

WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

# CHENNAI MUSINGS

Vol. XXXV No. 20

## INSIDE

- Luz Church Road Memories
- Babu Krishnaswamy
- Chennai Book Fair
- Three Chennai talents emerge World Champs 2025

February 1-15, 2026

## Opacity on OSR

The news item was so small that it passed everyone by. And yet it has massive ramifications especially for a congested city like Madras that is Chennai. We allude to the latest amendments to the Open Space Reservation (OSR) policy of the Government. It is yet another indicator of the insidious manner in which the real estate lobby works hand in glove with the bureaucracy and the political leadership.

OSR rules have been an integral part of the Tamil Nadu Town and Country Planning Act, 1971. As per this, developers need to set aside ten per cent of the land in development projects exceeding 3,000 sq mts (32,000 sq ft) in size. These were to be gifted to the local authority for communal and recreational purposes with a view to maintaining greenery

in the area. All very noble and highly laudatory no doubt. But mark the way these provisions have been steadily whittled down to a point where the very concept of OSR has come to mean nothing.

Initially it was mandated that the ten per cent land had to be one contiguous patch

• by Sriram V.

but later this was left to the discretion of the local authority, as many properties could not offer this owing to constraints of plot contours and demands of effective planning. But who was to decide whether this was really so? In reality, many builders began randomly earmarking small pockets here and there along the periphery of their

plots to comply with the ten per cent. This was so even by those who could offer a single patch of land. This fractioning of the OSR rendered it meaningless when it came to considerations of offering it for public recreation. There was another way out too – in cases where no OSR was possible, the builder could pay the local authority a compensation and be rid of the problem once and for all.

There then came another amendment to the effect that the land earmarked as OSR need not be given to the local authority. It could be maintained by the developer and all that was required was that there ought to be signboards declaring that the land was indeed OSR. In effect therefore, the builder retained control of

(Continued on page 2)

## Leveraging recent tourism initiatives to increase heritage awareness

The remarkable interest shown by the State Government and the Greater Chennai Corporation of late in heritage restoration is bearing fruit, as is evident from the successive glad tidings in recent times reported in these pages. There is promise of more to come, with work starting on the Bharat Insurance buildings, not to mention the much-awaited restoration of Gokhale Hall. With the Heritage Cell in place in the PWD to oversee restoration activities of government heritage structures, there is much to be positive about. Yet another heartening development is the

recent interest shown by the Metropolitan Transport Corporation in showcasing prominent landmarks of the city through

• by Karthik Bhatt

its latest initiative, the Chennai Ula bus service.

On January 17, the MTC launched its first vintage styled hop on hop off bus service, covering some of the city's iconic landmarks through a circular sightseeing route. A ticket, priced at Rs 50 per day

permits unlimited boarding and alighting across all stops, enabling tourists to indulge in sightseeing at their own pace. Starting and ending at the Central Station, buses are operated at 30-minute intervals, with the service being run from 4 PM to 10 PM on weekdays and from 10 AM to 10 PM on weekends and public holidays. The buses are especially retro-fitted, with the red exterior clearly designed to invoke a sense of nostalgia. An onboard audio system plays historical snippets as one passes major landmarks. The

(Continued on page 2)

## HERITAGE WATCH

### Dating the Trevelyan Memorial Fountain

The Trevelyan Memorial Fountain, standing on the grounds of the Victoria Public Hall is a monument commemorating the contributions of Sir Charles Trevelyan, former Governor of Madras. The location is but appropriate, for he was the one responsible for the creation of the People's Park, a vast lung of green for the city during his gubernatorial tenure, on which later came up the Central Station, the Victoria Public Hall, the Moore Market and the Ripon Buildings. However, it had for long been a mystery as to when it was put up, for there is no date on the memorial.

Recently, we unearthed a news report in the *Pioneer*, published from Allahabad, which gives some indication as to when it was probably put up. In its edition dated February 4, 1890, it carried

a letter from Lady Trevelyan to the President of the Madras Municipality, where she stated thus: "I am anxious to express to you and the Municipal Commissioners of the city of Madras how much gratified I have been by the erection of the Trevelyan memorial fountain in the People's Park in memory of my late husband. The description of it, showing that though years have passed, his work at Madras is fondly remembered, has touched me deeply. I shall be obliged if you would convey my best thanks to the kind donors". This would date the memorial most probably to late 1889.



The memorial which is made of dressed Pallavaram granite with white and red marble pillars at each angle over which an ornamental capital of Pallavaram granite rests, stood on the south side of the Victoria Public Hall, facing the Poonamallee High Road, until the Metro Rail started work. It was then moved and placed facing the Central Station, where it stands today, impressively restored, welcoming visitors as they enter the lobby of the main building.

**Lady Trevelyan writes from London to the President of the Madras Municipality thus :—**"I am anxious to express to you and the Municipal Commissioners of the city of Madras how much gratified I have been by the erection of the Trevelyan memorial fountain in the People's Park in memory of my late husband. The description of it, showing that though years have passed his work at Madras is fondly remembered, has touched me deeply. I shall be obliged if you would convey my best thanks to the kind donors."

# OPACITY ON OSR

(Continued from page 1)

the OSR. This could over time morph into servants' quarters, a generator room or even a private play area and no action would be taken. However, if and when the local authority needed the OSR, it could reclaim it.

But there was worse to follow. The law very clearly stipulated that the parcel of land offered as OSR should be contiguous to a public road so that the public could access the space when needed. The idea behind this was that the OSR land could be used as a public playground or a park. Now as per the latest amendments this has been declared optional. In other words, the OSR need not

be near a public road and can be anywhere within the plot as long as it can be accessed by the general public. The naivete behind this amendment is simply stunning. We live in a city where even footpaths are enclosed by the owners of nearby houses and converted into private spaces. What are we to say about large builders who do the same with the OSR that they have ostensibly offered to the local authority?

In effect, what we have today is a toothless OSR legislation that has pleased the real estate lobby no end. The general public, which has learnt to manage with less and less public space, is hardly likely to notice. As for the Government, all is perfect on paper anyway!

# Leveraging recent tourism initiatives to increase heritage awareness

(Continued from page 1)

key destinations include the Egmore Station, Egmore Museum, Lighthouse, Santhome Cathedral, the Vivekananda Illam, Kannagi statue and the War Memorial. The service seems to have certainly evoked interest amongst the public going by initial news reports.

This development comes at a time when the Tourism Department has launched its own daily city sightseeing initiative on an EV double decker bus, offering 'a panoramic view of the city's iconic heritage, cultural landmarks and scenic coastline', to quote from its website. Starting from the TTDC office on Wallajah Road, it offers passengers a glimpse of major landmarks around Anna Salai and the Beach Road, covering destinations such as the DGP Office, the All India Radio, the Napier Bridge and the memorials on the Marina. These services are run during three time slots a day.

While these are undoubtedly laudable initiatives aimed at promoting low-cost, comfortable and in the case of the *Ula* service, a flexible way of getting to know the heritage of our city, one cannot but help wonder if these could be more productively designed. Take the choice of destinations themselves. Both these services cover spots that anyway attract good amount of tourist crowds on a routine

basis and except for the novelty of the mode of transport seem to add little value to enhancing heritage awareness. It would be interesting to see if the patronage can be sustained, especially in the case of *Ula* once the novelty wears off. Without going into the merits of the choice of each destination being covered at present, it can be safely said that it is definitely possible to make a completely alternative list, covering landmarks that no one talks about but for dedicated heritage enthusiasts. Theme-based routes too could be curated. These would certainly help attract people wanting to explore the city through a non-touristy lens. A broader initiative could be to explore the possibility of making some space to display information in bus shelters across the city about heritage landmarks in their immediate vicinity. May be corporates could be roped in to fund these as a part of their CSR activities.

There has certainly been a lot of laudable conservation efforts of the city's heritage structures in recent times. Initiatives such as the *Ula* have great potential in promoting heritage awareness amongst the masses. It is hence crucial to leverage them to the fullest, which would hopefully lead the way to a more heritage-conscious society. All it requires is a bit of out-of-the-box thinking.

# Calendar Recall

Yet another New Year has come and gone. The spate of greetings on WhatsApp (ugh!) has abated and *The Man from Madras Musings* takes time off to look back at New Years of the past. Over time New Year celebrations have changed in style and even more so have the visible markers of ringing in the new. MMM alludes to calendars, diaries and greeting cards.

If you ask MMM, he will say he misses the greeting cards the most. There was a time when they were collectors' items and there would be a competition of sorts on which household got the maximum number of cards and of the most variety. MMM's favourite was always WWF cards which featured endangered animals. Now of course greeting cards themselves are an endangered species. You can even consider them to be extinct with most people preferring to send the E variety. When MMM says send, he means forward, because that is what most people end up doing anyway.

This was hung from a nail and when you switched on a ceiling fan, which was all too often in a humid city like Madras, the calendar would swing to and fro. Therefore, a circle would begin to be inscribed on the wall on which the calendar was hung.

The third variety was the daily calendar where you had a small square sheet that gave you not only the date but also a tally of good and bad times and in MMM's view, most fascinatingly, details of festivals at temples on that day in faraway towns and villages. At a time when the Internet was completely unknown, just reading the names of those pilgrim centres and the festivities that were taking place there on the very same day held a certain magic.

The greatest drawback in MMM's view was that very often these calendars featured pictures of gods and goddesses. These were not of the elegant Ravi Varma kind but of the more pedestrian calendar art for want of a better word. And after the year was over if you had a

to claw their way back. Everyone is doing what they are best known for – promising this, promising that and promising just about everything else. In all this there is a lot of to-ing and fro-ing around not just the city but the rest of the state.

*The Man from Madras Musings* was always of the view that the cars of the political class are a class by themselves. Party flags fly on the bonnet, and on the windscreens is invariably a sticker, often illuminated, of the leader to whom they owe allegiance, at least for the nonce. The drivers of these vehicles recognize no traffic rules and above all they discovered the automatic gear shift long before automobile engineers invented them. They operate the car only in the fourth gear, keeping their foot as firmly pressed on the accelerator as their hand is pressed on the horn. But if you thought the city political cars are bad enough, you need to really see the ones in the mofussil.

## SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

There was a time too when people would pester their social superiors for diaries. MMM is not aware of what people did with these, for writing a personal account each day is not one of India's best-known practices. Probably they were used for daily accounts, milk accounts and dhobi accounts. And now with everything getting on to the laptop, diaries too are on the verge of extinction.

The daily calendar is the third of those endangered species. You got them in essentially three varieties. The first of these was the tabletop calendar which still is somewhat in vogue. You flipped the months as the year progressed and the only drawback was the wedge-shaped base which lost shape over a period and would insist on tilting over just when you extended a hand to lift a sheet to look for a particular date. The next variety was the wall calendar. You got them in two or three different options. The upmarket ones were those issued by the big corporate houses. And then there were the standard ones where a month was a sheet and at the end of it you either tore it away or flipped it over to reveal a new month. The last one which in MMM's view was a true excrescence though he is sure that it had its fan following, was the single sheet date calendar with a metal rib at both ends, top and bottom.

religious senior in the family, you could not get rid of the calendar. They would remain hanging on various walls with nails protruding from below indicating that those were the supports for those daily sheets. The sheets themselves came in handy – to make boats on a rainy day, to scribble notes, and to make a convenient packet to take away sacred ash, vermillion, and sugar crystals. MMM also recalls that the young un's in the family vied for the honour of tearing off the sheet and in the interests of peace, a strict rota system was maintained.

Today, dates, months, and years are all off the laptop, the desktop, the tablet and the cell phone. You can do all that you did by way of scribbling dates and events on the calendars on these gadgets as well. But something of the old magic is missing. Or is it just that MMM is growing old?

## Party Cars in the Mofussil

'Tis election time, or rather like Santa Claus, elections are coming along in the none-too-distant future and so the action is hotting up in this our State. Those in power are going around inaugurating, foundation stone laying, scheme announcing, tom-tomming, etc. with a vim. And those not in power are gathering, aligning, coercing, relating, bonding, etc.

This aspect came forcefully to MMM when he was driving around the countryside last week. He then concluded that the lesser the functionary in a party outfit, the louder and more outlandish his car. Some of them need to be seen to be believed. There were a couple that had the party symbol by way of stickers painted all over the body. Others had on their rear window a large photograph of the leader. And all these vehicles had lights of various sizes on the front. These were not just headlights but more floodlights. As these cars careened on their way down highways, the drivers would keep switching on and switching off these lights each time they found a vehicle going ahead of them. This was kept up till the vehicle in front moved to one side probably after the driver in it was blinded temporarily.

Some have a loudspeaker attached which belts out songs on the way and then speeches of the leader when at a central location in a town. The decibel levels are so high that those in the car must soon be deaf from prolonged exposure. It must take them five years to recover, which is why, in MMM's view, post elections nobody, be it winner or loser, can be bothered to listen to us, the people.

– MMM

**OUR  
READERS  
WRITE**

**Spellbound**

I am spellbound by what I see on the pages of the current issue of *Madras Musings* (MM Vol. XXXV, No. 18, Jan 1-15, 2026). Just sitting back and staring. My deep appreciation and a hearty thank you! I will have to carry the print edition when I am visiting the Victoria Public Hall.

T.K. Srinivas Chari  
srinivaschar@gmail.com

**Concreting the Marina**

It is a noble gesture by the Madras Corporation to build a night shelter for the semi-nomadic families (near Anna Swimming Pool at the Marina), at a cost of Rs. 86 lakhs, covering 2100 sq ft with all attendant facilities. In addition to that, the civic body proposes to build another bigger shelter along the Marina, may be built on thousands of more sq ft. The ostensible reason given for selecting the place is to build shelters within 2-3 kilometres of their work place, so that the homeless can enjoy the sea waves from their shelters, after a hard day's work. Further there may be other structures like roads, parking lots, etc. which would appear later!

While the gesture is most welcome, the question is "Why at the Marina Beach?" concreting the spoilt silver sands again? Already the beach stands vandalised in many ways, including the massive concrete structures of burial grounds. When there are many other possible locations, why myopically select the beach? Because it is readily and freely available and without any cost or encumbrances?

Once called the second longest and most beautiful beach in the world, where does it stand in the ranking now?

It may be recalled that in the 1950s, when there were plans to build structures at the Madras Island Grounds, it was forcefully opposed by the wizard and the elder statesman Rajaji, stating that this was the lung space for Madras City and should not be vandalised! The proposal was ultimately dropped.

NP Andavan  
audconp@gmail.com

## Website Comments

**Our Readers Write**

(Vol. XXXV No. 17, December 16-31, 2025)

With regard to 'Encroachments by Civic Agencies: A Case of Government vs Government', over the last 25 years and more, I and a few friends have been fighting to get this encroachment removed. Even walking into our colony at peak hours is very tough. Temple and MLM hall on either side of the road at this point get a lot of visitors by car, scooter and walk. It is impossible to negotiate in this 1/3 available road width! I have written to the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister's cell 20 times, from the time when J Jayalalithaa was the chief minister. No one has taken action to remove the building on the road.

D Gopalakrishnan  
dgopala@gmail.com

**Vasanta Vihar, A Haven of Peace**

(Vol. XXXV No. 15, November 16-30, 2025)

The verdant campus is a home away from home. Observing the trees, plants and the birds, and even the people around provides an opportunity to look into oneself. A silent inquiry brings change in the quality of relationships and a new perspective of life itself.

Kala Krishna  
kagops@gmail.com

\* \* \*

# Evolution of foods of Madras

**C**hennai, India – Well before Chennai was the busy metropolis that it is now, its seacoast was part of the ancient land of Tamilakam's Neithal landscape. In the Sangam era (approximately 3rd century BCE to 3rd century CE), the diet of the people in this place was greatly influenced by their access to the sea, providing an interesting glimpse at a diet heavily based on the seas.

The Neithal diet's undisputed pillar was seafood. Their main larder was the sea, which gave them sustenance in countless forms. The life of the Parathavar was based on the back-breaking but rewarding endeavour of fishing, pearl diving, and gathering sea produce. Poems often describe fishing boats returning with the day's catch, symbolising the arrival of the most important ingredient in their food.

Fresh fish (Meen) was eaten right away, usually roasted or prepared just to enjoy its inherent flavours. Scenes of busy fishing villages processing fresh catches are common in the Sangam texts. To highlight the freshness and immediateness of consumption, *Narrai* poems, for example, frequently suggest the scent of freshly caught fish being prepared by the "young wife" as the fisherman returns from the sea. The abundance wasn't limited to the family; *Purananuru* poetry that highlights the generosity of coastal chieftains frequently depicts them "feasting guests with plentiful fresh fish from the sea", highlighting the importance and availability of this food.

Because seafood is perishable, preservation was essential in addition to immediate consumption. One necessary food item was dried fish, also known as Karuvadu or Ularttu Meen. The process included salting and sun-drying, which was made easier by the plentiful salt in the vast salt pans of the Neithal region. Long trips or lean seasons were made possible by this preserved form of fish. This procedure is eloquently described in Sangam verses: "On the sandy beach, the women spread out large pieces of shark meat to dry in the sun, guarding them from scavenging birds". This is a common theme in *Akamanuru* poetry and emphasises the work required to prepare this staple. *Pathupattu* anthologies serve to further solidify the significance of karuvadu. A thorough description of a bard's journey, *Perumpanatrupadai*, for instance, makes it clear that the "Parathavar offered the bard dried and baked fish," illustrating its function as a customary gift to visitors. The dish of "fried kozhumeen (a small fish, possibly anchovy or sardine) cooked over akhil (agarwood) driftwood" is also mentioned by *Sirupanatrupadai*, demonstrating a straightforward, rustic way to prepare fresh or preserved small fish.

The Neithal diet was not totally monolithic, even though seafood was essential. Although they were not grown along the coast, grains – in particular, rice (Soru or Sorru) – were an essential accompaniment. With the agrarian Marutham Thinai, where it was grown in profusion, rice was obtained through extensive bartering and trade. Whole meals were created by combining the two main food sources. A clear illustration of this culinary fusion can be found in the *Perumpanatrupadai*, which reports that the visiting bard was served "white rice cooked with boneless fish pieces." This demonstrates that rice, when combined with their main source of protein, constitutes a sub-

stantial portion of their diet. Even simpler dishes, such as "rice porridge (kanji) served with dried fish curry," seem to be a popular and healthy meal.

In the Neithal diet and economy, salt (uppu) has a special place. The coastal people had easy access to this essential commodity because the area was a major producer of salt. It was a primary seasoning and a valuable trade item, but it was also necessary for preservation. A recurring theme in Sangam literature is the Umanar, or salt merchants, who travelled the land in carts loaded with salt, indicating the significance of Neithal's salt production. The use of salt liberally is implied by the very existence of "dried fish" (karuvadu).

The Neithal social fabric included alcoholic beverages, especially toddy (Kallu), in addition to solid foods. Toddy was widely consumed after being extracted from the palm or coconut trees that were common along the coast. By referring to "aged liquor that their wives...have prepared," the *Sirupanatrupadai* makes reference to locally brewed drinks. In addition, *Purananuru* poetry frequently shows chieftains and other affluent people in Neithal kindly "offering abundant toddy to warriors and bards", implying its use in hospitality and social gatherings.

The Neithal people's preparation techniques were a reflection of their straightforward and pragmatic lifestyle. It was common to roast over open fires, frequently with easily accessible driftwood. The goal was to bring out the fresh ingredients' inherent flavours. Another common food was curries (Kuzhambu), which were probably made with only a few spices and flavoured with salt and possibly some regional herbs. This simple method is demonstrated by the *Perumpanatrupadai*'s reference to "fried kulal fish cooked over akhil driftwood".

In Neithal culture, food was more than just a means of subsistence. A deeply rooted value was hospitality (Virundhombal). The best catches, dried fish, and toddy were always generously offered to travellers, bards and guests. Their generosity and the close ties that bound the fishing villages together were highlighted by this act of sharing the sea's bounty. A society where food was a source of celebration and camaraderie is further highlighted by the abundance shown in a fisherman's hut or the group happiness over a successful catch.

In conclusion, the Neithal people's eating customs, as vividly described in Sangam literature, were a powerful illustration of their peaceful coexistence with the sea. Fresh and dried fish made up the majority of their diet, which was primarily marine-based. While salt served as both a culinary necessity and a financial foundation, acquired rice supplied the necessary calorie balance. The picture of a resourceful community whose culinary traditions were as extensive and profound as the ocean itself is completed by the straightforward but efficient preparation techniques and the deeply rooted culture of hospitality. These old Tamil poems provide a rich cultural account of life on the salt-kissed palate of Neithal, not just a menu.

– Dhivya Rajendran

dhivyacrajendran@gmail.com

## When Tamils made Delhi their Home, amid Struggle and Hope

(Vol. XXXV No. 14, November 1-15, 2025)

Happy to see the article on the Delhi Madras School. My mother would be 100 years old if she were alive.

My late mother Ranganayaki Krishnaswamy (maiden last name) used to proudly say she was one of the first few students (five if I recollect correctly) who studied till grade 4 or 5.

I believe she was very bright in studies due to which she was sent to St. Thomas Convent to continue her schooling, as I was told by one of her then teachers Ramachandra Rao, who incidentally happened to teach History to me in our SIES school located in Bombay.

Padmini Parthasarathy  
parthpadmi@gmail.com

## Restoring Pallikaranai Marshland: A Critical Imperative for Chennai's Ecological and Urban Resilience

(Vol. XXXV No. 3, May 16-31, 2025)

From what I understand, the wetland seems crucial for Chennai's water security, flood prevention and climate resilience. So, its conservation needs to be top priority of the government, which should be working along with concerned citizens and local communities. The area needs to be accorded the highest protection possible under the law. With detailed plans for its conservation and implementation of the same, Chennai is fortunate to have such a natural ecosystem – its importance cannot be overstated.

Ajay Mahajan

ajumahajan1@gmail.com

# Luz Church Road Memories

**Luz Church Road was one of the most prominent thoroughfares of the city in the early and mid-twentieth century. It was home to several legal luminaries and administrators, not to forget prominent institutions, some of which survive even today. Huge garden houses dotted the road, which began from what is today the Luz junction, as it snaked its way past the Luz Church and connected to Mowbrays Road.**

**With the efflux of time, several of the garden houses gave way to smaller residences and apartment units. This piece, which was found in an issue of the *Swatantra* magazine dating to the 1950s makes for interesting reading and captures the transformation. The writer, Capt RL Rau was one of the great-grandsons of noted administrator Sir T Madhava Rau, whose palatial residence Madhav Baug stood right at the beginning of Luz Church Road. RL Rau was a journalist associated with many newspapers such as *The Leader of Allahabad* and *The Hindu*. He also served as the P.R.O. in the British 14th Army and in the Home Ministry under Sardar Vallabhai Patel.**

**F**ailure, as Max Beerbohm once said, if it be plain, unvarnished, complete failure, has always a certain amount of dignity. Squadry in such a failure, let me add, heightens its pathos.

The Luz Church Road in Madras, it seems to me, is a road that failed. Losing its individuality after over half a century of fame and content to end helplessly today as a mere street connecting Mylapore's Cutcherry Road and Mowbray's Road, its failure is complete. Its mute acceptance of its present status is a pathetic reminder of the inevitability of things that befall men, women and roads.

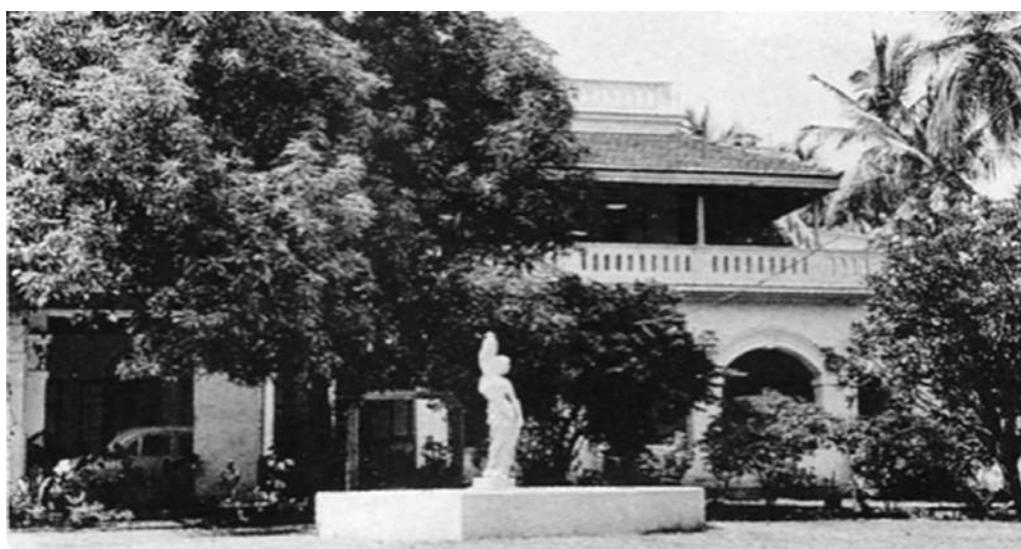
But what chance can a stately old road or avenue like the Luz Church Road have when people have begun to prefer to have dwellings instead of residences, tenements instead of houses, terraced flats instead of comfortable, roomy houses and monotonous six-foot high compound walls as they call them, instead of hedges?

It can give only what it receives. Give it dignity, it will

reflect it; give it a sense of quiet, it will give back a sense of repose. Leave it in peace, it will echo the spirit of deep solitude and the mellowness of age. Provide it with a stately avenue of trees, it will make the trees reach the stars; and when slumber and darkness steal over the landscape, it will make the stars peep through the leafy hollow of the trees gladdening the multitudes that pass under it.

I do not know who constructed the Luz Church Road and when. I do not care to know. Somehow it became a part of my childhood many years ago. Like all childhood's conceptions it had for me a permanence, a fixity of its own. The early memories I had of this pleasant old Madras road never faded. Fate took me to distant places, new pastures of endeavour and enterprise. I saw many roads, walked over them or past them in many countries. Many of them were stately, grander, picturesquely and better built than the Luz Church Road of my childhood, but I never could forget the Luz Church Road and the sheer romance it had for me.

This road of my childhood began with Madhav Baug, the old family residence of Rajah Sir T. Madhava Rau on the left and that of Justice Bashyam Iyengar on the right as one entered it. The road forked into two as it approached the present park which was formerly a pond where lilies and lotuses grew in profusion. The fork on the right took one to the dingy old Luz Church, dingly built but with the peace of a century old sanctuary with a big wooden cross in front. The



Ekamra Niwas, Luz Church Road, courtesy: The Alladi Diaries.

left fork ended in a lazy winding road with some more famous residences on its two sides and joined Mowbray's Road.

There was a little municipal water pipe where the road forked into two. It had a terrible looking metal lion's mouth for its spout out of which gushed forth an endless stream of cool water. It was enclosed by a lantana hedge and there used to be a boulder covered with grass, which was a paradise for some of us small boys.

No shabby looking electric posts defaced the then long and stately avenue of banyan trees that bordered the old Luz Church Road. Modern, minute looking houses were still uncommon. The road went past lovely old brick and mortar bungalows mellowed by the hand of time. Lantana bushes with their brick red blossoms and evergreen shrubbery ran riot along the ditches.

Many men made this road famous. They were the finest products of the age they lived and flourished in. Most of their names too were household words in South India and the parents of young aspirants to fame and merit always mentioned these names as examples and for emulation. Most of them, the older among the lot had died already, but they had left an abiding impression on the manner and life of intellectuals in South India. I had the privilege of getting to know one or two of them in my time.

These men, great lawyers, great judges, great physicians, great administrators as nearly all of them became at some time or other of their lives, gave to Luz Church Road the dignity and individuality it came to have in the last half a century. Each one of them earned great wealth too and did much in his way, to help build a kind of community life.

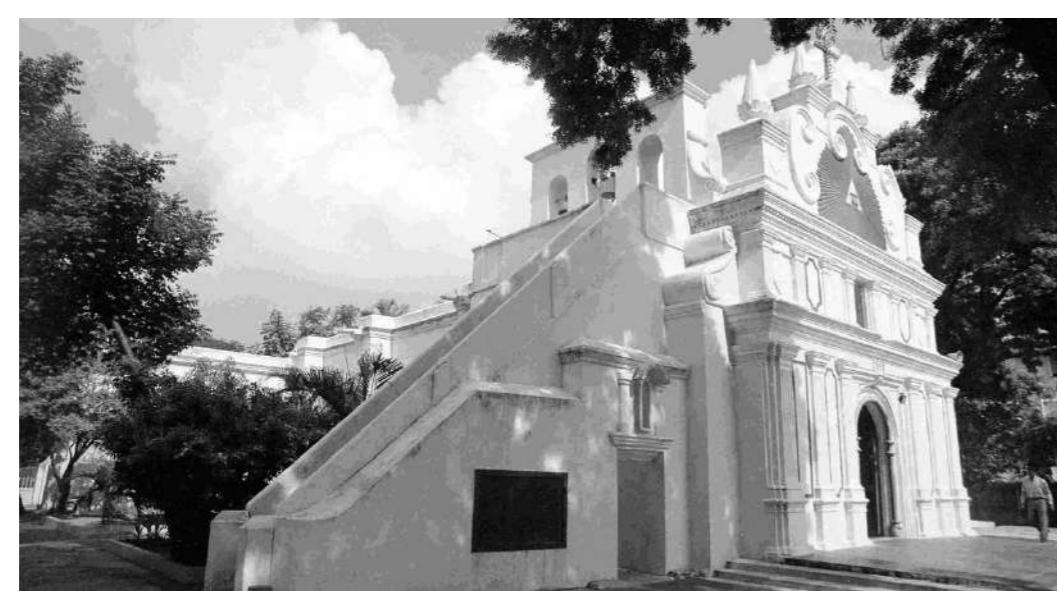
Having studied under a generation of British educationists and having imbibed the spirit of liberal British institutions and traditions, the outlook of these men was of a Gladstonian quality. They were all believers in British parliamentary government and could not imagine a destiny for India that was not connected with England. To the end of their lives they remained, therefore, staunch supporters of British rule and British traditions. They were not afraid to speak the truth as they saw it and stand for it besides, whether it had to do with a matter of local corruption in municipal administration or Government policy.

They said and wrote whatever they wanted to do with a great deal of restraint and dignity. To a man, nearly all of them refused to mix religion with politics or play to the galleries.

Some of them were deeply religious too in their own way and managed to give to their personal lives a spiritual background, making at the same time religion and orthodoxy an intensely personal affair. They scorned loose thinking and were never prepared to make virtue of a necessity. Simple, leading dignified lives, they died as they had lived in a splendour and dignity of their own.

What was the legacy they left to their children and progeny, these men who made Luz Church Road famous? Ask their descendants. They will tell you briefly this – One's life was not to be frittered away in useless pursuits. One's life was lived with dignity. There was no compromise between right and wrong. The spirit of human endeavour can never die.

\* \* \*



The Luz Church, also known as Kattu Koil, takes its Indian name from the fact that it was once in a dense forest. It still retains its baroque architecture. Photo Credit: The Hindu Archives.

# Babu Krishnaswamy – A film maker with passion for history

The news of Babu Krishnaswamy's demise on 28 December 2025 came as a surprise to me. I knew he was ailing for some time, but did not expect the news so soon after receiving a telephone call from him just a few weeks ago. He said it was just a courtesy call, wanting to know how I was doing and that he would be happy to meet me during my next trip to Chennai. During my earlier two trips to Chennai, I could not meet him as he was not in a condition to see me. His wife Mohana also came on the line and said that they would be happy to see me during my next trip, scheduled any time during January 2026. I feel really sad that I will not be meeting my good friend of 55 years anymore.

While I was still in Delhi, ACIL commissioned Babu to produce a film for our client CARE, an NGO headquartered in the US, which works in the areas of health and nutrition. We had recommended two alternative approaches – one 'positive' to be tested in the villages of Uttar Pradesh and another 'negative' to be tested in the villages of Andhra Pradesh. A benchmark study and a post-study conducted by CARE revealed that the negative approach, which



Babu Krishnaswamy. Picture courtesy: The Hindu.

used fear, produced by Babu, worked better than the positive approach. That experience was also the beginning of my long association with rural marketing.

That was also the time when Babu decided to part company with his brothers to pursue his

dream of producing a documentary on the 5,000 years of subcontinental history, under his own banner – Krishnaswamy Associates. While he was still fleshing out the idea and seeking funding for the mega project, including from the government,

he and Mohana visited my home in Delhi and stayed with me for two days. I got to know more about his mega dream for which he had staked every resource at his command. After many ups and downs, including a mild heart attack caused by the extreme stress he was undergoing, his magnum opus, *Indus Valley to Indira Gandhi*, became a reality. The enormous success of the film made him undertake many other projects dealing with various aspects of Indian civilisation, and television serials on interesting subjects.

I moved to Chennai in 1974 and built a house, close to his palatial home on the First Main Road in Sastri Nagar. Like me, he also had two daughters and a son with similar age profiles, all of them studying in Sishya. The families became close thanks to the use of our family's cars in rotation to take the children to school. Babu's son Bharath was a classmate of my elder daughter Kavita.

The years rolled on with both of us pursuing our businesses, meeting only during family get-togethers or special occasions. Later, my involvement with Consumer Association India started by our friend

Desikan, in which Babu was also a part, provided opportunities for us to meet more often.

In all the years that I have known Babu, he has been a dear, caring friend. I found him to be a scholar and passionate about whatever he undertook. An excellent conversationalist, he was very articulate both as a speaker and writer. I had the privilege of extracting the abridged version of his autobiography, and that was published in the *Madras Musings* issue dated June 2018.

His wife Mohana had been a pillar of strength to him in all his endeavours. Babu was always proud of his wife and her immense contributions to his achievements as a filmmaker. Blessed with talented children brought up with the right values, Babu lived a full life, winning many accolades and awards for his role as a filmmaker.

I will always remember Babu for his encouragement and the moral support he extended to me, along with Desikan, when I was going through a turbulent period in my professional life, before I moved to Chennai.

While offering my heartfelt condolences to the family, I pray to god that his soul attains Sadgati!

# A Visit to Chennai Book Fair at YMCA Nandanam

I was more than pleased to be back on familiar ground – the 49th Chennai Book Fair at the YMCA in Nandanam (Jan 8-21). My schoolmate Rege and I gathered that the Fair originated around the time we started high school. I remember it being held at the Quaid-e-Millath college, opposite Connemara and at St George's school on Poonamalle High Road from 2007 to 2012. Madrasa-I-Azam School in Thousand Lights hosted the first edition (1977) and had 22 stalls. The 1982 edition was organized at Woodlands Drive-in. The 2016 January edition was a washout because of the 2015 floods but was held later in June at the Island Grounds.

This time we went to the Fair around 1.45 pm. No crowd. We did see school children lining up near the eight entrances. Tamil book publishers and sellers outnumbered the English, 428 to 256. The website of organisers BAPASI is in Tamil but the stall list is mostly in English! We were only giving the Fair a dekko and hurried through, but some books caught my eye – biographies of cricketer Ashwin, M.S. Swaminathan and singer Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Shoba De's latest, a children's book that takes you on a tour of the city, a book about Al Pacino, a world atlas and one on *Chennai Rains*. On our way out, we had a poor excuse for kozhukkattais and kuzhipaniyarams. We washed them down with Irani tea.

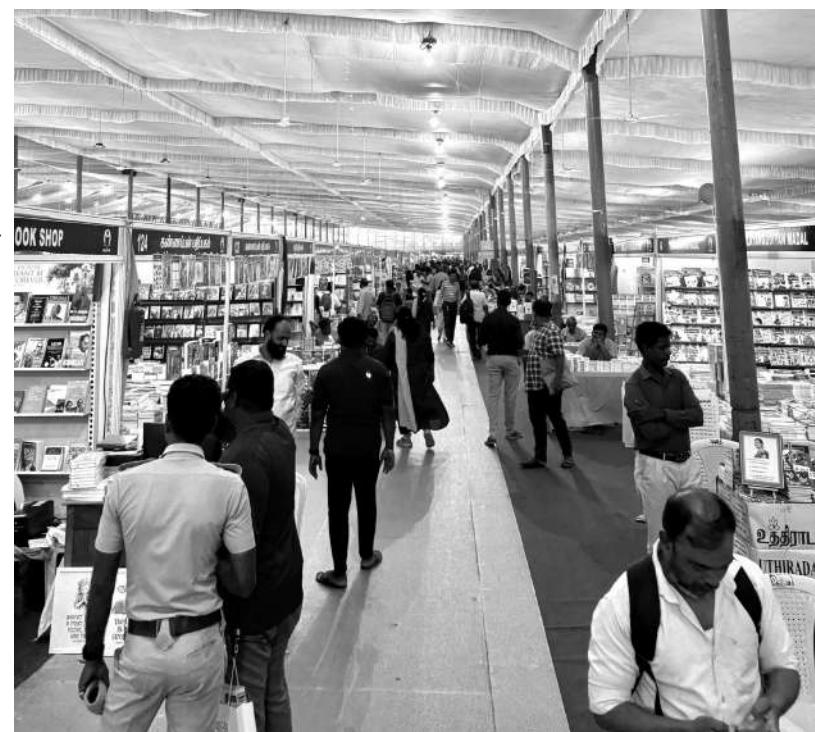
I was itching to go back to the Fair and did so the next day. My proclivities leaning towards English, I had that much less looking to do. That

didn't stop me from picking up a *Thirukkural, Annai Sarada Devi* by Mathioli and *Thumbi* – a bilingual magazine published from Puliyur village on the foot of the Javadhu Hills. I went up to Tamil writer Jeyamohan at Vishnupuram Publications armed with the English translation (*Stories of the True*) of his *Aram*. When I told him in the same breath that my father-in-law was Kanaiyazhi Kasturi Rangan and my knowledge of Tamil was below par, he said, "Ah, that makes for a good piece of gossip". He took me through the translation process of his book. I got my copy signed by him. Jeyamohan's *Venmurasu*, a modern re-narration of the epic *Mahabharata*, is the world's longest novel ever written.

I was happy for my nephew, Krishna Jagannathan, who had his first book (*Marakka Mudi-*

Their credo is that you don't have to be a 'writer writer', and anyone can give writing a go.

I was quick to take a year's subscription of *The Hindu*, availing of a hefty discount at the fair. At their stall, I chose *The Monk who took India to the World*, which has material from its archives dating back to 1893 and is a researcher's (into Swami Vivekananda's life) delight. I also picked their latest release, *Black and White* on Indian chess. Soon it was time to drop



Inside the Chennai Book Fair. Pic by Srinivas Chari

by TK Srinivas Chari

*yuma?)* displayed at the fair. I beamed to see my name in print in friend Vamanan's book *TMS, the Voice that Moved Millions*. He has thanked me for reading the manuscript and making suggestions. That's the closest I come to writing a book! I was glad to see a stall at a far corner by the name Kyn. They have an App and it shows places in the city where readers meet to read silently – Bessy, Tower Park, Chitlapakkam Lake and some others. Kyn also puts together workshops called 'Masterclass'.

into a chair and enjoy a hot cup of tea inside the fair area.

I sought out the used bookshops, fell for the '3 for Rs 500 deal' and then came across a stall selling '6 for 500'! I ended taking nine for 1000. Among them are *Sophie's World*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Third Man* by cricketer and Chennai's own V. Ramnarayan and a John Le Carre title. When I pick a book after sifting through the numberless titles on the shelves, I am going largely by my instinct for a promising read. I have

been proved wrong many times but never give up buying books. I suppose I have to up my game as a more discerning reader and/or collector. Fast fact: *TOI* reports that books worth rupees 50 K are stolen at the Fair every year.

In a throwback to my boyhood, I bought two Amar Chitra Katha titles. From Tulika, I bought *Look Ma, No Hands!* – a graphic narrative told by Vikram Agnihotri, India's first double-arm amputee to get a car driving licence and hit the tracks as a professional rally driver. You have to read it to believe it! *Flutter-Flutter*, an entirely illustrated National Book Trust title at Rs 60 is

worth its weight in gold. Ruskin Bond's *How to be a Writer* is for everyone though it bears a Harper Collins Children's Books imprint.

Movements like the Chinmayi Foundation, Isha Foundation, ISKCON, Islamic Foundation Trust, Krishnamurti Foundation and Sri Ramakrishna Math, which have robust publishing wings, marked their presence. Bibles were being offered for free at the entrance.

After trawling the fair for five hours, my backpack stuffed with books, I stopped for a hot concoction made from aavaram and rose flowers. I heard MP Tiruchi Shiva speak at the makeshift auditorium. "I am honoured to be present at the Fair where many distinguished voices have come together," he said.

Like me, Rege had not had enough of the annual festival of books. I was crazy enough to join him for my third and his second visit. This time round, Rege saw a method to the madness. He chatted with a fellow football fan as they lunged for a copy of legendary Manchester United coach Alex Ferguson's autobiography. He also bought two books of puzzles, *Lords of the Deccan* and the *British Paddington Bear*. Pressed for time, we exited after taking pictures with a seated Thiruvalluvar image, in front of the fair, holding the palm leaf manuscript and stylus. Admission was free this year.

## Higginbothams of Madras Central

Reading while travelling, especially in the train, is always a pleasurable thing to do. While travelling alone, books can be your best companion and a good way to pass the time. Some people start a conversation with fellow passengers, become friends and chat throughout the journey. But for others, books are their friends, especially during long distance travel by train.

Bookstores at the railways stations and platforms are becoming a rare sight nowadays.

But there used to be a time when we found more bookstores than eateries. There were even vendors selling books, magazines and newspapers in push-carts on the railway platforms. Sometimes people also sold books, newspapers and magazines in the train. But now we only see people selling various types of junk food, water bottles, key chains and earphones, and very rarely books.

Doesn't this show that our reading habits are dying? Now when I look around the com-

partment I see several people glued to their smartphones and some even keep it on full volume without using their earphones. Worse is the sight of

● by  
P Jegannathan

kids, including toddlers, watching shorts on smartphones and their parents feeding them.

Book lovers don't just love buying books, they are also at-

tached to the bookstores; sometimes even with the persons who sell the books, especially if it is an old bookstore. That personal connection with places and persons at the bookstores makes buying books even more enjoyable and memorable.

It is a thrilling experience picking up something to read before boarding a train. I always do this whenever I get a chance to go to Madras Central (now Chennai Central) where there is a Higginbothams – one of

(Continued on page 7)

# When It Rains, It Reigns

## – The Chennai Rain Holiday Drama

There is a certain electricity in the Chennai air that appears even before the first drop of rain falls. You can practically sense schoolchildren standing by their windows, hands folded in silent prayer, hoping the clouds will be kind enough to cancel school. While children see the monsoon as a benevolent hero, parents see it as a surprise guest who has arrived unannounced and plans to spend the entire day on their sofa.

For children, the joy of a rain holiday begins long before the official announcement. They conduct meteorological studies from their balconies, declare forecasts with the confidence of news anchors, and refresh WhatsApp groups with a devotion usually reserved for IPL scores. The moment a rumour spreads that "school might be leave", a wave of hope sweeps across every street. If the gov-

ernment eventually declares a holiday, households erupt with celebrations usually witnessed only when CSK wins a match in the last over.

Parents, on the other hand, react quite differently. They usually maintain an impressive level of dignity for the first five minutes. They say things like "Let the children rest" and

banks. They hop around the house, demand snacks every hour, and generate a level of noise that makes even the rain sound gentle.

Children view rain holidays as passport-free vacations. They wake up late, enjoy long breakfasts, and spend the day doing precisely what they would never be allowed on a school morning

Meanwhile, parents must navigate the challenging obstacle course that the city becomes during rain. Even the simple task of buying milk turns into an Olympic event, with roads transforming into unexpected lakes and potholes popping up like surprise quiz questions. Parents on two-wheelers return home looking like they have survived an adventure documentary, while auto drivers narrate rainfall stories so dramatic they deserve their own web series. Inside the house, parents attempt to finish office work while also acting as referees, chefs, entertainers, peacekeepers, and negotiators – sometimes all at once.

By afternoon, the kitchen becomes the heart of the rain holiday. Children demand bajjis, pakoras, noodles, and anything that feels "special", while parents, despite their exhaustion, somehow manage to produce snack after snack. The combination of the earthy smell of rain, the sizzling oil, and the growing mountain of used plates creates an atmosphere of domestic chaos and culinary triumph. Parents sip their fifteenth cup of tea, not because they want it, but because it is the only socially acceptable way to stay awake.

Yet the beauty of a Chennai rain holiday is that by evening, everyone – parents and children alike – settles into a shared sense of comfort. Children curl up with storybooks or watch the rain slide down windows, feeling as though the whole day was created just for them. Parents, though tired, admit quietly to themselves that these are the memories they will look back on someday: the laughter, the mess, the endless bajjis, and the temporary pause from the city's usual rush.

Rain holidays in Chennai are not merely days off. They are tiny festivals of chaos, humour, and togetherness. Children adore them because they represent freedom. Parents endure them because they represent love. And the city, with its overflowing drains, heroic auto drivers, and dramatic clouds, plays its part perfectly in this annual monsoon performance. In the end, when the sky finally clears, parents breathe a sigh of relief and children sigh in disappointment – until the next cloud forms and the delightful drama begins again.



● by Priyanka Soman

"Rain is good for the city". But by the time the clock strikes 9 am and the house begins to sound like an amusement park, that early enthusiasm dissolves into regret. Parents spend the rest of the day trying to understand why children, who claim to be tired on regular school days, suddenly possess the energy of fully charged power

– eating endlessly, jumping on sofas, and watching cartoons in the name of "relaxing". They rediscover old books, float paper boats in puddles, and insist on inspecting every inch of the terrace to check how much water has collected, as though they are personal advisors to the Chennai Corporation.

## You can contribute to CHENNAI HERITAGE

As a token of your support for the causes of heritage, environment and a better city that *Madras Musings* espouses, you can subscribe to *Madras Musings* – the annual subscription is Rs 100 and we welcome additional donations too to keep us going. You can make your payments to our bank account as below:

Chennai Heritage  
Indian Bank, Alwarpet Branch  
CA No. 413158606 IFSC : IDIB000A013

Please make sure you send an email to Chennaiheritage2017@gmail.com with transfer details so that we can acknowledge receipt.

If you are a new subscriber, you need to send us details of your name and address as well. If you are renewing your subscription make sure you quote your subscription number as reference. This is the number that is on the wrapper of your copy of *Madras Musings*.

## Letters to the Editor

Dear Readers,

Please email all your letters, comments, additional remarks, brickbats and bouquets to editor@madrasmusings.com

– THE EDITOR

## HIGGINBOTHAMS

(Continued from page 6)

my favorite bookstores. The Higginbothams main bookstore situated on Mount Road was started in 1844. Later several branches were opened across South India. I am not sure when exactly the Higginbothams bookstore was opened at the Central station, there are two of them inside the premises. The bigger one is to the west of the main entrance, and the smaller one is in the middle part of the station opposite to the platforms 2A to 4.

In 2006, the bigger bookstore was gutted due to a fire accident at the station. I have been visiting Central station since 2000 but am unable to recall what the bookstore looked like then. But after 2006, it must have been renovated as the bookstore got a new look and was quite stunning at that time. In a section on the ground floor, newspapers and magazines were sold and we could enter the bookstore through a narrow path. To the left, there was a staircase and more books were displayed on the first floor. During my subsequent visits, I noticed that the first floor was closed to the public and mostly used as storage space.

In this fast changing world, we tend to forget things easily if we do not document them. Sometime in 2023, I took a

photo of the bookstore on my mobile phone. After two years, in January 2025, I went there again and clicked a photo of the bookstore. This time, the first floor looked pretty much non-operational. No lights were on and there were no books on the shelves. Just after about 10 months, in December 2025, I was shocked to notice that there was no bookstore in that place. It was replaced by an ice-cream parlour!

I looked around anxiously and decided to take a walk inside the station to check if they had moved it elsewhere. Next to the cloakroom there was a kiosk with a board saying Higginbothams – the letters illuminated by a white light on a black plastic board. I was relieved but at the same time disappointed that such an iconic bookstore was now reduced to a cramped kiosk. I went inside and looked around. There was hardly any space to move since there were already two people inside. Books were kept all over the floor. I felt like I was standing in a lift full of people. I found a copy of *Madras Rediscovered* by S. Muthiah in front of me. I picked it up, paid up and came out. I took a couple of photographs from afar and quickly walked away to catch my train.

# Three Chennai talents emerge

## World Champs 2025

The best time for any sport is defined by the emerging champions rising from their native places – first on the national and then at the international level. Such star players are passionate about the sport they pursue, and work hard at it to rise, come what may, many a time!

The formula to achieve their goal may seem overtly simple, but is quite difficult to attain. And, that is “doing something extra” in addition to what is being taught by their coach or mentor.

In 2025, in such a scenario, Chennai saw the emergence of three highly talented sportspersons – one man and two women. First is Chen-

nai’s speedskater Anandkumar Velkumar, who bagged two gold medals at the World Cup championships in Beidehe, China in September 2025. He excelled in this growing sport which is gradually attracting the youth in good numbers. Anandkumar is a student of Anna University, Guindy in Chennai.

In November, Anupama Ramachandran, a 23 year-old exceptional talent in the green baize sport of snooker, which has a great tradition in this part of the country, brought laurels to Tamil Nadu and India. Speaking to *Madras Musings* about her achievement she says: “I started playing snooker at a summer camp just before I

• by  
V. Venkataramana

went to 7th standard in school. I did not expect to continue it beyond the summer, nor did I immediately start playing the game on a serious level. I happened to play in a state championship in which I stood second in the Sub-junior category. That was when I got more serious and started my training.”

She observes that the sport has changed a lot since she started playing. There are more girls taking it up following its recognition by the Tamil Nadu government. She also points

out that any big achievement in the green baize sports can now help with college admissions, getting scholarships and securing government jobs.

Anupama completed her schooling at Vidya Mandir, Mylapore, and is currently studying for a Masters Degree in Public Policy at MOP Vaishnav College for women at Nungambakkam in Chennai city. “Both the institutions have been very supportive of my pursuit of snooker, especially MOP where I got the time to practise and do my best in every tournament,” she explains.

The rise to fame of carrom talent Keerthana in the 2025 World Championship and winning the gold medal is rather moving. She took to the sport at a very young age. Hailing from a modest economic background, Keerthana the eldest of three siblings, was spotted as champion material by her coaches – multiple world and national champion Maria Irudayam and Chennai District Carrom Association Secretary Amudhavanan. “I have been playing carrom seriously for 13 years since I was introduced to the sport in my third standard. I am very happy that now I have won a gold medal in the world championships,” she exults talking to *Madras Musings*.

Substantial financial support from the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin

and the state Deputy Chief Minister and Sports Minister Udayanidhi Stalin (1.5 lakh rupees) and also from KP Sankar, a businessman in Tirupattur (50,000 rupees) enabled Keerthana to participate and prepare for the world championship. “I have also won medals in national and state level competitions,” informs Keerthana who was forced to seek employment in a steel factory when her father passed away due to ill health in 2017. She almost gave up playing carrom competitively at that time as she was in emotional distress. But after her coach Amudhavanan managed to persuade and successfully motivated her, Keerthana started picking up the nuances again, playing in a state championship and winning.

There was more to come – in addition to the honour brought to Chennai’s rich sporting scene by these three young talents in 2025, there was a bonus too! Another youngster, celebrated for his immense talent in chess, R Pragnananda qualified for the prestigious Candidates tournament that determines the Challenger to the reigning world champion in this mind sport. Pragnananda joined three Indian women to represent the country in that tournament, one of them being his elder sister R Vaishali.



From left to right: World Snooker Champ Anupama and Carrom – World Gold winner Keerthana.

### Madras Musings is supported as a public service by the following organisations



Amalgamations Group

THE HINDU  
The Hindu  
Group of Publications



ASHOK LEYLAND  
Koi Manzil Door Nahin



Brakes India Private Limited



IIFL  
SECURITIES



LARSEN & TOUBRO



murugappa

NAVITAS  
LIFE SCIENCES



Rane

RAYALA GROUP

SAINT-GOBAIN

SANMAR

Sify

SUNDARAM FINANCE  
Enduring values. New age thinking.

SUPER AUTO FORGE  
Forging Ahead into Future

TVS  
Sundram Fasteners  
Limited

TAJ  
COROMANDEL  
CHENNAI

tcs

TATA  
CONSULTANCY  
SERVICES

TVS  
TVS MOTOR COMPANY

WILD GARDEN  
Cafe at Amethyst

Since 1856,  
patently leaders –  
A WELLWISHER