

WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

MADRAS MUSINGS

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"Excuse? Traffic of course! That's the fashionable excuse nowadays!"

What's your excuse?

Chennai's chronic latecomers never had it so good.

"Why are you late?" snaps the irate spouse/parent/teacher/boss/host... whatever.

And pat comes the single-word answer: "Traffic."

That vast word hides many truths about the causes of delay, which run the gamut from forgetting to set your alarm, having unrealistic views on how much time you have, completely underestimating how long it takes some of us to merely 'get already', or just being incapable of placing any value on anyone else's time.

And you can do nothing. You know you're looking at the millennium's most bare-faced liar, yet you cannot challenge these excuses.

The problem is, you've been there yourself, so you know what it's like...

Traffic has also created an unhealthy sort of oneupmanship in a society already over-riddled with competition.

"I got stuck the other day for an entire hour," you boast.

"Big deal - one hour," your companion scoffs. "I got stuck for 3½ hours, that too behind a smoke-belching vehicle, and missed my flight."

"Factor in time taken" is the new basis for planning anything that involves road usage, with some roads arbitrarily rewriting the old rules about 'peak-hour traffic'.

Both weather and water problems are now depressed, as they have been completely replaced by Traffic as conversation pieces.

Having become such a rare phenomenon, maybe we should present annual awards to those who display punctuality - even occasionally.

Ranjitha Ashok

Rebuilding Foreshore's fishing hamlets

(By Sriram V.)

The fishing hamlets that dot the Marina are probably the oldest and the most continuously inhabited parts of the city of Madras that is Chennai. Today, the various clusters have more or less merged into one, though the constituent areas are called by various names such as Srinivasapuram, Doomingkuppam and Nochikuppam as you travel down San Thomé High Road to the Beach. A feeder road that runs parallel to San Thomé High Road, and acts as a bypass during peak hours, separates the houses from the beach and in the early mornings and evenings a thriving fish market operates on the side of this road.

These villages have seen several changes with the passage of time. The first was in the 1970s when the then newly set up Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board built multi-storeyed tenements along the beachfront for the benefit of those living there. However, it was really in 2003 when the first threat to the very existence of these hamlets came when, what with rapid urbanisation, a plan came up to 'beautify' the Marina and also develop housing for multinationals along the beachfront on the lines of Shanghai, in

collaboration with a Malaysian firm. Rehabilitation of the displaced fisherfolk was not to be anywhere near the place where they needed to be - namely the sea. A volley of protests followed and then with the tsunami of 2004, these plans were quietly dropped. During that natural calamity, the area bore the brunt of the sea's fury with many lives lost.

Despite this, and with an important road passing through it, the area has been greatly neglected. Fires are frequent in the tenements and the huts that surround them and even basic amenities such as toilets, clean water and electricity are denied to the residents. Matters may now change and things may look up with the Government taking up the project of rebuilding 7320 tenements between Nochikuppam and Srinivasapuram. There are at present 2862 tenements in four-storeyed buildings, all of them in terrible condition for which the saline air is largely being blamed. The cost of rebuilding is estimated to be Rs. 138.10 crore. Part of the funding is expected to come from tsunami relief funds as well and many of those affected by the disaster

(Continued on page 2)



Fishers' tenements awaiting rebuilding.

The Editor's Viewpoint

Some plain-speaking on City festivals

Before the British there was no Madras. There was no Chennai either. And that is a historical fact which needs to be recognised by everyone interested in truth and not fancy. Yes, there was Tamizhagam, but that had little to do with Madras or Chennai till nearly 150 years after 1639. Which is why we at *Madras Musings* have not only kept Madras and Tamizhagam separate but have also always embraced both identities of the city as one and have kept referring to it as Madras that is Chennai.

From earliest times, it was Madras in English and Chennai in Tamil, even in official publications; so, there was never a duality about it. But of late there has been a regrettable tendency on the part of a few to paint Madras as a city of Western-oriented elitists and Chennai as the voice of the people, even if those voices are in such Western-developed media as films and TV, loudspeakers and posters.

A recent summing-up of Chennai Sangamam, that successful city festival, is a classic example of this. This review, a splendid example of that Western discipline called sociology, has vitiating with its divisive language what was viewed as a city festival for one and all, "the city's elite" and "the urban multitude". The review contends that the Sangamam was cosmopolitan in its sweep and that the public spaces of the city reverberated to folk forms. Agreed - and the city has emerged much the better for it. But can we also look at the venues that were used for such events - parks, beachfronts and city malls? Now what are these locations if not elitist? Are they not the creations of an urban upper middle class, a bourgeois ordering of space? And let us not forget that if the events were not happening in these parks and city malls, they were taking place in the forecourts of five-star hotels. Yet another example of people-frequented venues?

And as for Town, which perhaps qualified as cosmopolitan long before the term became fashionable, and the oldest part of the city, the North, where the urban multitude is at its most congested, they remained completely left out, neglected as they have been for decades. The reason? Town and its earliest hinterland do not have parks, malls and open spaces, the kind of structures that are needed to support a people's festival. Above all, they also cannot accommodate cars, the kind in which the city's elite travel to witness people's festivals.

The essay, which sounded like a Western-educated academician's social critique, claimed that the Sangamam brought Carnatic music and dance to the public parks and out from "claustrophobic *sabhas*". Has this reviewer forgotten that till not so very long ago Carnatic music did belong to the streets when *nagaswaram* artistes performed in temple processions and musicians sang in temporary *pandals* outside temples? Was it not then interpreted as crass religious humbug and therefore banished from the streets? And as for dance, let us not forget that had it not been for a mid-Victorian morality that brought in legislation in the 1920s, dance would still be performed in streets and temple precincts and not in "claustrophobic *sabhas*".

The Paean for Sangamam has also conveniently forgotten other truths. That Mylapore Festival was really the first of its kind in the city in recent times, involving the public-at-large with its open air events, concerts in parks (yes, but then Mylapore is bourgeois and perhaps its attempts do not count), and folk art performances and demonstrations. It was an attempt

(Continued on page 5)

The mother of all excuses

The Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority has offered what can be considered the mother of all lame excuses when it comes to explaining its tardiness in demolishing illegal constructions that have been so declared by the High Court. It has claimed that it is unable to find any bidders for its tender floated for the demolition.

All this is very puzzling to *The Man from Madras Musings*. You only have to look around the city walls to see bright posters publicising an agency that claims to demolish any building in 48 hours! Or is that applicable only to genuine, Corporation-approved buildings?

It is quite amazing that in a city where buildings vanish within a day or two and wreckers are doing great business, the regulatory authority is unable to find anyone to help it.

Gokhale Hall latest

Demolition and wrecking nowadays always reminds *The Man from Madras Musings* of Gokhale Hall. The latest is that the Corporation has asked for certain clarifications from the Old (sorry) Young Men's Indian Association. That body has not replied despite a couple of reminders.

The YMIA when contacted adamantly claims that the building is "unsafe for habitation" and that "parts of it fell in 1996". This is patently untrue. MMM is familiar with the building and all that has happened is that one wall, a load-bearing member, it is true, has subsided leaving a big gap between it and the ceiling. This forced the relocation of gym equipment to the ground floor. That was all. The Hall has survived ten years after that and MMM has seen the restoration of buildings that were in far worse conditions.

Buildings like the YMIA were constructed to last and not all the "unfit for occupation" certificates will stand a genuine scrutiny. It is high time that the Government woke up

to the fact that it is a historic location and that it needs protection, restoration and re-use as a cultural centre.

Waste & Energy

Most organisations and corporate bodies of Madras that is Chennai claim to take the issue of waste and energy management very seriously, though the continuing emphasis on glass and concrete makes *The Man from Madras Musings* think otherwise. Be that as it may, an automotive components manufacturer in the city appears to have taken matters a bit too far. MMM was tickled pink to notice a poster displayed in the toilet which stated that the company took

its Energy Management Scheme very seriously and that its policy was to "Reduce Waste, Recycle and Reuse"!

Oh, for a camera!

That has often been the reaction of *The Man from Madras Musings* while going walkabout in our city when he notices many things ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. Recently we, or should MMM say some people who think they own the city, celebrated the birthday of their leader and hoardings and display boards erected for the purpose are still in various stages of being dismantled. Some may never be removed until Mother Nature does something.

What took the cake, however, though rather appropriately for a birthday, was a city bus with a huge poster hailing and feting the leader stuck on its rear by one of the unions affiliated to the leader's party. Just above the poster was a painted sign which said that the bus was public property and ought not to be disfigured by posters! Can you beat that for irony?

Bus Day

It was only recently that *The Man from Madras Musings* had written about Valentine's Day. Now MMM finds our city also has a Bus Day. No, it is not a day spent in the worship of buses. On the other hand, it is some kind of merrymaking by students which also involves the misuse or abuse of buses by climbing on to the roof and probably dancing there as well. After all, when film heroes, today's role models, dance on train roofs, can students not do something as close to it as possible?

This year, according to the police, Bus Day passed off peacefully, thanks to tighter

passenger seat maintaining a continuous monologue through a megaphone which is for the benefit of all those standing in the vicinity and includes fruit-mongers, loiterers, those who park cars, others who think they do, etc.

One such recipient of this advice is the owner of a pharmacy opposite the humble abode of MMM. This man puts out an enormous sandwich board each morning on the road, effectively blocking what is left of the sidewalk and also a part of the road. Along comes the police car and the voice within commands the man to remove the board. The man does so. The car moves on and the man returns the board to its

clients. But what do you call it when the recipient also gets mailers *en masse*? MMM was in precisely this situation when a multinational finance company of repute sent him 12 mailers of the same scheme on the same day. And all by courier and each to be signed for separately.

On asking if this was the case with any other recipient, the courier boy grinned broadly and said that this was the fifth bundle he was delivering for the day and everyone else had asked the same question.

What really happens is that most marketing outfits collect addresses from all kinds of sources and never weed out duplication and, presto! people like MMM get more than their fair share.

University buildings

The Man from Madras Musings has a humble request to all those involved in the restoration of *Senate House* – if they are still involved with the University and the work. Can they not now cast their benign glances at the main building of the University? A fortnight ago, MMM had visited the place and found that the exterior was being given a coat of paint and the grille work (called *jali* in Hindi and for some reason as 'jolly' in Tamil) was being cleaned up. Rumour had it that all this was due to some powerful team visiting the place.

The interior, however, had not been looked into. There were loose wires (the kind that cause short circuits and make old Chennai buildings go up in flames) and there were broken windows and corridors that had not been swept for years. There was a toilet with dripping taps and a door that had to be secured by means of either a string or simply will power. Now, do general hygiene and cleanliness not form part of an educational institution's framework?

– MMM

SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

security. What puzzles MMM is the tension that precedes and the relief that succeeds Bus Day. Why not have a strict set of dos and don'ts that the students need to follow year after year? These are already in existence, apparently. But, and here is the rub, unless someone complains, the police, which long ago stopped being proactive, cannot take action. Now who will complain? It is another of those Catch 22 situations.

Mobile police

It was only in the last issue of *Madras Musings* that *The Man from Madras Musings* had commented on the way the police cars remain stationary, oblivious of what is happening around them. But MMM was wrong and would like to correct himself before the police force notices.

The cars once in a while let out a foghorn-like sound, which by itself does enough to reduce the lives of geriatrics in the neighbourhood and also to scare cows into a permanent decline. The car then launches forward with the officer in the

original position... and life goes on just as it used to. This happens day after day and neither the policeman nor the pharmacist (and, to be frank, MMM also) ever appears to tire of this charade.

The helmet story

Yet another twist has been added to the helmet debate after the Government decided to make helmet-wearing compulsory from June 1st onwards. A lawyer of the city, *The Man from Madras Musings* learns, has appealed against this in the courts, stating that the lack of helmets alone does not result in fatalities. 95% of the road accidents are caused by poor road lighting, very poor quality of road construction and the terrible state in which most roads are. There is much to be said for both sides of the argument.

Mass mail

The Man from Madras Musings always believed that mass mailing meant an organisation or an agency sending out mailers to prospective

REBUILDING FORESHORE'S FISHING HAMLETS

(Continued from page 1)

are also expected to be rehabilitated in the new shelters. One of the principal sources of funding will be the World Bank-funded Emergency Tsunami Reconstruction Project.

In reality, the number of families residing in this area is estimated at 12,000. Those who cannot be covered by the present reconstruction are expected to be rehabilitated elsewhere. The Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board has begun finalising lists of families who will benefit from the plan and at present all but Srinivasapuram,

in which more than 5000 families live, have been covered. The list of beneficiaries will soon be published at taluk offices and then the public has been invited to respond. The aim is to make the process transparent, with a view to minimising social and environmental impact. Tenders will then be announced and construction is expected to begin in July 2007 for completion by October 2008.

All the tenements will be four-storeyed and will be on seven foot stilts, the area beneath which will be used for storage. The stilts are also ex-

pected to protect residents from flooding. The plan is to use pre-fabricated slabs and speed up the process of construction. All tenements will have a bedroom, a kitchen, a toilet and a bathroom. Electricity supply and water supply connections will be provided.

Last week, model tenements were fabricated and the public was invited to see them. Parts of the area abutting San Thomé beach have been cordoned off to begin construction. What, however, remains to be seen is the public reaction and how accurate the list of beneficiaries will be. Politics is very active in

the area and party rivalry may also throw spanners into the works. In addition, aesthetics and ergonomic practices are not really associated with anything that the TNSCB usually does. Will it be able to do something different and at the same time cater to the residents' needs? Only time will tell. Yet another issue is the attitude of the residents themselves, who do nothing to keep their environment clean. The expectation is always that the Government ought to do something. Unless that attitude changes, the new tenements may also very soon degenerate into eyesores.

A big 'Thank You' to 34 of you

We publish below the list of donors who have, between 16.2.07 and 15.3.07, added to the support Chennai Heritage and its voice, *Madras Musings*, have already received. We thank all of them for their support for the causes Chennai Heritage espouses

– CHENNAI HERITAGE

Rs. 50: Sridharanarayanan, T., Sobandevu Reddiar, V.
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Rs. 150: Rajan, R.; Ramakrishnan, R.; Srinivasan, D.
Rs. 200: Cherian, V.M., Murari Rao, P.
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Rs. 401: Varki, Anna

OUR READERS WRITE



8 hours to oblivion

B. Vijayaraghavan's piece on venomous snakes of the *viriyam/veeran/moorkhan* species (MM, November 1st) makes no mention of the dreaded *kattu viriyam* or banded krait.

Many years ago, my late friend, Charlie 'One Hand' D'Cruz (so named for obvious reasons), was bitten by a *kattu viriyam* while snoozing on the verandah of Seelva's Bungalow, a stately ruin which stood on open ground behind the Local Fund Dispensary not far from the Sembiam Panchayat Board office in Perambur.

Commotion ensued. The villain was chased, cornered, despatched, stretched out and its rings counted. It was well known that the victim would live for as many hours as the snake had rings. There were eight. Charlie 'One Hand' was on his way to oblivion. He indeed crossed the great divide eight hours later!

The *kattu viriyam's* poison becomes more virulent as it grows older. It also becomes shorter with age, shedding its length from its tail end, lessening thereby the number of its rings and, correspondingly, the projected life-span, in hours, of its unfortunate victims.

Malcolm Murphy
18, Northumberland House
Gaisford Street
London NW5 2EA, England

The driving seat

MMM's reflections about the dream job of being chauffeur to a political boss (MM, February 16th) are far short of the facts. The job actually goes beyond the privilege of being a road hog and getting away with it. Yesteryear grapevine had it that a certain very senior political leader (happily still with us) began his career as, as that peerless Tamil phrase

goes, a *yeddy-boody* (meaning lackey, menial) to that grand old man of Karnataka, S. Nijalingappa, and sometimes his duties were elevated to the role of chauffeur.

The tide in his affairs happened during one such trip when he eavesdropped on some vital information being discussed by 'syndicate' leaders and spilled the beans to the leader of the 'Indicate', Indira Gandhi. The rest, as the saying goes, is history and the man has been in the driving seat ever since and going so fast, even nemesis has not overtaken him.

C.G. Prasad
9, C.S. Mudali street
Kondithope, Chennai 600 079

A daily routine

With reference to the mention of 'Loudspeaker culture' (MM, March 1st), the marriage and other functions take place in the marriage halls only for a few days in a month, whereas the loudspeaker nuisance is a daily routine in some centres of worship at all odd hours. Surely this is noise pollution too — and needs action to be taken against it.

K.R.S. Sadhashivan
9A, C.K.S. Nagar
Gobichettipalayam
Erode 638 452

Poor pedestrians!

Sriram V. deserves commendation for recently highlighting the major problems faced by pedestrians and senior citizens.

The situation is no different on Poonamallee High Road where, despite the Bhaktavatsalam Congress Government acquiring some 20 feet of space for widening the road, pedestrians are still forced to use the road, as pavements have been taken over by waste accumulation and stench. The zebra crossings don't exist, making it difficult for pedestrians to cross the road at Egmore Bridge, Flowers Road/Poonamallee High Road crossing and even opposite Breeze Hotel; road safety can only be assured if the Police prosecute car drivers who don't observe rules. The Police personnel have to play a proactive role to protect pedestrians.

In regard to good overbridges, why not follow the example of Bangkok and provide escalators which people can use to cross roads. In the main thoroughfares of Bangkok, traffic moves fast and no pedestrian crosses the road but uses overbridges.

I am sure if an NGO starts a movement to demand an increased share of road space for pedestrians, then the bureaucracy in the Government or the Corporation will wake up to the needs of the poor pedestrian!

Anantharaman
Chennai 600 041

Isn't a clean beach a beautiful beach...?

The Chennai Corporation is all set to change the face of Elliot's Beach. Corporation Commissioner Rajesh Lakhoni made this evident during a public consultation held at the Lions' Police Boys' Club at Uroor-Olcott Kuppam in Besant Nagar recently.

The beach development plan prepared by the MEASI Academy of Architecture was finalised last month. The project envisages "beautification" of the beach by building a gazebo at the beach centre, setting up small fountains, laying a road parallel to the beach, and revamping the medians, the existing jogging track and the skating rink. The gyms at the beach will be expanded and provided with more equipment. Special facilities will be provided for the disabled. The project cost is estimated at Rs. 2-2.5 crore and work will start right away.

A gathering of about 30 people, including residents of Besant Nagar and Adyar, environmental activists, fishermen and other citizens with concerns were present. The residents felt that the beach was good as it was and there was no need to touch it. Some suggested that it was more important to keep the beach clean as garbage kept piling on the beachfront. Most people expressed the fear that the use of too much concrete might spoil the natural beauty of the beach. Lakhoni assured everyone that much of the sand would remain untouched, that they had nothing to fear and that beach maintenance would be assured by privatisation.

There was a general feeling among those present that issues concerning the use of public spaces were not being debated openly.

Lakhoni responded by saying that "infinite" consultation is not possible and there was "pressure" on the State Government to deliver. But he assured everyone that the suggestions of those concerned would be incorporated in the plan. He also said that the plan outline would be displayed prominently at the beach so that all beach-users would be aware of the proposals. He also hinted that the beach beautification plans were part of the Government's efforts to promote tourism. The Commissioner gave those concerned one month's time to get back with more suggestions.

Nithyanand Jayaraman, an independent researcher and journalist, said, "The beach is an important environmental resource. Already a number of

Fancy ideas not needed

(by Vincent D'Souza)

A few weeks ago, there was a party on Elliot's Beach. There wasn't any chilled beer, nor were there fizzy drinks. But there was a lot of food.

As the fireworks lit up the southern sky as part of the finale of 'Chennai Sangamam' arts festival hosted in the city, the party got better and went into the night.

Gathered on the sands off the Cozee restaurant point, were eight young men who once used to spend every other evening on these sands. Through school and through college, they had shared their highs and lows on these sands. They had even shared stories of their romances and dalliances on this beach.

And then, over a span of a few months, they had broken up. To go to different corners of the country and of the world where their jobs took them. But they did not forget Elliot's Beach. And they came back to it that week. To celebrate the old times.

Bessie Beach has been a part of the lives of thousands of people of this city. And now the Chennai Corporation has yet another plan to 'beautify' this urban heritage expanse.

During the course of 2007, something like Rs. 25 crore will be spent on a project to beautify our beach from the Port Trust end in the north to the Thiruvanniyur coast in the south.

A few fancy drawings and projects have been drawn up. Typically, the plans include fancy ideas — gushing fountains, tiled paths, colourful sun-shades, extensive landscaping, tropical avenue trees, swank washrooms and smart cabins for hawkers on the sands.

Ask the neighbourhood's beach-comber what he or she wants and he or she says: clean sands, clean shoreline and unpolluted water. Nothing more. Nothing else.

Why aren't City Fathers and the officials listening to the young people, the beach walkers, the hawkers and the *kuppam* residents on what is best for all of us?

constructions on the seafront, violating CRZ rules, are causing harm. Care should be taken to ensure that the Olive Ridley turtles nesting here are not harmed. Also the beach should be declared as a 'plastic-free' zone. These measures will go a long way in protecting the beach environment."

K. Saravanan, a fisherman from Uroor Kuppam, said, "If roads and pathways come up, the space used by fishermen to park boats will be reduced. Also, the beachside vendors may no longer have enough places to keep their push carts or kiosks if the plan is executed."

Those who attended the meeting have created an online community which can be reached at civilsocietyrights@googlegroups.com to gather public opinion on the proposed development.

Vidya Venkat

An earlier *Adyar Times* report adds:

Chennai Corporation officials, speaking at a public meeting organised by the Forum of Adyar Civic Exnora at Elliot's Beach, said that the civic body was open to ideas and inputs from the public for its plans to 'beautify' Elliot's Beach, Besant Nagar.

The meeting was attended by representatives of 'Friends of Beach', Maths Science Institute, Madras Institute of Devel-

opment Studies, Ability Foundation, *Adyar Times*, Tree Vigilant group and a few residents of Besant Nagar and Palavakkam.

The 'beautification' plan was circulated among the participants by the officials. The MEASI Academy plan includes a central pathway with a floor of decorative tiles and palm trees on either side to be laid perpendicular to the seashore, a six-metre landscape with seating facilities inside the beach, prefabricated fountains, pavements and kiosks (for vendors), sunshades off the pavement, stylised toilets, gyms with modern equipment, landscaped amphitheatre on the central sand dune and a play area for children near the skating rink.

Some of those present said that previous attempts to 'beautify' this beach — landscaping, installing play equipment, constructing small gyms, laying of lawns and planting trees — had come to nought. Others said that basic issues like storm and drainwater being let into the sands and piling up of garbage on the seashore have never been addressed.

Others felt that it would be better to interact further with the Corporation officials and look at the process of this whole project instead of merely debating the pros and cons of what MEASI had submitted. A follow-up meeting was scheduled.

READABILITY PLEASE

Dear Readers,

As letters from readers increase, we are receiving more and more **hand written** letters, many of them in a hand so small and illegible or large and scrawled as to be unreadable. Often this leads to our discarding a letter, particularly if some part of it is unreadable.

If you wish us to consider your letter for publication, please type it with enough space between lines or write it using a medium hand, clearly dotting the 'i-s' and crossing the 't-s'.

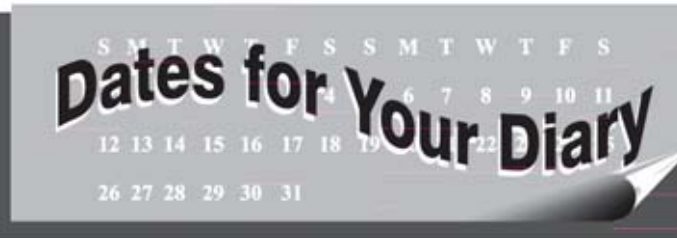
Many readers also try to fill every square centimetre of a postcard space, making reading or editing impossible.

Please help us to consider your letters more favourably by making them more legible for us.

THE EDITOR



A Shaju John photograph.



Till March 21: *Art Festival* – Art camp and exhibition (at Lalit Kala Akademi).
Till March 24: *Women – Struggle & Triumph*, a photographic exhibition by Shaju John, who has spent 20 years behind the lens in India, freezing colour, emotion, joy, sorrow, beauty, and the human spirit. This exhibition showcases the hard labour of women in the salt pans near Pondicherry (at Alliance Francaise).
Till March 28: An exhibition to showcase the manmade works of Tara Publishing (at Alliance Francaise).
Till March 28: *Baroda Revisited* - Exhibition by artists from Baroda (at Artworld).
Till March 30: *Enshrined in Ink*, an exhibition of recent works by Sirpi Jayaraman (at Forum Art Gallery).
March 19: *Book Launch* – Max Mueller Bhavan and Oxford Uni-

versity Press launch the book *200 Years of Immanuel Kant* by Prof. A. Raghuramaraju (at University of Madras, 10.30 a.m.).
March 23: *Art Auction* organised by Taj Coromandel in association with the Association of British Scholars, Artworld and Rotary (at Taj Coromandel).
March 24: *Military Band* – The Military Band from the Officers Training Academy (OTA) performs (at Rukmini Arangam Open-air theatre, Kalakshetra, 6.30 p.m.).



Work from Tara.

March 28-April 11: *Captured Forever*, recent photographs by Karthik Venkatraman (at Forum Art Gallery).
March 21-30: *Painting Exhibitions* - The work of Portosh Lal from March 21 to 27, the work of ASG Vasudev from March 22 to 28 and the work of Michael Irudayaraj from March 24 to 30 (at Lalit Kala Akademi).
March 31: *Dance Recital* – Bharata Natyam by Lokesh Raj (at Rukmini Arangam, Kalakshetra, 6.30 p.m.).



A Karthik Venkatraman photograph.

Sangamam created something special

“In our folk songs lie the stories of our lives”

The earthy, husky voice carries the proud, yet poignant, words over the park to city ears, while city hearts keep time with pounding rustic drums. The captivated audience is a strikingly mixed group of people – a significant feature of the recently concluded Chennai Sangamam, the quintessential *Theru Vizha* or Street Festival.

During the six-day carnival featuring 60 art groups, 700 participating artists, and 37 art forms, classicism stood shoulder to shoulder with folk art forms, with Carnatic musicians later describing the experience as ‘electrifying’. The Sangamam’s spectrum also included theatre, literary fests, classical dance performances, art exhibitions and music shows that featured rock and jazz, choir and piano concerts, and artists from neighbouring states.

Logistics was certainly a big challenge, with the Government and corporates playing key roles in providing an efficient support system. Volunteers came from among the people – students, NGOs, certain Rotary Clubs, and individuals. “This was a People’s Fest, taken care of by the people,” says volunteer, Chennai Sangamam,

Aruna Subramaniam. “The local support was far beyond our expectations.” She points out that over the years a certain disconnect had developed between people and folk art forms, which were, typically, seen on television, on national programmes or at international events. The concept of Chennai Sangamam grew

around 4000 people at a time. Aruna makes special mention of volunteer Satish David with regard to park management. My visits to these open-air fiestas endorse this view. The parks seemed to take on fresh life in their new role of showcasing greenery and art. And Chennai, as if realising that the Sangamam was in her honour, was at her balmiest best. Even mosquitoes



out of a perceived need to bridge these gaps and fight elitism in art.

Parks, beaches, streets of historical character like the Mada Veedhis in Mylapore, city landmarks, auditoriums – wherever crowds gathered – were chosen venues. Performances were also held in schools, colleges, old-age homes, shopping centres – even Central Jail. The parks appear to have drawn tremendous re-



couldn’t keep the crowds away. The audience revelled in the freedom typical of open-air entertainments. Crowd participation was heartwarming – clapping, cheers, laughter, wolf-whistles, they gave the artistes their all. *Maamas* and *maamis* who had so far kept *taalam* to the most pristine of Carnatic music, now tapped their feet and nodded vigorously to the

beat of another music, while young faces used to blowing ear-piercing whistles as their bodies moved freely in uninhibited street dancing, now sat quiet as classical voices soared. Artistes dressed as ‘village elders’ moved amongst the crowds, removing ‘dhristi’ in the time-honoured manner, playing out the roles of concerned, protective seniors, integral elements in all our lives. The integration of social classes worked better than we thought, says Aruna – although there were some ‘honourable’ exceptions who hesitated to climb out of the box. You talk at random to the audience. They are filled with appreciation. “Our kids finally have a true picture of our arts. This is the way to keep our folk arts alive, not just confined to villages or small towns. And what a break from tensions and routine – from TV, malls and movies.”

Performances were brisk, not laden with Chief Guests, speeches or even laboured translations. The flow between artistes and audience was as simple and straightforward as the milieu the performers came from. There were sublime lessons. The *nattu paadal* was descriptive of specific realities, and carried its own lessons. “How many cups of coffee must my mother serve to all these men who come to ‘see’ my sister”, one line went, drawing attention to the evils of the dowry system. Another points out that the images raised by cinema music are all unreal. “The key word was ‘Sangamam’,” says Aruna, explaining the ‘mix’ of so many art forms, traditional, classical and contemporary. This, after all, represents the multi-faceted citizen of today.

Kanimozhi, the Sangamam’s Coordinator, explains: “We wanted Chennai to have a unique Festival. We wanted to bring folk arts to the people, and create exposure for the artistes. “Have we got what we wanted, what we expected? Oh, more than anything we dreamed of. I never expected such spontaneous support... it’s been wonderful. “Do we want to make this an annual feature? Yes, absolutely, around Pongal. We’d like the Festival to spread all over Tamil Nadu, not restrict it to Chennai alone. We’d like to keep commu-

Bringing us closer to roots

At a time when everyone is thinking and talking “global”, it was heartening to watch an event that attempted to guide Generation Next closer to its roots. It is not the first time that many of us were attending *therukoothu*, folk arts, classical music, or fusion in Chennai. The classical music and dance season is just past. The Madras Crafts Foundation, DakshinaChitra and individuals like V.R. Devika and Vincent D’ Souza have been going to great lengths to present the folk artistes to the urban audience in Chennai and elsewhere. But what was special about Chennai Sangamam was that it brought all this and more closer home – almost to our doorsteps!

It was refreshing to listen to the *nagaswaram* and *tavil* in the open air as you sat on the platform under the green bamboo shoots, played a game of badminton, or took a stroll on the paved walkways in Nageswara Park early in the morning. What a change from the booming sounds in a closed hall! It was all the more heartwarming to see two young women – Radhika and Chitra – playing on the traditional pipe. Augurs well for the future of such classical instruments.

Having seen *therukoothu*, *mayilattam*, *karagattam*, *poikkaal kudirai*, *oyilattam* and the like on TV and on the proscenium stage, it was a delight to watch the

folk artistes perform in their natural setting – in the open air, on the green grass, amidst trees and shrub, with their bright and colourful attire catching the rays of the evening sun.

Entering the Nageswara Park close to 7.30 p.m., it was not too difficult to find your way through the dimly lit paths lined with Chennai Sangamam banners. You simply had to follow the music and walk towards the plaintive strains of *Pantuvavali* wafting in the breeze, and you chanced upon classical musician P. Unnikrishnan wooing his audience with a cascade of *swaras*. People were everywhere – occupying every available space to listen to his music. Throw formalities to the winds! The audience clapped in appreciation, a few even whistled in delight; the clever ones kept time to the rhythm to keep the irritating mosquitoes away. And when the percussionists thundered, the makeshift stage conveyed the beats to the mike which joyfully joined in the vibrations. The audience moved in and out. Unnikrishnan continued to sing under the colourful spotlights closely surrounded by his innumerable fans.

Chennai Sangamam – a warm experience for Chennaiites to remind us about our cultural roots. We look forward to Pongal 2008.

S. Janaki



Sirpi Jayaraman’s work.

It felt good...

It feels good when you get to know your work also inspired someone else.

We at the ‘Mylapore Festival’ (the annual arts fest held on the eve of Pongal in open spaces in and around Sri Kapali Temple, Mylapore) seem to have provided ideas for the promoters of Chennai Sangamam.

So when Fr. Jegath Gaspar called us up three weeks before ‘Chennai Sangamam’ was to be launched and asked us to replicate the ‘Mylapore Festival’ at another venue off Marina Beach, we felt good.

It was a job done in a hurry. But, then, often many ideas are launched in a hurry. ‘Neidhal Sangamam’ on the campus of Lady Willingdon College of Education, next to Queen Mary’s College, needed two evenings to create a buzz, before the crowds who flood the Marina turned to the campus.

The weekend was ablaze. Arts, crafts, traditional games, Thamizh books on sale, artists at work, screening of vintage cinema, folk performances and snacks were all on offer. We are convinced that this

mela should become a weekend permanent feature. A city like ours needs a *sangamam* like the one we created around the year.

And when the fireworks lit the Besant Nagar skies after a rocking rock and folk music concert had come to a close on Elliot’s Beach to signal the finale, it was evident that the first edition of ‘Chennai Sangamam’ had made an impact.

The stock-taking and planning for ‘Sangamam 2’ must begin NOW.

The hosts will have to do all they can to be, and be seen, as independent promoters. With Kanimozhi at the head, the show is seen as one that had been fabulously promoted by the State and its departments. The spread and schedule must have cost a tidy sum. Now, there is a need to plan and manage the ‘Sangamam’ professionally, ridding it of the political impression it has created. Conscious efforts must be made to involve the corporates and the community and tie in the event alongside the annual December Season.

(Text and pictures by VINCENT D’ SOUZA.)

And you think – while there were perhaps glitches, and many have voiced trenchant criticisms of so many aspects, something special was created by Chennai Sangamam.

Maybe recognising the sameness beneath the differences, and celebrating both elements in us, imbibes lives with many glorious colours.

And that is perhaps what Life was always meant to be – a confluence... a sangamam.

* * *

Ranjitha Ashok

SOME PLAIN-SPEAKING

(Continued from page 1)

made without sweeping government patronage, the kind that opens up parks and closes roads at will in order to allow a festival to take place. Perhaps because the Mylapore Festival began with no powerful backing, there were attempts to strangle it, what with some leading shops in the area approaching the Courts. Despite all this, the Festival survived and later showed the way for the Triplicane Festival, the ECR Festival and the Tiruvanniyur Festival. All of these involved the residents of the localities, not just the elite, but just about everyone – and very little sponsorship of any kind. Truly have they been people’s, and participatory, festivals.

An attempt was then made by the CII Tamil Nadu to get all these festivals under the umbrella of a Chennai Festival, but lacking official support the idea remained a dream to be fulfilled one day. Then came an attempt by FLO Tamil Nadu, the women’s wing of FICCI’s local chapter, to revive the idea. They too failed to get official backing – but several who were present at FLO’s meetings proved more successful and Sangamam was the result.

When CII-TN failed, Madras Week was thought of, on either side of Madras Day, to celebrate just that, the founding of a city. Talks on various aspects of the city were organised, a camera scanned people’s movements and presented interesting vignettes from the beach, there were quiz contests and song competitions for schoolchildren, and many more such events. Talks were held on Tamil poetry and the songs of the crossroads in the old city. Heritage walks covered areas that have long been neglected. The week-long festivity was made possible largely without any mega budgets. It was left to the people to celebrate and observe Madras Day in their own way and that was that. Many organisations celebrated the occasion in whatever way they pleased, but celebrate Madras is what they did in one way or another. There was no single umbrella body that directed the events, but that was exactly why everyone felt comfortable with its spontaneity. Now what was so elitist about that?

Madras Musings has long encouraged any festival in the city that displays concern for the city’s heritage, elitist or otherwise. All you have to do is to see the last couple of issues of *Madras Musings* and pages 4 and 5 of this issue to note how we feel about Chennai Sangamam. But *Madras Musings* has also long felt that openness and tolerance should be the order of the day. If the city has the potential and the wherewithal to hold festivals the whole year through, adding to the colour of the city, more power to it and long may they all flourish. Let us not allow chauvinism, long the bane of our life, and chips on our shoulders ruin the city’s festivals also – even under the guise of critical review.

You do not know the answer.

Quizzin'
with
Ram'nan

(Current Affairs questions are from the period February 16th to 28th. Questions 11 to 20 pertain to Tamil Nadu and Chennai.)

1. Name the proposal, approved by the G8 countries plus Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa, for a global carbon emissions trading system announced on February 15th to replace the Kyoto Protocol by 2009.

2. Name the new party that Bangladesh Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohammad Yunus wants to start.

3. Near which place was the Samjhauta Express firebombed on the night of February 18th-19th, leading to more than 68 deaths?

4. Who won the Best Actor and Actress Oscars recently?

5. Where in the Antarctic have scientists found over 20 new species of animals?

6. Who were adjudged best female and male athletes of the recently-held National Games in Guwahati?

7. What new feature is to be introduced at the Wimbledon tennis championships this year?

8. In which South American country was Ottavio Quattrocchi held recently?

9. Microsoft was recently ordered to pay \$1.5 billion to which company in a MP3 audio technology patent dispute?

10. By how much has the threshold limit of exemption in the case of all IT assesseees been increased in the latest Union Budget?

* * *

11. Why were the AIADMK's Nedu alias Nedunchezian, Madhu alias Ravindran and C. Muniappan in the news recently?

12. What innovation is to be used at the annual deer census at the Guindy National Park in the first week of May?

13. With which U.S. varsity has Anna University signed a MoU for promoting areas of mutual interest and common academic programmes?

14. What long-reaching environmental decision is to be enforced as regards Chennai autorickshaws within the next year?

15. How many wards did Vijayakant's Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam win in the Chennai Corporation Council elections?

16. What are the terminal points of India's third Garib Rath, flagged off on February 21st?

17. Who organised 'Chennai Sangamam'?

18. Diana Kurien is the real name of which now very popular actress?

19. What was the name of Tiruvalluvar's wife?

20. According to folklore, in which temple is Kannagi, the heroine of *Silappadikaram*, worshipped in a divine form?

(Answers on page 8)

The pluses and minuses of another mad, mad Season

● In balance, the general run of reviews from both *Sruti* staffers and others indicates that the recent season offered good performances overall, but none of them seems to have spotted any major new talent.

● The major gain from the music season was the display of an abundance of talent among violinists and percussionists. This trend would surely support the views of the optimists who see a rosy future for Carnatic music.

● Junior musicians, including many talented youngsters, almost always performed before poorly-filled auditoriums.

● By and large, there seems to be an increased awareness of the aesthetics of stage decor all around, to go by some of the reports we received, though a few of the major venues including the Music Academy showed an unwelcome departure from good taste, with their loud, even gaudy decors. Acoustics again was an area of improvement this season in some of the main venues, though here too we are a long way from the ideal.

● There may be widely differing views on the health of Bharata Natyam and other classical dances, but senior dancer and guru C.V. Chandrasekhar probably summed it all up neatly when he welcomed innovation and change as necessary for dance to evolve, but decried the tendency to create all the time and modernise the very format of Bharata Natyam.

● We receive with mixed feelings news of attempts being made to organise a comprehensive Chennai Festival under a single umbrella with government support. Even assuming that the Chennai music and dance season is amenable to be so brought together, with the same performers doing duty at multiple venues, not quite the case with the world's leading city festivals, is government intervention entirely desirable in what has been an organic evolution over the decades, with the *sabha*-s vying with one another to offer an exciting mocktail of music and dance?

V. Ramnarayan

● Enter any *sabha* and you find a sea of sponsors hogging centrestage along with the performers. In what is often an aggressive tussle, the *sabha*-s announce themselves in at least three but sometimes as many as ten places within the confines of an auditorium. The backdrop announcing the name of the *sabha* or festival seems absolutely superfluous on stage!

Our concerts deserve a better sense of aesthetics, when it comes to stage decor. The more

'creative' signs feature a ridiculous representation of the letter 'O' as a human ear, 'H' appears as horns on a dancer's head. 'A' acquires alarming forms as the head moves from side to side! Painted designs posing as background decoration come hurtling at you like objects from outer space. Advertising banners scream at you from all directions.

● Even when a concert reaches great heights, you are likely to descend from the sublime to the ridiculous as soon as you step out into the corridor of the *sabha*. All it often needs to become a mini Pondy Bazaar is to add a saree shop to the several stalls selling a variety of products. Not only are the displays jarring, but so is the cacophony of sounds from differ-



Arun



Aruna



Anita

ent CDs being played simultaneously. All this is made worse by the sight of potato chips and instant coffee sold in the same narrow space.

Usha Kris

● I am still at a loss to understand as to why the mobile phones cannot be switched to 'silent mode' before the start of the concert. It shows lack of respect for the fellow *rasikas*, the musicians and the music itself. Workshops should also be conducted on etiquette of 'using toilets'. Luckily there was running water in all the *sabha*-s but hardly any user is bothered to turn on the tap after using the urinals. They however manage to pour a lot of water around the sink which does not allow the floor to dry. Walkouts during *tani* have not really reduced – the NRIs are no exception, whether it be an American in America or an Indian in India!

● I felt that most sub-juniors were ascending the stage too early. You could easily notice the lack of depth, preparation and quality in them. There was no dearth of confidence though. The youngsters would do well to practise hard, improve their knowledge and attain greater depth in their music before giving public performances. As Seshagopalan pointed out in one of his speeches, the concert platform is not the place to practise. The most disturbing aspect was the attitude of these young musicians. They promptly packed their elec-

tronic *sruti* box and went off with their kith and kin once their performance was over. Listening to senior musicians is an integral part of learning. No?

A.R.S. Mani

● Every new season seems to bring in new innovations by our artistes. So we get to listen to *gottuvadyam* or *chitraveena* accompanying vocal music, or to various combinations like *gottuvadyam* and *tavil*; saxophone and *tavil*; violin, flute and *tavil*; keyboard and *tavil*. What next – Western drums with Carnatic vocal or instruments? The last idea in fact is already in vogue as fusion.

● Two good things worth mentioning – the habit of the audience slapping their thighs to keep *tala* has stopped. Applaud-

ing after every piece also has come down a little.

● The habit of celebrating "50 years of service to music" by musicians is growing. Service to music indeed! Is it not the other way round? It is the music by which the artistes earn their livelihood.

V. Karpagalakshmi

● The incomparable Sriram's historical account of the Music Academy during the festival evoked the most welcome nostalgia for me. For I was a student of P.S. High School, Mylapore, when the Academy sought refuge there in the 1950s, temporarily to stage its December concerts. I can still remember the Everest of a rostrum that used to be put up right in the middle of the playground, much to the annoyance of cricketers like me who were deprived of the game for a short fortnight. This was when I hardly had an ear for music. But now I cannot forgive myself for teasing my mother for what I considered an unhealthy interest in music for a housewife whose only preoccupation should have been to feed the four hungry souls at home. Looking back, I feel, as the eldest of the three sons – my father was most of the time away on tour – I should have been more supportive of her talent in playing the violin. I am sure she is watching with amusement my having become such an addict of 'Carnatic' music, after all my early indifference to, if not derision of, stal-

warts such as Ariyakudi, Madurai Mani, GNB and Semmangudi.

● The way the Music Academy has emerged from its trials is something that will warm the hearts of all those who are sometimes anxious about the future. The other *sabha*-s should draw inspiration from the manner in which the Academy has pulled itself out of controversy and is concentrating on how to make Carnatic music vibrant and contemporary without cutting at the roots of its hoary past.

R.K. Raghavan

● There are, among the mainstream participants, some who are conspicuous for an eclectic approach and experimental impulse. Playing safe and sublime is not in them. Well grounded in the basics and grasp of the idiom and versatile in talent, this irrepressible lot carries no burden of the cross while retaining affinity with tradition. They are not mavericks in the strict sense. They do want to belong, but on their own terms.

The 'off beat, on beat' trio – Arun, Aruna and Anita – hailing from different backgrounds, plebian, professional and privileged, two recently 'relocated' and one with long 'local' lineage, illustrates the point.

O.S. Arun – the Delhi-groomed lad – initially recognised for 'bhajan' singing and dance accompaniment, has travelled a long way and leap frogged to fame and riches in the Carnatic territory. The baritone with range and modulation skills is an adept in diverse pursuits – from 'nama sankeertanam' to fusion, composing music to complicated 'pallavi-s'.

Aruna Sayeeram started bombarding the Chennai scene as a Bombayite, with a brand of vocal pyrotechnics, unconventional articulation and 'abhang' ware. She then shifted base to the Carnatic bastion itself, for a rightful place. Not one to rest on her laurels, she continues to extend her repertoire.

Anita Ratnam, advantageously placed in terms of endowment and equipment, has the added benefit of wide exposure, enabling her to don many roles with equal aplomb. This high profile promoter of the 'Other' finds her place in the 'regular' with no problem. And in an orthodox 'arangam' one moment, Anita transforms, in no time, into a stylish MC of a modern dance spectacle in a posh theatre with elan.

In such a scene, where is *deja vu*?

'Manna' Srinivasan

(Courtesy: *Sruti*)

**• ARTLESS INNOCENTS AND IVORY-TOWER SOPHISTICATES
– The second article in a five-part series.**

Ananda Rau – and two who worked with him

A not-so-well-known contemporary of Ramanujan was K. Ananda Rau, a foundation member of Indian Academy of Sciences, Bangalore. His career had an altogether different kind of trajectory from Ramanujan's. He was born in Madras in 1893 (six years after Ramanujan) into relative opulence and, after a brilliant academic career of the normal kind through school and college in Madras, went to Cambridge in 1914 and became a student of Hardy's. As a student, he won the coveted Smith Prize. He returned to Madras after completing his studies in 1919 and was immediately appointed as Professor of Mathematics at Presidency College, Madras. Ananda Rau was an outstanding analyst who worked a great deal on summability, an area in which Hardy was a leading figure. A theorem named after Ananda Rau figures in Hardy's book *Divergent Series*. He was from all accounts an inspiring teacher, held in great respect and affection by his students, many of whom went on to become fine mathematicians themselves; some among them were leaders on the Indian scene and I will be speaking about them. Ananda Rau retired from services in 1948 at the then mandatory age of 55, but remained mathematically active for more than a decade after that. He died in 1966.

Ananda Rau got to know Ramanujan in Cambridge and he has this to say about his illustrious colleague: 'In his nature he was simple, entirely free from affectation with no trace whatever of his being self-conscious of his abilities'.

*Excerpts from a public lecture delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Indian Academy of Sciences, held at Chandigarh in 2002.

Another figure of importance in Indian mathematics of that time was Vaidyanathaswamy, also from Madras. He too went to England, not Cambridge though, to work with some British mathematicians, but that was after some years as a research scholar at the University of Madras.



K. Ananda Rau R. Vaidyanathaswamy



S. S. Pillai

I should like to emphasise that in his case as well as in the case of Ananda Rau, their career decisions were taken well before the Ramanujan story broke out. Also most of Vaidyanathaswamy's mathematical interests were far removed from those of Ramanujan's and he was among the earliest to venture into areas such as Symbolic Logic, Lattice Theory and Topology that were not British favourites of his times. After his return from England in 1925, he spent a year in Benares and joined Ananda Rau in Madras. The two men joined forces to create a lively and congenial atmosphere for mathematics students in Madras. Madras University administration, in its infinite wisdom, kept him as a Reader till his retirement in 1952. After retirement, he worked for a few years at the Indian Statistical Institute in Calcutta and later at Sri Venkateswara University in Tirupati.

Vaidyanathaswamy seems to

have been cast in the mould of traditional Indian scholarship. He was a keen student of Aurobindo's philosophy and studied Vedic texts in-depth offering his own interpretations.

Number theory, Ramanujan's area of interest, naturally had many adherents in the country; but work that had a truly great impact came only in the mid-thirties, and it came from S.S. Pillai. Pillai was born in 1901 in the Tirunelveli District of Tamil Nadu. His mother died within a year of his birth and he was brought up by his father with the help of an aged woman-relative. He made good progress at school, but tragedy struck again; his father passed away when he was in the final year of school. His talents had earned him the lasting affection of a teacher, Sastriar, who stepped in to help him continue his education. Pillai also secured scholarships and completed the B.A. degree at Maharaja's College at Trivandrum and moved to Madras where he became a student of Ananda Rau for whom he cherished life-long affection and respect. He soon proved himself to be a researcher of the first rank and, after taking his Ph.D. at Madras, took up his first job at Annamalai University; he later moved to Trivandrum, then again to Calcutta and finally back to Madras University.

It is in the 1930s, at Annamalai University that Pillai's talents were in full bloom and he cracked a problem that was engaging some of the finest minds... However, a controversy over priorities involving the American mathematician L.E. Dickson was a cause for some distress to Pillai and his Indian colleagues. Pillai published his great papers in Indian journals which did not have a wide circulation; nevertheless, recognition did come eventually for these outstanding contributions, but tragedy struck once more before he could savour his success.

On August 31, 1950, Pillai died in an air-crash over Egypt; he was on his way to the US – his first trip abroad – to spend a year at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where he had been invited..

There is little doubt that Pillai would have achieved a great deal more if his life had not been cut short so abruptly. — (Courtesy: The author, who is with the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, and *Current Science*, 2003.)

M.S. Raghunathan

(To be continued next fortnight)

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We look forward to all readers of *Madras Musings*, and those newcomers who want to receive copies, sending in their subscriptions. We are indeed sorry we can no longer remain a free mailer.

— The Editor

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THE EDITOR

Panthers or leopards are more cunning than tigers; a tiger is a gentleman when all is said and done – at least that is what Jim Corbett had said. A panther is more likely to enter a village or even a house than a tiger. He will lie in wait beside a hut for an unsuspecting child to come out, then seize him by the neck. There will be no sound, the child just disappears. A tiger will rarely trouble himself with a child, there is too little in it for him. It is a question of cost/benefit. The energy he will expend in capturing and killing a child provides him with very little food. He would rather kill a buffalo or other hoofed wild game, which provides him with more food. A tiger weighs 350-450 lbs, while a village or, as he is sometimes called, a dog-panther may be 100 lbs or so. Panthers sometimes take to child-lifting even though normal food like dogs, goats, chicken are easily available. This is true in India as well as in Africa where panthers are equally numerous. They suddenly change their diet to children. It is then that they are put down. This then was the case of the Suligiri maneater.

Beerpalle is an isolated little village, some 40 km from Hosur. Here terror reigned amongst the defenceless villagers from August 1997. A local panther had taken to child-lifting. The news startled some of us that a maneater was operating so close. The word itself conjured up horrendous thoughts.

The Tamil Nadu Government declared it a maneater and threw it open to anyone with a gun licence. A quartet of us decided to investigate this maneater scene as none of us ever had such an experience before. Maneaters were something new. We travelled by road to Hosur and met the District Forest Officer there at nightfall. At first light we were off, and by

lunch we were at Beerpalle, the scene of the panther's last depredation.

We settled down in a room in the local school and began our investigations. The panther had lifted a child from the doorstep of his house at about 7 p.m. a week before. His parents had been chatting with their neighbour across the lane. The killer had crept in the narrow space between the two houses and when the child, of age 5-7 years, had walked across the opening between the houses, it had seized him by his neck and disappeared before anyone realised what had happened. A hue and cry ensued, lights were lit and a rescue party set out. In the end, nothing was found but the head, the soles of the feet and palms. This was the second kill. A month before, in another village, a child of similar age was taken away from his hut. The day before our visit, several gun-toting gentlemen hunters had descended on Beerpalle.

Meandering through the forest, we dropped in the hunters' camp to say 'hello'. Here we picked up whatever information we could get and left the place, wishing each other good luck. That night, a couple of us slept on the verandah of the school, as ten Forest Department recruits took over the school room.

At first, sleeping out in a man-eating panther country was a bit uncomfortable. I remember protecting my throat with all sorts of clothes, but soon sleep overtook me. There was also the added comfort of a

dog that slept nearby. Perhaps the dog itself was using us as protection against the wily panther. However, I reasoned, the dog would warn us if anything untoward was afoot.

Next morning we went out to check on all the information we had gathered. We scoured the country all around, covering a large area. Finally we reached the village of Punalnatham. Early that morning, an old woman had heard roars from a nearby hill, we were told.

These hills are made up of huge boulders one on top of another, with hardly any vegeta-

● by
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tion, somewhat reminiscent of the African kopje. These kopjes in Africa are always home to a panther or two. Our kopje was longish, with an altitude of less than 200 ft and about 500 yards from the mud road that led to the village. As it comprised several huge boulders, there were numerous caves – a likely spot, therefore. We sat under a tree and eyed the place through our binoculars and settled on one particular cave as the likely retreat of the killer. During a few hours of constant scrutiny, all we saw was a troop of monkeys and a couple of raptorial birds. We repaired to the Bangalore Highway in search of a suitable eating house for lunch. Then, we were back at our vigil by 3.30 p.m. At 5.45 p.m., with a roar, a

Jonga and a Land Rover appeared and disgorged several hunters. It was quite an army for a panther.

A goat was procured in quick time and, as darkness began to fall, the hunters marched off up the hillside with the goat in tow. They stationed themselves somewhere halfway up the hill, with one of them high up on the crest of the hill. The four of us retreated to our tree to await events. Before long, we heard the bleatings of the goat. It was a wonderful caller and in good voice. Suddenly the silence was shattered by the roars of the panther. What surprised me was the volume. Each bout comprised 3 or 4 roars and there were 3 or 4 bouts that evening.

The roars initially came from the top of the hill. The roars now moved to the level of the bait and proceeded towards it. The goat, in the meanwhile, kept up a steady stream of bleats. The man who was stationed on top of the hill suddenly appeared among us all in a dither; he had seen the leop-

ard, but was so unnerved that he had failed to take a shot.

The panther now approached the bait, when all of a sudden there was a lot of flashing of torches, then absolute silence from the panther. The animal, it would seem, had retraced its steps back from where it came on the other side of the hill. This was confirmed by the chattering of the monkeys that were in the extreme left of the hill.

Our party stood near the tree waiting for the hunters to return. There was again the roar of engines as the two vehicles flashed past us leaving us gawking in the darkness. After a while, as there was no more excitement, we pushed off to our school room and slept. Next morning, we left the place as we had to be back in Madras. The story does not end here, as we read in the press that a hunter had killed the leopard that same evening (at perhaps the same spot) with a shot in the neck. It was reported that the animal measured 6 feet, a small animal indeed, considering that the tail must have been at least 2 feet long.

The question is, was this the maneater which was killed? We also wondered whether there were other panthers in those hills with a predilection for children? — (Courtesy: Blackbuck)

Answers to Quiz

1. Washington Declaration; 2. Nagarik Samiti; 3. Deewana, near Panipat; 4. Forest Whitaker and Helen Mirren; 5. The Larsen Ice Shelf after it breaks up; 6. Swimmers Richa Mishra and Rehan Poncha; 7. Equal prize money; 8. Argentina; 9. Alcatel-Lucent; 10. Rs. 10,000.

* * *

11. They have been awarded capital punishment in the Dharmapuri bus burning case; 12. The Wildlife Department will use the Global Positioning System for mapping; 13. University of Houston; 14. They will switch over to LPG; 15. Five (all in North Madras); 16. Chennai Central and Hazrat Nizamuddin; 17. Tamil Maiyam, Department of Tourism and the Department of Tamil Culture; 18. Nayantara; 19. Vasuki; 20. At the Attukal Bhagavathi temple.

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