

WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

MADRAS

MUSINGS

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Riding Roughshod Over Older Localities

If you left it to the Chennai Metropolitan Development Corporation, practically every road and street of the city would be filled with multi-storey buildings with no consideration for the topography or the surroundings. Thus you could be living quietly in a residential area and wake up one day to find that commercial complexes, hospitals, wedding halls and schools have come up all around you. And they all look upon you as an interloper. It is like Rip Van Winkle waking up to a nightmare. All of this was brought to light when the High Court of Madras recently pronounced a judgement.

The news was published on the day of the elections and so

could have passed unnoticed. Briefly put, a set of residents of an upmarket locality in the city protested when they found plans for a multi-storey building in their locality duly approved by CMDA. They represented to the CMDA that it violated

● by Sriram V.

the layout condition of 1968 notified by the Corporation that each plot could have only one dwelling unit and what was more, the building could cover only two-third of the plot area. But the CMDA refused to take this into consideration stating that all such conditions had

been nullified following the Tamil Nadu Combined Development and Building Rules (TNCDBR), 2019. In short, no consultation with local residents was necessary when their life is just about to be disrupted permanently. All we need to do is to take shelter behind a rule that was passed.

The residents were however of a tougher mindset and approached the courts. The High Court felt there was justice in their contention and said that the TNCDBR 2019 does not nullify the previous layout conditions. On reading this, the only feeling was a pang of

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Needed urgent reforms in fireworks industry

One of the most prominent industries in our state, the fireworks industry is in the news, once again for all the wrong reasons. A recent explosion at a fireworks unit in Kattankuppam near Virudhunagar left more than 25 dead, with several injured as well. The accident is touted to be one of the deadliest ones in recent times. It has turned the spotlight once again on the way the industry, whose business is worth an estimated Rs 6000 crores (and contributes to nearly 90 percent of all fireworks manufactured in the country), is being run and its failure to stop this recurrent scourge.

The fireworks industry has

seen much action over the last decade or so, particularly in the corridors of the judiciary. From a ban on use of barium salts, a crucial ingredient in colorful crackers, to the refusal by the judiciary to impose a blanket ban on the manufacture, sale

● by Karthik Bhatt

and usage of fireworks and allowing a sale of only green crackers, the mood has swayed between despair and relief. But what has remained unchanged is the unfailing regularity with which accidents occur, raising questions of a systemic failure.

It is an undeniable fact that the very nature of the industry makes it lot more susceptible to accidents, specifically explosions. Volatile chemicals have the tendency to combust under oppressive heat and hence the summer season generally sees more incidents. But what can possibly explain more than 130 deaths and 90 injuries since 2022, as per data submitted before the National Green Tribunal in mid-2025? This is something that requires detailed scrutiny.

The overall licensing and regulatory framework governing the industry falls within the domain of PESO (Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisa-

HERITAGE WATCH

A House on KNK Road

It may be today's downtown but not so long ago, Khader Nawaz Khan Road was a quiet residential neighbourhood with bungalows on both sides. Today there are hardly any and those that survive must be under pressure to pack up given the ham-handed pedestrianisation attempt. But memories are hard to shake off. We present here photos sent by Fran Forsyth, who lived on that road in the 1950s/1960s and came back in 2003 to look for the home of her childhood.

The OLD is from her family album and the NEW taken by her in 2003. The bungalow has since vanished. We present excerpts in pages 4 and 5 from her book *From Madras to Chennai, and some of life in between* (2QT Publishing, 2025), The book can be purchased at: <https://www.amazon.com/Madras-Chennai-some-life-between/dp/191932710X>



tion), a central body under the Department of Promotion of Industry and Trade. Additionally, there are units that function

with the approval of the district administration. Overall, there

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Riding Roughshod Over Older Localities

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regret for several localities of the city that have already been ruined beyond recognition by the application of blanket approvals with no consideration for ground reality.

The CMDA may be a body with many years of experience, but when it comes to local area sensitivities, it is completely lacking. It has been the contention of this paper for years that the CMDA's master plans are always just that -- a master document that has no exceptions. Thus localities such as George Town, Mylapore and Thiruvallikeni, are subject to the same rules as those such as ECR or OMR, assuming that these latter do not come under some panchayat and are subject to the Corporation's jurisdiction. The only guidelines pertain to street width and permissible floor space index (FSI). Here too, changes apply uniformly. Thus the proximity of a metro station to a building will determine its FSI, irrespective of whether the locality is Man-

nady or Anna Nagar. Which is why, George Town these days is full of giant multi-storey buildings cutting off all light and air to neighbouring buildings.

The plight of T Nagar is another example. What was once a beautifully planned layout has been systematically destroyed by rampant commercialisation, aided by freely given permissions and flagrant violations. The damage caused by this lack of awareness of local area requirements is alarming to say the least. It also poses a sense of insecurity among old-time residents of an area. They find themselves subject to brute market forces. An administration that is expected to protect its taxpayers becomes their enemy in the face of commercial interest.

The last word has not yet been said in the courtroom battle that has brought this malaise to light. But it does show that there are residents willing to fight for their rights and live on terms that they had planned for, and not those that get imposed on them.

Needed urgent reforms in fireworks industry

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are more than 1000 units in Virudhunagar district functioning under both regulatory systems put together. What is surprising to note is that many of the accidents reported have been from properly licensed units, which only raises more questions on the efficacy of the regulations and their enforcement. It is not as if the reasons for such a disastrous track record are unknown, for the ills plaguing the industry, such as employment of unskilled or semi-skilled labour, poor working conditions, overcrowding in working sheds, poor wages, inadequate training, etc. have all been well documented.

It has to be acknowledged that there has been and continues to be constant action, such as safety audits, preemptive checks, surprise raids and even cancellation of licenses for safety violations to ensure that the functioning of the units are streamlined. However, it is a sorry fact that none of these

have prevented or reduced the recurrence of the accidents. In today's environment, where AI driven systems are leading innovations, building capabilities to effectively address these issues are certainly possible. All it takes is an active will, both at policymaking and at individualistic levels to bring about real, rather than cosmetic changes. Until then, no amount of punitive action is going to prevent the occurrence of these incidents.

Fireworks are a thing of joy across all age groups, the sights and sounds enlivening our festivals and celebrations. However, it is a matter of great irony that those who make the experience possible are consistently at considerable risk to life and limb. It is time for a thorough study on all aspects relating to the functioning of the industry, particularly its safety aspects and to put in place structural reforms for its overhaul. It is a task that whichever party comes to power needs to address on an urgent basis.

Speaking Online

Those who follow *The Man from Madras Musings* know that he is no fan of online symposia, conferences and events. The average attention span of the audience, in his view is that of an ant and after a while, most in attendance mute their audio, block their cameras and get on with the rest of their work – watering the plants, taking their dog for a walk, etc. even while the speaker of the moment drones on.

Mind you, in MMM's view, this by itself is an improvement. There was a time when everyone, MMM included, was unaware of the subtleties of online events. Thus nobody ever muted their audio or blocked their cameras and so the poor speaker was subject to multiple windows where ceiling fans whirred, men in towels traipsed to and fro, and women in nighties lolled about on sofas. On one memorable occasion, the organiser of the event was having a pedicure even as the event progressed! But all of this paled into in-

eo and then send the file to the organiser. This way, the recorded presentation plays from the organiser's end and the presenter is only required to be present online and answer queries if any at the end. This obviates such issues as internet speed at the presenter's end and also problems of audio disturbances. MMM, for instance, prefers ceiling fans to air-conditioning and has had complaints of whirring noises in his presentations when made live. All of this can be avoided with this technique.

And so, MMM recorded his file and sent it off. He logged in at the appointed hour and found the earlier presenter in progress. It was then that MMM's heart sank into his shoes. For this too was a pre-recorded presentation using the same technology but all that was heard of the speaker's voice was something like this:

"Brrrrrgggggrrrrrhohoho rhubarb brr rggggggrrrrhohoho," etc. – you get the idea.

MMM thought it was an

these reviews began to be churned out. Book after book was reviewed and the summaries, together with impeccable critiques, began appearing at MMM's desk. MMM was stunned to put it mildly. Here he was, MMM, for whom each of those books would have taken months to read and then a few more weeks to review, and here was this intern who was literally swallowing them whole and disgorging précis after précis! You would not be too far wrong in saying MMM was even mildly jealous. This is the power of youth he felt, consoling himself that at that age, he too was full of energy, all raring to go.

Matters would have gone on like that but then MMM is not a user of AI. If he was, he would have fed those reviews to some online tool, made sure the reviews were not plagiarised and simply got on with something else. He being of the old school, he sat down to read the reviews. And found them all

SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

significance when compared to a music conference that MMM was in charge of.

This was at the height of the COVID pandemic and it was all online. A committee of experts was online to witness the presentations, and one of them was clearly a novice in the wonders of online sessions. He thus midway launched into a loud phone call that was heard by all in attendance. And then, if that was not enough, the camera on his device had a tendency to wander and soon revealed the daughter of the house going around in what could only be termed a chemise and that caught the attention of practically everyone logged in. Then came the maid, who as though to compensate, was covered head to foot like an astronaut on a moon mission. After a while the musician did his pooja, stripped to his waist. At which point, MMM, having by then come to grips with what the organiser could do, blocked and muted everyone except the presenter.

All of this and more came powerfully to MMM's mind when he was invited late last month to participate in an online seminar. The TQ (tech quotient) these days is bounding upwards and MMM was asked to prepare his presentation and then record his speech using something called cam-

audio issue at his end but that was not so. He was surprised to see everyone listening in – or at least that was the impression MMM got. It is so difficult to know who is actually listening with everyone muted, and off camera. There was a profuse vote of thanks at the end. And then came on MMM. He need not have worried for the audio worked well. There were questions at the end too which reassured MMM that some at least were online, listening.

The vote of thanks was the same profuse passage.

Artificial is the Key

It is a sign that *The Man from Madras Musings* is ageing that he is most uncomfortable with this so-called Artificial Intelligence. While he certainly welcomes it in matters of routine processing and so on, to have something as creative as writing (well typing actually) being done through AI gets his goat. And having been around for a while on this earth, MMM can certainly claim that he is still able to detect bunk if not in much else, certainly in writing.

Thus it was that MMM, recently presented with a bright young man as an intern, asked the latter to read a few books and submit summaries of these. He was surprised at the speed at which

to be perfect superficially but somewhat lacking in depth. And so he laid a trap. He gave the intern a book that he, MMM, had just read and asked for a review. And pronto, there it was, the next day. This time however MMM was all prepared.

He had requested that the review be done by chapter and so it was – the title of each chapter was followed by a neat summary. He now proceeded to call the intern and ask him to give in his own words, verbally, a summary of each chapter. The intern was stuck. He hemmed and hawed. He rolled his eyes skywards and said that would be impossible as it would take a long while. MMM said he had all the time in the world.

When after fifteen minutes of waiting nothing came forth, MMM asked the intern if he had read any of the books that had been given. The answer was an abashed "No". MMM did not say anything. The intern of course was justified in not reading anything for after all, all that was asked was a review and MMM had got that – had he not? Why was he investigating the means when the end was at hand?

But there was something artificial about it all. At least that is what MMM thinks.

– MMM

In No Great Hurry: The Gentle Art of Movement in Madras

Some cities move as though they are being chased. Chennai – still affectionately called Madras in many corners of memory – moves as though it has already arrived.

I have often tried to understand this, usually while waiting at a traffic signal on Anna Salai. The light turns green with all the authority it can muster, and yet, nothing dramatic happens. There is a pause – brief, but noticeable enough to suggest thought. It is as though the city collectively inhales before proceeding. And then, gently, almost politely, everything begins to move.

It would be inaccurate to call this delay. It is, more precisely, a form of agreement.

Movement in Chennai is rarely linear, despite what our school textbooks might insist. A simple walk through Kilpauk is enough to revise one's understanding of straight lines. Here, one walks with purpose, certainly, but also with awareness – of people, of space, and very importantly, of the kolam that has been drawn with care outside someone's home. Avoiding it requires a small but respectful detour, often executed with the grace of someone who has done this all one's life.

It is in these adjustments that the city reveals its character. There is no visible frustration, no dramatic display of inconvenience. A cyclist slows, a pedestrian shifts, an auto-rickshaw finds a gap that did not exist a moment ago. Everyone moves, not perfectly, but harmoniously enough.

Public transport, particularly the buses, deserves both admiration and a steady sense of balance. They operate with a confidence that suggests long familiarity with both roads and human nature. Boarding one is less an act of entry and more a moment of timing. Regular commuters seem to know exactly when to step forward, as though guided by instinct rather than instruction. It is a system that appears chaotic only to the uninitiated.

At Marina Beach, however, movement softens. The urgency of the day dissolves into something far more reflective. People walk, but not always to reach somewhere. Some walk briskly, determined to justify the indulgences of the day. Others stroll with no measurable goal, pausing occasionally to look at the sea, which continues its steady rhythm – arriving, retreating, and returning, without ever appearing hurried.

If the movement of people is visible, the movement of culture is far more subtle, though no less constant. It exists in the everyday rituals that shape life here. The kolam that appears each morning and fades by evening is not merely decorative; it is a quiet acceptance of impermanence. It is created with attention and erased without regret – a lesson that does not announce itself, but lingers.

Language, too, moves in its own distinctive way. Conversations flow between Tamil and English with an ease that resists rigid classification. A sentence may begin in one language and conclude in another, not out of confusion, but out of comfort. There is humour in this fluidity, but never at anyone's expense – only in the shared understanding that communication, like movement, is meant to adapt.

Food, perhaps unsurprisingly, participates enthusiastically in this rhythm. The preparation of filter coffee is a small study in both patience and precision. The act of pouring it back and forth between tumbler and davarra is not mere theatrics; it cools, blends, and prepares. More importantly, it insists that one slow down. In Chennai, even coffee encourages reflection.

There is also, it must be said, a particular approach to exercise. Walking is popular, certainly, especially in the early hours. But it is rarely pursued with grim determination. There are conversations to be had, sights to be noticed, and occasionally, reasons to pause. Efficiency is not the goal; continuity is.

What becomes evident, over time, is that Chennai does not separate movement from stillness. The two exist together, each giving meaning to the other. The quiet of an afternoon, when the sun persuades even the most energetic to slow down, is not an absence of activity. It is part of the rhythm. It allows the city to gather itself before continuing.

Even in its busiest moments, there is an underlying calm. It is not that things are always orderly – they are not – but there is a shared understanding that everything will find its way. Movement here is less about speed and more about coexistence.

Perhaps that is the lesson the city offers, without ever stating it directly. Progress need not be hurried. Direction can change without disruption. And stillness, far from being unproductive, can be deeply necessary.

In Chennai, one does not rush unless absolutely required. One moves, adjusts, pauses, and proceeds. And somehow, without apparent urgency, one arrives.

Not always on time, perhaps – but invariably with a story worth telling.

– by Priyanka Soman

Somewhere Between Sholinganallur and the City

I moved to Chennai in 2021, and for the first three years, my life here was contained within a very small, very predictable radius. Home, school, and the supermarket formed a kind of quiet triangle, and within it, days passed with a certain sameness that I did not question too much at the time. I was working from home, so there was little reason to step outside that loop, and even less urgency to explore beyond it.

If I am being honest, I did not feel I was living in Chennai so much as I was staying in a place that happened to be called Chennai.

Sholinganallur was where everything happened. It was convenient, familiar, and self-sufficient in a way that allowed me to settle in without really engaging with the city beyond it. I knew the turns, the signals, the small stretches of road that mattered to my day. The rest of the city existed somewhere at a distance, abstract and slightly irrelevant.

It was only later, in conversation, that I heard someone say, quite matter-of-factly, that this was “not really Chennai”. I remember reacting with amusement, and then with a faint, unexpected defensiveness. If this wasn't quite the city, then what exactly had I been part of all this while?

The shift began when my days started extending beyond that small radius, quite literally.

Work moved, and with it, my everyday geography. Suddenly, I was travelling close to twenty kilometres to Guindy, and the city that had once felt distant began to insert itself into my routine in ways I could not ignore. The drives were longer, the traffic denser, and the roads less familiar. Autos edged in confidently, buses towered and pressed forward with an authority I was still learning to respond to, and my small i10 and I found ourselves participating in a rhythm that felt both chaotic and strangely ordered.

Somewhere along this route sat the Kathipara flyover.

I must have crossed it a few times in the earlier years without paying much attention, the way one passes through large structures without really registering them. But once this became part of my daily commute, I found myself noticing it properly. Kathipara, I later learned, is often spoken of as one of the largest cloverleaf flyovers in India, possibly even in South Asia, though I'm not entirely sure how firmly that is established.

And yet, the first few times I drove over it after knowing that, I remember feeling a quiet, disproportionate sense of excitement.

There was something about being on that sweeping curve of road, suspended briefly above the city, aware of its scale and movement, that made me feel, for the first time, like I was inside Chennai rather than on its edges.

It was a small thing. Almost a trivial thing. But it stayed with me.

The city began to open up in other ways too, not dramatically, but through small extensions of routine. An evening that did not end at home. A plan that took me a little further than was strictly convenient. A space that I returned to not out of necessity, but because I wanted to.

At Cinema Rendezvous, a private group dedicated to cinema appreciation, I found myself sitting in rooms where films were watched with a kind of attentiveness that felt unfamiliar at first. These were not always easy films, or even enjoyable in a straightforward way, but they stayed with you, opening up a whole new world of cinema – Italian,

Bengali, Japanese, Tamil, English – and leading to conversations that stretched long beyond the screen. I did not know most of the people in the room when I first walked in, and yet, over time, it became a place where I could arrive without needing to explain myself, receiving so much from the discussions, perspectives, and friendships that I now find myself hoping to give something back too.

At Untangle in Thoraipakkam, a community space built around board gaming and shared play, something else clicked into place. I remember looking around the table and realising, with a kind of quiet delight, that here were people in their thirties and beyond, fully invested in rolling dice, collecting resources, and building make-believe cities as though it genuinely mattered. There was no irony, no self-consciousness, no need to outgrow it. It was play, taken seriously in the best possible way, and in that, I found not just a hobby, but a group of people who had quietly chosen to hold on to the same joy.

I had not realised how much I had been holding on to that same longing until I saw it reflected so clearly around me. To sit there, completely absorbed in something so joyfully unnecessary, and to find others doing the same, felt unexpectedly grounding. It was not just about the games. It was about finding people who had quietly given themselves permission to continue being this way.

At some point, without any clear moment marking the change, I realised that I was no longer thinking of these movements as effort. They had become part of how I inhabited the city.

I still do not know what makes someone a “proper” Chennai person, or which parts of the city are considered more authentic than others. Perhaps it lies in older neighbourhoods, or perhaps it shifts constantly as the city expands and redraws itself. Perhaps it depends on where you began or how long you have stayed.

But I am beginning to think that belonging here has very little to do with any of that.

It has more to do with the quiet accumulation of familiarity. With roads that no longer feel uncertain. With places that expect your return without demanding it. With people who become part of your everyday life without needing formal acknowledgement.

It has been almost five years now.

There is still a great deal of Chennai that I have not seen, and parts of it that remain, for now, outside my understanding. But somewhere between the small, contained beginnings and the wider, more fluid present, between the supermarket runs and the long drives to Guindy, between the unfamiliar flyover and the now-familiar routes, this city has, without any insistence, made space for me.

And in that space, slowly and without any clear intention on my part, I seem to have grown roots.

And perhaps, along with them, a few shoots too.

– Cauvery Kesavasamy

OUR
READERS
WRITE



Correction

In our article *A Brush with Arts and Artists*, MM, XXXVI, Vol. 1, April 16, 2026, the caption ‘Sashank Balu – Grapes’ is wrong. It should read: ‘Fireballs by Rishi Narayan’.

Memories of Madras in the 1960s

As mentioned in the Heritage Watch column, Fran Forsyth has published an account of her life, and this includes memories as a child living in Madras in the 1960s.

We reproduce below excerpts, with permission.

– The Editor

It was the early 1960s and we were living in India. British companies, like my dad's, had handed over to their new Indian owners and the process of transition was complete. My Dad never fully left India. He returned for stints with his Indian colleagues right up to the year he died, and he would have been happy to die there.

Khader Nawaz Khan Road

We lived on Khader Nawaz Khan Road in Nungambakkam. Once you got the hang of it, those words were nice to

say. They sound to me like the beginning of a children's poem. Khader Nawaz Khan Road Nungambakkam. That part of Chennai is now packed tight with buildings, mainly offices and upmarket shops. The roads appear to have changed direction, and the house seems to face the wrong way. It was still there when I visited in January 2024. It was mucky and dilapidated with boards and wire fencing, wedged between buildings and traffic, thick pollution and noise. Despite the change, it was also still the same – the familiar symmetrical shape in Art Deco style with geometric lines along the outside and a sensible, easy layout. I knew all the rooms so well, where we had talked and slept and sat to eat together. Where we had lived our everyday lives.

That house, where we went when I was two, was provided by the company, Tube Investments.

It was spacious and comfortable, as were the other distanced houses on the road. Next to us was an empty plot with patchy dried-up grass and pink earth. When it rained, the earth became muddy and a dip in the middle filled with water where the buffalo loved to wallow. I watched them up to their necks in thick pink water, happily sitting still. And then they tried to get up, heavily swaying and heaving and pulling to rise and walk away. The pink water sloshed and the suction of mud held them down. The process seemed to take hours, and their struggle went on and on. I thought I could see the beginnings of panic in their flat grey faces and wide-spaced staring eyes and that hint of panic began to become my own. Eventually they succeeded and I watched them walk away. Sometimes they wandered into our garden and ate Mum's precious cannas. "Quick quick. Shut the gate shut the gate." Our *mali* (gardener) had left it open.

Khader Nawaz Khan Road was a quiet road. There wasn't much traffic, but in those days there weren't many cars. There were bullock carts pulled by buffalo or cows, and long-handled carts with large, thin wheels which were pulled from the front and pushed from the back by men.

The house was only slightly set back from the road. It had a small front lawn with unpromising, usually half-eaten red cannas planted in a curve around it. There were two gates so you could drive in one and out the other, and a portico in the middle with the upstairs veranda on top. The kitchen area was three rooms; the first, nearest the dining room, for the fridge and storage, the next for cooking and then an area for washing up. They were warm and humid and had a distinctive odour, different from the rest of the house, of lingering food and drains. All drains had a strong, metallic rust smell. Sometimes I recognise it in the bathrooms of other hot countries

and although not at all pleasant, its familiarity makes me smile. In the mornings my Mum would stand by the fridge to discuss food and stocks with the cook and the bearer. Sometimes she did *abracadabra* and produced some sweets for me. Everything was screwed down tight and put away so that ants and other creatures couldn't eat it.

The Club

The library Mum went to was at the Adyar Club. We went there at least once a week – sometimes as a family, and sometimes just Mum, Ayah and me. When we first went to Madras there was another club, more prestigious, called the Madras Club. Its members were mainly higher echelons of the British Raj or Army, and it was very formal and starchy. No women or non-British men were allowed. Numbers dwindled through the fifties, and in 1963 it closed as a separate institution but blended itself into the Adyar Club, which was financially helpful to both. The Adyar Club had opened in the late 1800s specifically as a less formal option. It admitted women as guests, although not as members until many decades later. So the club I knew as the Adyar Club became the Madras Club, as it is now, and its address, rather oddly, is the Madras Club, Adyar Club Gate Road.

There were no or very few non-British members of the Club until the mid-fifties when other Europeans, such as diplomats and consultants, and Americans began to join. Indians were 'invited to join' during the time of transition when the British were leaving and all companies and institutions were being handed on. Now membership is almost exclusively Indian. Out of about 1000 members, only around 40 are foreign – may be American, Japanese or British.

The foreign faces you occasionally see are usually in Chennai for work. They live in the city and visit the club to use the pool,

which wasn't there when I was a child, or the walking track, or just to socialise and enjoy the oasis of green and birds and beauty.

The sight of the club buildings has an extraordinary impact on me. The whiteness, the pillars, the cupola and the sweeping steps to the long veranda at the front, and the black and white marble flooring on the portico side, are all so beautiful to behold. But even more breathtaking than the sight are the feelings. A surreal familiarity. A time-travel experience. The strongest sense of myself at that early age, in that place, among the people who were in my world at that time.

I went with my Mum in the afternoons. We drove past the portico to a small building where

● Excerpts from the book *From Madras to Chennai, and some of life in between* by Fran Forsyth

the office and the library still are today. Mum stocked up on books and I meandered between the shelves, enjoying the smell and the extraordinary neatness of all the lined-up spines. When I returned to that library in 2002, I found two books which my Mum had signed for – William Hickley's *Memoirs* and John Masters's *Bugles and a Tiger*. Perhaps I had been there when she had chosen them and carried them back to the car. I looked at her familiar writing on the sign-out card and ran my finger along the 'M V Forsyth' written by her hand.

After the library, we had tea on the veranda, or bearers arranged cane chairs and tables on the lawn. I had a tall glass of juice which they called an orange cocola. I liked to drink it noisily through a straw.

Sometimes we walked near the edge of the river. An occasional rowing boat would glide by from the Boat Club further along, and small groups of buffalo swam or just wallowed on the

opposite bank. I wore a hat and I felt the sun on my skin.

The back of the Club, the portico side, felt different. Pots of plants formed walkways into dense shade. It felt secluded and secret with jungly trees and leafy shrubs which smelt of hot earth and freshly watered warm plants. There was an aviary with whole trees in it and a myna bird that could speak in English, Tamil and Hindi. I loved that part of the Club. Sometimes I went there with Ayah and we sat on a bench near the aviary. We sat in the damp heat without talking. The birds were quiet at that time of day, just sitting it out in the trees, and the air was still, too hot to stir, and if anything moved it was slowly.

There were children's parties,

almost everyone speaks French. They have gendarmes, not police, and you can eat perfect croissants for breakfast.

At Sadras we parked outside what remained of the entrance, and with the help of people from the local village, we each carried something to where we would set up our camp. There was a quiet, ghostly feel in the fort – a vast abandoned area of broken buildings, dark dungeons and small red bricks scattered on the dusty, pale earth. Our voices and presence seemed to make little impact; they were superimposed, as we were, on that strange, ear-pulsing silence which heat and emptiness give off. It seemed a place that had been completely forgotten. I walked with my Mum around the small Dutch cemetery; she felt it important to acknowledge the people there and we tried to decipher the writing on the beautifully engraved flat stones. Sadras is now a heritage site, maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India, but in all the times I have been there over the last nearly 25 years, I have never seen another visitor. It remains a deserted, abandoned Dutch fort, full of its own history and a vivid part of mine.

Leaving

In Madras the wooden boxes with metal edges seemed to have multiplied. Their heavy square shapes and wood smell filled the downstairs room. I understood that our leaving was definitely going to happen, but I could not understand why Ayah couldn't come too. Mum tried to explain. Ayah couldn't leave her family and friends and uproot from all her connections, and she wouldn't like the way of life in England. This is a difficult concept at any age -- that the strength of your will and love cannot keep someone safe or happy or fulfil their every need.

The airport was small. It was a room with glass windows for people to see out to the planes, and a flat roof where they could stand and wave. Ayah came to



The Moubray's Coupla in the Madras Club. From our Archives.

the airport. We hugged and said goodbye and her face was all wet with tears. "My sweet lime, my sugar lump, my beauty face." Then Mum and Dad and [my sister] Jan and I walked across the tarmac to the plane, Mum had my hand. I was crying.

Inside the plane, I sat beside the small round window. People had sorted their luggage and were settling down. I could see a lot of people on the flat roof, Ayah at the front of the crowd. I called out to her. I was sobbing, shouting so she could hear me through the window, across the space between us to the building where she stood. "Ayah, Ayah! I love you!"

"She can't hear you, darling," my Mum said, and I turned to look at her and saw other people looking at me and smiling. What were they smiling for? How would I live without Ayah? How would she live without me?

India, 2002

I decided to return to India, to go back to what was now Chennai, for the first time since I was thirteen. It was blatant nostalgia, a wish to touch my past and feel connected to the people who had been in it. I would be away for three weeks. The coincidences and luck associated with the trip were se-

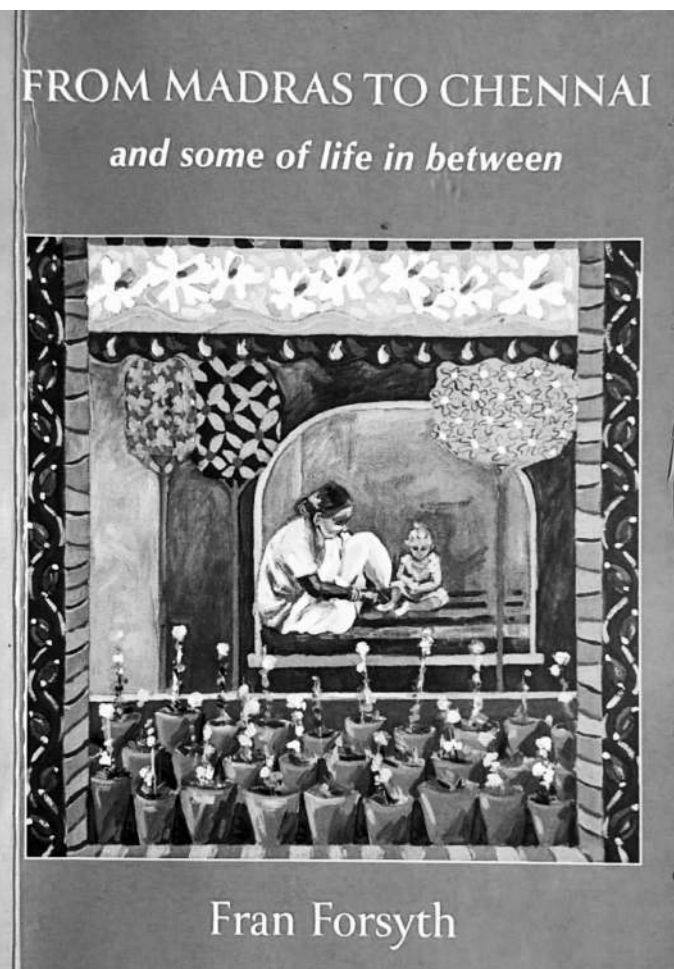
riously uncanny, and I truly felt they were the work of Jan and Mum and Dad, who were now my precious ghosts. Every day in Chennai I was astounded by the depth of familiarity around me, all the more astonishing given the amount of change that had taken place. Strangers wanted to help me. They pored over my old photos and discussed possibilities with other strangers on the street. From my 1950s photo, a passerby recognised the house on Khader Nawaz Khan Road, now hidden behind and between other buildings, and he guided me to the back of an office from where I saw our house! It was luck that the owner was there on that particular day. He was overseeing the process of turning the downstairs into a Punjabi restaurant. I knew immediately that he understood my quest and even seemed to share the wash of emotions. He let me walk around every inch of the house and let me video as I wanted. He said I could go back any time to just sit quietly and think.

And I sat in the unchanged church I used to go to with Ayah. I had letters written by her with her address on the back. They were written nearly forty years earlier, but I went to the Thousand Lights area clutching photos of Ayah and her address

at that time. People tried to help – they wanted me to find her or perhaps her daughter – but unfortunately to no avail. I walked around the dusty grounds of Church Park School with its perilously shiny red floor. I had tea and cake with Sister Basil who used to be up in Kodai. We called her 'Sister Daddy' because she had Dad's name.

On the same day as the house and church and school, I passed a hoarding on a roundabout which said "TI Cycles, Murugappa Group" – the company Dad had worked for, with the factories he had set up. He and Mum had been friends with the Murugappa family, so that name was very familiar, and it seemed so strange to see it there, as if it were waving to me.

I went to the Gymkhana Club with its blue-tinged water and what looked like the same diving board and slide as when I was thirteen years old. And then to the Madras Club. Through the gates and into a time warp of bright white buildings and beautiful leafy green. The grounds, the buildings, the trees, the verandas and the play area at the side were all as I remembered. The sound of the air was the same, it had a softness to it, muffled despite the crows.



Saving the Madras Hedgehog

This January, Copenhagen hosted the International Conference for Hedgehog Professionals – yes, it's really a thing. This was the third annual edition of the event where hedgehog nerds of various stripes – researchers, caregivers, veterinarians, and others – gather to discuss matters pertaining to the welfare of the tiny creature. The agenda read like a catalogue of the charmingly niche. One speaker elaborated on the finer points of designing hedgehog friendly robotic lawn mowers. Another shared his analysis of eDNA from hedgehog droppings to reconstruct their diets. A third gave a talk, rhetorically titled, "Why Does the Hedgehog Cross the Road?"

From India, Dr. Brawin Kumar of the Hedgehog Conservation Alliance carried the story of a species most of the world has never heard of. Recently, he coauthored the first complete mitochondrial genome analysis of the Madras Hedgehog (*Paraechinus nudiventris*), traced its evolutionary origins, and placed this elusive, nocturnal creature firmly on the scientific map. "Madras hedgehogs can be the subject of many research papers, but first, we have to save them from extinction," he says. (This time, his talk focused on the parasites that afflict the creature.)

While hedgehogs of the West have captured the popular imagination, their poor cousin endemic to southern India has remained largely unknown. It is one of four hedgehog species found in India and remains so obscure that few know of its existence even in its homeland. Dr. Kumar's mission – to pull this little known species back from oblivion – feels both im-

probable and important. What does it take to study – and save – an animal that most people don't even know exists? I chatted with him to find out.

What first drew you to this elusive creature?

One year into my job in conservation with the Zoo Outreach Organization (ZOO) in Coimbatore, at an Earth Day celebration in 2011, the audience in Tirunelveli asked me about a spiny little creature that often ends up as roadkill in those parts. One of them had even saved up its spines and brought them along.

Despite my postgraduate degree in biotechnology, I had no clue. The experts at ZOO identified it as the "mull-eli" (which means spiny rat in Tamil) or the Madras Hedgehog. It took several visits to the region

good resource. We networked with conservation groups like the Nellai Nature Club. People reported sightings from camera traps. I also drew up a questionnaire to document people's perceptions about hedgehogs in places where they have been historically documented. Older people said that they had seen live hedgehogs, or the pawprints on the sand, growing up, but not so much now.

At the end of the five-year-long study, we got a clearer picture of the distribution of these hedgehogs and the threats to their survival. In 2018, we published a detailed paper on this.

And what did those findings reveal about Madras Hedgehogs?

Hedgehogs were not confined only to arid landscapes

into a spiny ball – a strategy that worked well against predators, birds of prey or foxes, but fails entirely against a motor vehicle in motion. Hunters simply pick up the spiny balls and sell them in the marketplace – dead or alive – as products and pets.

Hedgehogs that end up as pets die soon because they are fed only greens. Even zoos that get rescues do much the same thing. There is simply not enough scientific awareness about the animal – few seem to realize they are not mini-porcupines.

You created a Tamil comic book about the Madras Hedgehog?

As an ecologist, it shocked me to see that the children in the hedgehog's homeland were growing up ignorant of the existence of the tiny mammal and what it was up against. I worked with the cartoonist Venkatesh Babu to create a 20-page Tamil comic book *Mullikkaattu Ithigaasam* (Legend of Scrub Forest). The plot: Two school children rescue a little hedgehog from a local quack. Most of the timid creature's siblings have already died as roadkill. The mother is overjoyed to be reunited with her little one in the end.

If more people know what a hedgehog is and if they can record sightings with location and time-stamps – like birders do for various bird species – we can get a better estimate of the hedgehogs' baseline population and distribution. Even recording a hedgehog roadkill can help. Hedgehogs are indicator species. When hedgehogs thrive, it means the ecosystem around them is thriving too. It will be helpful to have some baseline estimates about the hedgehog population. This comic is part of outreach to engage people and hopefully turn them into citizen scientists.

What are your next steps for outreach and conservation?

My goal is to conduct a mass outreach programme for the conservation of the Madras Hedgehog and its habitat.

Hedgehogs are not vermin, but their local name in Tamil is *mull-eli* (literally thorny rats), so people do not think twice about exterminating them. Being insectivores, hedgehogs are natural allies of farmers and help them cut down on chemical pesticides – a fact we need



Mull-eli.

to emphasise during outreach. In its habitat, underpasses in the roads will help hedgehogs avoid traffic which currently mows them down.

The government could nominate Hedgehog Day because India is the home of other species as well like the Long-eared Hedgehog and the Indian Hedgehog. The birthday of M. Krishnan (30 June 1912), pioneering Indian naturalist and nature writer, would be an ideal date because he was the first person to document that the Madras Hedgehog can survive snakebites. But how they do it – we still do not know.

Many good research papers about the characteristics and the behaviour of the Madras Hedgehog are waiting to be written, but first we have to ensure the survival of this species.

Last question, especially for Chennaiites: Can you find the Madras Hedgehog in the city?

In colonial times, vast parts of southern India constituted the Madras Presidency. That is how the Madras Hedgehog got its name. It is endemic to southern India – found only in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

There are, in fact, no hedgehogs even in the Arignar Anna Zoological Park in Vandalur, Chennai. The Madras Museum has a specimen, but its collection date and location are missing, making it impossible to say whether it was collected from the capital city. So, the Hedgehog is not in the *uyir college*, not in the *seththa college* either – both places where locals traditionally go sightseeing during the Pongal festival.

There are potential hedgehog habitats in and around Chennai, but we have not done field surveys yet, and without field studies, scientists cannot conclusively answer this seemingly simple question.



Dr. Brawin Kumar of the Hedgehog Conservation Alliance. Picture courtesy: Jude.

before I finally saw my first live hedgehog – a spiny animal resembling what I described in an essay as a "small bunch of twigs arranged with utmost care, ambling about in the scrub looking for food."

Meanwhile, I started reading up about them. The British first recorded these mammals in scientific literature in 1851, but very little is known about the behaviour of these solitary, nocturnal and elusive animals. They are hard to spot, but I began doing field surveys.

I got data from other sources: Local newspapers reported sightings – an unexpectedly

and thorny scrubland as we expected. Their habitats include pasture lands, edges of agricultural fields, shrub lands, grasslands, sand dunes, foothills of small hillocks, and even urban areas! You can see them in cattle-grazing fields, behind houses, and under leaves of the palmyra trees. You might even see them near lamp posts where they feast on insects that fall to the ground.

We pooled together confirmed locations and sighting records and used an algorithm to predict the potential distribution range of hedgehogs in southern India. Ninety percent of the hedgehog population lives outside protected areas, where – unlike mega fauna like elephants and tigers – they have no safeguards under the Indian Wildlife Protection Act.

If their range is larger than expected, why are you worried about their survival?

Worldwide, wildlife has had to contend with habitat loss, vehicular traffic, and climate change. Madras Hedgehogs face additional dangers. Dried hedgehog spines are used as medicine for whooping cough and other ailments. The meat is a delicacy. The dead skin is hung in front of homes to ward off the evil eye.

When hedgehogs sense a physical threat, they curl up

● by V. Vijaysree
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Thirty years of Saarang

Cultural and sports programmes have been an integral part of the IIT Madras campus life since its establishment in 1959. In the earliest years, when students were housed in the Saidapet and Guindy hostels, small-scale events brought together the fledgling community. These programmes carried forward into the Krishna and Cauvery hostels once students began residing on the IIT Madras campus itself, and they quickly became an integral part of hostel life.

Such activities were not confined to the hostels alone. They found a prominent place in the Institute Day celebrations, which began in 1960, as well

as in the Hostel Day functions that showcased the talents and creativity of students. Together, these occasions reflected the spirit of IIT Madras – a balance of academic pursuit with cultural expression and sporting enthusiasm. Over the decades, they have grown into defining features of campus life, shaping traditions that continue to thrive today.

In 1966, the Katyayini Sangeeta Sabha was established as a music club, though it eventually faded away. Around 1970, the IIT Madras Music Club came into being, with its primary mission centred on organising and hosting programmes in Indian classical music. Cultural



The inauguration ceremony of Mardi Gras 1995 – the final time the festival bore this iconic name before becoming Saarang.



A photograph taken in the green room behind the Open Air Theatre stage in 1995, after a Mardi Gras show.

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– THE EDITOR

programmes by other groups on campus, including the Staff Club, various region-based associations like Kannada, Telugu, Tamil and Hindi, and KV and Central schools, contributed to the vibrant cultural ethos. Gradually, the inter-hostel cultural competitions were initiated. As early as 1964, the Inter-IIT sports competitions were held in the stadium inaugurated by the Nawab of Pataudi, the Indian cricket captain. So even by the mid 1960s, the cultural and sports scene on the campus was truly lively.

The inter-hostel competitions gave impetus to the start of inter-collegiate cultural competitions at the Open Air Theatre (OAT), where the best talent from the city colleges participated. In the early 1970s, students eagerly looked forward to these competitions which they thoroughly enjoyed and learnt a lot from! A few of the participants went on to make their names in the music field of the country. And then Mardi Gras happened! In 1974, the inter-collegiate competitions turned more inclusive and colourful with the naming of the cultural festival as MG, short for Mardi Gras. The student secretaries of the time were greatly impressed by the variety, novelty, and scale of the IIT Bombay festival, which had started in 1971 as Mood Indigo. An idea developed that IITM must graduate from a limited inter-collegiate festival, mostly confined to city colleges, to the level of a national student cultural festival. This resulted in MG 1974, which went on to become a truly national

festival and soon arguably the most popular one, so much so that participating in it became a “status symbol” for college students.

In the early 1990s, a feeling emerged among some on the IITM campus that, however popular and well-established MG was, the relevance of the name to the campus cultural ethos could be reconsidered. The type of cultural programmes in the festival, the participants, the location, and the timing of the festival during the Pongal season (mid-January) in a Madras City campus, lush with heritage vegetation and wildlife – part of the Raj Bhavan forest area – suggested that a name of more immediate relevance to the festival might be appropriate. When this idea was floated initially, there was a difference of opinion among the campusites, with quite a few vociferous arguments on both sides. Over time, most of the differences were ironed out, though some remained unconvinced about the change, and the Board of Students eventually passed the proposal to rename the festival.

Campusites were invited to suggest names for the festival, yielding about 300 entries in various languages. A student group, guided by Dean Prof. P. Srinivasa Rao of Mechanical Engineering, was tasked with finalising the choice. After several rounds of elimination, six names emerged as favourites – one of them was Sarang.

While the final decision was hanging in the balance, a group of students explored the meanings of these suggested

names by consulting available dictionaries. Sarang embodies a multitude of meanings: sun, peacock, bee, snake, frog, butterfly, cloud, lake, a family of birds including lovebirds, lion, elephant, spotted deer, antelope, male deer with antlers, colourful, and a raga in Indian classical music. The word appears repeatedly in Kalidasa’s writings with general reference to nature. The student group appreciated these meanings, many of which resonated with aspects of the natural heritage of the campus. They were particularly impressed with three: “male deer with antlers” which the IITM campus is known for; “elephants” integral to their Gajendra Circle; and “sun” as the festival was held during the period of astronomical significance marking the beginning of the sun’s northward journey.

The student group experimented with different spellings of the name to avoid distorted pronunciation, and finally agreed on SAARANG – seven letters with two As – symbolising the seven swaras (notes) unique to Indian classical music.

This name was officially communicated to all concerned and, since January 1996, has become synonymous with IITM culfest and continues to be popular with the student body on a national level. It has stood the test of time for 30 years, and it is hoped it will continue in the future also for many more years. – Reproduced from *Glass Panels* / Heritage Centre, IIT Madras.

N. Ramachandran and his rich legacy in squash

In the passing of N. Ramachandran, former President of Indian Olympic Association (IOA), former President of World Squash Federation (WSF), and patron of the Squash Rackets Federation of India (SRFI), sports in India and squash in particular, has lost a 'father figure'. Such has been the impact of this ace administrator on the sports scene in the country. His stupendous role in uplifting squash from a club preserve to a medal winning sport in the country, is well known. Indian players have proved this to the hilt with medals in the Asian and Commonwealth Games as also the world championships. 'Rami' or 'NR' as Narayanaswami Ramachandran was fondly known, would inspire, help those in need and always have comforting words during difficult moments – all of which made him a "grand wall to lean on and look back with assurance" in the sports arena, as one leading official put it.

Ramachandran's tryst with squash began at the MCC courts early in his life where he would spend time sweating it out. "Climbing down the ladder to the squash pit", as he would say in those early phases of using the squash facility in

the Club, perhaps left a lasting impression! To take the sport from the pit to the heights enjoyed by other sports – became a mission for him and thus was born the desire for an academy for the planned growth of squash. Getting into the state body – the Tamil Nadu Squash Rackets Association was the first step and later, in the 1990s began his quest for realising his dream project of an Academy for squash. Being a leading industrialist helped; through negotiations and discussions with the State government and the Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu, a site was fixed and by the turn of the millennium, the Indian Squash Academy had become a reality.

As establishing a world class facility was his aim, he was on the look out for a suitable coach. He was able to convince the leading Malaysian coach, Maj. S. Maniam to lead the team and also brought in Cyrus Poncha, who was coaching children in the clubs in Mumbai, to Chennai. The team was formed and the rest, as they say, is history. Maj. Maniam, ably assisted by Poncha and others, laid out a well designed programme to build up talent. In time it yielded results, and before long Saurav Ghosal,

Joshna Chinappa and Dipika Pallikal (now Karthik) emerged as super talents, to soon become the leading lights of Indian squash. Such was NR's involvement in the activities of the Academy that he ensured that nothing was wanting there, including funds. Major championships were brought to India and that brought in leading players of the world. All in all, the Indian Squash Academy (ISA) had become a beehive of activity even as it earned a name for itself not just nationally but internationally as well.

● by
S.R. Suryanarayanan

Meanwhile NR himself rose up in the squash ranks – from the national body to lead the Asian Federation, and by 2008 had come to the World Squash Federation as its President, the first Indian to lead an IOC-recognised international federation. He served as WSF President for two terms until 2016. Soon thereafter he was to become WSF's first honorary life member. In the world body, he had the opportunity

to meet several leading officials, but it was his meeting with Dr Jacques Rogge, the then IOC President, that he cherished the most. It was through NR's major efforts that squash had entered the Asian Games programme. He next tried his best to boost squash in Olympic circles, investing a lot of time and effort, but that unfortunately did not fructify immediately though it set the tone for his successors in the Federation to take forward. The historic moment is soon to come when squash will make its official Olympic debut at the 2028 Summer Games in Los Angeles. For all his outstanding efforts, NR was honoured with the Olympic Order (Silver) from the IOC and an OCA award of Merit from the Olympic Council of Asia.

Besides being responsible for the upliftment of squash, its players and the rewards that came with medal-winning performances in various international arenas, NR also had a role in the grooming of officials, in particular the referees. For K Srikanth Seshadri, who had in the early days of the Academy been just a visitor bringing his son to the facility, the transformation that ISA brought about was extraordinary. He



N. Ramachandran, Picture Courtesy: The Hindu.

took to refereeing by chance, thanks to his inquisitive mind, learning the nuances of the rules and regulations in the sport. His rise from there was meteoric. Today he is the only Indian level 4 World Squash Officiating Referee. "Whatever I am today is all because of Mr Ramachandran and SRFI," says Seshadri while paying his respects to the man whom he calls his "Godfather".

NR's passing on 16 April 2026 (he was 77) has left a huge vacuum, but his rich legacy is bound to inspire generations and may be one day, his two unfulfilled dreams – of an individual world champion and an Olympic medallist from the ISA – would be realised to add more richness to his remembrance.

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