

WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

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New Plans for Old Anna Salai

Recent news has it that the Government has invited consultants for a Rs 10 crore contract to come up with Local Area Plans (LAPs) for Anna Salai and OMR. The idea behind this is that the consultants need to suggest how best to unlock the real estate value of the commercial space on either side of these arterial roads by improving the infrastructure. Accessibility and liveability are the key considerations it is said. While these are no doubt very ennobling thoughts, it must be remembered that Anna Salai or Mount Road was very much accessible and vibrant till just over four decades ago. Who then is to blame for the fact that it is no longer so?

Before we go on to the proposed improvements on Mount Road, it is necessary to speak of OMR itself. Considering that much of this space is recent development not going back in time beyond two decades, it is surprising that accessibility, alignment and other such urban qualifications were not thought of during the planning

phase itself. Does this not indicate that the Government is forever catching up with improvements which probably accounts for why our roads are perpetually in a state of disrepair? Even something as elementary as footpaths are shoddy in OMR. And as for pedestrians ever hoping to cross, perish the thought.

● by **Sriram V.**

Coming to Anna Salai/Mount Road, this was the acknowledged downtown for the whole of the old city. Till the 1980s at least, Mount Road was where you went for shopping, to watch movies, to eat out and generally hang around. The road was broad, the buildings were iconic and there was a buzz about the place. People spent time on Mount Road. Today, people just whizz past it. It is merely an arterial road to go somewhere else.

The first nails in Mount Road's coffin were the terrible concept of service lanes



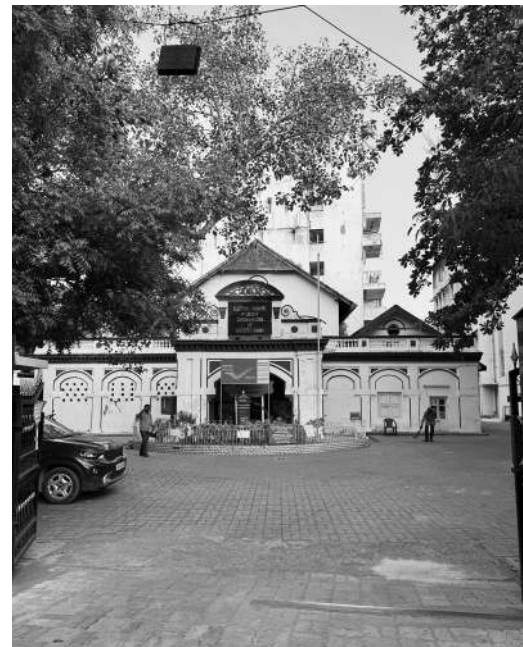
that came about in the 1980s. Ostensibly to help with traffic movement and also provide for parking (which existed anyway), they cut off all access to retail establishments that lined both sides of the road. And even that system was not followed consistently – the service lanes have all but vanished now. The new complicated one way system may work as far as the police is concerned

but business establishments may not see it that way. Traffic movement cannot be the only criterion – local area development often becomes a casualty and Mount Road is a classic example of this. It is high time we thought beyond cars and encouraged public transport. The Metro is a huge gamechanger and can redefine access to Mount Road.

The demise of cinema theatres as a concept was a major factor. Replacing them was a series of faceless office blocks that transformed the character of Mount Road – it ceased being a place that people came to hang around in. In many ways, the vanishing of theatres was an opportunity lost – the spaces freed up could have been put to countless creative uses and that is where a strong planning and permitting

authority would have helped with a vision in place for the entire area. Office blocks only added to the congestion on Mount Road and on weekends transformed it into a dead area. This was not so earlier.

Mixed zoning, which encouraged commercial buildings just about anywhere in the city, thereby tearing apart residential localities had its own benefits – restaurants, shops and entertainment spaces became more accessible, but that meant Mount Road was no longer where you had to go.



Will heritage buildings like these be part of Anna Salai's proposed revamp?

(Continued on page 2)

New proof of parking rule for cars hopes to decongest city streets

A new city-wide parking policy from the Chennai Unified Metropolitan Transport Authority (CUMTA) proposes that proof of at least one off-road parking space be made mandatory at the time of vehicle registration. The new norm is aimed at better parking management and the promotion of public transport over the use of private vehicles. It is also expected to discourage people from owning more vehicles than off-road parking slots. "People have only one parking space but have three cars. Two will be parked on the road,

● by Varsha V.

affecting the liveability of the entire neighbourhood. Proof of parking could be a checkpoint to restrict car buying and promote public transport," said CUMTA member secretary I Jeykumar to *The Times of India*. As for existing vehicles with no designated off-street parking, CUMTA is reportedly planning to introduce residential parking permits on broad roads. These may be made available through a lottery auction system and will be monthly or annual plans. Homes that already have parking facilities will reportedly not be eligible for residential parking permits.

The new policy suggests that the administration bring in shared parking rules for private buildings, which involves the construction of paid parking facilities for the public. It advises that a parking development fee be introduced towards private off-street parking that will not be opened to public use; the funds, it proposes, can be used towards public mobility initiatives. Finally, the policy also recommends that public and private parking include infrastructure for electric vehicle charging.

New plans for Old Anna Salai

(Continued from page 1)

All of these factors will have to be taken into consideration by whichever planner gets the contract. Solutions will apart from basic improvements such as accessibility and last mile connects also take heritage into account and how best to show case it. These long-term stakeholders in the area must be consulted and their views consid-

The State Housing and Urban Development department is reported to have accepted the proposal and has directed CUMTA to push forward policy implementation.

Chennai is not alone in mulling a proof of parking policy for vehicle registration. The idea has been mooted many times in the past at both State and Central levels. Mumbai is also actively exploring this norm, now commonly recognised as the Certified Parking Area (CPA) policy. There is little doubt among experts and policy makers that proof of parking rules will help decongest the roads. However, the idea perhaps requires more detailing. For one, it sets the stage for disputes in residential communities over the available parking spaces, both within apartment complexes (if left undesignated) and on the neighbourhood streets. Old buildings with inadequate parking facilities will have to consider advancing redevelopment plans. With the onus of ensuring off-street parking now firmly on the shoulders of residents, there is also a possibility of builders hiking the prices of allotted parking lots – this is hardly desirable given that ownership of real estate is already out of reach for a significant portion of the population. And then, there remains the question of cause and effect. The policy effectively mandates that the upwardly mobile own an off-road parking space – after all, it is arguably prudent to plan against the possibility of a car purchase in the future. And so, will the very provision of a parking space lead to the purchase of a new car? This will be interesting to see.

There appears to be room for an expansion in the policy scope. The current rule appears to regulate the use of public parking by private vehicle owners, but what of commercial

vehicles that are plied by rental cars, taxis and rideshares? The number of four-wheelers operated by app-based car services is not insignificant – it can be argued that they occupy as much, if not more, space than private vehicles. There is also an opportunity to appropriately extend the norm to include commercial establishments – both shopping and office complexes. These attract a steady stream of visitors and when facilities are not provided within the complex, the vehicles are parked on the road. For the implementation to be successful in its aim to encourage the use of mass transit systems, the robust expansion as well as upgrade of public transport facilities are necessary. The majority who will switch to mass transit because of the new policy are likely to be those aspiring to own a car; this suggests that convenience and comfort will emerge as key triggers for the switch to become a habit and a way of life. Take buses, for instance. Facilities hitherto buck-

The last flight home

The Woman from Madras Musings has been travelling a lot in recent times, and was thankful when she learned that her most recent trip would be the last one in a long time. The return flight home was a particularly lovely experience. Not only did she reach the airport in time, but found that there was virtually no queue at the security checkpoints. WMM had all the time and space in the world to arrange her electronics in the tray and roll them down the conveyor belt, and the person conducting the personal screening had an infectious air of joy and goodwill. The flight too was on time and there was none of the chaos that had marked less cheerful trips. There was ample seating at the gate for passengers, and WMM didn't have to stand until boarding commenced. The lady who sat beside her at the gate turned out to be a foreign tourist who was visiting Chennai for the first time. WMM asked her what she planned to do in the city, and received an answer that rather surprised her – the tourist was travelling to Chennai to consult a palm reader after which she planned to return to the garden city to meet a popular guru. It was evident that she was quite excited at the prospect, for she had a lot to say – in fact, WMM found

herself listening to her even when she was settled into her seat on the flight. It was only when WMM asked her about her ticket that she realized that she was in the wrong seat; she scrambled across the aisle, apologizing profusely to everyone around her.

WMM was just beginning to think that the flight was going to fly half-empty when a large contingent poured through. The group was traveling together, and it appeared to be their first time on a flight.

SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

A gentleman seated in front of WMM immediately assumed the role of what WMM can only term as a flight conductor. Much like his counterpart on a bus, he asked each person in the group their seat number and directed them to their respective seats. One couple discovered to their dismay that they had been assigned separate seats – the gentleman was to sit next to WMM while his wife was to sit further back. Deciding that this was not to their liking, the wife convinced her husband to sit next to her. The flight conductor was perturbed – more, it must be said, than the flight attendants. He warned the couple that there could be trouble when the rightful

owner turned up, but there was no arguing with the wife. She would talk him into exchanging seats, she said, and left it at that. WMM waited and watched, curious to see what would unfold. Sure enough, a young gentleman turned up and was momentarily confused at finding his seat taken. When he was informed by the couple – rather firmly, WMM thought – that they wished to sit together, he gamely agreed to exchange seats. WMM thought that was rather sporting of him and told him so. The rest of the flight passed uneventfully, affording WMM a restful nap before touchdown.

On the bus transfer from the flight to the airport, WMM encountered another heartwarming moment. WMM had noticed that the girl next to her was watching a live IPL match on her phone, and couldn't help but peek at the screen. This did not go unnoticed. The girl was kind enough to remove her headphones and turn up the volume so WMM could follow the match too.

WMM wonders whether readers will empathize when she says that these small acts of kindness are sometimes more touching than grand gestures. After all, life gives us more occasions to make small displays of kindness and friendship than dramatic ones.

WMM returned home with a light step. It's not often that one enjoys a flight.

The AI lie

The Woman from Madras Musings felt both sad and alarmed last week when the Better Half managed to fool her with an AI-generated image. It looked incredibly convincing, and the thought that it was not real hadn't crossed WMM's mind. Just the week before, WMM had gently chided the Eternals for buying into a plainly spurious piece of propaganda, so B.H.'s rather harmless trick made her both silly and old.

The only silver lining appears to be that she is not alone in her artlessness – fake content has reached such levels of sophistication that many are unable to distinguish between the true and false. WMM wonders whether the future will bring legal guidelines for the use of AI-generated content. She hopes it does.

– WMM

eted under luxuries – such as air-conditioning, rules against overcrowding or standing, etc – may be expected by upwardly mobile commuters who are likely prepared to pay higher prices to travel in premium buses. Last-mile connectivity will also be a crucial factor. Mumbai is reportedly considering implementing the CPA in a staggered approach alongside efforts to upgrade public transport.

It may not be enough to discourage private vehicles by making it harder or expensive to own and drive a car. An expansion in scope to include the commercial sector, and the provision of attractive public transport alternatives are important to bring about the sustainable change the policy wishes to deliver. It appears, then, that while the new policy holds much promise, there needs to be a discussion with stakeholders as well as mobility experts before implementation.

Tamil Nadu: Through My Lens – A Photo Exhi- bition in the Navy House

Last December, the city of Chennai played host to a unique and innovative photo exhibition titled *Tamil Nadu: Through My Lens*. The exhibition was part of the Navy Day celebrations and showcased the perspectives of twenty talented deaf artists, providing a platform for them to share their creative vision with the world. It featured a stunning collection of photographs carefully curated by Srivatsan Sankaran, Founder, Madras Photo Bloggers and Rangoli Dhingra, President, Navy Welfare & Wellness Association (Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry). The event, which began with the Navy's traditional Sunset Ceremony, was attended by several dignitaries, including Chief Justice Sriram and the Governor of Tamil Nadu R.N. Ravi.

● by Thirupurasundari Sevel

Each photograph told a unique story about Tamil Nadu's rich culture, vibrant landscapes, and resilient people. From the sun-kissed beaches of the Marina to the majestic temples of Mahabalipuram, the pictures on display captured the essence of Tamil Nadu's diverse heritage. The exhibit was a testament to the talent and creativity of deaf artists. Ms. Roja, a skilled, sign-language interpreter, played a crucial role in ensuring that the event was inclusive and accessible to all participants.

Madras Photo Bloggers was the organisation behind this collaboration with the Indian Navy. The group aims to promote photography as a passion and give a space for photographers,

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OUR
READERS
WRITE



Krishna's Summer Cut Chronicles

Taking my 10-year-old son, Krishna, for his routine summer haircut has become an event in itself – a ritual steeped in tradition, much like a festival, except instead of sweets and celebrations, we leave with a freshly cropped head and a lingering scent of talcum powder.

The moment we step into the barber shop, it's like entering a lively amphitheatre of sights, sounds, and smells. The waiting bench – our designated throne of patience – is already occupied by men flipping through dog-eared magazines, scanning newspaper headlines, or simply bobbing their heads to the nostalgic film songs blaring from an ancient radio. The customers – some seasoned gossipers, some reluctant visitors dragged in by their parents – animatedly discuss politics, unravel movie plots, and analyse the latest antics of cricket stars and local leaders.

The walls, oh, the walls! A shrine to cinema, they are covered with larger-than-life posters of actors, their thickly lined eyes glaring down at us like silent judges of our hairstyle choices. Krishna and I often pass the time by matching the actor's haircuts to the poor, unsuspecting customers in the chairs.

The barber's chair, a magnificent wooden relic, is cushioned and comes with a sliding headrest that the barber adjusts with a knowing flick of his wrist. Since Krishna is still a bit short for the chair, a sturdy wooden plank is placed across the armrests, instantly transforming the seat into a precarious-looking throne. Krishna eyes it with suspicion, as if expecting it to collapse under him at any moment.

Then comes the arsenal of tools – oh, how they've changed over time! Gone are the hefty brass clippers that required the strength of a bodybuilder. In their place are sleek, battery-operated trimmers, complete with interchangeable guards for precision

styling. The legendary leather strop, once used to sharpen straight razors, is now a relic of the past. Instead, barbers use disposable razor blades, snapped in half and fitted into slim handles – far removed from the days when used razor blades doubled as makeshift pencil sharpeners in our homes.

And then, the *pièce de résistance* – the water sprinkler! Once a long-necked, metal-ringed masterpiece that required careful pumping, it has now been reduced to an efficient but uninspiring plastic spray bottle. It gets the job done, but where's the drama? The old one had character, unpredictability – a mischievous mind of its own, sputtering out surprise sprays at unsuspecting customers.

One thing that remains unchanged is the mirror game. In the past, massive mirrors adorned the back wall, creating an illusion of endless space and ensuring that every customer had a panoramic view of their transformation. Now, barbers rely on a handheld, folding mirror, revealing the freshly clipped back of the head with a magician's flourish. Krishna, without fail, reacts with wide-eyed amazement every time, as if seeing the back of his own head for the very first time.

With a final flick of the barber's wrist, the trimmer hums to a stop. A firm pat on Krishna's shoulder signals the grand finale. The barber whisks away the cape with a flourish, sending stray hairs flying like celebratory confetti. Krishna hops off his wooden perch, rubs his newly shorn head, and throws me a look that silently asks, Do I still look like myself Amma?

And just like that, the Great Summer Shear is complete – shorter hair, a lighter head, and yet another memory added to the ever-growing collection of Krishna's barber shop adventures.

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Hundred Years of a Masonic Temple – II

This article was written for a special souvenir released by the District Grand Lodge of South India to commemorate the centenary of Freemasons' Hall and is published here with kind permission.

– Sriram V

(Continued from last fortnight)

A committee comprising prominent Masons had been formed to study at length the financing of the purchase of the land at Egmore and the construction of the new Temple. The old building on Mount Road was sold for Rs 1,35,000 (it became Pioneer Laundry and was demolished just a decade ago) and the Egmore site was purchased for Rs 35,750. The Branch Elphinstone Hotel, later to be renamed as Chesney Hall and which adjoined the new site, became the home of the DGL and the meeting place for all the Lodges, till such a time the new building was completed. A sub-committee comprising Wor. Bros. V. Tirumalai Pillai (a noted Justice Party member and after whom Tirumalai Pillai Road in T. Nagar takes its name), District Senior Grand Warden, P.M. Sivagnana Mudaliar, Past District Grand Warden and J.W. Madeley, District Grand Superintendent of Works (Special Engineer in charge of Drainage and Waterworks, Corporation of Madras, and after whom the Madeley Subway in T. Nagar takes its name) had toiled hard in ensuring the sale of the Mount Road premises, the identification of the new location and the purchase of the land. The task

of designing the new temple was entrusted to Bro H.W. Barker, junior partner in the architectural firm of Jackson & Barker. The plans however were contributed in great degree by the Masons themselves.

In the meanwhile, complaints kept surfacing about the inadequacy of Chesney Hall as a Masonic Temple. Matters finally reached a situation where it was no longer possible to function from there. This forced the brotherhood to build in 1919 a "new temporary Masonic Hall" to the designs of J.W. Madeley at a cost of Rs. 22, 000, to the rear of the present Hall. The permanent Masonic Hall was thus delayed further and the funds situation got tighter owing to the construction of the makeshift Hall. The Masons of Madras had been hoping that the foundation stone for their permanent home could be laid by the Most Worshipful the Grand Master, the Duke of Connaught and Strathearn when he visited Madras in 1921. But that date came and went with plans being nowhere near ready. It was 1923 before everyone agreed on what was to be built and how it was to be funded. The Governor of Madras, Lord Willingdon, Ration laid the foundation stone on February 26 that year.

The total cost of construction, estimated at Rs 3,15,000 was contained at Rs 2,60,000. And yet it was a tall order for the DGL. P.M. Sivagnana Mudaliar began a fund collection drive, cajoling the Lodges to donate to the cause. And they did give, some spontaneously, others rather reluctantly. The Lodge PU at Rs 18,184 and the Lodge Pitt



Macdonald at Rs 13,035 topped the list. The Wor. Bro. the Rajah of Venkatagiri gave Rs 15,000 as did Shanmukha Rajeswara Naganatha Sethupati, the Rajah of Ramnad. A total of Rs 140,000 was thus collected this way and Rs 50,000 was borrowed from the Madras Masonic Institutions. There was however a significant gap to be bridged and this was managed with great difficulty. And yet, the building took shape and was ready for inauguration on February 26, 1925, exactly two years to the date since Lord Willingdon had cut the turf. His successor, the Viscount Goschen declared the building in the presence of the first lady and a whole host of Masonic dignitaries including Sir Alexander MacDougall, the redoubtable Director of Simpson & Co who was then President, District Board of General Purposes in the DGL. Lady Goschen unveiled a tablet dedi-

cated to the memory of Masons who laid down their lives in the First World War. After the ceremony, the Governor and his wife were shown around the building and then entertained to tea.

At 8.30 pm that evening, the "stately and solemn ceremony of the Dedication of the Temple" took place with the Rt. Wor. DGM Rt. Wor. A.Y.G. Campbell performing the honours assisted by P.M. Sivagnana Mudaliar, V. Tirumalai Pillai, the Rev H.N. Bridge, Col R.F. Standage and Sir Arthur Knapp. Sir Alexander MacDougall addressed the gathering of Masons and his speech dealt with a history of the construction of the Hall.

It would be worth our while to take a virtual tour of this beautiful structure, now recognised as part of the architectural heritage of Chennai city. When built, its alignment to the River Cooum was considered important, as the plot was at its longest on the west, all of it running along the waterway. In terms of approach, the site was not without fault, for it did not have a vast frontage, the access being through a 110 yard driveway that was shared with Chesney Hall. This however provided ample privacy, as it cut off the property from Commander-In-Chief (now Ethiraj) Road.

The brethren had stipulated that the building ought to comprise two storeys, the upper one, accessed by a staircase that wound upwards in the anti-clockwise direction, having two Lodge Rooms, the larger capable of holding meetings of at least 200 Masons and the smaller for congregations of sixty. The ground floor had to have two dining halls, one to seat 150 peo-

ple and the other with a lesser capacity. The Masonic requirement of Lodge Rooms having to be on a east-west axis meant that the building too had to be that way, which is why, when it was built, the best view of the edifice was from Anderson's Bridge leading to Moore's Road. To enhance the beauty of that view, the Masons landscaped the eastern bank of the river and seats were provided for people to sit and enjoy the spectacle. All of that is now lost. Rampant encroachments on the opposite side meant the view was no longer there. The degrading of the river forced the Freemasons to plant trees to hide it from view. That in turn meant the building too can no longer be seen from the river. It is worth pointing out that the proposed elevated road from the Harbour to Maduravoyal is now coming up along the Cooum, cheek-by-jowl with the Masonic property. What challenges that will pose in future can only be conjectured at the moment.

With the east and north faces of the building being least visible, the kitchen, stores and service rooms were built on those sides. A debate arose as to the placement of the porte-cochere, an integral feature of all colonial buildings and a necessary one too, for it had two important roles – it shielded the structure from the sun and it allowed members to alight from their vehicles if there was rain. The obvious choices were the west and south faces but the former was ruled out, as a portico would hide the most visible façade of the building from view. The south side was thus fronted with what was termed a wet-weather portico. This has a series of Ionic



columns holding it up. The other faces, including the principal one on the west, follow a Grecian style all completed with plaster but with the ornamentation kept to a minimum owing to the harshness of the Indian heat, dust and rain.

Entering through the western loggia the visitor comes to the stairway chamber that has on its walls tablets recording the kindness of donors who made the building possible. Two Doric columns frame the grand stairway of Sholinghur stone rising from here. A wrought iron handrail, made by Crompton Engineering Company runs alongside. The steps, numbering 33 in keeping with the degrees in Masonry, lead to the first floor verandah from where the two Lodge Rooms/Temples can be accessed.



These chambers are all lit and ventilated through clerestory windows that are at a height of 12 ft from the floor. The walls of the rooms sport Masonic emblems, all formed with plaster and gilded over. The centre of the ceiling sports a large vermeil star in both the Temples. In keeping with its greater importance, the Larger Temple has a dais that runs along the entire east wall, while two-tier platforms run along all the other walls to seat the Masons.

Furniture in the larger temple was made to order and was all in rosewood. The smaller one had to make do with restored woodwork from the earlier temple. On Mount Road. The doors to both temples were made of rosewood too, with those opening into the larger Temple being particular-

ly noteworthy. It is clear that greater attention was given to the larger Lodge Room during the construction, meant as this chamber was for meetings of the DGL in all its pomp, regalia and ritual. Thus this room has in addition to the star on the ceiling, the heraldic arms of the DGL. It also has four friezes on its walls. Each of these bears Masonic ideals. The eastern one carries the words Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth. The western one has Faith, Hope and Charity; the other two are longer – Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence, Justice, Secrecy, Fidelity and Obedience are on the northern wall while Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Alchemy are on the south. The word music reminds us that this was an art very much integral to Masonry, the great Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart being a Brother who created several pieces especially for the Order. It will be recalled that the Lodges had a post of Organist as well. In keeping with that, the larger Temple also boasted of a fine pipe organ, which was in its own chamber along the northern side. The keyboard was set in the thickness of the wall so that the organist could sit within the organ chamber to play. Rosewood grilles around the opening to the organ chamber were an integral part of the decorations of the larger Temple. Sadly for music, it was relegated to a minor function over time and disappeared altogether, the post of Organist now being a mere designation. The disused organ was removed from the Temple during a rather misguided restoration in the 1970s and disposed off.

The double cube proportion, following the tenets of Inigo Jones, the 17th century father of British architecture and a Freemason, who in turn took inspiration from the dimensions of the mythical Temple of Solomon, is a concept central to the order. This was kept in mind while designing the flooring of the two Temples. The pavement, in grey marble, is of the double cube layout, with each stone being a perfect square. The larger Temple has in addition tassels in each corner, formed of black marble that is inlaid with white.

It is noteworthy that the Masonic Hall made maximum use of indigenous material. Barring a few door/window fittings, and Italian tiles for the verandah, everything else was sourced locally. The marble came from Lakshmi

Ratans Limited, while the bronze grills, Masonic symbols, the war memorial tablet and the foundation and inauguration plaques were all supplied by P Orr & Sons. The furniture was from Spencer & Co.

The kitchen was divided into vegetarian and non-vegetarian sections and the two dining rooms had provisions for pantries where liquid and solid refreshments could be stored before serving. The larger dining area had new furniture made to order while the smaller one made do with recycled woodwork from the old Temple on Mount Road. Over time dinners in the building became rare. The smaller dining room turned into a dump yard. It was fortunately rescued in 1986, when the Lodge PU, celebrating its bi-centenary, funded the conversion of the space into a third temple.

The new temporary Masonic Hall that Madeley designed at the rear of the main building served as a temple for long too. It was eventually converted into an exquisite auditorium for seating around a 100 people. It is let out commercially and brings in revenue. The adjoining space became the office of the DGL and also serves as its library. The kitchens that were located outside the main building eventually proved unnecessary as cooking within the premises ceased and catering from outside becoming the norm. However, with the festive board and dining being an integral part of Masonic ritual, in-house catering made a comeback in 2001, of which more later.

Outwardly, very little has changed in the Masonic Hall since 1926. It has lost a part of its driveway owing to the commercial development of Chesney Hall into a block of apartments. That has made the space even more distant from the hurly burly of the main road. And once you enter, you are in a different world of a cool garden with many shade-giving trees that frame a strikingly handsome building.

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(Concluded)



Clockwise from bottom left: Freemasons' Hall as seen in 1925, the Hall at present, one of the temples, and the wet weather portico.

The Adyar Riverbank at Gerugambakkam, Indira Nagar

Indira Nagar, Gerugambakkam is a suburb bordering Chennai that lies on the banks of the Adyar river. The area is a stark example of the city's failure to do well by its natural resources, and many residents are vocal in their unhappiness about the condition of the Adyar. The riverbank is full of non-biodegradable trash and decomposing waste. A putrid smell permeates the air, making it hard for residents and passers-by to breathe. In addition to waste, the river also receives untreated sewage on a daily basis. The water hardly flows, save for when it rains. The bank looks much like a dumpyard, with heaps of unsegregated trash strewn around. There are multiple burn patches on the ground, too – these are the result of attempts to burn the waste.

A significant portion of the waste being dumped into this part of the river reportedly comes from sources outside the local community, such as the airport compound and Cowl Bazaar. Mr. Kasi, a ward member, gave the example of an electric company from Pallavaram that he says used to dump and burn their waste near the river. "The only solution to stop waste from being dumped in the river is to build a compound wall throughout the river stretch," says Mr Palani, a lorry driver. "The government should do it." Adds Mr. Kasi, "People are suffering from malaria and dengue in our area because of

the mosquito breeding that arises from the dumped waste."

Ravi, an auto-driver, says that a leather factory in Nagalkeni which was once shut down has resumed operations and is dumping both physical and chemical wastes into the river. He also expressed his concerns about the sewage system under construction. "The sewage from this system will ultimately be released into the Adyar river because there is nowhere else for it to go. It will ultimately make the river's condition even worse," he worries.

Thus, while restoration initiatives promise infrastructure upgrades, sewage treatment plants, and recreational facilities, the current reality for residents of areas like Indira Nagar is bleak. Piles of waste, toxic air, stagnant water, and rampant mosquito breeding have turned life along the riverbank into a constant struggle. Local residents express frustration at being trapped in an environment where government action appears delayed and ineffective. Reports of continued industrial waste dumping, leaking pipelines, and improper waste disposal further highlight the systemic issues contributing to the river's degradation. The Adyar River's dependency on rainfall for its flow reflects its fragile state, symbolising the urgent need for holistic intervention.

Each year, the Tamil Nadu government passes grants to restore and clean the Adyar



From lifeline to landfill: The tragic transformation of Adyar River.



Nature's cry for help: Heaps of garbage clogging the Adyar River.

● by **Geethanjali Rajakkannu**



Adyar River: Once a lifeline, now a dumping ground for urban waste.

river. According to a 2024 article published in *The Hindu*, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has sanctioned Rs. 4,778.26 crore towards the first phase of the Adyar river restoration project. Administered by Chennai Metro Water, the project will be completed in 30 months followed by 15 years of infrastructure maintenance.

Key initiatives include laying 70 km of sewer pipelines to prevent raw sewage from entering the river; the construction of 14 sewage treatment plants with a daily capacity of 110 million liters; and the improvement of water quality indicators such as dissolved oxygen and pH levels. The project also aims to increase the river's carrying capacity, maintain biodiver-

sity, and develop recreational facilities in the form of parks at Kotturpuram, Ramapuram, Saidapet, and Greenways Road. The Chennai Rivers Transformation Company has been established to oversee and manage the initiative. According to the Chennai Rivers Restoration Trust website, all the efforts towards restoration aim to address these challenges holistically. It is hoped that rejuvenating the Adyar river into a thriving ecosystem will enhance its carrying capacity and help mitigate floods as well as improve tidal exchange. However, the success of these efforts hinges on sustained implementation, consistent monitoring and active public engagement.

"The water was once so clean that a coin thrown into the river would be visible to the naked eye," sigh Petchiammal and Murugai Irulappan. "Nowadays, there's barely any water."

Winner of 51 medals at National Masters Swimming Championship

You can see her regularly on Elliotts Beach Road in Chennai, in shorts, either running or cycling or participating in some marathon. Sheila Sekhar (67), a resident of Chennai since 2021, is another example of how age is no barrier to pursuing one's passions. After reaching several milestones in swimming and running, she is continuing to conquer.

Born in Jamshedpur where her grandfather was staying, she grew up in Kerala where her father worked. She did her primary schooling at St. Theresa's Convent, Shoranur and High school at Govt. Girls High School, Cotton Hill, Thiruvananthapuram. She is a graduate in commerce from Government Victoria College, Palakkad in Kerala.

Sheila remembers spending time playing many traditional indoor games during her childhood. Thanks to a neighbour she and her brothers were also exposed to Carnatic music.

Sheila says, "Sports were always an important part of our childhood and the competition was tough. I was a good athlete and played handball and basketball in college. All the neighbourhood boys and my brothers were enrolled to learn swimming, but being a girl I was not allowed. I was very disappointed with this."

While still a student of B.Com, she was recruited as a clerk by the Bank of India in 1978. In 1981 she got married

She took voluntary retirement from her bank job in 2000 when she was only 42. Apart from devoting more time to the family she also decided to revive her interest in swimming, a life-long unfulfilled dream.

"I started going to a swimming pool which was 13 km away. I was active, fit, and athletic but still it was not easy because adult swimming is not intuitive and I was terrified of deep water. Also, there was just a 30-minute slot for females

● by R.V. Rajan
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to R.Sekhar and moved to Hyderabad. Life became very hectic with a full-time job and the birth of her sons Srikant and Shankar in 1983 and 1985 respectively.

and that was not enough to pick up the courage to try anything. I would just stay near the wall in the shallows. However, at home, I spent time watching instructional DVDs about



swimming which my brother had sent me from the USA. I would just go to the pool and try the "drills" as per the DVDs. This turned out to be the best

method because this systematic way of breaking up the stroke into several parts and building

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Tamil Nadu: Through My Lens – A Photo Exhibition in the Navy House

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– THE EDITOR

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bloggers and history enthusiasts to share their work and ideas. Madras Photo Bloggers is also home to the Deaf Artists NIFT Collective, an initiative that seeks to empower deaf artists and photographers.

Speaking about the exhibition, Rangoli said, "As part of the At Home for Navy Day celebrations in Chennai, every year we endeavour to showcase some part of the local culture. This year, we decided to take a happy step towards inclusion."

Said Srivatsan, "Rangoli and I discussed the importance of showcasing the talents of deaf photographers through images that emphasise themes such as Tamil Nadu's culture, people, landscapes, and temples. Given the vastness of the subject, this proved to be quite challenging. This has truly been a collaborative effort, and I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to Rangoli for providing this brilliant platform to bring our vision to life."

"Not everyone knows much about the thriving deaf community in the city and that we have a large number of very talented youngsters who are part of it," shared Rangoli. "With the idea of bridging the gap and providing a platform for our young talented artists to showcase their talent, we decided to curate a Photo Exhibition especially for the Navy Day celebrations in Chennai." She said that given Srivatsan's passion for helping the community, Madras Photo Bloggers were the obvious choice for the Navy to collaborate with.

The photographs were chosen through a meticulous analysis of the works of various deaf photographers. "We were overwhelmed by the number of photographs that we had to choose from, but it is here that Srivatsan's experience helped," said Rangoli. "He painstakingly shortlisted the 20 photographs that were finally on display."

"The process took us two weeks to identify the best pieces, and the rest gradually fell into place," smiled Srivatsan. He explained that inclusion in the art space goes beyond mere representation – it is about amplifying voices and stories that have often gone unheard.

"This exhibition exemplifies an inclusive art environment, rooted in our belief that everyone is equal and talented," said Srivatsan. "Accessibility is a fundamental right that should be afforded to all."

Expanding on the subject, Rangoli said, "We are all happy to talk about diversity, but diversity without inclusion is meaningless. It is my personal view that every individual contributes immeasurably towards building a cohesive society. Those who are challenged in one aspect of life are often supremely gifted in every other way. And it is here that mutual learning happens."

Winner of 51 medals at National Masters Swimming Championship

(Continued from page 7)

muscle memory for each body position and movement is the best way to learn swimming. That concept was unheard of in India at the time and there was hardly any know-how to teach swimming to adults."

But her fear of deep water simply refused to leave her. She would mostly swim only in lane 1, where she could grab the boundary wall any time. After four months of self-learning, the coaches at the pool started noticing Sheila and marveled at how smooth she was in the water. Encouraged by them she soon gained enough confidence to participate in local swimming competitions for adults. She got her first prize in a competition at Osmania University, Hyderabad in 2002. She was quite thrilled that she could swim 50 meters non-stop!

In 2008, the family moved to Goa and in 2010 to Mumbai because her husband took new roles at work. This was a great blessing for her swimming. She discovered a robust swimming culture in Goa. There were swimming pools in every district and unlimited access to coaches and dedicated life-guards.

"All of this catapulted my training and skills to a higher level. In Mumbai, I was fortunate to have access to the TATA colony Olympic size pool and I trained with total dedication. When we moved back to Hyderabad we chose to live near the Gachibowli stadium which housed great swimming facilities and I could continue to keep up the practice. At about this time, the Swimming Federation of India started conducting National Masters swimming competitions annually. Swimmers from all states of India from ages 25 to 100 or more could participate in age group-based competitions. I started competing at these events after winning at the state level for my age group and qualifying for the nationals. I worked hard throughout the year, which paid rich dividends. I have participated in the National Masters swimming championships till 2021 and have won 13 Gold, 23 Silver, and 15 Bronze medals at the national level and several more at the state level."

Not content with her success as a swimmer, in 2011, she added race and cycling to her training activities. She always walked long distances daily so race walking was an easy tran-

sition. The colony where they lived in Hyderabad had several marathon runners and cyclists. She could train with them. This was also the time when big marathon events started featuring in major cities across India. She started participating in distance running events like the 10km race in 2014 and made her mark finishing within the top three places on several occasions. She also competed in a few triathlon events during this time.

The next dream was to participate in open water competitions. Sadly, in India lakes and rivers are polluted and there is no encouragement for these activities. Things are changing slowly and now there are sea, river, lake and reservoir swimming events.

"In Vijayawada, every January, there is a Krishna river crossing event which is a 1.5km swim at Prakasam barrage. I entered this event in 2020 and completed it effortlessly in 35 minutes. This was a major achievement and confidence booster for me. I value this achievement as one of my best efforts."

During the family's stay in a housing society in Hyderabad which had over 1000 flats and also had two swimming

pools Sheila would impart swimming training to several kids, adults, senior citizens and even visiting guests from abroad. Some of them, motivated by her, even participated in competitions and won prizes.

"Many of them today correspond with me to clarify their doubts about techniques and tips to improve" says Sheila with pride.

Her husband and children have been very supportive through all her sports activities. They are also major sponsors for all her training aids, costumes and traveling expenses, etc.

"Balancing these activities with my family responsibilities is indeed very challenging. I have to wake up early in the morning for my training / practice. Most evenings are also spent on my athletic training and also on looking after my terrace garden".

Sheila's children are also much into sports. Both her sons are settled abroad, and play club cricket. The younger one played at the national level in handball and the elder one is a certified umpire and coach for cricket

In 2023, her husband suffered a paralytic stroke and was

bedridden and speech impaired for over 6 months. Though he is a little better now, he is still dependent, and needs assistance. This was a major setback for her activities.

"My practice has taken a back seat, but still I manage to swim and run by getting up early in the morning and allotting time for these activities. Sadly, I have not been able to travel outstation for swimming competitions after this setback".

Despite this, she won four gold medals at the TN State Masters Swimming Competition in August 2024. She continues to dream about taking on new challenges,

"I am planning to train in sea swimming. It is my wish to participate in ocean swimming events, long-distance events and also to be a part of Relay Ironman teams, where I can do the swimming leg. I am also continuing my distance running training"

If there is a will there is a way. Sheila is certainly a role model among senior citizens who pursue their passions with determination and commitment. Let us wish her success in all her future endeavours!

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