Making a sham of heritage conservation

What makes for heritage conservation if a structure is generally believed to be of aesthetic, architectural and cultural merit? The best would be for the edifice to be preserved in its entirety and put to adaptive reuse. The next best would be for it to be retained and turned into a museum of some kind, though this is really not a viable option in India where countless badly run museums proliferate with hardly any footfalls. The worst option, just short of outright demolition, would be to leave the façade standing and paint it regularly so that it looks well preserved. And yet this is precisely the kind of ‘plastic conservation’ that our State appears to specialise in, and the most recent example is what has happened to the Raja Sir Savalai Ramaswami Mudaliar Choultry that stands just opposite the Central Station (see HeritageWatch alongside).

Constructed in 1888 by the eponymous businessman and philanthropist, the precinct was meant to provide transit accommodation for people who arrived in the city by train. The land was leased from the Government and the facility, housed in a beautiful Indo Saracenic structure, was well maintained, all its wings in full use.

Our OLD dating to 1928 is of the RSRM Choultry in all its glory, just 40 years after it was built. Our NOT SO NEW dates to 2008, when the building was run as a hotel, and was well-maintained, all its wings in full use.

Our NEW, dating to 2020 and taken by Rahul Jaywant Bhise, a student of the Asian College of Journalism, shows the façade in all its glory but now a hollow shell, with the rest of the building having been done away with.

The E. Padmanabhan Committee Report classified this building (no 156, page 243) as belonging to category 2a – a structure possessing aesthetic, cultural and architectural merit. Sadly only the façade has been considered worthy of retention.

City traffic and ways to keep it in control

If God were to offer one gift relating to our city, to be granted instantly upon asking, there is a high probability that many of us would want a noise-free, pollution-free, smooth movement of traffic and pedestrians on the roads. A sample of such peace on the roads can be experienced on the days of flash strikes by auto-rickshaw drivers. That experienced on the days of flash strikes by auto-rickshaw drivers is some indication of the role of strikers by auto-rickshaws. That is why any footfalls. The worst of abandoned vehicles was meant to remove this impediment to commencing reconstruction work. There is no mention of modernising pedestrian sidewalks as part of the road reconstruction programme. It is now an opportune time to construct walking paths and bicycle tracks and protect them from encroachment by vehicles and road-side vendors. The residual space should be set aside for vehicular traffic even if such order of priority calls for re-directing traffic flow and identifying more one-way stretches.

Fines have now been raised substantially to increase the (Continued on page 2)
Lotus awards times

SHORT 'N SNAPPY

Taking a Bat to an Alphabet Soup

Footnotes:

Footnote 1: Taking a Bat to an Alphabet Soup

Footnote 2: Taking a Bat to an Alphabet Soup

Footnote 3: Taking a Bat to an Alphabet Soup

Footnote 4: Taking a Bat to an Alphabet Soup
More focus on the present please

I am writing this to record my enjoyment and appreciation of two of your brilliant pieces in the recent issue of Madras Musings – one on Sridhar-Bharanidharan-Matrina and the other comparing the audiences for music and for dance in the MMM column; hilarious and so true! Look for more!

The Bharanidharan piece struck a chord in me: I was a resident of Purasawakkam during 1944-54 and resided for a while in Vellala Street. As a reader/contributor to Madras Musings, I see more of history and forays into the past. Please do also give space for the present and a peep into the future.

S. Viswanathan
Editor & Publisher
Industrial Economist

Cho at his best

The article Nali Palkhivala in Madras (MM, January 16-31, 2020) brought back nostalgic memories of a meeting I had attended. When the meeting commenced, Cho Ramaswami was to present Palkhivala to the audience. Cho took the mike and said, ‘Mr. Palkhivala is a lawyer.’ The well-read audience who knew Palkhivala to be a renowned lawyer laughed out loud at his statement. Cho stood unperturbed and when the crowd calmed down, said with a mischievous smile, ‘I am also a lawyer!’ The crowd went into raptures and it took a long time for their clapping to stop.

Tharicus S. Fernando
10, First Street
AVM Nagar
Vigasahabakam
Chennai 600 092

Humorous & interesting

I agree with what Mr. Srinanth has expressed in his letter to the Editor, regarding the new MMM’s sense of humor. The last issue regarding old calendar cardboards which are never thrown away and has the Davar Divine pictures on them, and how they are left with nails after the daily sheets are torn off is true of almost every South Indian household. The issue of audience participation at music festivals is again enjoyable and very true.

Such articles of simple day-to-day happenings tinged with humor will make the reader feel a sense of participation with the magazine as we can relate to these incidents better. Hope MMM keeps it up.

Prema Raman
88, Harrington Road, Chepauk
Chennai 600 031

Pavithra’s Perspective

Chariot of the Gods

The annual Sundaram Finance Mylapore Festival was held between January 9-12, 2020. Given below are some of the programmes that took place during the event.

Concerts at the Park

Carnatic music concerts at the Nageswara Rao Park in Luz by students of Suthralaya School set the ball rolling for the 2020 edition. Though the dew disappeared earlier than it has of late and the sunshine crept into this verdant park, the group of vocalists and instrumentalists, all in their teens and dressed in traditional attire started the concert on the dot of seven.

They sang for an hour as family and friends and some Mylaporeans who take walks or exercise in this park stopped by to listen to the music. Hot cups of coffee were passed around to rasikas who sat around the stage at Chess Square.

Cultural shows on main stage

The stage shows that were held in Sambith Street quadrangle drew a large audience. Various open-air performances were held over two evenings. From folk music and dance to classical music and choir, these recitals have led from one to the other ending with the main event – a Bharatanatyam dance drama.

On Friday January 10th, when the Telengana folk troupe came back for a second recital, their spirited dance to recorded music set feet tapping. The music may have spluttered and stopped but the artistes weren’t despondent; they got into the groove when things were set right. Through the weekend, there were a string of recitals from 5.30 p.m. onwards. The highlights included a malkamba display on Sunday and two Bharatanatyam dance productions each evening.

Hundreds of people enjoyed the food street (Sundareswar Smamy Street) zone during the Mylapore Festival 2020. On the roadside, the nartikura community spread colorful bead chains. Balloons, panjumittai and Dolly appalam seemed to be favourites among children as well as adults. From jigartangai to mangalore bonda and Delhi appalam seemed to be favourites among children as well as adults. From jigartangai to mangalore bonda and Delhi appalam seemed to be favourites among children as well as adults. From jigartangai to mangalore bonda and Delhi appalam seemed to be favourites among children as well as adults. From jigartangai to mangalore bonda and Delhi appalam seemed to be favourites among children as well as adults.

When a neighbourhood celebrates

Inside the school, some 50 participants were busy playing Daya Kattam. Senior’s especially were very happy to take part in the contest that was held at the school’s prayer hall. Said a volunteer, “No matter whatever commitments I have, I keep everything aside and make sure to participate in the Daya kattam contest every year.”

Vintage Pelathope bungalow hosts talks

A one-hundred years old house in Pelathope in Mylapore was the venue for two public talks. On Saturday, January 11, Jaishri P. Rao gave a talk on the histories, heritage and cuisine of the small Thanjavur Mahashrithan community. She has recently published a book on this subject and her talk was based on material she has collected over time. On Sunday, January 12, Padmavathy Baskaran whose passion has been to detail on-line hundreds of significant but forgotten temples/ shrines of Tamil Nadu talked on ‘Gods of the Holy Koovalam River’. Padmavathy has published a book on this subject.

The Fest featured over 30 events across four days. — Courtesy: Mylapore Times. Pictures courtesy: Sundaram Finance Limited
The inner vision gets recognised with a Padmashri

In her celebrated poem Tran-
science Sarojini Naidu says, ‘’No, you do not grasp the life in full of
sobs.‘’

Weeds will not set her rhythms
for your prey.

Now spring day that bright, ap-
pealed beauty is now bloom and
blossom.

The indefatigable Ma-
ho-Manohar couple proved the
truth of the sentiment that she
expressed in her poem.

April 23, 1927 – Birth of
Manohar Devadoss

Manohar Devadoss was
brought up in Madras, a
city that he loved and
continued to admire, and
graduated in Chemistry from
American College in 1957.

Famed for music and
arts, Mano learned to play
the piano, which he was quite
good at. However, Mano loved
the piano, which he was quite
good at. However, Mano loved

The Padma Shri

On the occasion of Manohar
Devadoss been awarded the
Padma Shri by the Government
of India, we offer our felicitations
through this article on him by historian
K.R.A. Narasiah.

Manohar was born in 1927 in
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continued to admire. He graduated in
Chemistry from American College in 1957.

Famed for music and
arts, Manohar loved the piano, which he was quite
good at. However, Manohar loved
drawing pictures from his early
time, and that the subjects
did not allow the debilitating
condition. With all sections of people,
par

"hearing"

Manohar Devadoss

"sighted"

A few years ago I was working on a book on the Corporation of
Madurai, and it came to him in a dramatic fashion when following
the research I met TV Antony and enjoyed the interactions with
him. The Administration Report of the following years (1973-
1974) records the then Commissioner U‘Kruparaj’s remarks, “The
significant fact of this year is that the oldest Corporation of the
Country was superseded from December 1, 1973 on the
grounds that the council, the Civic body failed to safeguard
the interest of public and came under the administrative
control of the Special Officer who replaced the Mayor and
Standing Committee. His methodical work brought out a good
discipline in the rank and file of the Corporation staff and
improved their efficiency."

As an administrator, the late
Mr. Antony was noted for
his administrative zeal and
stability. During his
administrative tenure, he
undertook a comprehensive
review of the entire civic
administration and
introduced several
measures to improve the
administration. Some
of the significant
achievements during his
administration were:

- Implementation of
the concept of the “Mass
Family Planning Camps” in
1971-72,
- The launch of the
Mass Family Planning
Programme (MFPP) in 1972,
- The introduction of
the “Mass Family
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Nani Palkhivala in Madras – II

(Continued from last fortnight)

Palkhivala and Cho Ramsawami

No account of my reminiscences of Palkhivala in Madras will be complete without paying due respect and admiration that Cho Ramsawami and he had for each other. I have the fond recollection and pride of being the person who had made a public platform for the first time. Their appearance in the same event used to attract enormous crowds. Whenever Palkhivala shared the platform with Cho, one could see that he was visibly infected by Cho’s humour. Once he invited Cho to preside over his meeting in Madras. Abruptly, I added, “Mr. Gopal, thank you for inviting me. Palkhivala is a great man, an icon for all of us. But my presence would only be a distraction. People should come to listen to him, not gaze at me.” But I was insistent. I assured him that I will wait for his arrival, take him to the stage and seat him away from public gaze. He attended the speech at R. R. Sabha and as quietly as he could slip in, he left after the event. Later that evening, at a dinner, I was privileged to introduce the famous industrialist, I told Cho about Palkhivala’s inconspicuous visit. He immediately became curious to meet him. I arranged for Palkhivala to call Cho’s residence. Palkhivala spoke to him on the phone and expressed a desire to meet him. It was then 9.30 p.m. Cho arrived at Sivasailam’s house at 9.15 p.m. I held a conversation for a little more than half an hour. In the following issue of Thuglak, Cho carried synopses of Palkhivala’s speech at R. R. Sabha and their conversation. From that time onwards, Palkhivala became more popular among the middle class in Madras.

A speech at Abbotsbury

In 1973, I arranged Palkhivala’s speech, presided by Cho, at Abbotsbury. In the Thuglak issue immediately preceding this event, Cho had published a small note signed by him, in which he invited the readers to attend it, not because he was presiding but to hear the man who was championing the common man’s cause.

I believe that if I was invariably successful in arranging Palkhivala’s big speeches in Madras, it was due to a divine intervention on many occasions, including the one at Abbotsbury in 1973. Palkhivala only found time to give that speech on 4 February 1973, a Sunday. But Abbotsbury was booked for a wedding on that particular Sunday. Since Cho was presiding, we could not find any other auditorium large enough for the expected crowd. I spent sleepless nights trying to work other options. A solution presented itself when my mother looked up the almanac and said that Sunday morning was booked for a wedding on that Sunday morning was not suitable for any auspicious function and the marriage party might only arrive between 2 p.m. and 4.30 p.m. I wasted no time in seeking the person who had booked the hall for his daughter’s wedding. Fortunately, he was the Branch Manager of ACC and Palkhivala was the Chairman of ACC. Overwhelmed, the gentleman readily consented to let us use the hall in the morning. I assured him that the pandhalak (an auspicious pole forming part of the wedding ritual) will be protected by our volunteers and I would be happy to provide seats for him and the groom’s family at the event. It had thus happened that we not only got the venue but also got it free of cost! The Sunday arrived and the audience overflowed the hall. Many stood outside the hall, under the scorching sun to hear Cho and Palkhivala. Cho’s introductory remarks were so witty that Palkhivala said, “Rarely have I seen the Chairman outshine the speaker in advance.” This was also the occasion when Palkhivala said with a broad smile as to why he thought the organizers had invited Cho to preside, using the anecdote of a waitress in a U.S. railway restaurant, who served the customer two eggs, “in case one turned out to be a vegetable”. Among the numerous people who attended the event, there were distinguished personalities such as A. Sivasailam and D.C. Kathiri, well-known industrialists, J.H. Tarapore, the famous architect, Justice Narayanawamy Madlal, K.S. Venkataraman I.C.S. (Retd.), M.S. Subbulakshmi and T. Sadasivam. Making arrangements for this speech, successfully despite the initial hurdle, gave me immense satisfaction as this event brought Palkhivala in close contact with the youth of Madras. He always loved and had great hopes for the younger generation of the country. As I recall those events, more memories of the 1973 Abbotsbury speech come back. An interesting incident concerns the late J. Jayalalitha, former Chief Minister of Tamilnadu. She was then a busy film star. It is well-known that she wanted to become a lawyer but circumstances led her into the film industry. She held Palkhivala in high esteem and wanted to attend the speech at Abbotsbury. Sometime before the event, she called up Cho, who was her good friend, and asked him if a seat could be reserved for her at the venue because she might arrive late. Cho asked me on her behalf but I firmly declined the request. Normally seats were not reserved for anybody and I was not willing to make an exception for Jayalalitha. But I must add that we used to have volunteers sitting in rows other than the first row, and they would give up their seats for VIPs if needed. I also felt that a popular film actress arriving late would be an unwelcome distraction at the venue. When Cho conveyed my decision to her, she was understandably upset and did not attend the speech. This coincided with the time when she was writing some of her reminiscences as a series in Thuglak. After that unhappy incident, the series came to an abrupt end. As if he held me to blame for it, Cho said in a lighter vein, “Gopal, because of you she stopped writing her reminiscences!” Another interesting remembrance of that event at Abbotsbury is that Palkhivala came to Madras by a Tata owned private aircraft – it was ‘Cesna’ if my recollection is correct – because his busy schedule prevented him from catching a commercial airline flight from Bombay in good time. The plane landed in Madras two hours before the event and flew back without any passenger, while Palkhivala, who later visited the Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry, went to Delhi by a commercial flight. His arrival at Madras by a private aircraft caused an interesting titbit to appear in Ananda Vikatan. Bala, who was on the editorial staff of the magazine, was a close friend of Cho. I used to chat with him while waiting to meet Cho at the Ananda Vikatan office. At Abbotsbury, while we were chatting before the speech, I said to him that Palkhivala had to arrive by a private plane. Impressed by the public adulation that he witnessed at the event, he caused a box item to appear in Ananda Vikatan that read ‘Palkhivala came by a private Tata plane especially for this speech’. The same piece also carried a facsimile of the initials ‘NAP’ written by Palkhivala with the caption, ‘This is how he signs’. Appearing in Ananda Vikatan, which had always been quite popular among Tamil readers, was unexpected publicity for us. I sent the clippings to Palkhivala. He was pleased to see them and felt flattered like a child. Cho’s presiding over the speech at Abbotsbury and that piece in Ananda Vikatan made him a household name in Madras.

A full house at Abbotsbury to listen to Palkhivala. Among those that can be made out are A. Sivasailam, M.S. Subbulakshmi, T. Sadasivam and Justice K.C. Venkataraman, I.C.S.
Marble-like chunnam in 18th- and 19th-Century Madras Presidency

Chunnam, or lime, occurs in extensive quantities among the boundary hills, and is accessible during the rains, from whence it is transported by the inland navigation to the most distant parts of Bengal; but it is greatly inferior to the beautiful shell-chunam of Madras. A commerce in chunnam, wax, ivory, and other articles, is carried on with the Cosseahs and other mountaineers on the eastern frontiers of Bengal.‘

The nature and quality of chunnam used in the Madras Presidency are formally recorded in various published reports by the British either living in or visiting Madras from the 18th Century. All of them consistently remark that the quality of this material used in building human residences and other buildings was superior than that used for the same purpose elsewhere in India.

James Anderson of Hermis comments on the houses in the 18th Century Madras Presidency (1820) says (p. 193):

‘Panænus (the brother of Phidias) used a plaster or stucco in the Temple of Minerva at Elis, Southern Greece, mixed with milk. This should be something like the beautiful marble-like stucco or chunnam-work of India. I once saw a floor laid at Madras, among the materials of which were jaggery (jagery) or coarse sugar, water and milk.

Because of its quality and shine, the Madras chunnam was preferentially chosen for use in several buildings in Singapore in the mid-19th Century. The Government House and St. Andrew’s Cathedral are two classic examples. To carry out this task, convicts deported from Madras, who were familiar with the technology, were used as labour.

The Madras Terrace Roofs, unique construction using chunnam

Madras chunnam was used both for fixing bricks and plastering wall exteriors. A popular component of human residences from the early decades of the 18th Century Madras was the ‘Madras terrace roof’ laid tightly on bamboo frames. MTRs were constructed using baked, red bricks plastered with lime mortar, placed diagonally over 30-45 cm apart-wooden rafters. If considered necessary, the MTRs were supported by wooden pillars.

Frederick Hemingway (Collector and Magistrate of Trichinopoly (Trichirapalli)) comments on the houses in the district Tiruchirapalli in the first decade of the 20th Century (1907, p. 81):

‘The houses of the poor are thatched. Persons of even moderate wealth build themselves terraced or tiled houses. Terraced houses are rare in Namakkal and Udayarapalaiyam taluks, where tiles are generally used. Terraced houses, in many other districts, are usually owned only by the wealthy. Two-storied houses are perhaps more common in this than in most other districts. Thatch is made of plated coconut leaves covered with straw of various kinds. Occasionally a loft or mud terrace called kurungamachu (a kind of mezzanine) is built beneath the roof. Houses are generally ob-long in shape.’

Engineer John Thomas Smith and the Lime Mortar of Madras

John Smith (1805–1882), chief engineer with the Madras Engineers Corps (MEC), is immortalised in Madras for designing and building the Grecian-Doric column light-house in 1838–1839. Smith explored the science of lime and lime mortar used as building material. Many of the classy engineering papers and reports submitted to the government at Fort St. George (Madras) by MEC staff were published in the Reports, Correspondence and Original Papers on Various Professional Subjects Connected with the Duties of the Corps of Engineers Madras Presidency, edited and published by him from 1839. These papers enlighten us on some of the remarkable science that flourished in Madras.

To be continued next fortnight

Dr. A. Raman

by Dr. A. Raman

Mortar mix used while building the Government House, Singapore. (Source: McNair and Bayliss, 1899)

MADRAS MUSINGS

February 1-15, 2020

1. Jaggery is the unrefined, raw sugar from sugarcane juice (Saccha-rum officinarum, Poaceae). Jaggery is also made from Asam Palm (Borassus flabellifer, Arecaceae) by extracting and boiling the sap that oozes from the cut end of either the shoot bud or the inflorescence. It is the most abundantly available sugar source widely used by the less well-off rural people of India (Playne et al., 1914–1919).

2. Cosseahs — people belonging to the Khasi Hills of the Shillong Plateau, Meghalaya (Norwegian) 2002.

Establishing a world-record in Madras

January 12, 1964 dawned bright and clear. It was clearly a lovely day for cricket and the huge Sunday holiday crowd assembled at the Corporation stadium in Madras, eagerly looking forward to an action-packed third day's play in the first Test between India and England. They had watched two eventful days, with India having declared at 457 for seven and England replying with 63 for two at stumps the day before. The third day promised to be engrossing with the expected duel between Ken Barrington, Jim Parks and Micky Stewart and the Indian spinners led by Salim Durrani and Chandu Borde.

But the packed crowd saw one of the dullest days of Test cricket as England dawdled along to finish the day at 235 for four. The most boring part came during the fourth wicket partnership between Barrington and Brian Bolus, the opening batsman who resumed his innings. The two added 119 runs in nearly five hours – a sure cure for insomnia for the spectators.

There was a reason behind England's dawdling. Parks and Stewart had taken ill and were not in a position to bat. If they could be kept away from the crease that day, there was ample time for them to recover as the following day was the rest day.

So Bolus and Barrington just blocked and blocked, eking out only 27 runs in the two-hour period between lunch and tea. Gathering runs was of the least interest to the duo as their goal was to eat into the time. But amidst all this, the bored spectators did witness a world record.

The Indian left-arm spinner Bapu Nadkarni was well known for his accuracy, but on this day he was so parsimonious that he set a world record. Taking runs off him was like squeezing the proverbial water out of a stone. Over after over, he kept wheeling them down on the same good length spot and the two batsmen just played the ball dead at their feet. Ultimately, he sent down 21 successive maiden overs which has remained a world record – this included a long spell of 131 balls without conceding a run. By the time England were all out for 317 on the fourth morning, Nadkarni had the mind-boggling and eye-remarkable figures of 32-7-3-0. In the second innings, as England made a brave bid to reach a target of 293 runs in 265 minutes, Nadkarni curbed their charge with two quick wickets, finishing with the figures of 6-4-6-2 as the Test meandered to a draw.

Just nine months later at the same venue, Nadkarni enjoyed the best match of his 41-Test career, picking up five for 31 and six for 91 against Australia. Indeed, Nadkarni reserved some of his best batting feats too for the Madras crowd. Against England in January 1962, he and Farokh Engineer figured in an eighth wicket stand of 181, which was India's first century partnership for this wicket, Nadkarni's share being 63. Three years later, the same pair broke that record by sharing an eighth wicket partnership of 143 runs against New Zealand, Nadkarni scoring 75.

Making a sham of heritage conservation

(Continued from page 1) administered by a private trust which in the 1970s made way for the Official Trustee of the High Court who managed the space with a descendant of the founder as a co-trustee. By then the need for a choultry having faded, the place was leased out to its own time to pass the Act, dithered over the matter, taking its own time to pass the Act. While the State Government waited for the High Court to oversee the task and also to pass a heritage act for the State. That was in 1987 and the latter body assured the High Court that it would protect the structure. What it has done is to retain the façade but also all the other heritage buildings. What has come during the fourth wicket partnership between Barrington and Brian Bolus, the opening batsman who resumed his innings. The two added 119 runs in nearly five hours – a sure cure for insomnia for the spectators.

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It is safe to assume that no scientific study on structural stability was ever done in any of these instances, given that many of these buildings were quite sound at their core. The RSRM Choultry was handed over the Metro Rail in 2014 and the latter body assured the High Court that it would protect the structure. What it has done is to retain the façade, in keeping with the High Court’s 2010 guideline and done away with the rest of the building. Work has now begun in the rear on Chennai Metro Square – a 33-storey structure that will dwarf not only what is left of the RSRM choultry but also all the other heritage buildings in the vicinity – Central Station, the railway headquarters, Siddique Serai, Ripon Buildings and Victoria Public Hall. This will be a monstrosity that will destroy what was for long a very harmonious skyline. But then when it comes to ‘development’ in India, aesthetics has always taken a backseat.

In the midst of all this the façade of the RSRM choultry will survive, with no connection to its surroundings. But yes, we did save it did we not?