also being extended to inde-



The 'golden' Grundfos green building.

pendent houses. It is estimated that the construction of such buildings costs only 3% more than conventional ones.

Internationally, buildings are rated for their environmental friendliness through the LEED system (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) which looks at five parameters:

sustainable site development, water savings, energy efficiency, materials selection, and indoor environmental quality. The LEED system, like any certification process, has third party inspection and rating and there are LEED-accredited profes-

(Continued on page 7)

Increase road space, arrest vehicle growth

– Recommendations to the CMDA

"Every department in the transportation sector of Chennai metro has its own agenda. Each works to its own advantage, without considering the larger interest of the whole," said an expert who initiated a recent Discussion Session on the Transportation Sector of the Second Master Plan, at Anna University. And this is exactly why 'constructive criticism' of different aspects of the Second Master Plan that looks in a 'holistic fashion' into each issue is so vital to the city.

The discussion was organised by the Alumni Association, College of Engineering, Guindy, and, after four hours a deliberations, the following recommendations were made to the Vice-Chairman of the CMDA who was present throughout:

- The road space must be augmented from the present 3% - 4% to 30% in newly developing urban areas. Transport network develop-

ment must be planned before land development. Transport facilities must not be added on a piecemeal basis.

- The alarming rate of vehicle growth must be arrested. Control measures on vehicle growth need to be put in place, as in other countries. The growth of automobile manufacturing units

• by SHOBHA MENON

too continues unchecked, with scant regard to diminished road space. Augmenting bus services, **increasing fuel cost**, and discouraging personalised vehicle usage etc. could be a long-term help.

- Suburban/metro and MRTS must be linked to encourage people to make use of intermodal transportation, as in integrated transportation systems in different cit-

ies in the world. Buses must be used as a link to encourage more rail transportation, which is more economical, energy-efficient and environment-friendly.

- There must be an emphasis on the safety of pedestrians and cyclists, and more road space must be provided for them, with pavements and separate lanes.
- Planned parking spots should be a must in public concourses and shopping areas, and there must be improved enforcement of parking discipline.
- Road crossings and subways near women's institutions must be planned properly to ensure safe usage.
- Education and Enforcement must complement each other. Currently, the focus on Education is low, leading to problems when Enforcement is inadequate

(Continued on page 2)

The joys of a Ministerial visit

The Man from Madras Musings lives in what used to be a residential area which, thanks to the mixed (or complete lack of) zoning laws of our city, has now become a commercial zone in which virtually the only surviving bungalow is MMM's. The property opposite is now a warren of business establishments in which a bank and a pawn broker coexist in amity. Now a supermarket has been added to the motley grouping. And MMM is thankful for its having sprung up. For, it was due to the inauguration of the supermarket that a Minister came to the area. And it was thanks to the Minister coming that the garbage of the last few weeks, which had been piling up ever since the changeover of clearing agencies, miraculously vanished. One of the drains had clogged, and liquid was pouring forth from it for a few days and this too was stopped, owing to the ministerial visit. MMM hopes and prays that more and more ministers come to his road regularly so that it will receive some attention.

A castle for a home

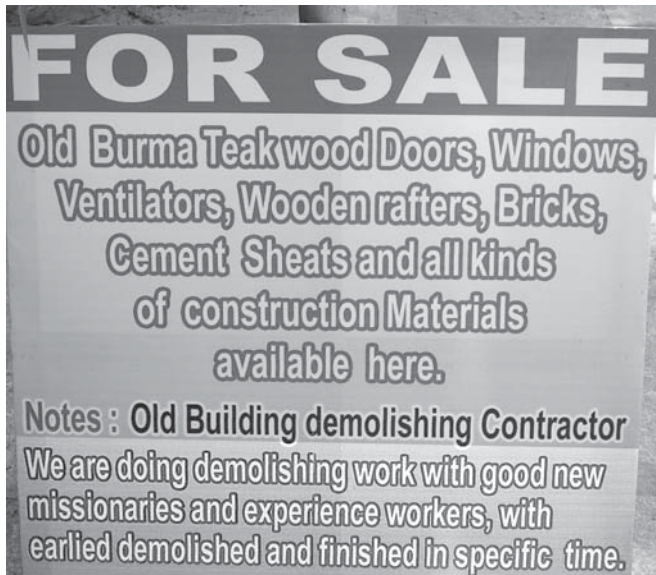
A few weeks ago, *The Man from Madras Musings* called on a friend only to find that there was no access to the latter's house. The cul-de-sac in which the friend lived was the scene of some hectic drain-laying activity, part of a city-wide project to provide stormwater drains. While this is perfectly laudable and most necessary, what MMM cannot understand is the cloak and dagger manner in which it has been done. Of official word, a by-your-leave, a suggestion to alleviate the dislocation, there was NONE from the authorities.

It was only by the sound of a pickaxe going about its job that the residents of the area got to know about the plan to lay new drains. By then a huge chasm had been dug as a result of which residents could not take out their cars, leave alone themselves. The elderly found it impossible to leave their homes, for, in order to do so, they would have had to be as supple as Njinsky was in his prime to hurdle the deep drain and climb over the mounds of

excavated earth and rubble. A few made bold to ask those digging how they could go to office with such a moat around their homes. Why don't you take a few days off, was the rather pert answer. Easier said than done was the feeling of those in salaried jobs. As for the others, they had to only imagine that, like the Englishman, their home was their castle and be happy. The moat must have lent verisimilitude.

Meanwhile, the residents of the lane have had to park their vehicles on the narrow road off which their lane leads or in friends' houses some distance away. Cars left in the lane have, without exception, suffered damage from garbage lorries or the lorries of the drain-diggers – or other users of the road, not least the urchins who delight in scratching them with a sharp instrument. Who is to pay for all this?

Just before these lines were written, MMM visited his friend again. The situation was a little better – six weeks of considerable inconvenience looks like coming to an end in a COUPLE of weeks, says



SIGNS OF THE TIMES: The Man from Madras Musings is surprised to find that a new use for missionaries has been found by a demolishing contractor. (Photograph: Dr. N. RAMANATHAN.)

wrecker's hammer moves inexorably on, rather, like the moving finger in Nebuchadnezzar's feast.

The *Bharat Insurance Building* (Kardyl Building) has been without a roof for over a year now. True, the LIC has put a scaffolding to make passers by

fulfil the avowed objectives of the Association. It has, however, been noted that conservationists have voiced their views through the press and electronic media, joined by some conservatives."

Now, what is that "conservationists" and "conservatives" have asked for which is not in keeping with the spirit of the Association? In what way is the present building not a "fitting memorial" to the founder? Plainly put, the present structure does not please the present office-bearers. They want to pull down a historic building and put up a monstrosity which will have no bearing on the history of the existing structure. Why is a new building necessary? In what way will it improve on the facilities now available? As always, there are no answers to this. There is only a desire to demolish.

Showing the way

While Madras that is Chennai seems hell bent on destroying what little heritage it is left with, whether built or natural, Mumbai that was Bombay has shown the way when it comes to preservation and restoration. *The Man from Madras Musings* was recently in that city and a

news item caught his attention. The Central Railway has decided to open a second entrance to the Victoria Terminus (VT), now renamed the Chattrapati Sivaji Terminus. Towards this end, 20 acres of old sheds and tracks were removed and, while in that process, the authorities discovered a "lost station", complete with magnificent pillars and cobblestone floors intact.

The building had been shrouded by dense foliage and came to light only when the trees were being cut. It has now been identified as an old station connected to the docklands and has been dated tentatively to 1879 when it must have been part of a line connecting VT to the Princess Docks from where goods such as cotton and opium were exported. A steam crane has also been found intact inside the station. The construction must have been the work of the Great Indian Peninsular Railway which later became a part of the Indian Railways.

What was heartening to MMM and other lovers of heritage was the decision by the railways to leave the building as it was without demolishing it to make way for some other construction. It will hopefully be brought into day-to-day use, if not as a station, then at least for some other railway purpose. In Mumbai, the preservation of the old has become a matter of routine, while in Chennai it is always a fight to the finish with the building usually ending up a complete loser.

Elsewhere in Mumbai, the Santa Cruz police station has been restored and renovated without doing away with the existing building. And it is not even a 100-year-old structure. The culture of heritage preservation has permeated all levels in Mumbai, while Chennai, which calls itself the cultural capital, has chosen to lag behind.

Tailpiece

"Don't dring and drive" says a sign on Mount Road. Syne of the Tymes?
— MMM

SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

MMM's friend, resigned to a city that does not care for its citizens' comfort.

Whither the Act?

Another Madras Day has come and gone and there is no Heritage Act in sight. *The Man from Madras Musings* is deeply disappointed. *Gandhi Illam* in Government Estate stands half demolished and whatever is left standing has been abandoned to the elements.

The story goes that work on bringing the structure down has been suspended pending the larger demolition activity that is to take place here in order to make way for the new Assembly. The fate of *Government House*, in the same enclave, hangs in the balance. Last heard, the police, who are in occupation, have not been asked to leave. But such delays are small comfort. The

believe that some renovation is on. But with the matter in court, there has been no new development. This has been a year of copious rains and heaven knows what damage the building must have suffered by now. MMM is not sanguine at all. As for Gokhale Hall...

A Besant memorial?

A friend of *The Man from Madras Musings* is a life member of the Young Men's Indian Association which owns *Gokhale Hall*. He showed MMM the latest annual report of the association which, in addition to listing the regular activities, has a paragraph on the Hall. And that is worth quoting:

"The Association would be initiating further steps for constructing a new building as a fitting memorial to our founder Dr. Annie Besant with all the infrastructure and facilities to

ROADS & VEHICLES

(Continued from page 1)

or not applied uniformly across the cross-section of road-users.

- Building plans must be approved only if the space allocation for transportation is also submitted.

An example of good planning that was shared during the discussions was the Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagar Palike's re-

cent initiative to make a traffic management plan compulsory to obtain approval for buildings. It was being done through suitable modifications in the existing building by-laws.

Owners of commercial buildings with built-up areas of more than 2000 sq m and residential buildings with built-up areas of more than 4,000 sq m have to produce traffic management plans, that show how many ve-

hicles would enter the building every day and their impact on the traffic congestion in the surrounding areas. Also "Visitors' vehicles are not allowed" boards outside multistoreyed apartments must be removed, since the building by-law clearly states that 10 per cent of the total parking area should be reserved for visitors' vehicles (which would otherwise compound the traffic congestion).

A big 'Thank You' to 29 of you

We publish below the list of donors who have, between 16.8.08 and 15.9.09, 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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We, the people, at CMDA consultation

The final event deliberating the draft Second Master Plan for the Chennai Metropolitan Area (CMA) was a two-day workshop organised by the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA). Builders, citizens, NGOs, Government officials — all offered their ideas.

Some of the recommendations made in the workshop were:

- An integrated mode of public transport linking the bus routes with the rail stations, having common ticketing facilities.
- Providing vertical parking facilities and underground parking lots.
- Need to implement the Coastal Regulation Zone rules.
- Creation of a solid waste management authority.
- Heritage should be treated as a local issue.
- A heritage committee to implement conservation plans on the ground for man-made and natural heritage.
- Natural heritage, such as wetlands and estuaries, needed to be saved.
- Population growth will stabilise by 2026 and infrastructure should be provided for the expected population.
- Answers needed to be found for lopsided employment.
- Extension of Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) concept for lands taken over for development or heritage conservation.
- Need for self-contained townships and satellite towns.

- Real estate issues needed to be answered.
- Green building concepts to be promoted.
- Urbanisation of two- and three-tier cities to be encouraged.
- Vertical development, without compromising on the density, should be allowed.
- Employment and skill training in cluster development areas.
- Fishermen's contribution needed to be included in the Master Plan.
- Poverty alleviation and slum improvement projects should be implemented.
- Market forces should be allowed to decide the location of the informal sector businesses.
- Wastewater to be recycled and new sources for water options to be identified.
- Bus fleet to be increased from 2800 to 9000.
- Staggered school timings and allotted zones in market centres.
- Exclusive pedestrian areas to be designated.
- Advanced traffic management technologies to be introduced.
- Prevent formation of new slums.
- Working women's hostel and single-person quarters should be encouraged. — (Courtesy: *The Hindu Property Plus*)

EDITOR'S NOTE: How many of these can we expect to be included in the final master plan and how many of them will be implemented? We live in hope.

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

OUR READERS WRITE



Trams again?

People speak of old buildings and their beautiful architecture, of personalities of the past who had noble conscience and always thought of doing good to the community without any return. But, surprisingly, no one has looked at a transport system of the past which was a boon to the then travelling public. It was the cheap and effective tram service. Trams were noisy due to the tracks but there was no polluting the air, no smoke emission, etc.

Further, the trams carried more passengers, upto 102 passengers in the bigger trams. From Royapettah to Mylapore we paid only 3/4 anna or 4 nayepaise. It was 1/2 anna by small tram plying between Luz and San Thome with single track and crossings at certain places. It was indeed a pleasure and a good experience to travel by tram.

Bharat Hiteshi
3/54, Gandhi Nagar
II Cross Street
Palavakkam
Chennai 600 041

EDITOR'S NOTE: Yes, why not look at trams again? They are no longer noisy, they travel faster and are more comfortable in every city they ply abroad. Their services are continuing in Kolkata even today.

Garbage resort

I was shocked to recently read an article about dogs being shot at hotels and resorts on the East Coast Road. But readers should also be made aware of the appalling conditions under which these hotels dispose of their garbage. One beachfront property with an international tag has a pit on a small plot of land near its southern boundary on the seashore (about 25 m. from the water line) into which solid wastes including plastic and thermocole from the kitchen, bathroom and service areas are just thrown and left in the open. This attracts plenty of stray dogs, hundreds of crows and many gypsies to the area.

Another 'green resort' throws its plastic and other waste over its rear compound wall on to what happens to be the bank of the Buckingham Canal (this canal not long ago used to be a traditional fishing ground for fishermen during the rough sea season).

Brazenly polluting the environment and then employing illegal means to get rid of the dogs (apparently, these country-

made guns do not kill the dogs but only injure them and make them yell and squeal for a long time in pain till they eventually breathe their last) are inhuman, to say the least.

Can the Government do something to make our 'resorts' responsible corporate citizens?

C. Navaz
2/157, Karrikatu Kuppam
Muttukadu Village
Chennai 603 112

Earlier Assembly

In the 1950s, an Assembly building (MM, June 1st) was constructed in *Government Estate* and it functioned for some time, i.e. in the present-day Kalaivanar Arangam (Children's Theatre). In fact, the Post Office inside *Government Estate* was renamed Assembly Buildings P.O. For reasons best known to the authorities, the Assembly was again shifted back to Fort St. George and at that time Rajaji had stated that abandoning the newly constructed Assembly buildings and subsequently changing the same into the Children's Theatre were all wasteful expenditure.

Already the State Secretariat is functioning inside the Fort and the functioning of the Assembly there would be more conducive to the effective functioning of the Secretariat. By again shifting back to the *Government Estate*, not only is the tax payers' money being wasted but also the only patch of greenery in the Mount Road area will be wiped out, besides creating more traffic snarls in an already congested area.

T. M. Sundararaman
19, Nallappan Street
Mylapore
Chennai 600 004

Improve the old

I quite agree with your Special Correspondent's views (MM, August 1st) about the construction of the stadium on Old Mahabalipuram Road. I had the opportunity of attending a baseball game in San Francisco, US. It was in a huge indoor stadium with all infrastructures like weatherproof structures, comfortable seats for the viewers, etc. If such arrangements are made to convert our Chepauk Stadium, it would not only be beneficial to sports lovers but would also create another fine building in Madras.

P. A. Ranganathan
16/24, Vedachala Garden
Mandavalli Street
Chennai 600 028

Public utility ordeal

Of what avail is the BSNL's "Public Utility Services" pertaining to the Railways?

On Saturday, August 18, 2007, waiting for a response to an urgent telephonic enquiry about special trains on the Erode route, I had to be on the line for nearly 75 minutes! On dailing 131, my order of waiting was given as 20 which took about 30 minutes to move to 1 at snail's pace. I gave up following a further 20 minutes' wait. Then I tried 132 and my order of waiting improved slowly from 17 to 3 where again I had only to 'grin and bear' the otherwise sweet "Your call is important to us" voice for yet another ten minutes. I gave up on that too! Then I got the response, thank my stars, from one Mr. Raghu who came on the direct line 25353816. He hung up on my asking for names of other persons on duty during my grueling attempt!

The "Public Utility Services" is billed after the first 3 minutes, and so the cost I have incurred for a simple enquiry may very well be imagined! (Except the above and other automatic enquiry numbers, no other direct line was responding.)

I have no complaint if it were a system failure, but that was not the case here. It would be in the public interest if action is taken immediately to rectify the inept handling of the system.

If the PUS cannot be offered free as before, why can't the caller get an "engaged" tone after 3 minutes of unsuccessful wait? Otherwise such enquiries would be unaffordable, apart from irritation and inconvenience.

P.K. Parameswaran
Technoclan Flats No.6
11, Vembuliamman Koil Street
K.K. Nagar
Chennai 600 078

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.

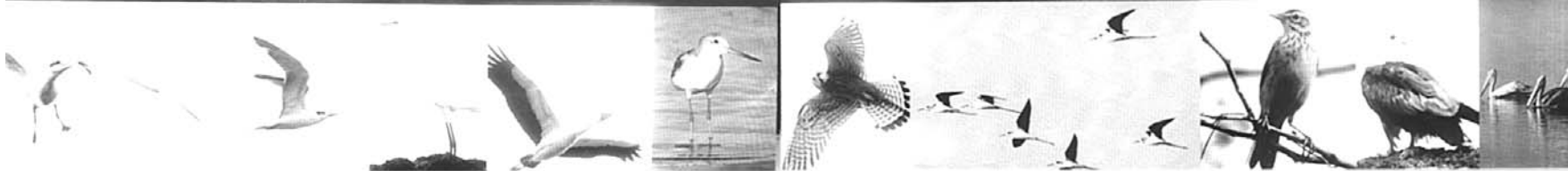
Please help us to consider your letters more favourably by making them more legible for us.

THE EDITOR



A glimpse of the winged visitors that through the Salt Works at Vedaranyam. A rare visual treat!

Photograph: Maheswari Kripasigamani



A bird-watcher's paradise visited...

EDITOR'S NOTE: This may not be Madras that is Chennai – but it's a place every nature-lover in the city should visit.

• The swamps of Vedaranyam are a showcase of our feathered brethren in action. The flocks of migratory birds that swarm the swamps have drawn the attention of naturalists. Chemplast Sanmar and the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) have set up a study centre at a cost of Rs.20 lakh of which Sanmar advanced Rs.12 lakh. The foundation stone was laid by Pheroza Godrej, Vice-President of the BNHS, at Point Calimere Sanctuary on the Vedaranyam coast in Nagapattinam district in Tamil Nadu in April this year. This centre established by the BNHS and the Sanmar Group is the first of its kind in the country and is a boon to ornithologists, birdwatchers and tourists. Two-and-a-half acres of land has been purchased by the BNHS for this purpose. (Courtesy: Matrix, the house journal of Chemplast Sanmar.)



... And a far cry from it, the garbage of the city

Madras Musings on September 1st carried a story on the way garbage was piling up in Triplicane, Kodambakkam and Pulianthope Zones even as the new agency, Neel Metal Fanalca Environment Management Limited, was coming to terms with the volume. The principal problem appeared to be one of shortages of bins and a workforce that was not trained to handle the pile-up.

There is, however, much more to it than meets the eye. It now emerges that there were delays in the floating of the tender by the Corporation which, therefore, cascaded into delays in identifying a new agency. The term of the previous contractor, Onyx, ended more than six

months ago and they had been requested to continue till a new agency was appointed. The contract was awarded to Neel Metal on the basis of the lowest bid, but, according to a leading business daily of the city, this is the first time that the company has forayed into garbage collection! Sheet metal fabrication is the company's speciality.

The shortage of bins and lack of trained staff is now staring everyone in the eye in the shape of the mounds of garbage in various localities with animals foraging in and around them. The citizens of Chennai, never the most conscious of their environment, have continued dumping garbage in the same spots where the bins of the previous contractor used

to stand. Only, now devoid of the bins, entire stretches of road have become dumpyards.

Neel Metal had placed an order for 1000 bins of 600 and 700 litre capacities with a manufacturer who failed to deliver owing to a fire in his factory. It has now

By A Staff Reporter

been decided that the bins will be imported from Bangkok and the delivery is expected "soon". It needs to be pointed out here that this number is lower than the 3700 bins that were estimated as being required earlier. It must also be noted that the previous agency used 1000 litre capacity bins in most locations.

The present agency claims that it has estimated the requirement of smaller bins mainly because its mandate was to collect pre-segregated wastes from households. The Corporation has made no move to train households into segregating wastes and, so, the refuse continues to pile up without any separation. In any case, it is doubtful as to how many households will practise the discipline that is required. Even as this issue of *Madras Musings* goes to print, not many in Chennai are aware that this is required of them.

The absence of a fleet of garbage handling vehicles is also striking. The company had estimated that it would require 32 compacting trucks, 10 hook

loaders and 160 Tata Ace trucks. At present it has only one compacting truck; the delivery of 27 more is awaited. As a stopgap measure, 43 tippers are being used to ferry the garbage to the landfills. All this is making for a very slow and highly inefficient system.

There are also reports of serious shortages of trained staff. On September 7th, the company claimed to have begun training 1300 workers in garbage clearance, a full month after the contract was awarded and at least two weeks after the takeover was effected! The original staff requirement was 2700 and the present strength that is roughly half does not encourage hope.

Mazes and cheese

All right, Chennai, that's enough – slow down a little.

Enough with the frenzied activity-ing.

Honestly, what's happened to the old girl? She just doesn't want to stay still any more, even for a minute.

She's behaving like a particularly youngish 22, high on life.

And her citizens are in a tizz. A few decades ago – well, yes, decades certainly sounds 'long, long ago', but, then, Time changes in texture, colour and content as you grow older. And what's 20-30 years in the life of a city? So – until a few decades ago, this was little Miss Prim 'n' Proper among the nation's metros – oodles of culture, yes, but not too great on the hustle-bustle-boil-and-bubble variety of social hysteria already rampant in other 'big' cities.

People?

Well, like everywhere else – friends, family. But, don't forget, those were the days before highrises broke out all over the city, shutting people into boxes, both basic and luxurious. So, with everyone knowing everyone, going back several generations to boot, you had people telling you they remembered your grand-uncle kicking up a fearful fuss at Next-Street-Corner-House Maami's daughter's wedding, because of the late arrival of his second helping of *payasam*.

Or how someone's aunt-twice-removed was a great one for landing up, by remarkable coincidence, exactly at tiffin-time at various long-suffering homes every day.

Everyone you came across had been classmates (with one another) at some stage of education or the other at some point in time.

A newcomer to the city took years to get naturalised. Some merely stayed 'new' for ever, too tired even to try, after a while.

Chugging along in a Time-warp – that was what superior beings who lived in sprightlier cities liked to say.

Locals, as only to be expected, would spring immediately to an aggressive defence of their beloved Madras, leading to some truly spectacular fights with cousins during summer holidays, requiring parental intervention and grandparental soothing.

Not any more. The Chennaiite, thoroughly gratified, can actually say with

complete pride: "I can't make it to the book-launch; I am going to that theatre festival thing in the morning. Today they are showing the growth of a pin – in black and white – so stark and effective, no? Then there's that lunch for the latest flavour-of-the-month personality; then a gallery opening at 7, followed by cocktails to meet the Consul General of Little-Friendly-Nation by 8 pm."

And you can genuinely claim not to know your neighbours, or their grandparents – who has the time, after all?

Isn't that something?

Considering Chennai is so adept at bringing various streams of life together, chances are that

Bright eyes and a healthy appetite mean you just haven't enough to do, and you obviously do not figure on too many invitation lists. Arriving breathlessly late to an inaugural, trailing cell-phones and *haute couture* embellishments, whispering agitated complaints about traffic is practically *de rigueur*, and it's a sad social flop who doesn't have at least a few of these 'difficult times' in a week. And those times are increasing. It is honestly getting tougher to keep track of the various 'happenings', and the way you run around, it's a wonder you don't catch your heel on your own manic shadow and come a cropper.

Sometimes, you have no choice but to throw up your hands at the sheer impossibility of dovetailing all the various programmes and timings, and opt to stay home and watch song-and-dance sequences on TV instead.

Even that permanent fixture in all forms of community living – the wedding – has gone larger-than-life. There was a time when old-timers in your family caused much inter-city dissension by

● by
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the above-mentioned Hop-About will probably 'show-face' at a kutchery, or even a philosophical discourse, before turning up at the gallery.

Being exhausted all the time is a sign of a full life these days.



"It's an easy evening and here is the list... starting with the art opening, there are only a dozen other events to go to!"

baldly stating, "Nothing like a Madras wedding."

They are still around, the old-timers, but have been struck dumb into stunned silence by what defines a 'Madras wedding' in certain sections today, and the vast, and varied, amounts of 'running around' it now demands.

Chennai has become a city of festivals – and not just for music and dance. Theatre, food, interiors, clothes, jewellery... you name it, somebody or the other is festival-ing away for all they are worth.

And some of these designer gatherings are throwing up an alarming question – are people getting substantially thinner? Or being forced to?

What's happening to the familiar Southern silhouette?

The S is definitely 'S - er'; 'M'

's a joke, and even a so-called XL hasn't bothered to take the presence of hips into account.

Since age groups are no longer divided strictly along non-negotiable lines, everyone is desperately trying to fit, literally. After all, you cannot possibly be seen trying on an XXL, wonderfully comfortable as it might prove, can you?

No, not even surreptitiously, no way.

It's easier to give up breathing for the rest of your life.

And so the citizens run, and not just for causes.

A concert here, an exciting sale there,

Here a talk show, there a fashion week,

Everywhere a 'something on'....

But what to do, as we say?

We've become like this only.

Of gharials, frogs and pythons

• Some excerpts from B. VIJAYARAGHAVAN'S column 'Random Harvest' in *Cobra*, the journal of the Chennai Snake Park.

From the brink, back to the brink

That, in brief, has sadly been the tale of gharial conservation in India. The gharial was on the brink of extinction in the early 1970s with an estimated wild population of just about 200. A crocodile recovery programme for all the three crocodilians of India was then formulated by the Government of India with assistance from the FAO/UNDP. This led to the collection of about 12,000 gharial eggs during a period of three decades. Over 5000 young gharials were released, mostly in protected areas. "While numbers built up in some areas like the Chambal River (and subsequently crashed), in other places like the Mahanadi in Orissa only two gharials have survived although 700 were released there."

At present, there are only some 200 adult gharials in the wild. (Back to the early 1970s!) Breeding is taking place at only four locations in the wild: Chambal River, Girwa River, Son River and the Rapti/Narayani River in Nepal. The gharial is confirmed as extinct in the wild in Burma, Pakistan, Bhutan and, probably, Bangladesh. – (Source: *Zoos' Print*.)

Frogs in peril

Of all of God's creations, the frogs seem to have the toughest time. They live in a wide variety of habitats, on land and in water, but everywhere their luck seems to be running out. Numerous species of frogs have become extinct in the past few decades, many of them even without being known to science, and far more are threatened. Habitat destruction, pollution of the waters, prevalence of pesticides and herbicides, global warming, known and unknown diseases, vulnerability of frog eggs, tadpoles and juveniles to a whole lot of native predators, introduction of non-native predatory fish, cattle grazing, prolonged droughts, floods, depletion of the ozone layer and consequent increase in ultra-violet ray radiation, acid rain, human exploitation for food and for the pet trade, all these and some more have conspired to take a heavy toll of frog populations across the globe.

In the meantime, let us, in the words of 'Anon', celebrate the frog, one of the most endearing creatures that populate this planet.

"What a wonderful bird the frog are!

When he walk, he fly almost;

When he sing, he cry almost.

He ain't got no tail hardly, either;

He sit on what he ain't got almost".

'Man-eating' pythons

We occasionally hear stories of pythons and other such large snakes eating or attempting to eat humans. But authentic accounts are extremely rare. Writing in *The Monitor Newsletter* of the Hoosier Herpetological Society, Ed Ferrer says, "...Scientists feel it is unlikely that a large snake could take an adult human. First, the chance of a healthy human being caught is improbable, although someone injured, resting or asleep might be vulnerable. Secondly, although snakes have the ability to dislocate their jaws and swallow items bigger around than they are, our wide shoulders make this feat very unlikely. Although adult humans are not prime targets for these large predators, children and babies are certainly on the menu." Ed Ferrer then proceeds to recount a few confirmed cases of pythons killing adult humans.

Now, *The Hindu Business Line* of 28th February 2007 reports that a python kept as a pet in southern Vietnam strangled its owner who had cared for it for more than 10 years. The 40 kg 2.5-metre reptile reached out and wrapped itself around the neck of its 69-year-old keeper and squeezed him to death. But the snake did not try to swallow him.

Incidentally, in case you ever happen to get entangled with a python or vice versa, remember that the coils are the real danger, not the head. There is a vernacular saying: "Letting go the head and holding the tail". This bespeaks the folly of trying to tackle a problem from the wrong end. But in the case of a python attack, that is precisely what you should do. Grab the tail and unwind the coils. Simultaneously, keep an eye on the head too, lest it gives you a bite which can be nasty though not poisonous. And best of luck!

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