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**WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI**

# MADRAS

## MUSINGS

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# The City gets back its Town Hall





# VP Hall – A Tale with Many Tortuous Twists

And so, finally, Victoria Public Hall is back to its old glory. And it has, in a sense, been returned to the public to whom it rightfully belongs. What, however, is of utmost importance is to appreciate this precious legacy and make sure that the place does not end up getting caught in a fresh maze of bureaucracy and worse, legalese. The accompanying article gives ideas and suggestions on

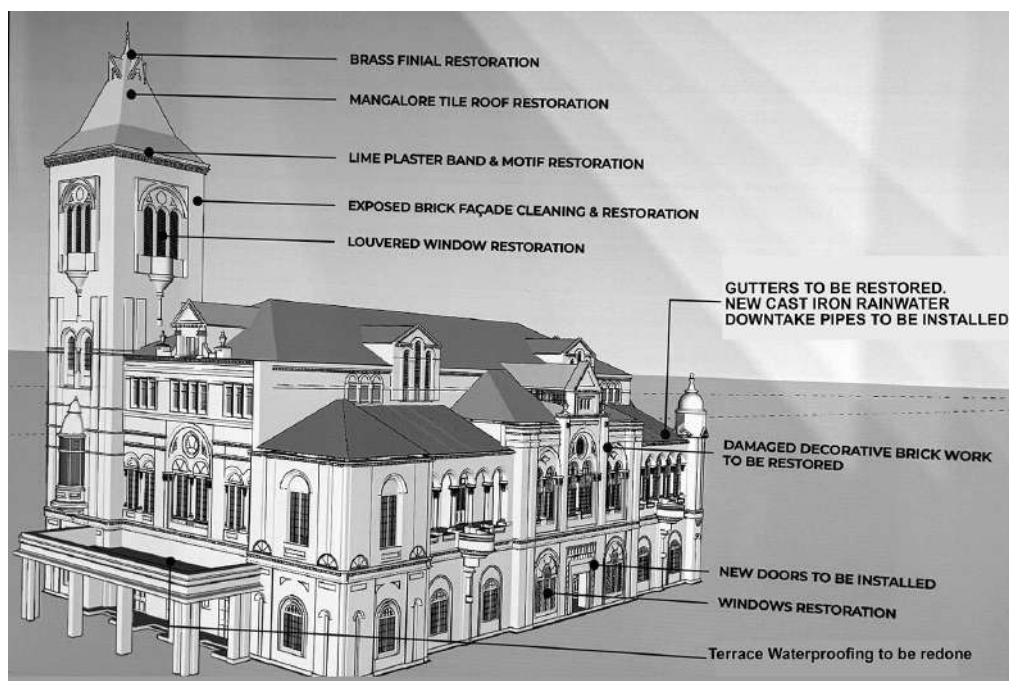
● by Sriram V

what can be done. But before we go to that, we need to see what made VP Hall dysfunctional for over sixty years as a people's venue.

The problems began probably when VP Hall was conceptualised itself. The land belonged to the Corporation, and the 3.14 acres was leased at a rent of fifty paise per ground (2400 sq feet) to the private Trust that ran VP Hall. Trouble seems to have begun as early as in 1921 when the Advocate General filed a scheme suit before the High Court. It sought to lay down the guidelines for the administration of the building and the subsequent decree

became the basis for all future developments. Even in that suit, it was alleged that some of the trustees had tried appropriating the hall rent income. The Court stipulated that its permission would have to be sought if and when the Trust considered handing over the building to the Corporation.

In 1950, the Corporation sought control of the property and this was referred to Court. The Trust challenged the takeover and owing to this conflict, the Public Resort Licence of the Hall was cancelled in 1952 by the Corporation. Thus, the Hall could not rent out its premises for events and therefore received no income on that account till 1972! Of course, its lessees continued to be in occupation and paid their lease rentals but these amounts were so small that there was practically nothing for the upkeep of the premises. The litigation came to a conclusion in 1956 and the Corporation gained possession of the building and completed its renovation a year later. A fresh Trust Board was constituted comprising the Sheriff, the Mayor, members of various trade and commerce associations, a representative of the Maharajah of Vizianagaram and a nominee of the High Court.



*The scope of the present restoration.*

The Commissioner of the Corporation was the Secretary. Of course, with the suspension of the Corporation Council following the muster roll scandal, the office of Mayor fell vacant and the post of Sheriff was filled only sporadically.

The new Trust Board remained in charge of the Hall but, as the lessee, it began to

sub-lease the premises to others. A line of shops came up on the eastern front and the Chennai Andhra Mahasabha, long a sub-lessee, built its own premises fronting the building. In addition, a hotel came up on the southern front. It must be realised here that while the main building did not have any activity or generate revenue for

itself, practically everyone else did, including from film shoots. The building thus grew increasingly dilapidated.

The 99-year lease expired in 1985 and rather inexplicably, nothing was done till 2009, when the Board of Trustees decided to handover the premises

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Well-Restored is Half Done

And so, the new year begins on a happy note for heritage in our city. After several delays, the magnificently restored Victoria Public Hall, a veritable jewel of the city, was finally dedicated to the public by the Hon'ble Chief Minister on December 23, 2025. Restored at a cost of around Rs 33 crores under the Singara Chennai 2.0 scheme, it has been given a fresh lease of life. A job well begun is half-done, as the saying goes, for now comes the bigger challenge of ensuring that the hall becomes a must-visit place on the tourist itinerary, which will also make it a commercially viable exercise.

That the potential to make it a vibrant place is immense is undeniable. Imagine people on a stopover at the Central Station with a few hours before catching a train making a quick visit to the hall to watch a performance or catch a piece of history walking through the

three halls of the museum on the ground floor. With its proximity to the Chennai Central Metro Station, a well-run and professionally managed Victoria Public Hall can attract sustained footfalls. However, it is essential to ensure that the ills that plague many of our city museums do not spillover to this historic campus as well. Readers of this magazine may recollect its views not so long ago (MM, July 16-31, 2024) stressing on the need to keep museums relevant, which will be a key factor in attracting higher footfalls. We have been promised that the museum of the Victoria Public Hall will be a mix of stationary and revolving exhibits, which ensures that there is some freshness to it periodically. Hopefully this is followed in spirit and is not something that remains on paper. Getting a full-time professional curator to manage the show would also help in this re-

● by Karthik Bhatt

gard. It is also essential to price it appropriately and not too low, which would be hardly sufficient for its upkeep. At the time of writing, the website shows a fee of Rs 25 per adult (with foreigners being charged Rs 50) and students and senior citizens at Rs 10. While these nominal rates are understandable at present, probably keeping in mind the need to attract higher footfalls, it is essential that they are reviewed periodically and changes as necessitated carried out, so that they correlate in some proportion at least to the cost of upkeep.

Victoria Public Hall's connect with the performing arts, and Tamil theatre in particular, courtesy the Suguna Vilasa Sabha have been well-docu-

mented. The renovated performing space on the first floor, which the Corporation plans to let out for events, holds much promise in reviving this connection. Hopefully, the government takes the lead in organizing regular theatre festivals at the venue, which would in-turn throw the spotlight on the hall amongst theatre audiences. It is also important to ensure that those booking the hall are assured of its availability for the day they book. There have been instances in the past when bookings at another prominent performance space of our city, the Museum Theatre, have come along with an unofficial diktat that they would be at risk should there be any official function that is scheduled later.

Hopefully, this does not repeat at the Victoria Public Hall. The Corporation could also think on the lines of having differential slab rates for different kinds of event bookings instead of a flat rate, which would help attract audiences from a wide stratum of society and in turn increase the footfalls to the campus.

It must be remembered that the splendour of the hall was at its best when it was in continuous use for performances and public meetings and it is essential that in its refurbished avatar it continues to be put to best use. We have seen, in the not-so-distant past as to how a well-planned and executed renovation effort of yet another architectural wonder of our city, the Senate House was largely rendered ineffective, with the hall being sparsely used for events and largely as a godown. We surely cannot afford the same fate to befall Victoria Public Hall.

# Victoria Public Hall in 1889

● The following extract is from *A Guide to Madras and its Suburbs*, published by Higginbothams in 1889, just a year after VP Hall's inauguration. It gives us some information pertaining to the circumstances in which the Hall was conceptualised and then made a reality. It also gives us details of what the rentals for the Hall were then.

— The Editor

The first public meeting convened by the Sheriff to consider the question of supplying Madras with a Town Hall, was held at Patcheappah's Hall, on 24th January 1871, when the late Maharajah of Vizianagram presided and after several attempts, the scheme was set on foot by a few public-spirited men in Madras, with the approval of the inhabitants. In March 1883, a prize of Rs. 1,000 was offered, and the design for the building was thrown open for competition, and as an inducement, an honorarium of Rs. 500 was given to the competitors.

In May 1883, eight designs were submitted and the sub-committee accepted Mr. R.F. Chisholm's (late Government Architect) design and awarded him the prize. The then Governor of Madras, Sir M.E. Grant Duff, was asked to lay the foundation stone, but he declined, as he disapproved of public

money being spent in that manner, when the drainage of the town demanded more attention. The Committee then requested the present Maharajah of Vizianagram to perform the ceremony, which he did on 17th December 1883, in the presence of a large number of people, and he then renewed the donation of Rs. 10,000 his late father had promised. Subscriptions came pouring in on all sides, which exceeded Rs. 75,000. The site selected, measuring 30 grounds, is that portion of the People's Park lying north of the Poonamallee Road and upwards of 120 wells had to be sunk for laying the foundation, as that site was originally a tank. The work progressed very rapidly and the Committee had hoped the Hall would have been ready on the occasion of the Queen's Jubilee in Madras, but they were disappointed, and the opening ceremony took place on 25th January 1888, when His Excellency Lord Connelmar, the present Governor of Madras, presided at a meeting in the Hall, which was duly opened, the Trust Deed adapted and 12 Trustees elected.

The building is admirably suited for the purposes it is intended to serve. The main Hall measures 110 feet long by 40 feet broad,

without any intermediate pillars. At the western end of the Hall there is a raised dais, capable of accommodating 100 performers, and which is easily convertible into a stage with necessary accommodation for wings, screens, &c. A recess with dome is also provided (10 feet deep) capable of holding an organ, which would be a valuable acquisition. At the eastern end there is a wide gallery, which is about 20 feet above the floor of the hall; and on the northern and southern sides there are verandahs with a depth of about 16 feet. At the top of the main staircase, at the eastern end of the building, the northern room has been fitted up to serve the purpose of a "bar" and refreshment room, while the room to the south contains a winding staircase, which leads up to the top of the tower, from which point an excellent view of the city can be obtained. The lower floor contains an entrance hall and staircase at the eastern end, measuring 40 feet by 15 feet, with cloak rooms on either side, and a private retiring room, each of which measures 17 feet square. The supper room is 78 feet long by 40 feet broad. Then there is a Committee room to the south, which covers an area of 46 feet by 17 feet. There is another room on

the ground floor, which measures 30 feet by 15 feet; this was meant for the Secretary's office. The kitchen has an air-tight door, and measures 30 feet by 15 feet, and the rooms for storing furniture are 40 feet by 25 feet each.

The following is the inscription on the trowel used on the occasion:

Presented to His Highness MIRZA ANANDA GAJAPATI RAZ MUNNEY SULTAN, Maharajah of Vizianagram, on the occasion of his laying the Foundation Stone of THE MADRAS TOWN HALL on the 17th December 1883.

The following is the inscription on the Foundation Stone:-

The Foundation Stone of THE MADRAS TOWN HALL was laid by His Highness

MAHARAJAH MIRZA ANANDA GAJAPATI RAZ, Munney Sultan of Vizianagram, on the 17th December 1883. His Excellency The Right Honorable M.E. GRANT DUFF, C.I.E. Governor of Madras. and H. E. Lieut. General Sir FREDERICK ROBERTS, Bart., v.C., G.C.B., C.I.E., Commander-in-Chief.

The charges for the use of the Hall are: for professional entertainments, taking money at the door: for first week, Rs. 350; for second week, Rs. 300 each week; for third week, Rs. 250 each week; for fourth week, Rs. 200 each week; but if taken for one month certain, Rs. 1,000. These charges include use of the stage and paraphernalia. For a term less than

a week and more than one night, the charge will be Rs. 50 a night, or for a single night only Rs. 60. For quasi-public entertainments where entrance money is taken, the charge will be Rs. 40 a night; for Amateur Dramatic Societies, whether money is charged or not, Rs. 40 a night; for Entertainments by the Madras Volunteer Corps, Rs. 25 a night; for private entertainments, Rs. 25 a night; for purely charitable purposes, Rs. 25 a night; for Lower and Upper Halls taken together, with lights, for one night Rs. 70 a night; and for Lower Hall, by day Rs. 20, and for a night Rs. 25. The North and South Rooms (downstairs) by day, Rs. 7, by night, Rs. 10, without lights. All charges will have to be paid in advance.

## An Architectural Assessment

Designed in the Romanesque style and rectangular in plan, measuring approximately 46m by 26m, the new entry portico is at the eastern end. The ground and first floors contain two large halls capable of seating 600 people each, the latter fitted with a gallery at its eastern end. Special features include arcaded verandahs along the northern and southern sides supported on sleek Corinthian stone columns, and a tall square tower that rises at least three floors above the rest, covered by a curved pyramidal roof typically of many other buildings of this period. An intricately carved terracotta frieze resembling Islamic calligraphy adorns the top of the tower.

Built of red brick and pointed with lime mortar, the intermediate floor is of Madras Terrace while the roof is a large hip with Mangalore tiles and dormers at the ends and along its length. As in other buildings of a similar style and form, the Town Hall too appears more human in scale than that expected from a building of its size, mostly due to its massy brickwork, sleek and slender details and large tiled roof. The walls of the top floor are highly embellished with decorative and painted plaster work on the interior and the gallery constructed completely of wood.

Reproduced from *Madras The Architectural Heritage* by K Kalpana and Frank Schiffer.

## VP Hall – A Tale with Many Tortuous Twists

(Continued from page 2)

to the Corporation. The sub-lessees went to Court on the grounds that the restoration of the building

was not in any way impeded by their continued presence! This fortunately was overruled by the Court and was appealed against. This was dismissed. It was only then that the way was paved for VP Hall's restoration, which due to the Metrorail work, was stalled again. Finally, we now have a restored VP Hall.

In the midst of all this, though it is not clear as to how the matter of ownership was resolved, there were attempts to restore VP Hall. The first of these, as per a plaque on the east-

ern entrance of the building, was in 1967 at the orders of the then CM, CN Annadurai. It is said that the then trustees of VP Hall were contemplating demolishing it and putting up a cinema theatre there! Anna prevented this and the restoration was duly ordered. It is not clear what was the outcome. It appears that the eastern portico was constructed as part of this, for it is architecturally completely out of synch with the rest of the building. Sadly, it has been retained.

We then move to 1992/1993 when industrialist Suresh Krishna became the Sheriff of Madras. He initiated moves for restoration and

in 1996 when MK Stalin became the Mayor, the matter moved ahead. But it had to wait till 2010 when the Corporation allotted Rs 3.06 crores for the restoration. While the news reports of that time give a very comprehensive scheme of conservation, it is not clear as to what was done. The building certainly languished and went from bad to worse. A heritage walk in the premises, in 2010, revealed a stairway in a state of collapse, plenty of bats and a first floor that distinctly sagged. Then came Metrorail and the foundation of VP Hall was impacted though the superstructure fortunately remained stable.

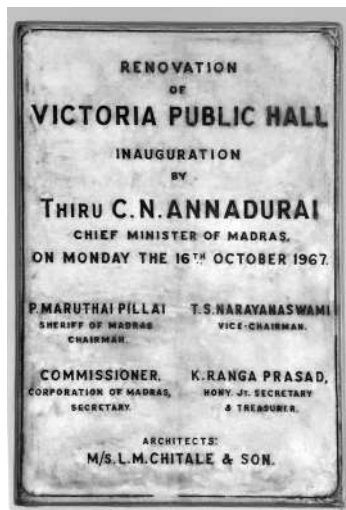
Which brings us to the

latest and happily, successful restoration. To quote *The New Indian Express* – "In May 2023, the Greater Chennai Corporation undertook a comprehensive conservation, revitalisation and seismic retrofitting project at a cost of Rs 32.6 crore under Singara Chennai 2.0. Though the work was given a 24-month deadline, it overshot by seven months.

The official said the restoration was carried out to preserve the building's original architectural character while enhancing its structural safety and functionality. The project included structural repairs, seismic strengthening, complete roof restoration, interior and exterior con-

servation works, upgrading of building services and architectural façade lighting. With a built-up area of around 2,200 sq m, the restored hall now meets modern safety standards while regaining its historic grandeur."

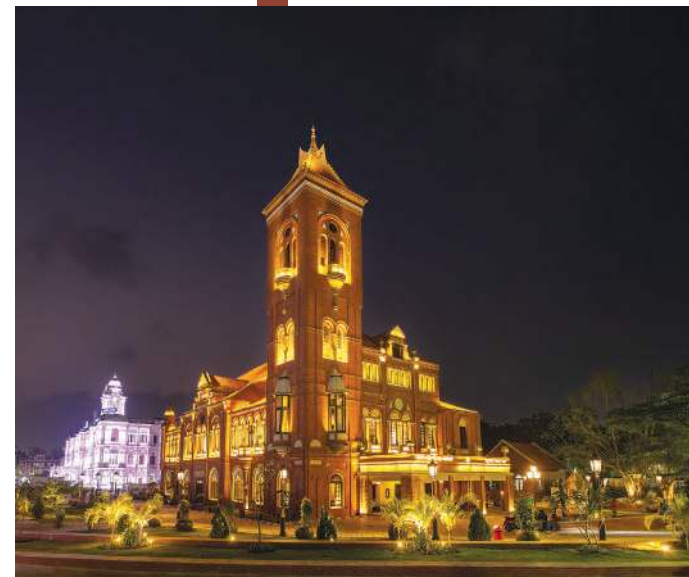
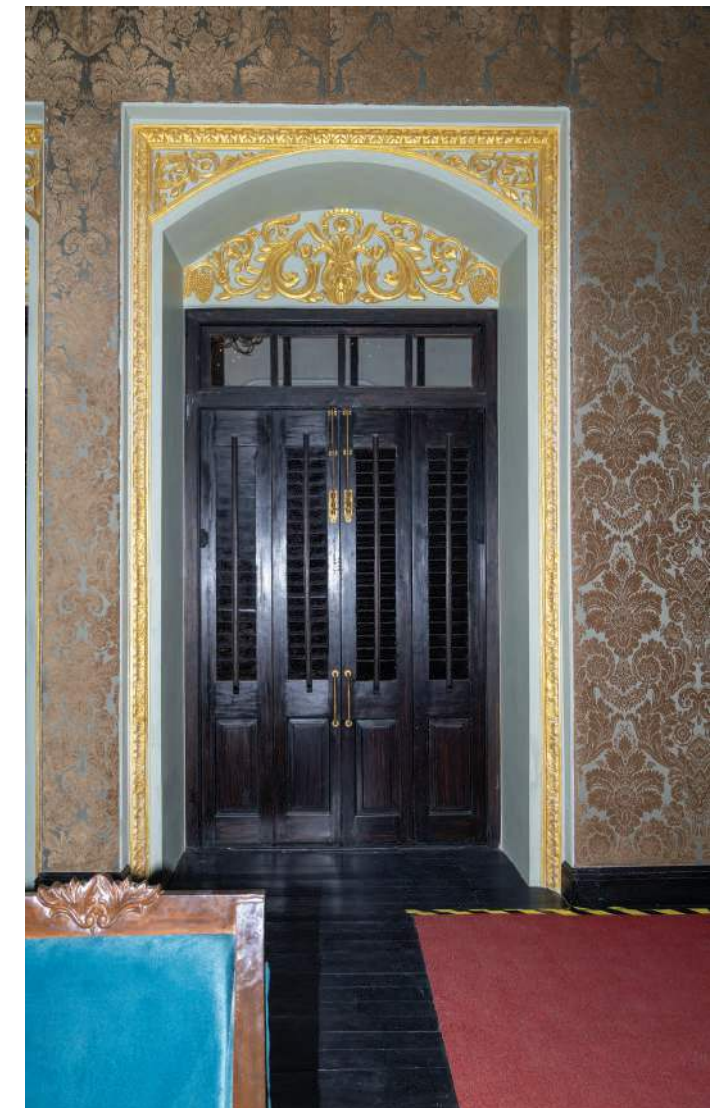
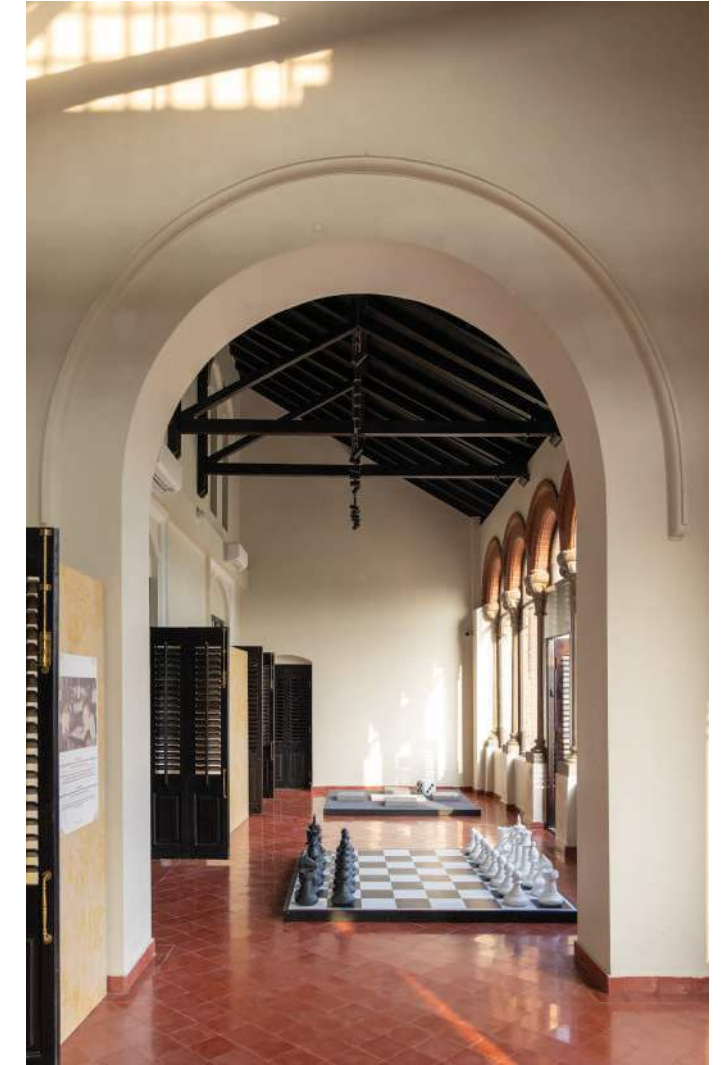
The work, carried out by Abha Narain Lambah Associates of Mumbai, with actual restoration by Savani Heritage, certainly is most impressive. And it serves as an exemplar of what should be done with heritage buildings. The attention now shifts to how the Corporation will manage, and more importantly, make VP Hall a living heritage structure.





# Restored Victoria Public Hall

(Pictures by William Satish)





# The VP Hall and Suguna Vilasa Sabha

In its history of 135 years or so, VP Hall's tenant for the longest tenure was the Suguna Vilasa Sabha (SVS). Beginning with 1891, the association continued for forty unbroken years, ending only in 1931, when the SVS acquired its own property on Mount Road and moved out.

Among the leading lights of the SVS was Rao Bahadur Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar, one of the original seven signatories to its founding. At the invitation of CR Srinivasan of the *Swadesamitran*, Mudaliar in 1930 began writing *Nataka Medai Ninaivugal* (Memories of the Stage), which is partly an autobiography but more importantly a history of the SVS. The series of articles was published in the *Swadesamitran* till 1936 and provide a year-by-year account of the SVS from inception. And from a reading of it, VP Hall emerges as a live and vibrant venue where plays invariably ran to full houses. In addition it also comes across as a social hub of Madras, resounding to music, speeches, fun and laughter.

The following article, based on the original, and written by me, was published in *Madras Musings* (Vol. XIX No. 20, February 1-15, 2010), in two parts. We now reproduce an abridged version.

– Sriram V

The birth of SVS was itself partly due to VP Hall. The original seven, including Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar heartily despised native theatre, considering it to be cheap and vulgar entertainment. They were to change their minds when, as young college students, they witnessed a dramatic performance in the summer of 1891 at the VP Hall by the Bellary Sarasavinodhini Sabha. This was the brainchild of D Krishnamacharlu, a lawyer practising at Bellary who ran an amateur dramatic society comprising his friends. The play that Sambanda Mudaliar watched was the last of a series, all of them in Telugu. Each one was a sell-out and Mudaliar writes that he was thankful that his father had arranged a reserved ticket for him, for otherwise it would have been impossible to gain admission into the Hall. Following this play, Mudaliar and his friends decided to form a similar amateur dramatic society themselves and thus the SVS was born on 1st July 1891. It had Raja Sir Savalai Ramaswami Mudaliar as its first President and Poondi Ranganatha Mudaliar as its first Vice-President. Under its auspices Sambanda Mudaliar was to emerge as a playwright, better known today in this capacity than as a lawyer which he was by profession. He wrote 94 plays during his long association with the SVS besides translating several from other languages.

In 1891, following the successful reception of a private staging of Mudaliar's first play *Pushpavalli*, the SVS decided to make bold to hire VP Hall for two nights for public

performances. At that time, the VP Hall expected the hirers to bring their own stage curtains and props and the SVS did not have the money for such items. Last minute donations by patrons such as Savalai Ramaswami Mudaliar and Koonichampet Lakshmanaswami Chettiar ensured that this gap was bridged. So was the money required for renting VP Hall – Rs 50 for each night. When the curtains were made, the SVS ensured that a picture of Senate House was put on the main stage curtain, this to indicate to the audience that the dramatic society comprised university graduates.

In order to publicise the first performance sufficiently, 25,000 handbills were printed and a retired sepoy was hired to go on horseback from street to street and distribute them. The man carried a bugle which he blew at each street entrance and when a sufficient crowd had collected, he gave away the handbills. On the day of the first staging, the two gates of VP Hall sported decorative arches and were embellished in the traditional way with plantain stems and flags. A band was hired to perform at the gate from 4 to 9.00 pm when the play would begin. All these publicity measures had their effect and a vast crowd descended on the Hall and stayed for the full duration of the play, which lasted six hours and ended at around 3.30 am. Mudaliar writes that this was the duration of the average play in those days.

VP Hall, according to Mudaliar, was much in demand at that time despite being completely unsuitable for the stag-

ing of plays! He states that the Hall was built for the public to gather on certain occasions and not for dramatic entertainments. He writes (in 1930) that in his forty years of acting in plays, he feels that the VP Hall is the most inferior among all venues when it comes to acoustics. He also notes that the first dramatic society to ever stage plays in VP Hall, The Madras Dramatic Society, soon packed its bags and moved over to the Museum Theatre. The SVS however, decided to experiment with various measures to improve the acoustics. The members first tried a network of metal wires above the proscenium. Later they attempted to lower the height of the ceiling by stretching a cloth canopy across it. None of these methods really worked and then, as Mudaliar writes, they came to the conclusion that only those with buffalo-like vocal chords could really survive in VP Hall. The SVS, whatever be the vocal capabilities of its members, certainly did and encouraged by the response to the first performance of *Pushpavalli*, made VP Hall the venue for all its plays.

At the VP Hall, the SVS presented many new ideas and innovations, many of them being attempted for the first time in Madras. One of these was *Kalvar Talaivan*, which according to Mudaliar was the first tragedy ever to be written in Tamil. The Hall resounded to the sniffs and at times open weeping and wailing from members of the audience. Applause was also received but at the end of the play there was complete silence. The assembled throng had never witnessed a play where everyone on stage died and left with heavy hearts. Another pioneering attempt



Victoria Public Hall, Madras – the home of the Suguna Vilasa Sabha.

plicated backdrops were moved and successfully positioned for subsequent scenes. This was directly inspired by the way in which the Parsi Company, then touring Madras and staging its plays at the Esplanade Theatre, managed its backdrops.

In 1896, the joys of English theatre were introduced to native audiences by the SVS, when *Julius Caesar* was staged at VP Hall. From 1897, Telugu plays were also taken up by SVS. In 1902, yet another pioneering entertainment for Indians was offered – fancy dress competitions.

where Manoharan, the hero, breaks free from the chains that bind him to a pillar. Sambanda Mudaliar, during the first staging did it with so much of force that the noise woke up Ellis, the Superintendent of the VP Hall, who was sleeping in his private quarters at one end of the building. He immediately rushed in thinking that a riot was in progress and VP Hall was in danger.

The SVS took its responsibilities to society very seriously and often staged charity performances. The first was for the Indian Famine Relief Fund in 1897 and this was a staging of Mudaliar's *Pittham Piditta Veeran*. The staging netted the fund Rs 214-4-8 and among those who sat in the audience to witness it was Sir George Moore, President of the Madras Corporation. In 1902 the SVS had to bail out the VP Hall itself for the building was constructed with what was thought to be a monetary gift from the Maharajah of Vizianagaram which later transpired to be a loan. The SVS staged *Virumbiya Vithame*, which was inspired by Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Presided over by Justice Boddam, the proceeds of Rs 200 were handed

by Sriram V

was the staging of the mythological *Rukmangada Charitram* entirely as tableau vivantes, a series of scenes, without any dialogues. This was done as a play within a play – during the staging of *Sarangadhara*, another great hit from the SVS. An innovation brought into Tamil plays by the SVS, and displayed for the first time at VP Hall, was the practise of having two intermissions during which com-

Among the plays that were to be repeatedly staged was *Manohara*, a creation of Sambanda Mudaliar which premiered at the VP Hall on 14th September, 1895. Though it was to later become a play much in demand and also be made into an enormously successful film, its first staging did not see much of an audience and ticket sales amounted to only Rs 200. The climactic scene in the play is

(Continued on page 7)

# THE VP HALL AND SUGUNA VILASA SABHA

(Continued from page 6)

over to the VP Hall Redemption Fund. An interesting aside about the play is that as in the original, it is largely in a forest setting. The SVS members therefore desired to see it being performed in a garden. The play was performed once in the grounds of Government House

with Lord Wenlock in attendance and much later in 1904, in the gardens of the Ranade Public Library and Mylapore Club.

V Krishnaswami Iyer, the noted lawyer, was at first irritated and later curious to know how a hallowed play of Shakespeare's could be acted out in Tamil. He witnessed the

staging at the Ranade Hall and was so impressed that he became the President of the SVS! Another interesting fallout of this play was that the SVS began translating and reworking on several of Shakespeare's plays to suit an oriental setting. Arising out of this came plays such as *Jwalita Ramanan* (*Romeo and Juliet*), *Vaanipurathu Vanikan* (*The Merchant of Venice*), *Sarasangi* (*Cymbeline*) and *Amaladityan* (*Hamlet*). In 1905, the SVS began the practice of celebrating Shakespeare Day at VP Hall. This gradually expanded into a Shakespeare Week, with the increasing crowds necessitating an outdoor staging of the plays. A stage was put up at the tennis courts at the rear of VP Hall and the plays were enacted there.

The practice of holding night-long plays was soon felt to be an impediment as many members and guests were government servants, professionals and businessmen who needed to report for work early the next day. The SVS pioneered the concept of evening shows when for the first time on 21st October 1906, the play *Kaadalar Kangal* was staged at the VP Hall within three hours, beginning at 6.00 pm. At that time it was a novelty and several criticised the SVS for its new timings fearing that it would result in the loss of patronage. It however soon became the norm and when cinema came to Madras, it followed the same timings.

VP Hall became home to the SVS in 1902 when the latter began renting a small room on the western side of the Hall. The society had till then managed its activities at various places in North Madras. Space was rented in Chintadripet for storing the props and curtains. By this time the SVS was also blossoming as a social club, providing cards and reading room facilities. A central location like the VP Hall became an asset. Gradually, the SVS expanded its occupation of the VP Hall. In 1910, the Cycles Club and the Mercantile & Marine Club, which were occupying the entire lower floor of the Hall became defunct and the SVS took over the space at a rent of Rs 125 a month. The legal luminary Sir VC Desikachariar expressed worry over the move as in his view no organisation that had rented the VP Hall till then had flourished! A new acquisition by the SVS that year was a billiards table which was housed in the ground floor of VP Hall.

In between, in 1908, the SVS also inaugurated its library, which was perhaps the only one



A group of S.V. Sabha actors in 1895.

## Host to Several Greats

VP Hall has hosted several greats from the 19th and 20th centuries. They were here at the behest of several organisations that hired the venue for their events. But undoubtedly, the track record of the venue as far as speakers/performers are concerned is truly unparalleled. We present here a partial list:

Swami Vivekananda  
Mahatma Gandhi  
Gopal Krishna Gokhale  
Rabindranath Tagore  
Iyothee Thas Pandithar  
Rettamalai Srinivasan  
S Satyamurti  
Sir Pitty Theyagaroya Chetty  
Dr TM Nair  
C Natesa Mudaliar  
The Rajah of Panagal  
Calcutta Gauhar Jan  
T Balasaraswati  
Annie Besant  
EV Ramaswami Naicker  
CN Annadurai

In addition, the Hall played venue for events such as the public meeting following the Arbuthnot Crash, the golden jubilee of the Indian Fine Arts Society, early meetings of the Theosophical Society and the first display of cinema.

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– THE EDITOR

in the city dedicated to books on theatre. Begun with a collection of 180 books, it expanded by 1930 into a vast horde of 1,680 books which included works in English and the four South Indian languages. The SVS also felt that a Hall named after Queen Victoria ought to have her portrait in it and commissioned one at a cost of Rs 200. Unveiled in 1910 by Sir Arthur Lawley, the Governor of Madras, it was later put up on top of the stage and is probably the one that still survives in the Hall. (It no longer does in 2025 – SV)

By this time the SVS was the preferred agency for organising entertainments whenever any important personage visited Madras. Viceroys and Governors witnessed its plays and on one occasion the Viceroy, Lord Minto, refused to believe that the women on stage were actually men in drag. Sir Arthur Lawley however, was not fortunate to be entertained by the SVS. When approached to organise a suitable entertainment for the Governor's farewell, the SVS chose to snub him by refusing, a decision that was warmly endorsed by V Krishnaswami Iyer despite his being a sitting High Court judge! When Krishnaswami Iyer passed away within a year, the SVS organised a commemorative meeting at the VP Hall and unveiled a portrait of his. It also contributed Rs 1,000 towards the statue that was later put up in front of the Senate House.

By then it was said in a lighter vein that if anybody desired to become a High Court judge, he ought to become a member of the SVS. V Krishnaswami Iyer, PR Sundara Iyer, TV Seshagiri Iyer, Sir CV Kumaraswami Sastri, K Srinivasa Iyengar, C Krishnan, Sir M Venkatasubba Rao, Sir Vepa Ramesam, Masilamani Pillai and VV Srinivasa Iyengar were but a few examples. Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar also became judge of the Small Causes Court.

Many women also became members of the SVS, though they did not take to acting. Dasara celebrations were particularly colourful at the SVS thanks to the women. The

practice of kolu was initiated when a large Ganapati idol that was gifted to the SVS began to be worshipped before each performance. For Dasara, members would bring clay idols and these were duly arranged in steps in the large auditorium on the first floor. There were days during Dasara that were exclusively earmarked for children and women. The Ladies Day allowed only for women to attend and they were entertained by select scenes from plays, all enacted by men of course. On one occasion Sir T Sadasiva Iyer demanded to be allowed and an exception was made for him. He was allowed to sit on stage and witness the performance. For many years, it was the practice of Sir CP and Lady Seethammal Ramaswami Iyer to defray the expenses incurred on Ladies Day. Within a few years, Ladies Day had to be celebrated in a special pandal on the grounds belonging to the South Indian Athletic Association.

By 1915, the SVS had begun to outgrow the VP Hall. In that one year alone 363 new members were enrolled and it was commented that if all members of the SVS were to come in to attend a programme at the VP Hall, it would be impossible to accommodate them. One such instance was the staging of a play for the benefit of the warship HMS Madras. The demand for tickets was so high that the play was eventually enacted in a tent in neighbouring People's Park. It was also the same year when the SVS perhaps pioneered the concept of a December cultural season. By way of commemorating its silver jubilee, the SVS hired the auditorium of the VP Hall for 45 evenings and staged plays on all days. Despite this there were days when sale of tickets had to be stopped early in the morning.

With all this, the SVS realised that it would have to move out of VP Hall. Funds had been systematically set aside since 1900 for the purchase of a suitable plot of land which in Sambanda Mudaliar's words, "would accommodate an auditorium at least six times the size

(Continued on page 8)



# VP Hall and Sports

An abiding thread in the history of VP Hall is the manner in which it was a venue for sports of various kinds. From the narrative of Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar (see pages 6&7) we note that the Cycles Club was a tenant here towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though the history of that short-lived body is not available, we can assume it comprised cycling enthusiasts.

The Suguna Vilasa Sabha itself promoted sports. The billiards table here was very famous. At a time when the Madras and the Madras Cricket clubs were whites only and were the only other social bodies to boast of such a facility, it

was the SVS at VP Hall that promoted the sport among Indians. The first reference to billiards at MCC is in March 1907 and this is quite late for we find that the SVS had a billiards room, situated inside VP Hall by then. The Madras Presidency Billiards League was established here organised by the South Indian Athletic Association. In this event, the billiards markers of the Madras Club, the MCC, the Gymkhana, the Madras United Cricket Club (MUC), the Suguna Vilasa Sabha, the Cosmopolitan Club and also those employed in the various hotels of the city participated.

Tennis was well-known

● by  
Sriram V

at VP Hall. There were tennis courts on one side of the building and together with the courts at the MUC and the Cosmopolitan, did much to promote interest in the sport among Indians. Photographs from the 1920s reveal victorious teams seated at the rear of VP Hall, thereby indicating that it was a venue for competitions.

The South Indian Athletic Association (SIAA), which

historic body has all but vanished from public memory now, for more than a 100 years promoted interest in track events in the city, as also boxing. The SIAA, which operated for years from its leased premises on People's Park, moved into VP Hall after the SVS left and made it the home for sports of various kinds. In the 1930s, though it is not clear if it was indeed under the auspices of the SIAA, VP Hall was the venue for a demonstration of table tennis. Thereafter, right until the 1980s, VP Hall was where numerous TT tournaments took place.

The SIAA also organised the Park Town Annual Fair for years in People's Park. It was begun in 1878 by the Corporation but in later years the SIAA took it over. Track and field events were organised surrounding VP Hall each year during Christmas week. Apart from athletics, there were rekla races and exhibition boxing matches. It was during this fair that Gun Boat Jack displayed his daredevilry on a motorcycle inside a wooden enclosure. And the North Madras boxing champions made the venue their own. The gradual taking over of the People's Park land by various buildings and the construction of the indoor stadium eventually led to the Park Town Fair itself being

abandoned. The vanishing of the SIAA was a natural corollary, and the stuff of tragedy.

VP Hall was then rented by the Chennapuri Andhra Mahasabha (CAM). It eventually came to build its own premises on VP Hall land, apart from occupying the ground floor. This body, founded in 1916 by Sir Pitty Theyagaroya Chetty as a social association for Telugu-speaking people in the city, expressly included the promotion of sports among its goals. Though its role in the later history of VP Hall is not very edifying, there is no doubt that as far as sports were concerned it did much. Carrom, chess and billiards were its forte, and under its auspices, many chess tournaments were held at VP Hall which went a long way in establishing Chennai as a chess capital.

VP Hall, as renovated and restored now, may not be a centre for sports any longer. But then, the city itself has plenty of other public facilities now for the promotion of sports. VP Hall therefore will not be required to play such a role. But its role in making sure that the citizens of Madras came to appreciate sports of various kinds is undeniable and in that aspect too it proved that it lived up to its name as the city's town hall – a space that was the public's own.

## THE VP HALL AND SUGUNA VILASA SABHA

(Continued from page 7)

of VP Hall". The Government agreed to lease the Napier Park (present May Day Park) for this purpose and on 31st January 1925, the foundation stone was laid for this by TV Seshagiri Iyer. Within three years, the stone was back in VP Hall, Napier Park being found unsuitable for the purpose. Money continued to accumulate, with

performances in the mofussil, Colombo and Bangalore being particularly remunerative.

Ten years later, Pitty Tyagaraya Buildings on Mount Road, which had belonged to the Justice Party and which was keen on selling following its decline, were negotiated and purchased for Rs 95,000. The SVS finally had a new home but it never fulfilled its promise of being a dramatic society. Today it is a thriving social club though

office-bearers still sport titles such as Tamil/Telugu Conductor, these being a throwback to the days when those occupying these posts really conducted plays, one of them being S Satyamurti.

*The SVS did construct a theatre at its new premises, but this was leased out. It functioned as the Plaza Theatre for long and then, following litigation, was retrieved by the SVS and demolished – SV.*

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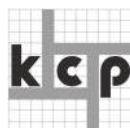


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