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MADRAS

MUSINGS

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Still awaiting a Heritage Act

Chennai still awaits its Heritage Act. It also awaits a revision of the list of heritage buildings prepared by the Madras Metropolitan Development Authority, many of the 42 historical buildings listed relating to a newer political heritage than an older historical or architectural one.

Meanwhile, Calcutta continues following the pace set by Mumbai. After a newspaper, *The Telegraph*, had pointed out that the list of 72 heritage buildings prepared by the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority early last year was "incomplete" and that several buildings that should have been on it, but were not, were endangered, the Municipal Affairs Minister, Ashok Bhattacharya, instructed the Calcutta Municipal Corporation (CMC) to set up a Heritage Committee "to prepare an exhaustive list of buildings to be preserved, since the list of 72 prepared by the CMDA was found unsatisfactory".

The CMC has just announced that the five-man committee set up last October had, till the end of last year, identified 30 more buildings in different parts of the city as 'architectural marvels', in addition to the 72 listed.

A recent report in *The Telegraph* adds:

"The municipal architect and town planner, Dipankar Sinha, said the number of "heritage buildings" in the city may actually touch the 150-mark.

In its draft report, the Committee on the preservation of heritage buildings has recommended creation of three categories for the purpose. First, no structural change will be allowed in the buildings and the lands surrounding them. The Victoria Memorial Hall is a case in point. Second, buildings like the Old Currency Office in BBD Bagh will be allowed certain minimal internal changes.

But their owners will have a lot of explaining to do if they try to change the facade. Third, an owner can change a large portion of the structure, but only after ensuring that the 'heritage' aspect is not compromised.

The civic commissioner, Asim Barman, said he would soon place the report before the Municipal Affairs Minister for a decision on the enactment of legislation to protect such buildings.

G C Mondol, the city architect, said that for maintenance of heritage buildings, the transfer of the development rights had been suggested in the draft guidelines. He said that by this scheme, owners of a heritage building will be allowed to enjoy the same covered area benefits elsewhere if they hand them over for commercial use.

The purchaser, on the other hand, he said, will be given permission for change of use without having to pay an extra charge. But it will be binding upon the purchaser not to change the basic external character of the building.

Barman announced that a number of NGOs had expressed willingness to join the drive to preserve the city's heritage.

There are several in Chennai too willing to help the Chennai Corporation and the Tamil Nadu Government not only identify heritage buildings in the city but also with their preservation and care. When will our Corporation and Government respond to the numerous pleas by NGOs and in these columns?

The Editor

(Also see page 2)



A 'hammocked' resting place in a tree on Graeme's (Greame's) Road, created with strong tapes by 'auto'-drivers who consider the area their 'stand'. (Photographs by RAJIND N CHRISTY of an unusual scene of creativity spurred by necessity).

More & more young runaways

(By A Staff Reporter)

According to recent estimates, there are about 44,000 street children and young rag-pickers in Chennai. And at least ten new entrants join this community every day at the Central railway station alone, says an NGO worker. Almost all of them have run away from their rural homes.

Most of these children are found in the age group 12-15 and have chosen this lifestyle due to ill-treatment at home or seeing no future with their parents or in the rural areas. Some become rag-pickers, some beggars, while others become anti-social elements.

Most of these boys have not crossed even the elementary school level of education. So their struggle is harder.

Several NGOs are working with these street children, offering them shelter, food and rehabilitation. Some have succeeded in returning children after reconciliation with their parents. Others have arranged for jobs, like headload workers, paper-pickers and auto drivers, for the boys. And training is offered to make them good citizens. But the few NGOs are unable to tackle the growing numbers.

A 'Cabinet' in search of a better society

(By A Staff Reporter)

The indefatigable R. Desikan, Chairman of the Federation of Consumer Organisations — Tamil Nadu, continues the good fight for a better society.

As Managing Trustee of the newly-formed Catalyst Trust, he states its aims in these questions the Trust asks:

Can we light a candle, instead of cursing the darkness?

Can we help promote norms of probity, propriety, accountability and transparency on the part of all democratic institutions, without becoming part of any political party?

Can we function as Catalysts — fully involved to help constructive change and yet

remain unattached and unchanged ourselves?

Can we arrest the decline in values and reverse the trend?

The Trust has appointed a Cabinet of Sevakas consisting of experts in different fields of activity. This Cabinet will monitor and constantly suggest improvement to Government policies and their implementation in Tamil Nadu.

The Cabinet comprises of:

B.S. Raghavan — Chairman of the Citizens' Assembly.

Dr. A.L. Mudaliar — Industries.

Dr. Easo John — Agriculture.

Dr. S. Krishnaswamy — Culture, Communications and Media.

V.R. Lakshminarayan — Home, Police, Law and Order

K. Ravindran — Transport

S.S. Narayanan — Rural Development

Dr. Kannabiran — Health.

More portfolios will be added from time to time.

A Citizens' Assembly of about 120 members, drawn from all the districts of Tamil Nadu, will help the Sevakas by disseminating the message of the expert group to the public at large, and by being an important feedback mechanism to in-

(Continued on P6)

A Sterling crunch

The time share resorts industry is anxiously watching the market leader and pioneer, Chennai-based Sterling Holiday Resorts (India) Ltd., to see how it will manage its present predicament. It was Sterling Holiday which withstood the rigours of the market in the initial days and gained the investors' confidence in the industry when several of its ilk wound shutters. If Sterling Holiday now fails to meet the challenge facing it, there'll be an adverse impact on the entire industry, with investors becoming sceptical about the time share concept.

From a Rs. 38 lakh negative networth and zero sales in 1986-87, Sterling Holiday's growth over the last decade is nothing but stupendous. With 11 operational resorts, the com-

and 1500 time share and luxury residential apartments. The first phase of the project will have 500 time share apartments, a golf links, a sports club and a family centre. Sterling Crown (luxury time share priced at Rs.1.25 lakheach), meant for discerning corporates, is another high profile project underway. Concentration on both these appear to be at the expense of normal time share resorts, many of which are delayed. The sales team has also tended to concentrate on these projects rather than the normal resorts.

The departure of Ramesh Ramanathan, the President of the Company some time last year, has also hurt. As Vice President (Marketing), he and his team had taken 200 time shares a year to 2000 a month!

Venkatachari Jagannathan looks at THE INDUSTRIAL SCENE

pany closed 1995-96 with sales of Rs.128.73 crore and a networth of Rs. 113.37 crore. Unfortunately, this once cash-rich company today finds itself strapped for cash, with time share sales down. The result is a slowing down of all construction activity, which in turn will delay completion of eight resorts that are already in business and six new resorts, and the temporary shelving of a couple of other projects.

* * *

All these years, selling 60 per cent in resorts under the time share concept and the balance 40 per cent let out on daily tariff basis (in other words, 100 per cent of the construction cost was collected in advance from the time share holders), it was always a win-win situation for the Chennai company. What, then, went wrong, leading to the present cash crisis?

P.N.Mohan, Managing Director, cites the general liquidity crisis in the economy, but other leisure experts feel that Sterling's problems have been due to not following the age-old business strategy of growth-consolidation-growth, instead always planning for grand expansion.

Sterling Holiday's expansion plans, without consolidation of existing activities, have started to take their toll. These plans include setting up a massive integrated sports-cum-resort complex in Greater NOIDA, near New Delhi. Spread over 437 acres, the Rs.440 crore project, called Sterling Grand, will have two 18-hole golf links

When Ramanathan was promoted as President, his concentration remained on marketing. Differences of opinion between him and Mohan, who gained total control of the company when R. Subramaniam and VN Pai decided to look after the Maxworth Group and Sterling Tree Magnum respectively, led to Ramanathan leaving Sterling Holiday. Since then, the slot of President has been lying vacant, except for a short interim, and Mohan, the promoter, has been doubling up as Managing Director.

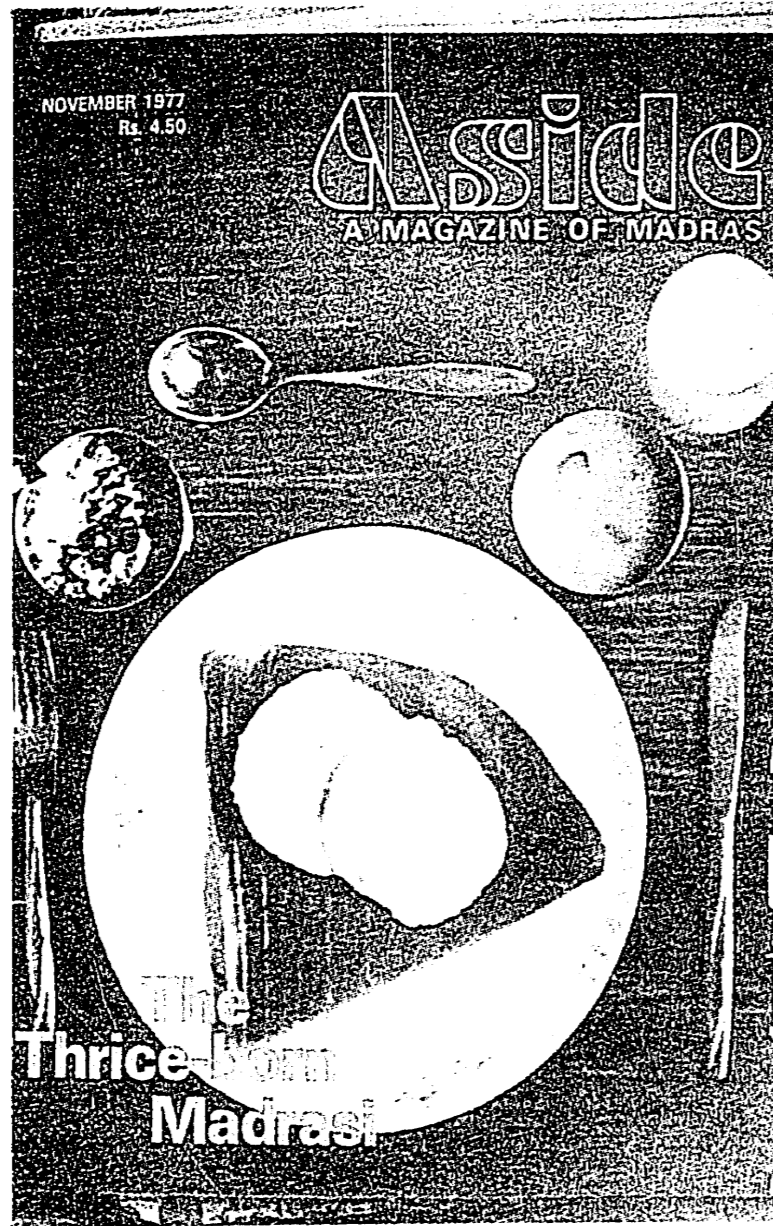
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Other problems are rooted in the sales operations. According to reliable sources, most of Sterling's recent time share sales have been under the instalment scheme and several instalments are due on those. Given the present cash crunch, the company is not able to cancel such bookings, refund the balance and scout for new parties, since that would involve cash outflow initially.

Also, with sales executives holding Sterling Holiday to ransom, by demanding greater incentives for collecting instalment dues and making sales, the company gave marching orders to scores of them and enlisted the services of individual agents. This, despite reducing the overheads, has disadvantages, particularly in commitment.

* * *

To ease the pressure on it, Sterling Holiday has restructured itself. Its 'Heritage India' division — which builds resorts



THE OLD... ...& THE NEW

Our OLD and NEW this fortnight are something out of the ordinary. They are a tribute to a journal that called itself 'A Magazine of Madras' when it started publication in November 1977 and lost its way in seeking a national audience, leading to its closing shop with its January 15, 1997 issue.

Your Editor, who was associated with Aside from its beginnings, remembers how Sita and Abraham Eraly struggled over that first cover, which featured Raghavendra Rao's photograph symbolising the lifestyle of 'The Thrice-born Madrasi'. They also struggled every day with what was the first of the city magazines in India, a journal focussing more closely on the local community than anything else around. When the magazine, supported till then by sympathetic local advertising, began to search for a wider audience, it lost its focus... and its days were numbered. But following its first footsteps emerged Madras Musings in 1991, almost a clone in content but not in format. What Sita Eraly wrote in the last two paragraphs of her first 'Letter from the Publisher' in Aside, Volume 1, Number 1, Madras Musings is still trying to do, in part. But then as now, your Editor never agreed with much of the viewpoint expressed in her first two paragraphs.

As tribute to what Aside set out to be, we publish below that first 'Letter':

— It is said of Madras that we are just a bloated village, not a city. In a sense this is true. Social fluidity, a chief characteristic of urban life, is not much evident in

Madras; communities here live in separate and sterilised compartments in benign "tolerance by exclusion". This prevents social tension. Unfortunately, it also prevents social interaction. Madras therefore does not have a distinctive ethos as a city, unlike Calcutta or Bombay or even Delhi. In Madras, it is the different communities that have flavour, not the city itself. And no community dominates Madras.

From the outside, of course, Madras appears to be a unique cultural entity — the term Madrasi seems to mean something. But what? There was at one time a dominant Brahmin culture in Madras, but this is rapidly fading into the background, in the face of the changing socio-political situation.

Madras needs to develop a new ethos out of its contemporary reality. Aside, hopefully, is a contribution towards that — to give the city an awareness of itself.

Ours is a quiet voice. An aside. We subscribe to no dogma of Positive Truth. Aside is an open magazine. All views are welcome. The only requirements are sensitivity and intelligence.

SITA ERALY

It is sad that Aside's race is run, a little short of its 20th birthday. But the writing on the wall was there for several years, from when it stopped being 'A Magazine of Madras' and decided to compete in the southern, then national marketplace. The end came suddenly, in fact, after an issue had been readied for print. In retrospect, our NEW, that last cover, ironically, truly represented 'Fimis'. And curiously, it was also a stage-managed one like our OLD, the first cover of Aside.

Vale, Aside. It was a good race that was run for a while.

— The Editor



in religious and historical places and hotels catering exclusively for foreign tourists — has been formed into a separate company, Sterling Holiday Resorts International Ltd. Its home products division, manufacturing dietary fibre supplements and marketing orthopaedic support systems, has become a new company, Sterling Health Care Ltd. Sterling Holiday will now concentrate only on its core business, viz., time share, and golf and sports resort complexes.

Mohan says, "I am not changing the company's focus drastically. I would like to make the company the number one integrated tourism corporate in the country. We'll get there in stages." Expanding on this he says, "When we started the

company back in 1984, the middle class didn't know of the holiday time share concept. When we succeeded in getting their attention, we decided to cater to the up-market segment and, so, we offered Sterling Crown. Then we looked further afield and arrived at Sterling Grand, the NOIDA project. Investment in this will now be in stages."

On the charge of change of focus (by entering the real estate business, the hotel business etc.), Mohan explains, "It is not a change in focus. The primary aim is to promote resorts. The construction of residential apartments is incidental. As regards the 400-room hotel in the NOIDA project, it will be our last priority. But in Coimbatore

we are building a 180-room three-star hotel at an outlay of Rs.30 crore. We have not stopped construction elsewhere. We are going slow on some projects till the liquidity position improves. Meanwhile, we are concentrating on selling plots in Mercara instead of resorts as originally planned, to tide over the cash problem."

Leisure experts say that this is a temporary phase and things will improve, as the market for time share resorts has not saturated. On the contrary, it is likely to explode in the years to come, with the growth of an Indian middle class with disposable income. In fact, Sterling Holiday itself has plans to develop 30 resorts with over 5000 operational rooms by 2000 AD.

Restoration that never took place

Spencer's, founded in 1863, will, on July 1st this year, celebrate 100 years as a public limited company, Spencer and Company Ltd. In these 100 years it has suffered only two major mishaps. In 1944, the Bombay Dock explosion destroyed its godown there. And on Friday the 13th February 1981, 16 years ago this fortnight, its magnificent showroom, designed by N.R. Pogson and opened for business on December 2, 1895, was ravaged by fire.

Spencer's reported the day after the disaster that the fire was contained more or less within the main hall of the showroom, that all other operations, including its factories and the Connemara Hotel, were "completely spared", that no employee was hurt and "no documents or records of any importance damaged" and that loss of stocks and damage to the building were fully covered by insurance. From the very next morning, the staff of the depart-

Compiled by A Staff Reporter

ment store worked day and night and performed "the incredible feat" of putting the Retail Department Store back into operation on the seventh day after the fire.

A Spencer's publication to mark the fact that "...some traditions cannot be burnt out" went on to record the tragedy in these words:

"It was a perfectly normal evening for Spencer's. The usual late customer sauntered in just when the doors of the showroom were about to be closed. He was received and his requirements supplied — not emergency medicines, but a few tins of gulab jamuns. Not for a moment did he imagine that that was to be the last sale from this historic and ancient showroom.

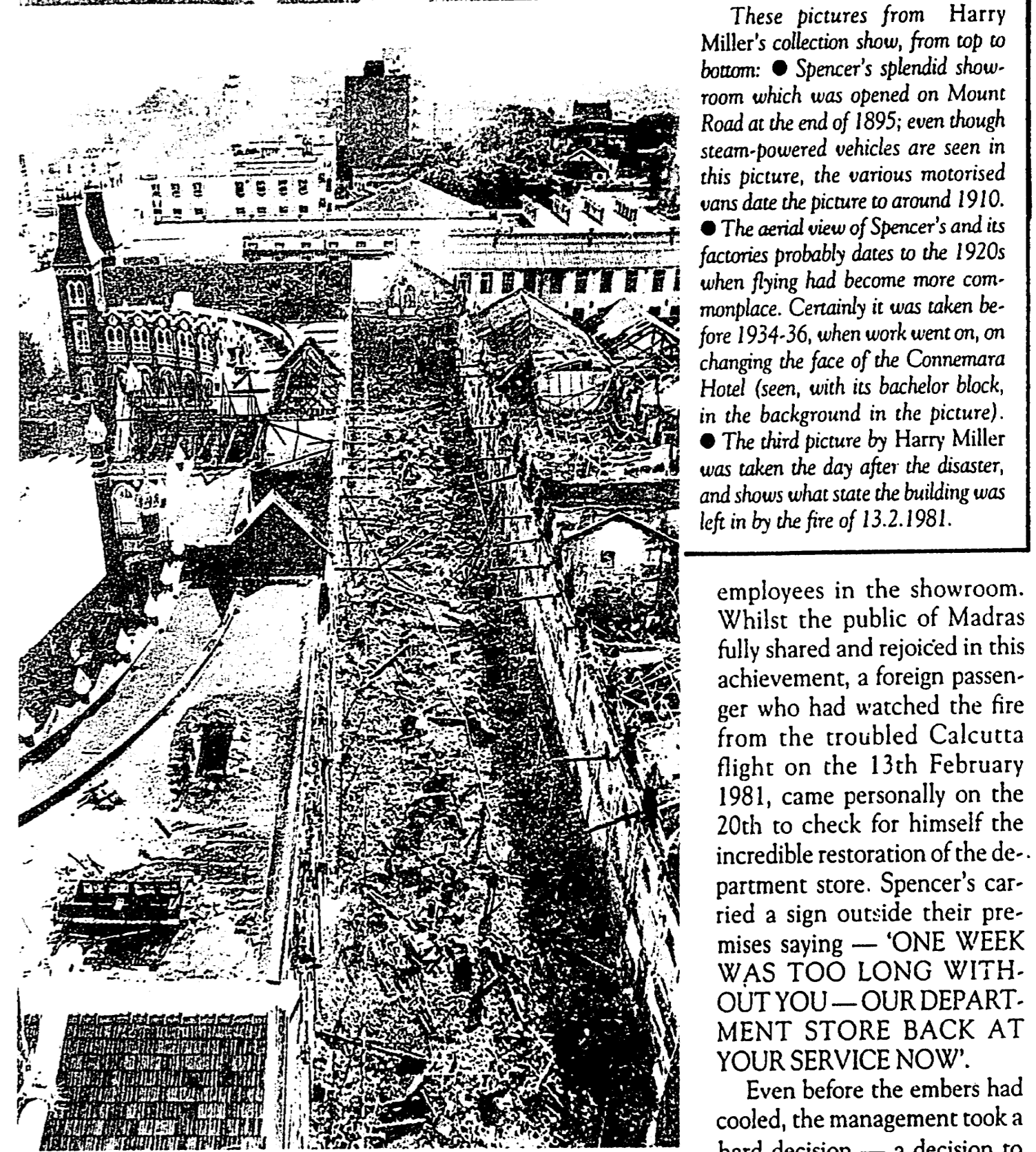
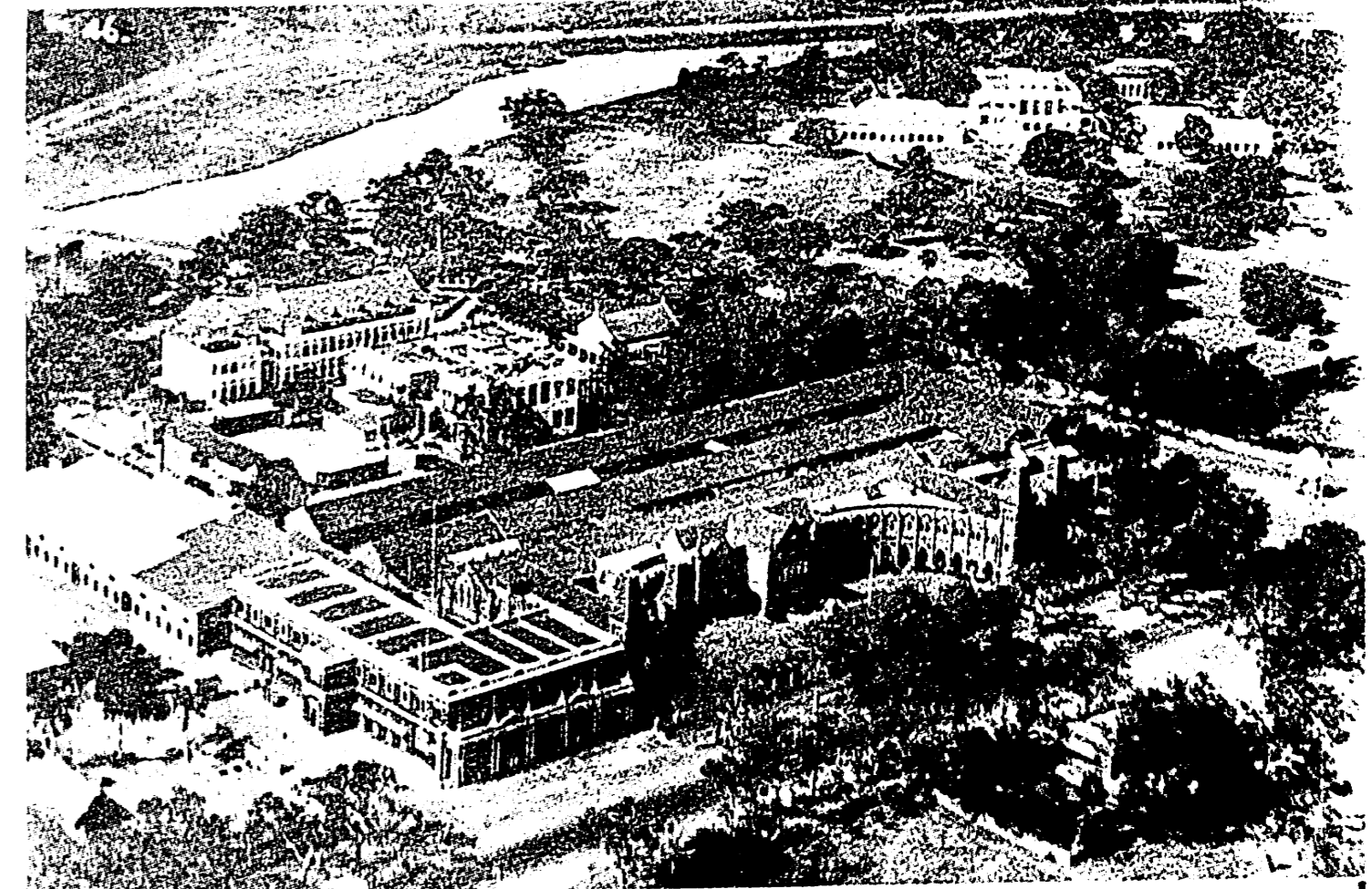
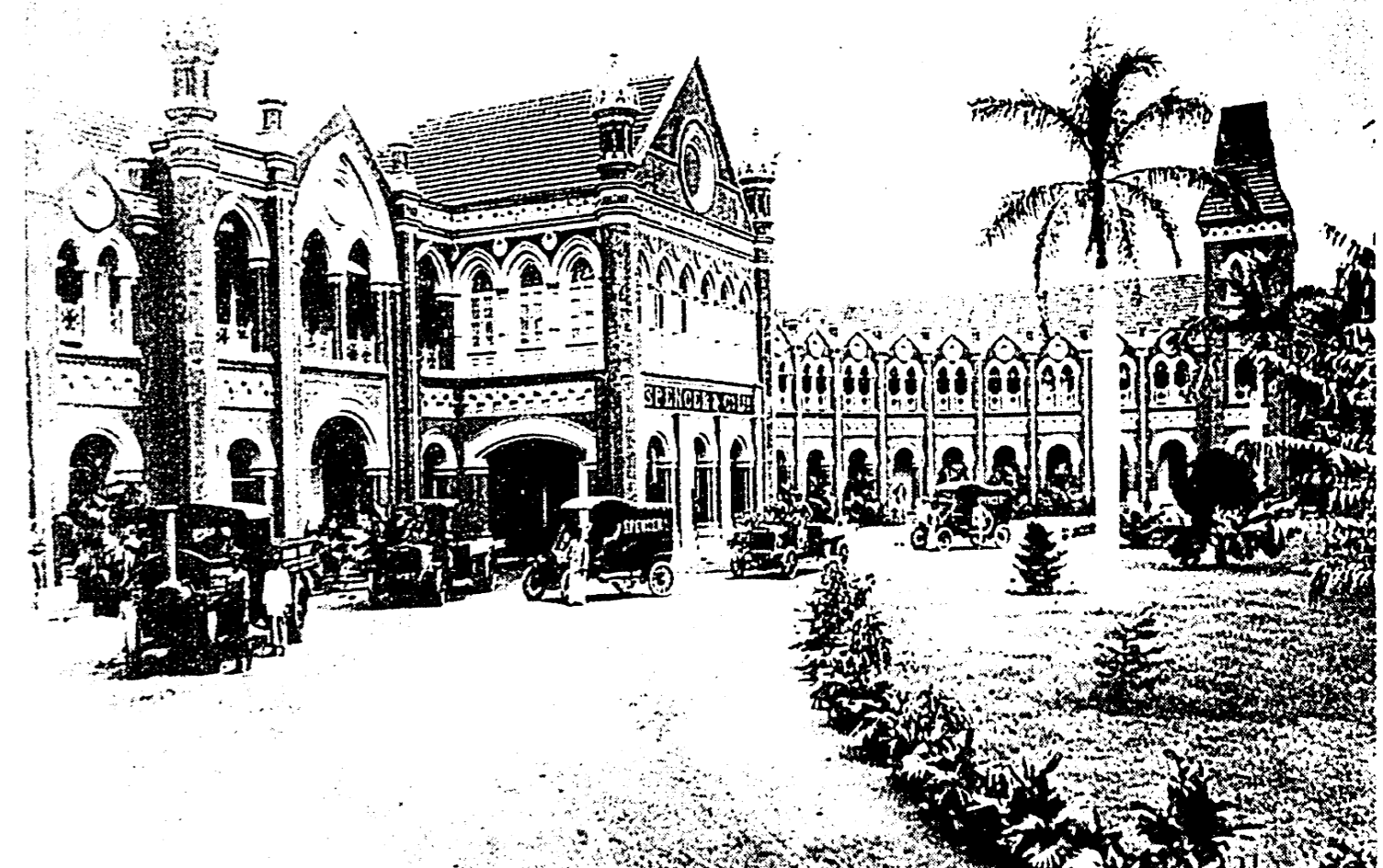
No one knows for sure whether a Friday falling on the 13th of a month brings misfortune. The evening of Friday the 13th February 1981, however, did start on an ominous note. Around 7.00 p.m., an Indian Airlines flight with a full load of passengers took off from Madras to Calcutta. Minutes afterwards, the pilot discovered some snag in the undercarriage and decided to return and make

an emergency landing. Considering the risk of a crash landing, he circled over the city for over 3 1/2 hours to empty the fuel. A hundred-odd passengers sitting in the aircraft with bated breath and holding on for dear life were tensely watching another disaster taking place down below. What they saw was the second major fire in the entire history of Madras. The first one had destroyed a modern multistoried building years ago. The second one was ruthlessly devouring an 85-year-old building so dear to the citizens of Madras and so much a part of their lives.

The news of the fire spread, indeed, faster than the fire. Within 15 to 30 minutes, vast crowds gathered around the building — more out of distress than out of curiosity. Hundreds of Spencer's employees had already come rushing.

The assistant who had rushed to the spot leaving his wife just recovering from a major operation; the frenzied and bewildered look on the face of the aged employee who had to be restrained by four people from rushing into his office which was already in flames; the clerks who had recklessly run upstairs in a bid to save documents and who had to be forcibly brought down with the aid of the firemen; the supervisor who was pulled back at the last moment from under a collapsing roof which, however, did not spare a fireman; those who broke down and cried uncontrollably; those who kept their cool, doing their best to guide, salvage and protect, in the dark surroundings, the building, lit up now and then only by the leaping flames from the fire; and, lastly, the foreign guests in the Connemara Hotel next door, who, after being moved to a place of safety, were hugging and kissing the hotel staff for all their courtesy and attention in the face of a calamity hardly a few yards away; all this was just a part of the tremendous human drama which was unfolding in the harsh limelight of the fire.

For the showroom staff, the Spencer's building became a virtual home during the following six days. Working round the clock, they restored the Department Store — every bit of it from the pin to the refrigerator — and put it back at the service of the customers in exactly six days after the night of the fire. In a simple ceremony held



These pictures from Harry Miller's collection show, from top to bottom: ● Spencer's splendid showroom which was opened on Mount Road at the end of 1895; even though steam-powered vehicles are seen in this picture, the various motorised vans date the picture to around 1910. ● The aerial view of Spencer's and its factories probably dates to the 1920s when flying had become more commonplace. Certainly it was taken before 1934-36, when work went on, on changing the face of the Connemara Hotel (seen, with its bachelor block, in the background in the picture). ● The third picture by Harry Miller was taken the day after the disaster, and shows what state the building was left in by the fire of 13.2.1981.

in the early hours of the morning of the 20th February 1981

the new department store was inaugurated by the two oldest

employees in the showroom. Whilst the public of Madras fully shared and rejoiced in this achievement, a foreign passenger who had watched the fire from the troubled Calcutta flight on the 13th February 1981, came personally on the 20th to check for himself the incredible restoration of the department store. Spencer's carried a sign outside their premises saying — "ONE WEEK WAS TOO LONG WITHOUT YOU — OUR DEPARTMENT STORE BACK AT YOUR SERVICE NOW".

Even before the embers had cooled, the management took a hard decision — a decision to restore the ancient showroom

(Continued on P6)

Regatta time again

The 130-year-old Madras Boat Club (MBC) hosts the 56th annual Amateur Rowing Association of the East (ARAE) Regatta from February 15th on the Adyar River. The MBC is one of the founder members of the ARAE, which came into being in 1933 and has a membership of 14 clubs from Karachi to Hong Kong.

The Calcutta Rowing Club, started in 1858, is the oldest rowing club east of Suez. In 1867, a few British rowing enthusiasts started the Madras Boat Club. At that time, the club used the Cooum River and the Long Tank in Teynampet (where T' Nagar has now developed). Later, a regatta was held on the Adyar River and the Club started seriously considering the benefits of a move. In 1892, the Club shifted to its present location on the north bank of the Adyar River but racing alternated between the Long Tank and the Adyar River till 1904 when it was finally decided that the latter was a better venue. This area may officially be known as Raja Annamalaipuram, but to most people in Chennai it is the 'Boat Club Area'.

According to the earliest records of the club available — they date to 1874-1875 — there were at the time 32 Rowing Members and 24 Non-Rowing Members. Today, the strength of the club is 764; of these, 316 are Rowing Members.

In 1960, a vital decision was taken by the Club committee to admit Student Members. It is these Student Members who now keep racing alive in the Club and contribute substantially to its crews selected for wider competition.

During the Club centenary year, its crews made 1967 memorable by winning the Willingdon Trophy and the Hooghly Cup. The Willingdon Trophy is a challenge trophy for the 'Coxed Four Oared' race and is named after the then Viceroy, the Earl of Willingdon, who presented it to the ARAE in 1935. The Hooghly Cup is a challenge cup for the same 'Coxed Four Oars' event, but is an additional cup for the overall team championships and was presented to the ARAE in 1935 by the Calcutta Rowing Club, though it had been instituted as early as 1872. The MBC has been figuring in the

Hooghly Cup events right from 1872, the first race for the cup; it lost in the finals that year, but won the cup under the new rules in 1956, thus figuring in both its inaugural presentations.

However, 1973 was the MBC's most successful year. It was undefeated in all the inter-club rowing events, winning the Madras-Colombo Challenge Trophy, the Ladies' Fours, the Willingdon Trophy, the Hooghly Cup, the Venables Bowl and, for the first time in its history, the Macklin Sculls.

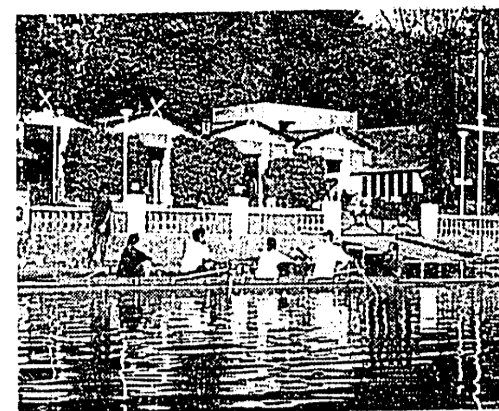
The Venables Bowl is a trophy for 'Paired Oars' and was presented in 1935 by A.V. Venables, then Chairman of the ARAE. That same year L.H. Macklin of the Calcutta Rowing Club presented the sculling trophy named after him. Macklin was the visionary who, dreaming of an Eastern Henley, conceived in 1929 the idea of an Amateur Rowing Association of the East.

This year, 11 clubs are taking part in the regatta. They are the Karachi Boat Club, Madras Boat Club, Bengal Rowing Club, Lake Club (Calcutta), Colombo Rowing Club, Trishna (Military Engineering, Ban-

galore), College of Military Engineering, Pune, Government Polytechnic Boat Club, Pune, College of Engineering, Pune, Royal Connaught Boat Club, Pune and Calcutta Rowing Club. There are to be five events — the Sculls, Coxed Four Oared, Coxless Four, Pairs, and the Ladies' Four. (Note: When you row, you are using a single oar grasped with both hands, when you scull you use two oars, one in each hand, and the cox is a kind of coach who helps you maintain a rowing rhythm).

Ever since the Asian Games in 1982, rowing has become a very competitive sport in India. Nowadays all the trophies are cornered by the clubs that have members of the Armed Forces representing them. These members from the Services put in long hours of practice, something amateurs like those representing the Madras Boat Club, cannot. So no one at the MBC is very hopeful of trophies this year. But trophies or not, the MBC membership will be there at the Club in their numbers to enjoy the sport and the club facilities.

The Madras Boat Club has been keeping pace with the



changing times. The old buildings of the Club have been replaced with new, more spacious ones. In 1966, the bar and clubhouse were completed. In the air-conditioned Dining Hall, old race records and trophies are to be seen on the walls. One name that figures often in the early records is F.H. Wilson, who won the Challenge Sculls in Madras year after year from 1901 to 1909. A Club boat is named after Wilson. Later, when Indians started taking part in the sport, names like Prabhakar Rao and Sanyal began to figure regularly in the records.

Since 1974, the Madras Boat Club has started building boats. The first boats manufactured were three coxless shell pairs and one shell scull. It has also built two junior fours for the Secunderabad Sailing Club. The MBC has also supplied boats to Singapore. But it is still looking for an international champion of the 90s.

Dhanya Gopinath

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