

# Two pages recalling a celebration

## Sriram V's Madras Week Diary

Aug 27, 2016

In the evening we had R. Mohan speaking on *Cricket in Chennai*, as part of the *Madras Musings* lecture series. This was at Hanu Reddy Residences, Poes Gardens. The talk was very good, the venue phenomenal. I never knew that such an excellent set of serviced apartments existed in this area. The auditorium was top class.

Probably because of the forbidding address or because it was not a five-star hotel, the freeloaders were conspicuous by their absence. I had, of course, called the hosts and asked them to tone the food down to a minimum.

R. Mohan had all his facts at his fingertips. There was lots of humour. Among those we had at the event was Mrityunjaya Singh, grandson of Vizzy of Vizianagaram, and so he was the obvious choice to present our memento to the speaker.

Aug 28, 2016

This was a killer of a day. Three events, all involving change of wardrobe, it being a horribly muggy day. There was, besides, no afternoon nap, which means the week will be crabby.

In the morning went to Tag Centre, for the release of Randor Guy's book, *Memories of Madras*. He is one my mentors, one of the four Rs, the others being S. Rajam, K.V. Ramanathan and V.A.K. Ranga Rao. Sadly, two are no more and I miss them. Besides these, there is of course the Mega M – S. Muthiah.

Randor Guy and I have been great friends since the time I heard him first speak on the lawyers of Mylapore at the C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation sometime in 1996. A man with a wicked sense of humour, he has imparted much info on Chennai to me, a lot of it unprintable. Now I don't get to see or speak to



him as often as I would like to. He spoke at the book release and had the audience in splits. The old fire still lingers.

Went to the new Hotel Turyaa on OMR at lunchtime where my friend Ranjit Pratap, celebrated Madras Week helping with a display of vintage and classic cars organised by the Madras Heritage Motoring Club. The exhibits were great. The Chief and I spoke on the occasion, he on some lesser known cars of the city, including his Lanchester, and I on the companies that grew to become industrial houses from beginnings in car trade. There are plenty of that kind in Chennai – Simpson's, Addison's, Rane, TVS and UCAL being some. Even Ranjit's Rayala Corporation began as Rajagopal Motor Works, started by his grandfather. Got to know of several more from interactions at lunch with the knowledgeable and passionate audience. There could have been a better MC. She kept referring to S. Muthiah as Subbiah Muthiah and me as Venkatakrishnan Sriram (I realise that Wikipedia is responsible for this) and also said the Chief founded the Madras Book Club, whatever that is. She also wanted the audience to give a round of applaas for every sneeze, burp and whatever else.

Back home at 3.30, it was time to get on with some work and then, ho, to The Park for the last (yippee) of the *Madras Musings* lectures for the year. T.N. Venkatesh, IAS and MD of Co-optex had us all eating out of his hands with his brilliant presentation on the company. The staff had taken pains to study the venue two days earlier and so made good use of the space to display their wares, including some rare pieces – Kodaligaruppur sarees worn by Thanjavur royalty, Muppagam sarees worn by *devadasi*-s, the *sadir* saree worn at dance performances, a brocade shawl that was a duplicate of what was gifted to Leonid Brezhnev and several others.

This being the last of the lectures, the freeloaders had to stock up for the rest of year and so their behaviour was at its worst. Much grabbing, snatching, pushing, shoving and per-

## How do we celebrate Madras Week

● How do you celebrate a city? With pomp and zero rules. Everyone does it his or her own way. And this year, this translated into a plethora of varied events. There were walks for the differently-abled, play themes for the elderly, storytelling sessions for children and more. There was even a talk on temples in Vietnam, which seemed like an unusual topic. SRIRAM V. explained, "We did wonder about it, but then S. Muthiah made a point: this is the place from where temple building went across the seas – the Cholas left from Tamil Nadu and introduced the Hindu culture to places like Indonesia and Vietnam. So, in a way, it is also a celebration of Madras."

### Under the gopuram

We visit temples, but how many of us notice the inscriptions on the walls? At the Marundeeswarar Temple, the workings of the Chola administration, like tax collection, are detailed. There is much to discover, says Pradeep Chakravarthy, a history buff who runs Mystical Palmyra, a portal that organises heritage tours. "Did you know there was a thriving Jain population in Tiruvanniyur back then?"

There were also games like *aadu puli aattam* etched on the floor of the temple and his group learnt how to play them, with some help from Kreed Games' Vineetha Siddhartha.

### Port of call

For the last five years, on one day of the year, the general public has the freedom to amble through much protected Chennai Port Trust. That is when Sriram V conducts his heritage walk. "When the harbour's construction began in 1875, it was classified as one of the greatest challenges man faced against nature. It's a story of hard work, sacrifice, foresight, politics and more," he says. He urged his group to spot surviving symbols (like the foundation stone), related how the port helped mathematician S Ramanujan, and how it even featured in the slave trade.

### Forgotten paths

Architect Thirupurasundari Sevel didn't understand why heritage buffs never highlighted suburbs like Anna Nagar, when it also has a lot of history. So her organisation, Nam Veedu Nam Oor Nam Kadhai, conducted walks in "neglected" parts such as the narrow lanes of Aminjikarai. "Did you know it's also called Mini

haps groping as well. A.S. Diwakar was lucky to get a glass of water. Tulsi Badrinath had coffee spilt on her saree and I think that was the nearest she got to the food. The Owl, who is also known as the Camp One, tried to snatch a cup from a passing waiter and in



Traditional games at Ashwita Bistro, organised by Kreed.

Kanchipuram because it has the Varadaraja Perumal Temple and the Ekambareswarar Temple. The houses also still retain the old flavour, with *thinnai* and *thalvaram*," she said.

### Hit the water

Last year's floods brought the sorry state of our marshlands into focus. While government action is a matter of debate, the Madras Naturalists' Society is continuing with its efforts to spread awareness. It conducted walks to the Perumbakkam Tank and the Kelambakkam backwaters. "It focused on how these water bodies sustain vibrant eco-systems, recharge the water table and help prevent floods," G. Vijay Kumar, its Secretary stated.

### British footprints

You'll find plenty on the British in Madras on Wikipedia and in books. But there's something to be said about the information being presented to you as stories. Vijay Kamalakar, the founder of Storytrails, led two walks that talked about the British and how their rule impacted the city. "Stories are an interesting way to look at

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the process nearly upset all the crockery the man was carrying. Had I not been there to hold the lot, *Madras Musings* would have had a hefty damages bill. The man who has a crush on Sushi took a selfie with her on the sly.

Veteran journalist S. Viswanathan of *Industrial Economist* did the honours by presenting our music-loving Venkatesh a book on Semmangudi. After the talk many wanted to take photos with the speaker. I asked him if he can make as passionate a presentation on say cement as he did on Co-optex. He merely smiled but I think he can. There is no limit when you have a passion for excellence. May there be more of his kind.

And so, ladies and gen'men, lets conclude with a round of applaas!

# A Madras Week thought

Events are aplenty now and they overlap. But little can be done to draw a calendar because the events are planned by volunteers according to the time and space they can mark/spare for Madras Week.

Some suggest that it is time the events are spread across August.

Perhaps, audio recording all talks, and posting them online would help 'broadcast' the talks since many of them are on interesting themes.

## The Vysarpadi fest

There were small efforts that popped up across the city this year. Like the talk on 'Sterling Road Histories' hosted by two women who have lived long years in that area.

They even got a senior Railway family, who live in a colonial bungalow on the Railways' sprawling property on this road in Nungambakkam, to interact with them.

These bungalows are bound to go some day soon, unless there is a quiet campaign that reaches the Union Railway Minister, to save them and restore them and give them a new life.

The big effort was in the north Madras area of Vysarpadi where a few people joined hands with volunteers and social workers and linked up with other city groups to highlight the good things of life there.

The community had thought of this event to showcase the plus points of

Vysarpadi which is often in the news for gore, crime, scandals and gangs.

The events may have been small and simple, but they launched what could be an annual Vysarpadi Celebration.

Sadly though, this year too there were very few events in north Chennai.

## Smart Chennai

United Ways Chennai had 130 schools of the city doing some amazing work, pondering and giving us a way forward to solve the City's problems.

Wish the City Mayor and the Councillors were there to pick some inputs and answer their questions on a better upkeep of the city.

Time these boys and girls practised a lot of what they projected and got their families to follow. – (Photos: Ramana Varakur Srinivasan.)



The participants of 'Smart Chennai'.

## Controversies & cheap jibes

Controversies have enveloped the Madras Day process from the time the idea was floated.

Are you pro-British? Are you saying the area we call Madras/Chennai did not exist before 1639?

Are you celebrating white men who took Indian blood and suck us to this day?

Why not Chennai 2000 Plus?

The last mentioned is an idea circulated by a senior journalist who seems to run a Trust – Chennai 2000 Plus.

Debates are always welcome.

As long as they are civil and don't cross unwritten borders.

Sadly, many who blow hot and cold have not even celebrated the city in some way.

Now, there are people who are hitting below the belt. Mails are being sent to newspapers and people casting aspersions on the 'catalysts', calling the name of Jesus and Good Friday into arguments filling in the mail boxes.

– Vincent D'Souza



Veera Santhanam with film maker Gita.



Sir Sivaswamy Kalalaya School NSS celebrate Madras Week with a campaign for a better Madras.

# CELEBRATING MADRAS WEEK

the social histories behind buildings and monuments as these were built by real people, driven by human emotions," he said, explaining his two walks, first from the Gandhi statue on Marina Beach to the War Memorial, and the second from Beach Station to the Fort.

## Blooms and trunks

The lofty trees that line our roads are often overlooked, unless it's noon and we need the shade. But Nizhal, the organisation that promotes 'tree culture' in urban spaces, made sure we don't forget them or how fast they are disappearing. This year, their walks focused on landmark trees, "old (some over 90 years) and rare trees that are irreplaceable," according to Shobha Menon, one of the Trustees. At the Kotturpuram Tree Park, a dump yard that Nizhal converted into a forest, children who volunteered led the walk, while Shobha led the walk at

Nandanam where "plant artist" O.P. Ravindran lived. "He planted some rare trees, like the Ashoka and the Purasu (Flame of the Forest), and I focused on them and stories about him," she adds.

## Word power

Cinema isn't just about his trionics; language is key, too. And one of the interesting elements of Tamil cinema is its use of Madras bhashai. "This is the slang spoken in the city, one which has evolved over the years and includes a number of words from other languages, like Hindi, Telugu, Urdu and Sanskrit," according to actor V. Mohan Raman, who focused on this unique language in his talk this year. He traced its origin and how actors and comedians used it in films, right from the 1930s to today. Raman feels that an actor who has mastered the art of Madras bhashai is Kamal Haasan. "In Vasool Raja MBBS, he used it flawlessly."

## Through her eyes

Dancer Chandralekha's connection with Chennai was a long one, but arts editor Sadanand Menon condensed it in his talk, focusing on two aspects. "He presented a poem she wrote between 1968-69, on Madras and how it influenced her. It has since been published in a book called *Rainbow on the Roadside*.

He then got more anecdotal – talking about her coming to the city, learning Bharat Natyam and her experiences while living here (from 1950-2006). "She chose to settle down here because she always said this city lets you be," says Menon, adding "The dancer is still relevant today and her mantra – to be true to yourself – affected all those who met her". He also recalled that she was an enthusiastic Scrabble player. "If there was a Scrabble world championship, she'd win". – (Adapted from an *Indian Express* report.)



A walk along the Marina with storytrail.



S. Anwar and walkers during a heritage walk at Amir Mahal.