

WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

MADRAS

MUSINGS

Vol. XXXVI No. 13

October 16-31, 2026

INSIDE

- Short N Snappy
- Human skeletons of ivory and sandalwood
- Reginald Dann
- Pioneer in paper manufacture
- A small visitor called Krishna
- Another rising talent in TT scene

The Heritage of CMA

The Chennai Metropolitan Area or KTCC as it is better known, that acronym standing for Kanchipuram, Thiruvallur, Chennai and Chengalpattu, is around 5,900 sq km in extent. As the city has now expanded to its fringes and seeks to take in more of the CMA, it is vital that what heritage those locations possess is documented for posterity. Experience has shown us that as the city expands, the built, cultural and natural heritage of the newer areas are the first casualties. Much has already been lost and yet, there is a considerable amount still standing, or hidden in plain sight as the adjoining *Heritage Watch* column will show. Will the authorities, the educational institutions and the residents of these places rise to the challenge? Or will they allow it all to

vanish in the face of real estate demand?

Madras that is Chennai has been singularly lucky by way of its heritage. Ever since the 1890s there has been an almost continuous stream of documentation of what is today the

● by **Sriram V**

core city by which we mean from George Town in the north to Adyar in the south and Egmore in the west. Beyond that it is sketchy at best. What for example do we know of the histories of Shenoy Nagar, Anna Nagar and KK Nagar before they became localities with those names? Who owned the lands there? What were the landmarks in these places before the plots and layouts took

over? History in these places has come to mean essentially those of the temples located there. And even those are hagiographic and belong to the realm of legend.

The colonial city core may seem better off. But even here, myth-making has become a full-fledged industry, beginning with 'informed explanations' on the etymology of place names. This is followed by exaggerated antiquity for religious precincts, and in this we include all the ancient faiths. There is also too much dependence on English accounts with scant respect for those in Indian languages. That the latter lack in citations and references and depend largely on hearsay is another matter altogether. Taken overall, we rarely draw a line between myth

(Continued on page 2)

HERITAGE WATCH

When a Lake Brings Us a Gift



Arjun Shankar messaged us on September 24. He and fellow volunteers were desilting Nallathener Pond at Medavakkam when they found a stone with inscriptions on it. He sent a photograph to us asking for help in deciphering what was written.

Now, archaeologists are not what we are. And so we suggested that the ASI be brought in. The team from there gave the city a new piece of history -- the inscription dated to the reign of Vijayaganda Gopala of the 13th century. And the area's name was Monavakkam and not Medavakkam.

It just goes to show how much of our history is hidden in plain sight, just waiting for us to find. Kudos to Arjun Shankar and his team for helping add to our heritage. We only hope the ASI takes care of the stone and does not just leave it behind to the mercy of the elements. If the latter were to be so, the stone may be better off at the bottom of the lake.

Documenting a landmark locality

Readers of this column would attest to the fact that it more often than not reads like a dirge of the sorry state of affairs concerning issues affecting the people of our city and the state. This piece is however going to be a departure from the routine and seeks to introduce the readers to a series that the magazine proposes to feature, commemorating one of the most prominent localities of the city today, T Nagar.

Why single out a locality in our city, when there are ones which are of older vintage? And why now? These are two important questions that we must address, before delving further. While it is an undeniable fact that there are several neighbourhoods that far pre-date the city itself, the development of T Nagar marks a watershed moment in town planning in our state, for it was an initiative

that was the first major effort by the government and the Corporation to address the housing shortage in the city. The origins of this initiative begin with the drawing of the Mambalam Scheme by the Madras City and Suburban Town Planning Trust, a body constituted pursuant to the Madras Town Planning Act,

● by **Karthik Bhatt**

1920. This scheme would, over the next two decades, gradually take shape to give the broad contours of the locality as we know it today. Without going into the specific timelines of its various milestones, it can be safely said that this decade thus marks the centenary of this pioneering effort, making it an appropriate juncture to reflect on its origins and journey.

The scheme was nearly a non-starter, for having been proposed by the Town Planning Trust in 1923, it was not sanctioned by the Government on the grounds that the Trust had no funds for the purpose. It was therefore decided to transfer its execution to the Corporation of Madras, which took up the responsibility of around 600 acres. The Corporation's plan, which was largely based on the proposals of the Trust, was sanctioned in February 1925. One significant modification made from the original plan was the provision of a number of smaller houses on sites of one ground each. This was chiefly necessitated on account of the fact that though the scheme was intended to cater primarily to the middle-class population, it had by its design invited

(Continued on page 2)

THE HERITAGE OF CMA

(Continued from page 1)

and fact. The present age of AI and Insta reels has only added to the chaos. These are believed to be absolute truths by the gullible and that creates a fresh wave of dissemination of these fake narratives.

Today, the new areas stand exposed to this risk in a big way. They represent a green-field for the syllabus writers of the WhatsApp University and other similar institutions. The tragedy is that these 'new' areas are actually historic localities, even more so than Madrasapattinam. A Madhurantakam or a Chengalpattu town has a far richer past than the colonial city. And as these places get absorbed by the metropolis, they will lose this entire narrative, without any documentation. Which means the history is lost for good. As is well known, we are still groping for the story of

Madras and Chennai before the British came along. Why allow for the same ignorance to prevail over the newer areas when we have the opportunity to set this right?

Until the 1960s, it was the District Gazetteers that fulfilled this role. They painstakingly documented the stories behind practically every village in their district. This practice seems to have been given up of late, but what is noteworthy is that the older publications of this series are available online. These need to be taken up as reference and used by educational institutions and volunteers in each area to record their history. And in today's era of the internet, it costs nothing to chronicle that past and make it available for a larger audience. The only caution is that sources need to be cited for authenticity. If this is done, our city's history will get richer.

Documenting a landmark locality

(Continued from page 1)

criticisms that it benefited the richer class. While recollecting the origins, it has to be pointed out that one cannot gloss over the fact that the entire exercise involved draining of the Mylapore and Nungambakkam Tanks, setting an unhealthy precedent for similar acts to follow. The problems arising out of conversion of water bodies into real estate in our city have been well-documented and we repeatedly keep making the same mistake and paying the price for it.

The transition of the neighbourhood from what it originally was to what it is today has brought along several civic issues which continue to plague it to this day. In fact, subsequent developments have shown that it has gone against almost every single restriction envisaged in the original scheme. Particular mention needs to be made of a green belt that was proposed, bordering the tank bund (in today's context, the area that is the entry point to T Nagar, just as one crosses Mount Road, stretching from Teynampet to Venkatanarayana Road), as it was low lying and hence found desirable "to preserve the area as an emergency storm water channel at times of excessive

rainfall". The regular flooding episodes that these roads and localities face stand as reminders of the perils of not having heeded the warnings.

So what does this feature propose to document? While it is a well-known fact that several of the roads commemorate officials of the Corporation of Madras and the leaders of the Justice Party whose government was in power at the time the scheme was executed, not much is known about their lives or careers, which this feature hopes to bring to light. Even less is known about roads named after local residents, who may have been people of accomplishments in their chosen field. While recognising that the entire exercise would be a painstaking one, with materials available being scarce in most cases, it is hoped that the effort would encourage more dedicated research into the history of the area and more locality-centric documentation of the city.

We however start this series with a brief profile of the man who, by virtue of being the Director of Town Planning, was an active participant in the entire scheme, Reginald Dann.

(See page 4 for further details)

Pedestrian Miracles

You could have felled *The Man from Madras Musings* in one swoop. Just catching a glimpse of one them as he gazed out of his car window made MMM all weak. And at first he could not even believe his eyes. But as the traffic light was still red, MMM had enough time to gather his wits and take a photograph just to make sure. Miracles do happen in this other Eden, namely Madras that is Chennai. For there it was – a button for pedestrians to press to make traffic come to a halt so that they can cross the road in safety. Singapore, watch out! Chennai is fast catching up.

As to when this had been installed and why it had not caught the attention of the media was something of a surprise. And why had a minister or MLA or at least a Corporation Councillor not done the honours, pressed the first button, posed for a photograph and then walked at the head of a procession across the road? With some luck we could have even got the CM & PM! If this is not newsworthy or worth its weight in gold in publicity, then what else can be?

Having wondered much, it was the turn of MMM to sorrow more. For the gleaming yellow of the pole and the glistening silver of the button itself indicated that none had dared press it. Which can only indicate one of two things. The first is that this facility itself had come under the head of casting pearls before swine for it would seem to indicate that none of the backward Chennaites had any idea as to what it was for. Their idea of crossing the road is usually to just jump in and then take a chance, leaping among oncoming traffic and making it safely to the other side. The second is that nobody trusts such a button to have any impact. After all, which sane pedestrian in Chennai will expect that the mere press of a button can cause all traffic to come to a standstill so that he/she can cross? And which motorist can be expected to halt just because a mere button has been pressed? After all, is it not a matter of thrill in Chennai to jump red lights, disobey traffic policemen and above all, attempt to go straight in the 'cycle gap' left by a larger vehicle that has got its left indicator on and is turning left? If you find that last bit too confusing, MMM apologises but he is aware that there is a category of vehicle driver who thinks he needs to switch on his left indicator to show that he is turning right – in his view the left indicator is meant to show others behind that they can turn left. Who dare says courtesy is dead in our city?



MMM is of the view that no politician worth his/her salt wanted to be involved in the inauguration of such a facility. Imagine claiming credit for it and then having to live in daily fear of people using it and being run over! And the newspapers then publishing headlines that scream – Pedestrian facility inaugurated by XYZ slays six!

SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

And with this we have added one more feather in our cap – a pedestrian amenity that exists on paper and physically but which in practice is beyond useless. You cannot fault our administrators on this but we the people you know are a different class altogether.

In a million years we may become a Singapore.

The Lord of the People at the Town by the Tank

The long weekend that just went by, and this year there are quite a few, saw *The Man from Madras Musings* driving past the Town by the Tank (TT) at which constituency there was a byelection. By the time you receive this copy of MM, the results will be out and one of the hopefuls would have won. MMM's drive past coincided with the Lord of the People's (LP) visit to TT where he was canvassing for his candidate, a person who had switched political sides with such rapidity that even the party faithfuls were a little dazed. But that is not MMM's story for as you know, we in this publication are above politics. What on the other hand MMM wishes to highlight is that rather like the political affiliations of the candidate, which are hazy at best, LP's going drive about is becoming increasingly like those of his illustrious predecessors namely Pater, Mater and Fil.

The TT is obviously a place that cannot handle such VIP arrivals and departures but that the fanfare started right from within the city was something of a surprise. Policemen standing at signals where they never are usually, and then what is known as posse of them at various places, all of them confabulating busily on what should be done when LP passes by. As the city thinned out and the mofussil took over, there were plenty of cut outs, the round variety so liked by Mater Dei being the dominant specimen. This is in case you are not aware the most impactful, or looked at another way, the biggest obstacle to cross. You cannot go under it, and if you wish to do so sideways, then you need to be right in the middle of the road. The vertical cutouts had LP in various postures, the most popular being the one where he folds his arm across his chest in a scythe-like gesture. MMM is told Fil unfortunately did this just before the election, and LP has taken to it with a vengeance.

This being around 10.00 am, the usual spirited gaiety that accompanies such state visits upcountry had not yet made itself manifest. But of bands and orchestra there was plenty, all raucous. At various places, buses had arrived and were offloading cheerleaders – MMM is told the service to drop them back home does not exist and so how they manage after the spirited gaiety is a question. As MMM drove on and lunchtime approached, he noticed various makeshift kitchens churning out the now Tamil dish of biryani by the tonne. And all along, the number of policemen and women got bigger and bigger. You could say that they even exceeded the numbers of the faithful who MMM noticed seemed rather lukewarm about the byelection.

By early afternoon, activities seemed to be reaching fever pitch and as MMM was leaving the TT area he decided to ask if LP was expected any time soon. That he had not even left his home was the reply. And he would be at TT late in the evening. Which brought to mind other nightmarish incidents of the past that MMM will not dwell on. But he could not help wonder as to the plight of the poor policemen – imagine being asked to stand around from the morning, for something that will happen late in the evening. What energy would they have to monitor law and order after so many hours?

As a state we need to take a hard look at VIP bandobust as it is known. It seems a farce on many fronts.

– MMM

OUR READERS WRITE



Unethical practices by the Gas Distributors

I had been to an Indane gas distributor in connection with the transfer of gas connection in favour of my sister following the demise of her husband in whose name the connection was obtained earlier.

The staff gave me the application form and told me to attach xerox copies of the death certificate, the ID and address proof and photo of my sister who is the transferee. I was also told to pay Rs.1568. On enquiry, the staff stated that Rs.568

represents the loan/advance which the government pays to consumers as subsidy which is to be returned owing to the termination of the gas connection. Rs.1000 is towards the cost of fireball extinguisher.

After making the payment, I had a talk with the sales officer-in-charge of Indane gas, seeking to know whether the process and payment were in order. He told me that he will get back to me after speaking to the distributor. Thereafter, I got a call from the owner of the agency. He told me that the

fire extinguisher is the product of Indane and that it will be useful in case of any fire mishaps. He further stated that the consumers are at liberty either to accept or decline as there is no compulsion to purchase the same. When I told him that I do not need the same, he stated that Rs.1000/- would be refunded to us.

When there is no compulsion for the consumers to purchase the products being offered by the gas distributors, why, in the first place, are they being thrust upon the consumers? If the consumers are not in the know of things, the distributors would definitely take them for a ride.

When I was with the distributor, I saw a staff member handing over the fire extinguisher to a consumer without even telling as to what the

product was all about, how it had to be used and the like. The said consumer must have thought that it needed to be purchased! And, for him, it is a dead investment.

Even when a new connection is given, the distributors ask the consumers to purchase from them various items including the apron. Why should anyone purchase items being offered by the distributors? Why are the oil marketing companies [OMC] not taking action against the distributors indulging in unethical practices? Does it mean that the OMCs are hand in glove with the distributors?

Further, every distributor must display the details of stocks available and the name of the sales officer from Indane who is in-charge with his/her contact number. Many distributors do not display the names of the sales officers in order that their unethical deals are not brought to the notice of the OMCs. This must be curbed and the OMCs must ensure that the display board indicates the name of the sales officers of Indane gas with their mobile numbers.

V.S. Jayaraman
ramvsj@gmail.com

Madras Week – some counter questions

I read the front page article, *Yet another Madras Day comes to a close, but how do we make it better?* (MM September 1-15) and got its general drift but would like to pose counter questions. Do we need to make Madras Day celebrations better? Isn't enough enough? It is my humble opinion as evidenced by the contents of the issue that it's time to sit back and bask in the afterglow of the celebrations. It's too early to ask what next but as they say, doubting minds think. Again, I am afraid we are overthinking it. Did I participate in the celebrations? No. But I sure get vicarious pleasure. And in my own way celebrate the romantic 'idea' of Chennai nay Madras, its past and present and future too.

It is relevant here to state that Mahaperiyava, the Sage of Kanchi, is said to have suggested to a devotee, Tripurasundari, to pray that she should always be born in Mylapore in every birth of hers, and have the constant fortune of getting the darshan of Goddess Karpagambal! When I heard this piece of news it tickled my senses. Next time I meet Annachi of Karpagamal Stores I will ask him about it. Do you know? Parts of Thiruvannamipur near Marundeeswarar temple have a similar vibe that the Mada Veedhis of Mylapore have. You can see on the gopuram (ECR side) the words 'Marundeeswaram'. Yes like Rameswaram and Thirunag-eswaram. My recent recce (I

MADRAS QUIZ QUESTIONS

– By Vidya Swaminathan

1. Name the city's first movie theatre, run by a German, which shut down in the aftermath of World War I?
2. What were the distinctions held by the newspaper *The Spectator*, founded in Madras in 1836?
3. Which media mogul of Madras was also one of the early representatives of advertising agency business as he began canvassing advertisements for newspapers for a commission?
4. Which locality gets its name from the fact that the ruler of the region had exempted it from taxation for religious reasons?
5. Name the iconic educational institution of the city that debuted in social media on September 9, 2026.
6. Expand TANSIM whose chairperson Singai Ramachandran is an IIM Ahmedabad graduate.
7. Name the classical music organisation in Chennai whose abbreviation is deceptively similar to that of an organisation promoting physical activities, founded in Madras in 1890.
8. Who is the founder of Garuda Aerospace, an international swimming champion who was felicitated with the Champions of Chennai award this year?
9. Which STEM institution in Chennai is currently researching precision agriculture to reduce the water consumption in rice cultivation?
10. What innovation has been done to the traditional Parai instrument by the Central Leather Research Institute in Chennai to increase its resonance and durability?

(Answers on page 8)

Small Airstrips for States

The writeup on *Madras Air Taxi Service* by John Isaacs in MM, July 16-31, 2026, was interesting. I wish to share here that I tried to promote a similar, but informal service – which could be availed only if and when passengers were available – when I was Secretary, Tourism, Govt of India.

There are more small airstrips with the State Governments than with the Govt. of India, a World War II legacy. These could be utilised by having informal take-offs as and when passengers turn-up. My wife and I saw such an arrangement in Norway with twin-otters of 12 capacity.

Similarly, in anchorage, small planes fly from the lake or takeoff from the ground. The accompanying photo is that of a jungle-landing wherein you can see the lady pilot and me sipping coffee.

Our Prime Minister inaugurated such a service on the Sabarmati. Though the launch was successful, the company could not carry on after three months

We always think of huge enterprises like the one at Parandur, so near Chennai, depriving people of agricultural land. Let us think innovatively!

Dr. G. Sundaram, IAS (R),
Chennai



hope to make more visits) to Thiruvottriyur has left me asking for more. Lest I wander away, I wish to taper off.

To me Madras Day celebrations spilled over to September. Around the Vinayaka Chaturthi gala, I took a quick dekho with some new friends at Kosapet to stare in wonder at the Ganesas lined up there. My peep into Google says the place was originally called Kuyavar Pettai which means 'Potter's locality'. In summary, the Karuppur Kalamkriya art that quietly illustrates the article has the last word: 'I love Madras'.

T.K. Srinivas Chari
srinivaschari@gmail.com

Ivory and Sandalwood human skeletons made by Saraboji II

Sarabendra Bhupala Bhupati Bhosle (aka Serfoji the Second; r. 1787-1793; 1798-1832), the titular ruler of Tanjavur Mahratta principality (presently in Tamil Nadu), was interested in human anatomy. Sarabendra's interest in and knowledge of medicine is documented by Taravath Madhavan Nair (1868-1919), a medical practitioner in Madras city. Nair speaks of a human-eye model kept in his Kunstkammer (Cabinet of Curiosities) in the 1800s. Important it will be to recognise that Sarabendra performed cataract eye surgeries, although we have no record of the success rate. Sarabendra's medical depository included two complete and accurately made life-size human skeletons: one of ivory and the other of sandalwood (below figure).

In an earlier article on the papier-mâché anatomical model (Vol. XXXI No. 14, November 1-15, 2021), used in the hospital located in Fort St. George, decades before it formally transformed into the General Hospital in Madras in the 1800s that trained personnel for the Subordinate Medical Service, we had made an inconclusive reference to two life-size human skeletal

models made by Sarabendra Bhupati Bhosle of Tanjavur. But we could not shed any light on the present whereabouts of the skeleton models made and maintained by Sarabendra. However, in the recent past, in 2025, we found an article by a medical doctor R.K. Rau, entitled *Some interesting anatomical exhibits* published in the June-December 1944 issue of the Bulletin of the Indian Institute of the History of Medicine (presently, the *Journal of Indian Medical Heritage*, Hyderabad).

Before we go into details of the skeletons spoken by Rau, providing some details of R.K. Rau, the author of the 1944 paper, will be in order. He was 'Rungnath Krishna Rau', Professor of Human Anatomy, Andhra Medical College, Visakhapatnam, in 1929-1946. He had qualified for the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. The Archives and Library website of the Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh shows his roll number (3295), date of admission into the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh (19 October, 1927), and his professional status (Fellow). In early 1920s, Rau was lecturing in human anatomy at the Tan-

jore Medical School, Tanjavur. Rau originally published the anatomical-exhibits article in the *Antiseptic* (a monthly *Journal of Medicine and Surgery*) Volume 29, 1932. The same article was later republished as such, by Venkata Subba Reddy in the *Bulletin of the Indian Institute of the History of Medicine* in 1944.

Rau thinks that these near-life-size skeletal models (5'7", c.175 cm tall) may have been displayed in the foyer next to the Saraswathi Mahal Library developed by Saraboji the Second in 1805-1810. These models were made at the behest of Saraboji for instructional purposes. Rau

still within India.

I could not track down details of how Saraboji II may have thought of creating ivory and sandalwood skeletal replicas. R.K. Rau does not clarify this point either. Presumably, Rev. Schwartz, his mentor, was the trigger. The Henry Wellcome Museum Collection, London, includes an ivory anatomical figurine of a pregnant human (far smaller than the Tanjavur skeletons; c. 20 cm in overall length) with some removable organs, crafted by an unidentified French person in the 17th-18th centuries. The Henry Wellcome Museum also includes a wood-

● by Dr. Anantanarayanan Raman

even tracks details of how he managed to get hold of these skeletons. Anyhow, a 2018 issue of *The Hindu* (6 April 2018, Visakhapatnam edition) refers to the same ivory and sandalwood skeletons safely stored in the Anatomical Museum of the Andhra Medical College, Visakhapatnam. That is gratifying because these pieces are treasures of scientific art and are

en sculpture of a human male showing muscles and arteries, carved in the mid-18th century Switzerland with no sculptor identified. Many new knots have been identified in the present article and hopefully time will untie them.

Notes

1. The *Bulletin of the Indian Institute of the History of Medicine* has a distinguished history and was founded by Danda Venkata Subba Reddy (1899-1987), who graduated from the Madras Medical College in 1925. Reddy set up the Department of History of Medicine in Andhra Medical College, Visakhapatnam in 1956. He pioneered exploring the medical history of India. Subba Reddy was a medical-science professor and he pioneered medical history of South Asia. Subba Reddy started the Department of Medical History in Andhra Medical College, Visakhapatnam in September 1956, but shifted to Hyderabad in December 1956. He was majorly inspired by Henry Ernest Sigerist of the University of Zurich, a medical historian, and a loud proponent of universal health care in the 1940s. Today the Department of Medical History, Hyderabad, has grown into the National Institute

of Indian Medical Heritage, Hyderabad, managed by the Ministry of Ayush, Government of India.

2. The Tanjore Medical School grew out of the Prince of Wales Medical School, named to coincide with the visit of Albert Edward (the Prince of Wales) to Madras Presidency and established in Tanjore in the late 1870s. In the 1910s, this facility metamorphosed as the Tanjore Medical School utilising the Raja-Mirasdar Hospital (R.M.H.) as the hospital facility that was founded in 1876 through the initiative of Henry Sullivan Thomas, Collector of Tanjore. The generosity of the Mahratta royals (particularly, Kamatchi-Amba Devi) both as cash (Rs. 30,000) and as kind (40 acres of land) made the R.M.H. possible. A few wealthy local mirasdars (hereditary landowners in pre-colonial and colonial India who held rights to manage land – miras; they paid either rent or revenue to the rulers of pre-colonial days or to the administrators of colonial state) contributed further towards this effort, meeting the total expense of Rs. 96,000. The *Madras Presidency Administration Report* for 1907-1908, Ch.6, p. 83 speaks of the Tanjore Medical School that offered 'hospital training' in 1907-1908. The 'hospital training', most likely, implies the four-year long training towards an L.M.P. (Licenced Medical Practitioner) title. The L.M.P. qualified personnel were eligible for employment in the Subordinate Medical Service of the Presidency of Madras.

One notable alumnus of the L.M.P. programme of the Tanjore Medical School was 'Vengu Iyer Kuppuswami' – later Swami Sivananda (1887-1963) – who established the Divine Life Society, and who was born in Pattamadai, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu.

3. The *Antiseptic* was first established in Madras in 1904. It was edited and published by Udupi Rama Rau (1874-1952) and Taravath Madhavan Nair (1868-1919), who were medical practitioners in Madras city in

Reginald Dann – One of the earliest Directors of Town Planning

The first serious attempt at town planning as a specialized matter of study undertaken by the Government of Madras was thanks to Lord Pentland, who in 1914 invited the multifaceted Sir Patrick Geddes to the city along with his popular exhibition on the evolution of cities. Remarkably, most of the exhibits were lost enroute to India, the vessel carrying them having been sunk by the *Emden*. Aided by friends at home, replacements were hurriedly sent and the exhibition opened at the Senate Hall in January 1915. Geddes would also tour 13 towns in the Madras Presidency and prepare a report on them. His visit was followed by that of HV Lanchester, who in 1916 would come on a tour of six months and prepare a seminal work titled *Town Planning in Madras*. It was in the backdrop of these that the Madras Town Planning Act was passed in 1920, following which the Madras City and Suburban Town Planning Trust was constituted. The Act also created a specialised post of the Director of Town Planning. Prior to this, the Sanitary Engineer and the Director of Public Health were the expert advisers of the Government in matters of town planning. One of the earliest Directors of Town Planning was Reginald Dann.

Born in Surrey in 1883, Dann was educated at Pontefract in West Yorkshire. Details about his early life and education are scarce, though it is stated that he won several competitions in England for the design of towns. Married to Freda Southall, whom he met while serving with the Friends' Ambulance Unit and the Friends' War Victims Relief Committee in France during World War I, the couple came to Madras soon after. In 1921, Dann was appointed as Director of Town Planning to

the Government of Madras at a salary of Rs 1750 per month. His duties were to advise the Government in all matters connected with town-planning and to assist local bodies in carrying out the duties imposed on them by the Madras Town Planning Act, 1920. He was assisted by R.D. Narasimham, an alumnus of the Government College of Engineering, Chengalpattu District and had also served as the Public Works Engineer, Sivaganga. Narasimham was elected a Fellow of the American Society of Engineers in 1924.

The appointment of Dann came at a time when our city was seeing a lot of activity in

● by
Karthik Bhatt

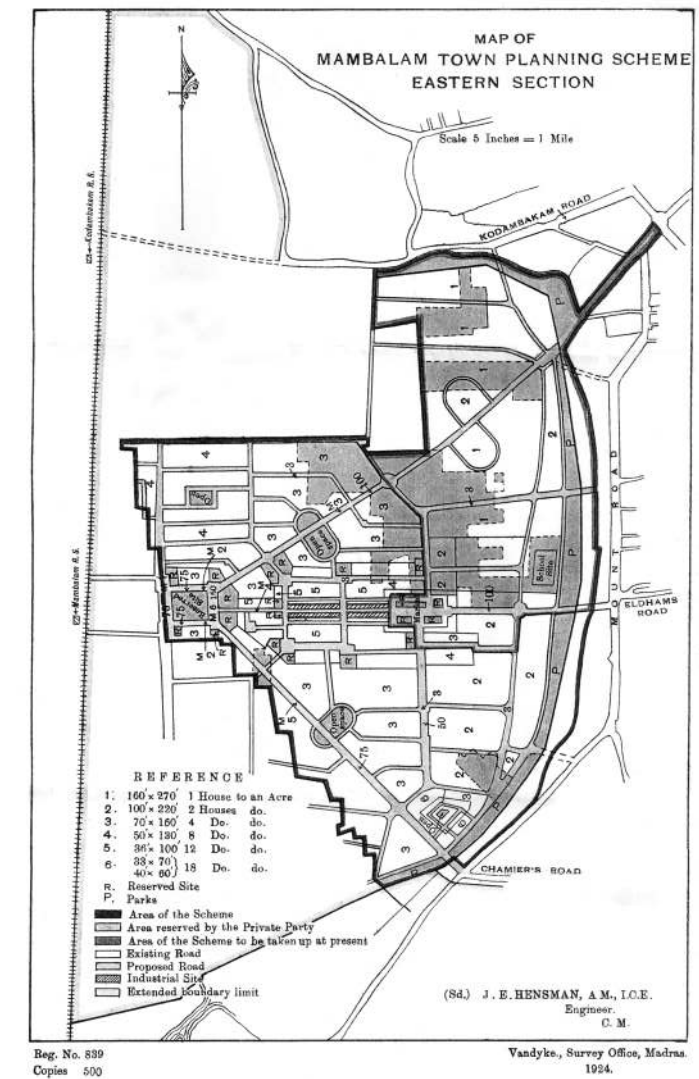
the creation of newer localities. Housing cooperative societies were starting to be formed, of which the Madras Government Servants Cooperative Building Society, formed in 1923 was the pioneer. This society's layouts included localities in South Madras such as Gopalapuram, Lakshmi-puram and Sriram Nagar. Dann's inputs were informally sought in the creation of the Gopalapuram layout, as also in Gokulam Colony, a pioneering attempt at Harijan welfare in Triplicane in the late 1920s. The Madras City and Suburban Town Planning Trust too would draw up several schemes, in localities such as Ambattur, Nungambakkam, Kodambakkam and Mylapore. That most of these would not be sanctioned by the government on the grounds that the Trust did not have funds for the execution is another story. Over the course

of his tenure, Dann also toured South India extensively, visiting places such as Madurai, Trichy, Srirangamand, and wrote articles on his findings for publications such as the *Indian Geographical Journal*.

Of the schemes proposed by the Madras City and Suburban Town Planning Trust, the one that attracted most debate, chiefly owing to its ambitious nature, was the Mambalam Scheme, in 1923. When the nuances of the scheme, including its design were widely debated upon, Dann mounted a spirited defence. Writing in an article in the *Garden Cities and Town Planning Journal*, he stated that it was essential to implement the scheme as it would relieve the

pressure of housing accommodation on the whole city to some extent, as it provided for 3000 house sites, translating to around 15,000 to 20,000 people. He also stated that criticisms of its design, particularly of the plot sizes was on account of an insufficient understanding of the concept of a garden city, which favoured an open type development rather than intensive development, as a larger percentage of land and money would be wasted on roads and other works in the latter.

The progress in town planning in Madras as a concept does not seem to have been as significant even after a decade of the introduction of legislation mandating the same. Writing in the Administration Report of the department in 1929-30, Dann remarked that the "situation called for a far more intensive and effective application of the



powers of control, of guidance and of initiative, that are vested in local authorities for the development and improvement of their towns, than has yet been seen," and noted that financial reasons were most frequently advanced as an excuse for failure to adopt a progressive town-planning policy, whereas it had to be emphasised that its neglect was a "luxury that poor local authorities could not afford".

Dann was an ardent member of the Quaker brotherhood, officially known as the Religious Society of Friends, a Protestant Christian movement founded in the 17th century. This also led him to pursue several private projects within a short span of time since his appointment as Director of Town Planning, notable amongst them being the design of the church inside the Women's Christian College, the Wesleyan Mission in Tiruvallur, and the London Mission in Erode. In Vellore, he would provide the design for the Union Medical Mission hospital and medical school for women.

These projects, while in government service obviously created a controversy, with the Madras Chamber of Commerce and the noted architect firm of Jackson and Barker lodging formal complaints with the Government of Madras. Nothing much seems to have come out of this, for Dann is noted to have designed more than twenty hospitals. He was in fact appointed Consulting Architect to the government in 1932. He also served as a member of the Town Planning committee of the Corporation of Madras and was also a special member to the Council.

Dann returned to England in 1937, where he was appointed by the Ministry of Health in connection with the hearing of appeals under the Town Planning Act. It was however a short-lived assignment, for he passed away in 1939 at the age of 56.

It remains a matter of intrigue that a man so central to the Mambalam Scheme is not commemorated in T Nagar and is largely a forgotten figure in the annals of 20th century Madras.

—The Editor



A recent-time photograph of the sandalwood (left) and ivory (right) skeletons stored in the Anatomical Museum of the Andhra Medical College, Visakhapatnam.

The God who travelled — how a Chola bronze ended up at Cern

A thousand-year journey from a Tamil temple to a Swiss physics laboratory, through colonial drawing rooms, smuggling rings, and the question of who owns a dancing god.

In the lobby of CERN, the European Organisation for Nuclear Research in Geneva, stands a two-metre bronze statue of Nataraja — Shiva as the Lord of Dance. It was gifted by the Government of India in 2004, and a plaque beside it quotes the physicist Fritjof Capra: “Modern physics has shown that the rhythm of creation and destruction is not only manifest in the turn of the seasons and in the birth and death of all living creatures, but is also the very essence of inorganic matter.”

It is a striking image: the cosmic dancer beside the particle accelerator, Hindu metaphysics meeting quantum physics. But the neat symbolism obscures a far more turbulent story — one that stretches back to the foundries of the Chola empire and passes through some of the most uncomfortable chapters of India's cultural history.

Cast in the Chola fire

The Chola dynasty, which ruled much of South India from the ninth to the thirteenth century, did many things extraordinarily well: naval warfare, irrigation engineering, temple

construction. But their most enduring legacy might be their bronzes.

Chola bronze-casting followed the lost-wax method — madhu uchchishta vidhana — a technique so refined that metallurgists today still study it. A wax model was sculpted in exquisite detail, encased in clay, and heated until the wax melted away, leaving a hollow mould. Molten bronze — an alloy of copper, tin, lead, and sometimes gold — was poured in. When the clay was broken open, a deity emerged, unique

age of the activity of God which any art or religion can boast of.”

These bronzes were not museum pieces. They were — and in many temples still are — processional deities, carried through streets during festivals, bathed, dressed, and worshipped as living presences. The Western distinction between “art object” and “religious artefact” simply does not apply.

The Colonial Drain

The British were enchanted by the bronzes almost from the moment they encountered

tidying itself up. As recently as 2020, the Norton Simon Museum was in negotiation over a Nataraja that had been stolen from a temple in Tamil Nadu in the 1950s. The statue — known as the “Sivapuram Nataraja” — had been sold through a chain of dealers, laundered through auction houses, and displayed in Pasadena for decades before Indian authorities traced its origin.

The idol wing and the modern smuggling trail

India's efforts to recover its stolen heritage have been uneven but increasingly assertive. The Tamil Nadu Idol Wing, a specialised police unit, has been at the centre of several high-profile recoveries. In 2016, the Australian government returned a Nataraja valued at five million dollars to India after it was linked to Subhash Kapoor, an art dealer who ran a smuggling operation spanning three decades and four continents.

Kapoor's network — now the subject of books and documentaries — reveals how the trade works. A bronze is stolen from a temple or illegally excavated from a site. False provenance documents are created, often citing fictitious “private collections” dating to the colonial period. The piece enters the international art market through galleries in Hong Kong, London, or New York. By the time it reaches a museum, its

origin has been buried under layers of paperwork.

The Kapoor case led to the return of over two hundred artefacts to India. But thousands remain abroad, their provenance disputed or deliberately obscured.

What belongs where

The Nataraja at CERN is not stolen. It is a modern cast, a diplomatic gift, and its presence in Geneva is entirely legitimate. But it exists in a context shaped by the illegitimate removal of its ancestors. When an Indian visitor sees Shiva dancing in a Swiss lobby, the reaction is rarely simple. There is pride — our metaphysics on the world stage. There is discomfort — why is it always our heritage that needs to travel to gain validation? And there is the unavoidable question: what about the ones that did not travel voluntarily?

This is the tension at the heart of India's heritage conversation. Preservation and repatriation, national pride and universal access, the temple and the museum — these are not problems with clean solutions. The Chola artisan who cast the original Nataraja was making a god, not a commodity. A thousand years later, the world is still trying to figure out the difference. The dancing god, as always, is unmoved.

— Barath is a B.Tech.CSE Student at VIT Vellore

● by K. Barath

and unreproducible. Every Chola bronze is, by definition, an original.

The Nataraja form crystallised during this period. Earlier depictions of Shiva dancing exist — in Badami cave sculptures, in Pallava reliefs at Mahabalipuram — but it was the Chola artisans who gave the image its definitive form: the right foot crushing Apasmara, the demon of ignorance; the ring of fire representing the cosmos; the drum in one hand beating the rhythm of creation; the flame in another signifying destruction. It is, as the art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy wrote in 1918, “the clearest im-

them. Colonial officers, amateur archaeologists, and professional dealers began acquiring them in the nineteenth century — sometimes purchased from temples in financial distress, sometimes simply taken.

The scale of removal was staggering. The British Museum holds over sixty Chola bronzes. The Victoria and Albert Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Cleveland Museum, the Norton Simon Museum in Los Angeles — the finest specimens of Tamil devotional art are scattered across institutions that most Tamil people will never visit.

This was not ancient history

God and Works of Art



Nataraja in worship, in a museum and at an airport.

When Little Feet Come Calling A Small Visitor Called Krishna

There are festivals that arrive with great ceremony. And then there are festivals that quietly leave little footprints all over your house.

In Madambakkam, Krishna Jayanti can begin with a woman at the doorway, carefully drawing a trail of tiny feet in rice flour while someone inside asks the most important question of the morning:

"Did you make the seedai?"

The milk packets have arrived, the newspaper has been collected, and the street is slowly waking up. Yet somewhere between the front door and the pooja room, it appears that a very small visitor has already arrived.

At least, his feet have.

There is something wonderfully charming about those little footprints. To an adult, they are part of a tradition. To a child, they are simply evidence that somebody small has walked into the house.

And once a visitor has been invited into a Chennai home, there is only one sensible thing to do.

"Feed him."

That is when the kitchen becomes the busiest room in the house.

Seedai, murukku, aval, payasam, appam and, naturally, butter begin making their appearance. The kitchen starts the morning looking reasonably organised and ends it looking as though a small catering company has been operating without a licence.

There is also invariably someone who wanders in saying:

"Just checking."

Nobody believes the "just".

Recipes for these delicacies often come with no written instructions at all. They have been passed down through generations in measurements such as "a little", "enough" and "you will know when it looks right".

And if something goes wrong, there is always someone who knows exactly what should have been done. Usually after it is too late.

The house, meanwhile, gets its own festive makeover. Flowers appear, lamps are lit, the little Krishna is dressed up, and the doorway receives a fresh kolam.

Then comes the transformation that children take most seriously.

They become Krishna and Radha.

A little boy appears with a flute, a peacock feather and considerably less patience than the occasion requires. A little girl is dressed carefully, jewellery adjusted and hair arranged.

Then begins the photography.

"Look here."

"Don't move."

"Smile."

The child moves.

The child stops smiling.

The peacock feather falls.

The photograph is taken anyway.

Perhaps that is what makes these celebrations so delightful. The adults are trying to preserve a perfect moment; the children are busy creating a real one.

Chennai has long embraced this playful side of Krishna Jayanti, with children taking part in costume activities, music and cultural programmes. Recent celebrations have even included 'Kutti Krishna' contests, turning the traditional dressing-up into a community event.

But a festival does not need a stage to become memorable. Sometimes it is a child walking past the gate in costume. A neighbour arriving with a plate of homemade sweets. A plate going out and, eventually, coming back with something else in it.

The contents change. The conversation grows. And nobody seems to notice that "just dropping this off" has become a 40-minute visit.

That is one of the pleasures of a Chennai neighbourhood. Festivals have a way of turning people who merely live next door into people who know whether you have made enough seedai.

By evening, music may drift through the neighbourhood – a bhajan from a nearby home or a community gathering. Children sing, adults join in, and somebody who came only to listen for a few minutes discovers that leaving has somehow become unnecessary.

"Just for a little while" is, after all, one of Chennai's more flexible expressions.

And then, almost unnoticed, the day begins to settle.

The flowers are no longer quite as fresh.

The kolam has acquired a few accidental footprints of its own.

The little Krishna has abandoned the flute.

The seedai has disappeared with remarkable efficiency. And the house is quiet again. Except that it isn't quite the same house. Perhaps that is the part of the festival we notice only as we grow older!

As children, we remember the dressing up, the sweets and the excitement of seeing those tiny footprints appear on the floor.

As adults, we begin to notice the people behind the tradition – the mother who remembers the recipe, the grandmother who still knows exactly how the kolam should look, the neighbour who sends over a plate, the child who is being taught something that was once taught to us.

Traditions rarely survive because someone formally announces that they must. They survive because someone says, *"Come, I'll show you."*

And someone else watches. Years later, that person is the one drawing the footprints.

That is perhaps what those little feet really bring into a home – not simply the memory of a familiar story, but the quieter feeling of continuity.

The city changes. Houses change. Children grow up.

Even the kolams become a little more adventurous.

But someone still makes seedai.

Someone still draws those tiny feet.

Someone still tells a child to stand still for a photograph.

And someone still sends a steel container across the road saying, *"Take some. There is plenty."*

There probably isn't. There never is. But that has never stopped Chennai from sharing.

And perhaps that is the loveliest thing Krishna Jayanti leaves behind – not grandeur, but generosity; not ceremony, but connection.

We may begin by welcoming a little Krishna into the house, but somewhere along the way, we end up welcoming back pieces of our own childhood. Which may explain why, years later, we still draw those tiny feet.

Or perhaps we know that once Krishna has been invited in, Chennai's hospitality has a strict no-return policy.

The footprints may disappear by morning. The memories, thankfully, don't.

The seedai, however, is another matter.

– Priyanka Soman

Tamil Nadu – a pioneer in bagasse based paper manufacture

I have never understood why people used to think for a long time that Tamil Nadu was conservative and averse to growth. I have said this many times because for some reason, the state never drew attention to itself, or its achievements. They may not be glamorous but the state's businessmen set up new industries and found cost effective solutions to many things. For instance the newsprint industry started using the less expensive bagasse for paper manufacturing for the first time in the world. It was the brainchild of S Visvanathan who had set up Seshasayee Paper and Boards (SPB) to use bagasse.

Viswanathan was an early pioneer who deserved much more appreciation than he got in those publicity averse days. Bagasse is the dry, pulpy, fibrous residue that remains after sugarcane or sorghum stalks are crushed to extract their juice. It serves as a viable, eco-friendly non-wood alternative for manufacturing newsprint and printing paper, reducing reliance on softwood timber which was a far more expensive raw material.

Sugarcane waste is generated in massive quantities by sugar mills, making it a readily available local resource for paper manufacturing. The Tamil Nadu government showed great interest in the project initially, but later dragged its feet. There were many years of delay mainly due to rupee devaluation which happened without any prior warning that made the project prohibitively expensive. There were many sceptics who dismissed this project off as unviable as bagasse was not so easily available.

Not giving up, Visvanathan revived the project in the 1970s. Fortunately, in 1979, the government decided to give 100 percent excise relief for paper manufactured with at least 75 percent bagasse content. TNPL started working in real earnest. It chose the technology from US-based Beloit research centre. Printability with this technology was established when *The Hindu* newspaper was able to successfully use the paper made with bagasse. In spite of all these experiments which were moving in the right direction, it still was not cost effective. The project may not have taken off without the World Bank stepping in.

In 1977 a World Bank representative who was studying this technology visited SPB's plant in Erode and was very impressed with the feasibility studies that the company had done for bagasse based newsprint. He recommended it as an ideal candidate for funding. The World Bank then approached the company and offered it a 100 million dollar loan. The IDBI too stepped in. The Tamil Nadu government also was willing to put in part of the funding.

While the funding problem was getting resolved, the project had to find bagasse. Fortunately, it was possible to locate five sugar mills within a radius of 100 kilometres. These mills were persuaded to part with bagasse in exchange for the company agreeing to maintain their coal fired boilers.

Finding various innovative ways to overcome hurdles, TNPL started supplying newsprint on a regular basis to users and has not looked back since. Today it is the largest bagasse based paper manufacturer in the world.

– Sushila Ravindranath

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

Another rising girl talent in Chennai TT scene

Like the male players, a few female talents have also come into the limelight in Chennai's Table Tennis scene. There have been players like Vidya Ramachandran, Pallavi Hari, Arul Selvi, Bhuvaneswari and M.S. Mythili who performed with distinction for Tamil Nadu in national level competitions and represented the country too in the past. A Chennai girl residing in Anna Nagar, 19-year-old paddler Shriya Anand, is now being

seen as a very promising talent by her coach – former India and Tamil Nadu star Sharath Kamal, at his SK Academy.

Shriya's parents are doctors. Her mother Dr. Mekhala, who spoke to *Madras Musings*, said that they had shifted to Chennai from their native Tiruchirapalli so that Shriya's development in the sport could be on professional lines under the guidance of good coaches. Sure enough, Shriya with her all round game, started

● by
V. Venkataramana

winning multiple national and international level competitions. In 2024, Shriya emerged as the youngest women's state champion as well as the Under 15 and Under 17 champion.

Talking to *Madras Musings* she says, "My goal is to bring glory to India at the global level. I have already been play-

ing against some international players, including Olympians." Her current world ranking in the Under 19 age group Singles is 38. Her mother adds that "Shriya is training intensively with this goal, and to play in more international competitions, including the Olympics."

Shriya's achievements till date include a silver medal in the 2026 World Table Tennis Youth Contender at Novi Sad, Serbia in the Under 19 Girls Singles. In the 2025 edition of this competition in Georgia, Shriya won the gold medal. At Amman, in the Jordan edition of this competition, Shriya won bronze, at Panagyurishte in Bulgaria she won the bronze medal in the Under 19 mixed doubles event. In the same tournament in 2022 at Morocco, Shriya won a bronze medal in the Under 17 age group Singles category. And, at the 2018 Prague Grand Prix Table Tennis tournament in the Czech Republic, Shriya bagged the gold in the Under 12 Girls Singles, kicking off her successful climb in winning tough competitions.

"Winning a gold medal in the Olympics and the World Table Tennis Championship and emerging as a role model

for aspiring younger players is my ultimate goal," says Shriya, whose current national ranking is 12.

At the national level, Shriya has represented Tamil Nadu in the Khelo India Games in 2022 and 2023 and in the Ultimate Table Tennis (UTT) national championships between 2018 and 2025 and bagged silver and bronze medals in the Under 12, Under 15, Under 17 and Under 19 age group Singles and Doubles competitions.

Answers to Quiz

1. Mrs. Klugg's Bioscope
2. It was the first English newspaper of Madras to be owned by an Indian and became the city's first daily newspaper in 1853
3. S.S.Vasan
4. Thiruvotturiyur
5. Madras University
6. Tamilnadu Startup and Innovation Mission
7. Youth Association for Classical Music – YACM, the other one being YMCA
8. Agnishwar Jayaprakash
9. IIT Madras
10. Colouring it with creation of Tie-Dye patterns



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

 Amalgamations Group	 ASHOK LEYLAND Koi Manzil Door Nahin	 Brakes India Private Limited	 CHATNATH TRUST	 IIFL SECURITIES	
 THE HINDU The Hindu Group of Publications	 LOKAVANI SINCE 1959	 LARSEN & TOUBRO	 MRF	 MURUGAPPA	 NAVITAS LIFE SCIENCES
 Rane Rane Group	 RAYALA GROUP	 SAINT-GOBAIN	 SANMAR	 sify	 SUNDARAM FINANCE Enduring values. New age thinking.
 TAJ COROMANDEL CHENNAI	 TCS	 TATA CONSULTANCY SERVICES	 TVS TVS MOTOR COMPANY	 WILD GARDEN Cafe at Amethyst	 Z O H O
					 Sundram Fasteners Limited

Since 1856,
patently leaders –
A WELLWISHER