George Town to suffer redevelopment

If the State and Central Government are to have their way, George Town, the heritage quarter of our city, is likely to soon be a thing of the past. On the anvil is a plan for the complete redevelopment of the space, including the creation of, hold your breath, a logistics park or a hub to cater to the financial and legal industry. The Government has opted to make a virtue out of every one of George Town’s weaknesses, all of which came about owing to prolonged neglect and apathy. The idea is laughable in the extreme and dangerous too, for it aims to destroy the cultural fabric of the space. But that the powers-that-be do not consider it to be so is quite clear from the recent pronouncements. The area it has been announced, will be redeveloped with funds from the Centre’s... (Continued on page 3)

Will Metro relieve Chennai’s congestion and pollution? – if so, when?

Now that Phase I is functional, it is time to take stock of how the Metro is going to improve the city’s environment and citizens’ lifestyles when both phases are completed. Phase I of the Metro has cleaned the traffic in many parts of Chennai and imparted a modern look to the city. Structures under Phase II, now set to take off, are going to be sleeker and less intrusive of road space. Beautification apart, the expectation from the mass transit system is that it will clear traffic congestion on the roads, reduce pollution, provide an inexpensive mode of transport and, because of its predictable schedule and speed, deliver more time for leisure. All this makes for a better quality of life when realised. Phase I is a sample, covering 45km out of the total 163km of the two phases. Its results can now be extrapolated to predict... (Continued on page 2)
Food for all during Madares Week

The week is over and The Metro, the fast-rising metropolis, sinks back into his chair with a sigh of relief. The eight talks that Musings hosted were well received and many attended. The speakers spoke, MMM, mused, the veteran afterglow, to integrate them with Metro and allowing for off-peak hour usage is equivalent to double the system is calculated to be about 7 lakh people per day. The present effective usage is thus 7 lakhs, which is 56 per cent of its capacity and has been able to reduce losses from Rs. 348 crore in 2016-17 to Rs. 145 crore in 2017-18. Therefore, the next logical step is to increase the fare, inasmuch as break-even at the operating level are bright if full capacity utilisation is attained by imaginative pricing for maximising the average revenue passenger, which will not vary greatly whether the carriage is occupied by 50 passengers or 200. Therefore, it follows that more the number of passengers, greater the revenue collection without a corresponding increase in operating expenses.

Lower fares alone may not be enough about a secure policy committing that fares would continue to be maintained at affordable levels. Most passengers taking to the Metro would be on board only if they can choose between the Metro and the bike, the latter involving a borrowing decision locking up Rs. 60-70,000. Streamlining bus routes and relocating bus stops to integrate them with Metro network is as important as last mile connectivity, apart from the likely outcome of the second phase, the present rate of congestion year after year makes the target of 2025 for Chennai Metro project if it is to meet its objectives. At a full usage is equivalent to double the system is calculated to be about 7 lakh people per day. The present effective usage is thus 7 lakhs, which is 56 per cent of its capacity and has been able to reduce losses from Rs. 348 crore in 2016-17 to Rs. 145 crore in 2017-18. Therefore, the next logical step is to increase the fare, inasmuch as break-even at the operating level are bright if full capacity utilisation is attained by imaginative pricing for maximising the average revenue passenger, which will not vary greatly whether the carriage is occupied by 50 passengers or 200. Therefore, it follows that more the number of passengers, greater the revenue collection without a corresponding increase in operating expenses.

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Madras Musings is an extraordinary idea given shape by its legendary founder Mr. S. Muthiah. I recall having a couple of conversations with Mr. Muthiah seeking his help for getting information (that is lying buried in the archives of the erstwhile Madras Presidency) about Cochin.

His suggestion was that we engage a young student to dive into the realms of information (that is lying in the Archives). Somehow we never got to proceeding with suggestion. That idea though is still in the must do list. Perhaps now under the aegis of INTACH Kochi.

Incidentally when I was President of Cochin Chamber in 2006-08 we started a monthly by the name Cochin Chronicle borrowing the idea from Madras Musings. This too was supported by Kochi organisations as a public service. It survived for a while but does not exist anymore.

Though much belated, this note I share with you as a tribute to S. Muthiah.

Jose Dominic
Co-founder CGH Earth (Former Convener INTACH Kochi Now co-convenor)

His Father’s Voice - a Bharatanatyam-inspired drama

E nglis h language films made in India by Indians are quite uncommon, and sometimes tend to be self-conscious and stifled. Of course, there have been a few lovely exceptions, and some of the better efforts can be freely-flowingly multi-lingual, at least bilingual, as many of us are in real life conversations. The recent India premiere of His Father’s Voice, produced by Kavadi Productions – the Padacherry-based husband and wife team of K. Kaarthikeyan Kirubhakaran and Ashwini Prapat Pawan, along with Shankar Kirubhakaran – was refreshingly free of artificiality, despite a storyline that offered plenty of scope for just that kind of treatment. It traces the journey, both physical and spiritual, of Kris, a young male dancer battling the rage, confusion and acute sense of loss that follow the estrangement of his parents and his father’s absence from his life since his boyhood days. Happily, the film has equally successfully avoided the safe path of a maudlin tearjerker.

Twelve years ago, Kaarthikeyan, who co-produced Loin of Punjab, a rollicking comedy with an Indo-American cast that included Shabana Armi, but His Father’s Voice marks his directorial debut. The director shows a keen understanding of the medium, particularly in the restrained performances he has extracted from the dancers (as against the relatively exaggerated abhinaya of their Bharatanatyam training), and the authentic dance scenes filmed in sylvan surroundings. Hints of extramarital romance are handled delicately, if with unexpected candour, as when the father (P.T. Narendran) tells his daughter (Sudharma Vaithanathan), “There were moments,” on being asked if he had been troubled by his wife’s relationship with her American student (Jeremy Roske). It is for the same reason that the American’s wife (Julia Koch) returns to the US with their son, while her husband stays on in India to pursue his passion for Indian music.

The film has a happy ending with the music and dance deeply entrenched in the souls of the protagonists reuniting father and son in a moving, if somewhat predictable, climax. The acting is of high quality, with Ashwini quite brilliant as wife-dancer-painter-teacher-mother, quite an accomplishment for a dancer in real life with no on-screen acting experience. The other dancers in the film, P.T. Narendran, Sudharma and Christopher Gurusamy, have given creditable acting performances too, with Christopher portraying the angst and anger of his character with a sugary-sweet element of understanding. Kalasikshetra veteran C.K. Balagopalan and senior dancer Bragha Bessell are featured in choreographed dance scenes, the music by Vedanth Bharadwaj, an integral part of the story, is hauntingly beautiful, as are the voices of Vedanth and Bindumalini Narayanaswamy. The songs and the story – “a reflection of my own inner journey” – by Kaarthikeyan show promise of greater things to come.

His Father’s Voice, which was enthusiastically received at its Hollywood premiere last year, is a commendable contribution from Tamil country to world cinema.
Heritage Walks were the flavour of Madras Week this year, with over 50 such events put together by organisations, individuals and groups. It shows how much enthusiasm there is to learn and explore in Chennai. We provide some representative photos here and in page 8.

Chennai Heritage Lectures during Madras Week

Muthiah Memorial Event: Panel discussion on Water Management was held on August 22nd at Hotel Savera. The speakers were Ranganath N. Krishna, MD/CEO of Grundfos Pumps, Ashok Vadhan Shetty, IAS Retd. and Kartikeya Sivasenapathy (Sivasenapathy Kangayam Castle Research Foundation) and moderated by Sushila Ravindranath, seen here with N. Shankar, Director, Chennai Heritage and Sriram V, Editor.

Above: ‘Butterfly watching with Mahil’ at Kotturpuram Tree Park and left: children at the Tree-Sure Hunt. Both events were organised by Nizhal.


U.S. Ambassador Kenneth I. Juster commemorated the 50th anniversary of the U.S. Consulate General building in Chennai on Tuesday, August 20. He was joined by the Honorable K. Pandiarajan, Minister for Tamil Official Language and Tamil Culture; Chennai historians, V. Striram; U.S. Consul General Robert Burgess; and distinguished guests and patrons of the American Center in Chennai. Held on the eve of the 380th founding of Madras, the event celebrated the longstanding cultural, educational, and commercial ties between the United States and South India. Ambassador Juster inaugurated a photo exhibit depicting fifty years of U.S. diplomatic engagement and cultural exchanges. The Ambassador also honored Chennai’s famed chronicler, S. Muthiah, dedicating a collection of his books for permanent display in the American Center.

The Bohra Heritage Walk: On August 24, 2019 as part of Madras Week celebrations, a new heritage walk got added to the list giving an insight into a trading community that has made George Town its base. Led by an enthusiastic Tasneem Kutubuddin, a Dawoodi Bohra herself, participants got an insight into the Gujarati speaking Dawoodi Bohra Muslim community, its close to two centuries old history in Madras, its mosques, school, food and culture. The walk meandered through the crowded streets of George Town, ending at their oldest mosque in Moore street.


Bohra Heritage Walk: On August 24, 2019 as part of Madras Week celebrations, a new heritage walk got added to the list giving an insight into a trading community that has made George Town its base. Led by an enthusiastic Tasneem Kutubuddin, a Dawoodi Bohra herself, participants got an insight into the Gujarati speaking Dawoodi Bohra Muslim community, its close to two centuries old history in Madras, its mosques, school, food and culture. The walk meandered through the crowded streets of George Town, ending at their oldest mosque in Moore street.

Making the most of Madras Week are the top picks for heritage walks. Heritage walks are the flavour of Madras Week this year, with over 50 such events put together by organisations, individuals and groups. It shows how much enthusiasm there is to learn and explore in Chennai. We provide some representative photos here and in page 8.

Three Pages of Madras Week Events (More events on page 8)
The ‘99 houses’ of Namberumal Chetty

Whenever social media finds time hanging heavy on its hands, it re-circulates a post on T. Namberumal Chetty. And this trots out a certain amount of fact along with huge chunks of fiction. It is the standard Indian style of making myths in place of biographies of high achievers.

The first of these myths is that the builder baron of 19th and early 20th Century Madras had 99 houses near the Spur-tank and so the area came to be called Chetty Petani after him, which later was corrupted to Chettpet. Truth is of course quite different. The historian K.V. Raman writes of how noble in the camp of the Rashtrakuta King Krishna III made a gift of gold to the Tiruvottriyur temple and this was deposited with the residents of Settruppu in Thondarumiyur. What is of interest are the houses on the right, for this where the builder constructed is his famed residences.

For fortunately, the map of 1920s has the names of most of the houses here marked and the ones owned by Namberumal are remembered by his granddaughters. N. Panchali, who is the daughter of Harrington Road, is the former of Harrington Road, opposite the entrance of Harrington Road and all to the right of it, were Raven- (this was the first house that Namberumal built accord- ing to his granddaughter), Petri- ton, Carimbooke, Nutford, Syden- ham, Gometra, Qudsia, Lismoyre (which also appears to have briefly been named Dilkusha), Croynant, Acton Lodge, Tunapara, Clyncroft and Mercy Cottage. According to Panchali, the houses, apart from Gometra, which was always meant to be the family home, were rented out to ICS and other Government officers and Namberumal was quite happy for them to bestow whatever name they fancied on their resi- dences. Some it would appear, like Dilkusha, changed names. Mercy Cottage later became Mentmore and was the residence in the 1940s of the educationist Kuriwilla Jacobseven as he shift- ed the MCC High School from the Elephanade to Chettpet.

Of Namberumal’s set of 15 houses listed above, some have attained immortality. His Chettpet still stands, a ghostly mansion that houses the family trusts and also has the family temple dedicated to Venugopala- lawasmi on one side. Some of the design features of Chettpet are clearly inspired by the ed- ifices that Namberumal built. The doorway leading to the grand staircase has a frame that sports the same pattern as the compound wall of the Govern- ment Museum. The top storey is identical to a wing of the Connemara Public Library. A round keep on the side, which evidently houses a spiral stair- way, is similar to many in the High Court. Among the others, demolished. Gorleston itself has vanished, its extensive grounds now Tarapore Avenue.

Namberumal’s younger daughter Chandramma married C.T. Alwar Chetty’s younger brother C.V. Krishnaswami Chetty. Educated in Manchester, he came back and joined the Corporation of Madras as Electrical Engineer, in which capacity he illuminated the principal thoroughfares of the city. He is better remembered for being the father of radio broadcasting in India, begin- ning the Madras Presidency Ra- dio Club in 1924. Krishnaswami Chetty lived in Sydenham, with canny Namberumal ensuring that the Corporation paid the rent for it! After his retirement, Krishnaswami Chetty shifted to Acton Lodge behind Croynant, which is still remembered in name.

The offices of Namberumal Chetty, with its army of ma- sons, carpenters, drapers and clerks functioned from which Kuchalamba Kalyna Mandapam is today. His grand- daughter remembers leftover construction material from some of Madras’ colonial build- ings littering the compound for years. It was also in the vicinity that Namberumal put up a bungalow entirely made of tin and timber! Known as Thagara Bungalow, it survived for long – originally designed as a makeshift residence that his men could put up wherever he travelled!

The best years of the family business were clearly till the old man’s death in 1925. His elder son Rajamannar was a chip off the old block and much was expected of him but he died relatively young. There- after, the business devolved on younger son Rajamman who struggled in a changing world. With grandson Ramachandra choosing to administer the family trusts and his brother Namberu- mal junior opting to settle... (Continued on page 7)
When VB overshadowed Srikanth

First Class Cricketer VB. Chandrasekhar passed away in August. This is a tribute to him.

Kish Srikanth's swashbuckling approach made him a partner look pedestrian but if there was one exception it was VB. Chandrasekhar. He was the only batsman who could match Srikanth in daredevilry and on many occasions outscored him when the two opened for Tamil Nadu. And at the MAC stadium in Chennai, Srikanth was forced to play second fiddle and in fact was little more than a spectator at the other end as VB blazed little more than a spectator stadium on October 5, 1988.

The process also enabled him to reach the fastest hundred ever scored by an Indian in first class cricket. He left Srikanth way behind and used his willow like a sword to rattle the bowlers. Hirwani returning to the scene where he took a world record 436 in 119 off 78 balls hitting three sixes. Ultimately he was out for 119 off 78 balls hitting three fours and totally dominating the first wicket partnership of 154 with Srikanth who was in his 30s when VB was out. Thanks in the main to VB's pyrotechnics Tamil Nadu were able to register an unexpected three wicket victory.

There was only one selector N.S. Tamhane who was present in January that year was treated harshly and went for 82 runs in his 17 overs. Sharma fared better in that he took six wickets but he too was not spared by VB and conceded 133 runs in 33 overs.

VB just went along his merry way getting his 100 of just 56 balls with eight sixes and eight fours. Ultimately he was out for 119 off 78 balls hitting three more fours and totally dominating the first wicket partnership of 154 with Srikanth who was in his 30s when VB was out. Thanks in the main to VB's pyrotechnics Tamil Nadu were able to register an unexpected three wicket victory.

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Sukram Foundation, a non-profit trust founded by Sangita Kalandanidhi elect Vidushi Dr. S. Sowmya, presented the first edition of Musicarnival on August 3rd and 4th in Chennai this year. Invaginated by N Murali (President, The Music Academy), the event aimed at bringing Chennai's music community together to share & exchange their knowledge of music from refreshingly new perspectives – participants were regaled by music puzzles, skits, performances and even a musical treasure hunt. The city's prominent musicians like Nithyasree Mahadevan, Sudha Raghunathan, Anantha R. Krishnan, N.Prabhu Siva, the performers Ranjini-Gayatri and more lent their support to the initiative, by participating in the event alongside music lovers and artists of all ages.

Meena, a member of the organizing committee, says that the idea was conceived around 20 years back, when present-day eminent musicians were children or were just starting. They would play with and challenge each other by creating and solving musical puzzles, learning more while having fun in the process. Sowmya, now a faculty member at the Music Academy, carried forward the tradition with her class, sending a musical riddle each day for her students to solve – a jumbled kni, for instance. Recognizing the potential of the format to study music from a different point of view and also encourage students to find the fun in learning, she decided to open the game to the public under the aegis of the Sukram Foundation. The team worked for three months on the project, basking the event 'Musicarnival'. Apart from their immediate peers and professional circles, the organizing team also personally invited schools and colleges such as Vidyavarti Mata Maramore, PSBB (TP Road & KK Nagar), Queen Mary's College and Madras University to participate in Musicarnival.

The attending teams put up stalls, bidding visitors to try their hand at solving the unusual music puzzles and tricks they had each devised. The Music Academy's stall, for instance, included a novel rag-based maze made of sevaanatham paths which one had to solve by identifying the key swaras and the aravukku they occupied (spoiler: the answer was shanmatharpanam!). The students of MOP Vaishnav college challenged participants with their 'Saptta Thali' quiz and 'Math in Music' puzzles; Kalakshetra pupils invited them to play their special version of Dumb Charades, ‘Abinaya Charades’; and the team from Shankara Gana Vidya Nilayam challenge

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Answers to Quiz


Apart from games and puzzles, Musicarnival also invited interested participants to put up performances of their own. A group of young children entertained the audience with a charming puppet show put on by Bharathiyar, 'Meena Maama Enna Solarkarum?'. The older kids put up a skit, narrating stories of sageguyakana like Purandaradasa, Dikshitar, Tyagaraja and Syama Sastri. An open mic stage was also set up for anyone to showcase their talent, sparking improvisation as well as polished performances. The creative tried their hand at jamming together, making musical instruments out of kitchen utensils like forks and spoons, tins, paint brushes and rattles. The two-day fest also had just-for-fun stalls like mehendi, goli soda, filter coffee and chaat, leaving music-lovers with happy hearts and full stomachs.

— Vantha Venugopal

The '99 houses' of Nanberumal Chettty

(Continued from page 6) abroad, the houses were all that remained to tell the story. Most of these changed hands, leaving Crynant the sole survivor.

It is of course quite likely that Nanberumal owned 99 houses and that these were scattered all over the city. He did own Jarrett's Garden in

Egmore (see Lost Landmarks MM, March 1, 2018) and there were two residences Anuradha Bhavan in George Town for instance. But to say he had 99 houses in Chepjet is just plain fiction. Of course, that it is possible to build 99 residences the opposite of Nanberumal's house is another matter.

Chennai.
On August 24, journalist Govi Lenin took heritage buffs on a tour of the various journal offices that were associated with the early days of the social justice Dravidian movement.

Exploring the Mercantile history of Kutchery Road Walk organised by Madras Inherited.

Participants at the Anna Nagar Walks organised by S. Thirupurasundari Sevvel.

On August 10, 2019, a group of 18 citizens of Chennai led by Vikas Madhav, birdwatched along the road to the Perumbakkam Tank. The participants were given observation sheets to record the birds they spotted and a Pocket Guide of the Birds of Tamil Nadu to relate to the birds they were watching. Below: Participants of the Kelambakkam Backwaters nature walk organised by Madras Naturalists’ Society.

Independence Movement – Mylapore Walk organised by Past Forward.

RK Salai East Walk organised by Nivedita Louis.

Participants at the Anna Nagar Walks organised by S. Thirupurasundari Sevvel.