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MADRAS MUSINGS

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WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

Vol. XXX No. 6

September 1-15, 2020

MADRAS WEEK GIFT –

Chennai is India's third dirtiest city

As the city celebrated Madras Week this month, the results of the Swachh Survekshan survey – an initiative under Swachh Bharat to monitor cleanliness in different cities and towns in India – were released as well. It seems to be a mixed bag for Chennai. While our city has jumped up the rankings from the 61st place last year to the 45th this year, it also achieved the dubious distinction of being tagged the third dirtiest city in the category of those with a population of more than 1 million, behind Patna and East Delhi. The city authorities are reportedly unhappy with the results, expressing dissatisfaction over the metrics used to measure a city's sanitation and hygiene

levels. With a daily garbage collection amounting to 5,400 metric tons, the Greater Chennai Corporation website specifies the various measures it has taken to improve sanitation in the city, including the implementation of door-to-door collection of municipal solid waste in all zones. Further, the authorities are also reportedly taking steps to educate households about the need to segregate household waste as well. GCC's work has actually received positive attention in recent years, with reports that the city has managed to considerably reduce the amount of waste sent to landfills. So, it is understandable that the survey results are a bit of an unpleasant surprise.

However, without discounting the achievements of the local authorities, it must be acknowledged that our city has the potential for marked improvement when it comes

● by The Editor

to cleanliness and hygiene. For instance, despite the claim of widespread door-to-door collection in all zones, the practice of dumping household waste in street corner bins still seems to continue in all areas, with said bins often seen overflowing with garbage. Also, it is estimated that only around 40 per cent of Chennai households segregate their waste. Buildings



A familiar sight in Chennai.

and complexes which generate waste in bulk, rarely segregate the waste they generate, with such unsegregated garbage ending up in the nearest street bin. It is felt that a plan to disincentivize street-corner dumping (or incentivise segregation for easy door-to-door collection) is the urgent need of the hour and the lowest hanging fruit in improving sanitation – not only is it deeply

unhygienic to leave mounds of waste lying around on street corners, it is also hazardous to sanitation workers and ragpickers who help empty the bins and sort out the waste.

Of course, it must be pointed out that the pandemic has complicated matters in the past five months. Door-to-door collection has understandably

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Speculating on life after Corona

For some time to come, Corona will not yield place to any other subject in social conversations and for publication in print and electronic media. Media people have a tough job, every day, and every hour, finding subjects that pass the tests of relevance and audience interest. The Chinese intrusion and Bollywood mysteries provide some relief from this singular obsession but may not last long. We indulge in a wishful speculation, with no pretensions to special expertise, on the likely longer-term impact of Corona.

It looks as if Corona has come to stay with us for as long as we can see. People and governments are tired of large-scale lockdowns. Perhaps, at an

initial heavy cost of lives, this might force people to experiment with alternative lifestyles and work models that are not socially suffocating, nor economically constrictive.

Awareness that poor hygiene could be life-threatening has been imprinted on our minds. A much-needed attitudinal transformation could be a positive outcome of Corona. This change, combined with a new energy for collective action might raise the effectiveness of municipal services like solid waste collection and disposal, elimination of single use plastics, composting of organic waste and rain water harvesting. Encouraged by public response, the State Government should go for substantial

investment in improving the hygienic environment.

The inward-looking lifestyle imposed by the prolonged lockdown will help discover joys of family togetherness, strengthen inter-generational bonds, and make way for a lifestyle of con-

● by A Special Correspondent

tentment, freed from the aid of external props.

During the crisis, neighbourhoods learnt to act in concert, share responsibilities, make do with what was available, help the old and the infirm, extend financial support to the poor, feed the hungry by running community kitchens, take care of street dogs starved

of food and so on. Community action is a powerful social energy that will help overcome future crises, small and large. By demanding physical distancing, Corona has promoted social cohesion.

Dharavi-like slums, huddles of large families within 100-150 square-foot space, are everywhere in the country. Apart from the need to save them against another Corona, it is no matter of pride that such inhuman conditions have been allowed to exist alongside mansions, grand malls and seven-star hotels showing up another world of pomp and luxury. Defining living space in terms of minimum standard of physical distancing may become a legally enforceable

obligation for residential and working space. This may be accompanied by a concomitant obligation, cast on the State, to provide bridging assistance to low income groups so that they too are housed in dignity. Town planners, in the new era, will integrate physical distancing principles into the design of urban settlements. As we write, the World Bank is offering financial assistance to Chennai to redesign footpaths and public spaces to adapt the city to physical distancing.

The desirability or otherwise of inter-state migration has become a burning issue. Should such migration be stopped or allowed? Home

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LIFE AFTER CORONA

(Continued from page 1)

States want to prevent their workers from going to distant parts of the country. They try to create employment within the State. It cannot be done overnight. Generating jobs through economic growth is slower but sustainable in yielding results. Artificial invention of jobs is instant but, often, merely disguises unemployment. Mobility of labour is necessary to physically link jobs created with jobs taken. The cultural fusion that mobility brings about is icing on the cake. Host states would find it beneficial to look after migrant workers. Agriculturally rich states would prepare for labour shortages and incentivise progressive mechanisation.

Lockdown has become a debatable issue. Should there have been a lock down at all? If it was useful, should it have been better timed to avoid hardships? Should it have been more selective? How gradually should it have been drawn down? What are the benefits of lockdown in terms of lives saved versus economic contraction? These are likely to be discussed, researched, and evaluated to provide guidelines for better-informed decision making in the future, should the need arise again, God forbid. For the first time, we are confronted with the macabre option of purchasing economic growth with human lives. If we must pay a price again in the future, the price must be made affordable and human.

In a pandemic, hospital beds, medicines, vaccines, ventilators and medical and para medical services come under heavy pressure providing scope for profiteering and other mal practices. Even in ordinary times, diagnostics, and cures, made available by technology, are not necessarily within the reach of the poor. The trade-off for the poor is between suffering and life steeped in debt. Corona might lead us back towards the welfare state model resembling the plan of British economist of the forties, William Beveridge, that was based on universalism. Everyone "received coverage for a set of social risks, as a right, based on contributions paid by everyone". To meet its responsibilities, government would want to raise more money from taxes, economise on expenditure and transfer functions/services to private sector and NGOs that can do the same more efficiently and less expensively. A thorough overhaul of current priorities and identification of new sources of tax revenue may be commissioned. Agriculture that contributes 50 per cent of GDP not only goes scot-free of taxes but enjoys subsidies in several forms,

colours, and shapes. Being risk-prone by nature, agriculture does need support, but how much of it is good for its own inherent sustainability is moot. This would come up for critical scrutiny, hopefully free of electoral considerations.

Work From Home gives us a new acronym. The lockdown-imposed experiment with WFH has found that it could, with further refinements, be made the new normal. Critical staff members log into the office network, take decisions, give directions, consult each other, and monitor the output of others. Businesses and other organisations could do with perhaps a fourth or third of office space. Office space rentals will fall. Traffic on the road will diminish, lessening congestion and pollution. There would be saving in office costs, rental, petrol and electricity. Thanks to the time saved on commuting to work, more of it would be available with the family. Because of lesser frequency of going to the work place, families may stay farther from the business centre. Urban congestion will reduce. Away from town, some families might live at lower cost in healthier environments and have more spendable income; others, spending the same money could afford living better, say, in farm-attached houses. They might, in due course, take to farming, availing the free time and physical presence. Professionally managed household farms raising orchards, vegetable gardens, orchid gardens, poultries, and dairy farms may emerge as a new phenomenon in the horticultural sector. This might lead to a benevolent reversal of urban migration from rural areas.

The virus took heavy toll of countries without distinction of power, armed or economic might, race, religion or colour. It spread because it was an interconnected world. There is more mobility of skills and expertise across nations today than a few decades ago. International migrants keep in touch with their roots thanks to a shrinking world and low flight fares in real terms. Countries realise that they cannot withdraw into remote social islands without shrinking economically. International trade and mobility of people across continents cannot be reversed without serious contraction of world GDP. Affluent countries might find that their security and happiness is integrally connected with making the poor parts of the world hygienic, healthy, and happy – without extracting a price for it. Altruism might become the best policy, though not as a moral imperative.

Zoomed out

Ye Gods, when will this year end was the question most often on the lips of *The Man from Madras Musings* until he read that the current pandemic is all set to extend well into the next year. And so, MMM has recalibrated and would like to know when 2021 will end as well. In the meanwhile, it is best to think happy thoughts, spread cheer and above all stay away from news updates regarding the virus and also shun pronouncements from the WHO (Woebegone Health Organisation). There is one man from there with a perpetually pained expression and a long name comprising four separate words that MMM particularly avoids. He (of that name 1 name 2 name 3 name 4 fame) makes the most negative statements.

In the meanwhile, MMM is rather fatigued at this point, what with his having had more than his share of Zoom meetings for Madras Week. MM was not part of the festivities, the old magazine having rather sensibly taken the stance that it would prefer to wait for better times, after all Chennai and *Madras Musings* are not going anywhere and will be around for better Madras Weeks to come. But that did not prevent some from sending private messages to MMM stating that they understood but were deeply disappointed, whatever that means. They presumably wanted MM to conduct events online. Of course, some may have been deeply disappointed that the snacks and tea/coffee that was freely distributed in earlier Madras Weeks will not be forthcoming this year unless of course the magazine was considering doing a dunzo to all attendees. But these are tough times and MM does not aim to throw cash on such lavish acts.

The magazine may have stayed away but not so MMM, who spoke at this forum and that, not to forget that one, this one and the one over there in that yonder corner. All of these were addresses over Zoom, Google Meet, Webex and other such online tools, which have proliferated rather like the virus itself. MMM came away from most feeling completely exhausted and rather bemused as well, apart from being amused at times.

Firstly, there is the matter of the audience. MMM is of the kind that thrives under certain ideal conditions – and in this the first requisite is a live audience. The webinar audience is not exactly dead, but it may well be. Most meetings these days demand that the audio and video of the listeners be turned off, which mind you is not entirely a bad thing – too often you have men in vests listening in and to make matters worse, they scratch themselves as well. MMM also had a memorable meeting

where two women attendees, lounged on bed, in negligees. The horror of the whole thing put MMM off his speech for quite a while. But the alternative, namely the blocking off of all screens is not so good either for MMM has the feeling that he is soliloquizing, like some character out of Shakespeare. There is no way of ascertaining if a punchline got across or if a joke was appreciated.

Secondly, there is the matter of technology. Bandwidth being what it is, what we actually get being a fraction of what was promised in the contract, showing videos or playing audios over these online meeting platforms is iffy at best. This was amply borne out around Independence Day when MMM had to speak on songs of freedom from our city. MMM thought he had delivered, with some live singing and more importantly some great recordings. Those who attended duly applauded at the end and some said it was wonderful. MMM preened like a peacock, until an old man sent in an email where he said he wished the quality of the audio had been better. That set MMM off and he asked the host for a recording of the talk. On playing it, he found that his speech was clear and so was his singing but the audio recordings had all played out like a

webinar link. As these are free tools, there is not even a monetary outlay. Rather on the lines of the Tamil proverb that speaks of shoplifting a coconut and offering the same to a way-side shrine, all it requires is the creation of a meeting link. As for introduction, these days, at least as far as MMM is concerned, it is restricted to a bland statement to the effect that the introducer is certain MMM needs no introduction, followed by a nervous giggle. MMM also notices that this is when most people are still logging in, after they have slipped into their vests and negligees (what do they wear otherwise MMM wonders). As for the vote of thanks, that is when people have logged out in a hurry, no doubt to slip off the vest/negligee. And the memento – MMM never thought he would come to regret the absence of the plastic Ganesha, the coffee mug, the mothball-smelling shawl, the black-lacquered plaque with silver work, the photo frame and the dead flowers. But now he does. Life is a good teacher.

The organisers are clearly evolving. There is one variety which after sending the meeting link asks you to share it with all your friends (hint – please bring your own audience). If even the ensuring of an audience is beyond an organiser, why organise an event in the first place? MMM thought he had seen them all when he came across a new one. He had just accepted a speaking assignment, much against his better instincts, when the organiser said he hoped that MMM would take care of the sending out of the meeting link as well, as he, the organiser did not know as to how to go about it. If this had been a face-to-face conversation blood may have been shed at this point but having conversed over the telephone MMM had to maintain sangfroid and in an icy voice tell the man at the other end that this was the responsibility of the organiser and not the speaker.

SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

sledgehammer being operated. The exact equivalent would be something like digadogdugadigdigdogdougdigdingdong and so on. And yet not a single attendee had mentioned this during the talk. It transpired that they could not have, even if they had wanted to, for their audio and videos had been turned off. These two aspects kind of complete MMM's case against these online tools but there is one major aspect to follow, which he elaborates on below.

The Webinar (lack of) etiquette

There was a time, in the old normal, when the organiser of events had to do some work. Now, in the new normal, much of this is eliminated. Thus a person who hosts a talk had to book a venue, arrange for audio and projection facilities, fix a caterer and a menu for the refreshments, purchase flowers and mementoes no matter how ugly, for the speaker, and ensure there was someone to introduce and deliver a vote of thanks. The speaker for his or her part, was expected to deliver content.

Nowadays, in the new (ab) normal, as *The Man from Madras Musings* notices, much of this is given the go by. All the host has to do is to send out a

Tailpiece

The Man from Madras Musings has much more to say on the topic of these web meets but will desist, in the interest of preventing this column from becoming Long and Loquacious. He would just like to issue a warning in public interest that those with vertigo ought not to accept these web invites. Many attendees focus their screens on their ceiling fans which if gazed at for long can cause dizziness. The other option of getting them to change focus is no good, as most people then present a close-up of their nostrils.

– MMM

OUR READERS WRITE



Master of Express Estates

I read with great interest the article *Master of Express Estates*. As a sub-editor working with him from Nov. 1988 till end-1995, my image of him was more of a respected elder (he should have been well into his seventies then) than a journalist. Though he was seated behind a huge desk in an executive chair in the editorial room (I believe it was Mr. Ramnath Goenka's in the early days), he was not part of the daily general desk routine.

His masterly editorial touch was reserved for the city and district copy. And that, done without much ado. From the first time I met him (when I reported to him after landing in Chennai from the Kochi IE office) throughout my 8-year tenure, he was a father figure commanding love and respect.

I remember that in a burst of inspiration, I even prostrated before him in the office. It is no exaggeration to say that he got me married (he passed on my horoscope to one of the editors of the Express Group's Tamil newspaper, *Dinamani*). Of course, everything went through and he made it a point to attend my engagement. Incidentally, the venue was the house of Prof. K. Swamina-

than, the editor of the Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi, and also a one-time Express editor.

By the time Master passed away in his eighties, he had moved out from the *Express Estates*. I am one among hundreds who was deeply affected by him and his persona.

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Nehru & Krishna Menon

I was delighted to read the anecdote of a vegetarian meal at V.K. Krishna Menon's house for Jawaharlal Nehru.

I am reminded of the anecdote about his breakfast in Gobichettipalayam where he had come for a meeting of the TNCC. When he was served Uppuma, C. Subramaniam explained to him, "Panditji, it is nothing but Kesari minus sugar plus salt."

Jairam Ramesh's biography of V.K. Krishna Menon is a veritable journey into the freedom struggle and thereafter. It was thrilling to read about his mobilisation of British Parliamentarians in support of our freedom. He emerges as a most misunderstood person.

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The lockdown mismatch

I thought I had missed the July 1 issue of *Madras Musings* when I received the post copy of the issue – July 15 (Vol. XXX, No. 3). The previous one was June 15 (marked Vol. XXX, No. 2). On checking the website, I find that the date and numbering system is rather different – The issue with the same content is dated July 1 (Vol. XXX, No. 6).

Perhaps there is a need to maintain continuity in numbering without breaks, but readers like me are liable to get confused. I feel it is better to have a common Issue Number for both print and web versions in all future issues to avoid wrong referencing.

Quite likely the extra lockdowns have upset your half-monthly (not bimonthly!) schedule. And there may be readers who are unaware of the uses and misuses of terms like biennial, biannual, biweekly, etc., though the Indian Railways may have popularised the usage of biweekly contrary to what my dictionary claims!

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Editor's Note: Reader Tharu is correct and we stand admonished. We were all ready with the July 1st issue for print when the lockdown was extended and so we uploaded it on the web. We decided to print the same issue on July 16th and hence the confusion. We trust there will be no more breaks in printing.

Covid – the social reformer

Seeing the title readers may wonder if the lockdown has addled my brain. Well, let me explain. We ill-treated our migrant labourers and made them walk home on empty stomachs. Here we are hardly three months down the line requesting them to come back. Many are even offering them a pay rise and accommodation. Builders Associations are even hiring charter flights to bring some of them back from Jharkhand and Bihar. Already 5,000 migrant labourers have been brought back by labour contractors for the foundries of Coimbatore. We shouted ourselves hoarse when our maid absented herself for a couple of days. We shouted almost till the point when they threatened to quit. Did you in your wildest of dreams think of a day when you would pay them their full wages and beg them not to come?

For ages we have been talking about simple weddings. Our big fat Indian weddings often led to the ruin of middle and lower income families. For the rich it was an occasion to flaunt their wealth and their social and political clout. For the poor it was time to mortgage their houses and take loans which would be paid back over decades. All this for a crowd which left complaining about the hard idlies and the watery sambar. Now it is the time of Online weddings with only 50 persons in attendance. Parents who celebrated the wedding of their children in January will be wondering if they should have waited until March and saved several lakhs which could have been given to the couple instead.

The less said about funerals, the better. The large flower bedecked chariots with scores of inebriated men dancing in front and the elaborate rituals that followed often put poor families back by years. If only the money had been spent while the person was alive there may not even have been need for such an early funeral.

You open your cupboard and out tumble your costly Kancheevarams and Patolas. You wonder why you bought so many. The huge sofa that you bought to impress your kitty party friends lies forlorn, occupying almost three fourths of the room.

You are thankful though for the Zoom meetings and the technologies that make them possible. It saves you the bother of dressing up and going to the meeting venue, listening to boring speeches wondering whether someone will notice if you left midway. Now you sit in your old clothes, join the meeting, register your name and listen for a few minutes (this is to send a reasonably informed congratulatory message to the organizers). You then switch off the video and audio and go about your work. The only thing you may miss is the tea, snacks and the gossip.

In a few months the Corona Virus may cease to be the threat that it currently is. Will our mindset remain the same or will we go back to our old ways? I leave it to the readers to answer this question.

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Why not open book examination system in New Education Policy?

When I was a student of Annamalai University (Tamil Nadu) several years ago, Dr. C.P. Ramaswami Iyer (Dr. C.P.) was the Vice Chancellor. It has been well recognized, then and now, that Dr.C.P was one among the brilliant educationists, scholars and administrators of his time.

When Dr. C.P. was the Vice Chancellor for the second time in 1960s, he used to be present in the campus for around ten days every month. He used to address several meetings of students and staff on various subjects at the Shastri and Gokhale Halls. The venues would be filled with the participants who were well aware of the eminence of Dr. C.P. and were eager to hear his speech. Many used to carry note pad and pen to write down the highlights. I was one of them.

Among the variety of topics that Dr. C.P. used to cover, the need and importance of reforming the educational system and the testing methodology of the knowledge level of the students were two frequent ones. He decried the prevailing pattern of examination, where students are closeted in a hall, question papers given just at the beginning of exam along with blank answer sheets and at the end of the stipulated examination time, the students hand over the answer sheets and move away from the hall. An unknown teacher then evaluates the answer sheets and provide grades and marks based on the answers provided, with little knowledge about the background and capability of the student.

Dr. C.P. was of the view that the prevailing system of examination was flawed and was doing immense harm to the future of the students, by not evaluating them suitably and adequately. He regretted that in this traditional examination system, students were expected to provide answers as they had learnt from the text books without any scope for original thinking. In other words, if the students did not provide the answers that were taught to them from the prescribed text book, they would get poor marks. If the student applied innovative skill and came out with fresh and innovative ideas, it would not be encouraged or credits provided, as the student had strayed from the prescribed and accepted examination path.

Dr. C.P. advocated that at least in the case of courses for higher studies and competitive examinations for job selection, an open book examination system would be the ideal method for assessing the capability of the students. He suggested that students should be allowed to take any notes or books that they want to the examination hall and the questions should not be routine or predictable, though the questions should be within the overall syllabi for the course. The question should be directed in a way that the student would have to apply his/her mind, instead of reproducing the memorized lessons in a routine way. Dr. C.P. even went on to the extent of saying that setting such question papers for students in the open examination system is a challenge for the teachers as well. They need to exercise their thoughts very carefully and keep an open and interested mindset in evaluating such answer sheets from the students, who undergo the open book examination system.

Today, what the student gets in the classes is education given by one person namely the teacher and given to the students for getting academic qualification and marks. The education is not oriented towards knowledge for the sake of knowledge but for success in the examination. Marks obtained have become the be all and end all for assessing the merits or demerits of the students.

In today's context, this suggestion should be considered for NEET examination and for selection of candidates for All India Services. It is high time that educational experts in the country introspect about this great suggestion of Dr. C.P. and try to implement the idea, at least in an experimental way to start with.

With the Government evolving the new education policy which is now discussed all over India by a cross section of people, it is strange that the open book examination system has not even been thought about or mentioned.

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The Theatre Just Off Mount Road

Wellington Cinema! The very name conjures up a different era, of cinema's early days and heydays. One of the older movie theatres of the city, it was also one of the first to fall victim to the wrecker's hammer. A commercial complex of multiple colours and unsurpassed ugliness stands in its place now, bearing the name Wellington Plaza.

There are many interesting facets to the history of this theatre, beginning from its name. Before the cinema was a cycle company, run by Rustomji Dorabji. And that was in Bombay, in 1901. The Wellington Cycle Company he founded was the Indian agent for several foreign brands and one of his collaborators was the West End Cycle Co, London. The business prospered and soon Rustomji had opened branches in Secunderabad, Poona and Madras. He also appended the company's name to his own and became Seth Rustomji Dorabji Wellington. He however appears to have been a man who was forever looking out for new business interests. In 1908, the Wellington Cycle Co briefly forayed into making gramophone records in Bombay and withdrew a year later.

His first venture into cinema screening was in Madras. That was in 1918, when he set up Wellington Cinema and its neighbour, the West End (no prizes for guessing where those two names came from) on General Patter's Road, just off Mount Road. In the history of the Dravidian movement it is a landmark for it was here that the Justice Party had its first annual meeting, in 1918. On the space that fronted Mount Road he set up his cycle showroom. The success of the theatres here encouraged him to lease the Cowasji Framji Institute in the Dhobi Talao area of Bombay and convert it into the Wellington Cinema. He also ran the West End theatre at Girgaum. A third, Venus, would come up later. Rustomji was a complete anglophile and he made it clear that his theatres would screen only English movies. Catering to an Indian audience was nothing short of an invitation to disaster he opined, for the theatre's fittings would all be ruined for good, their tendency to chew betel leaves and spit being the first of many bad habits. Run a film for one week for an Indian



LOST LANDMARKS OF CHENNAI

— SRIRAM V

audience he said, and you will spend the next three weeks cleaning the place up. In order to attract the elite audience, the Wellington at Madras, in the time when cinemas were still silent, had a full orchestra that provided the musical entertainment even as the film progressed on screen.

The details as regards the ownership of the land on which the Wellington stood is hazy. It was in all likelihood owned by Raja Venugopal Bahadur, a Telugu aristocrat who possessed considerable property and many commercial entities on Mount Road, including the Indian Siegwart Beam Company, which introduced reinforced concrete beams to this city. Rustomji appears to have had a run in with the Raja and more importantly his manager, W.H. Nurse and was taken to court on charges of forgery and cheating. The case was thrown out in the Sessions Court as baseless, whereupon Rustomji sued the Raja and Nurse in the High Court for defamation. The Raja very conveniently died but Rustomji pressed on with his case leading to a serious legal question on whether damages could be claimed from a dead man. After due deliberation, the law ruled that this was not possible, a verdict that Rustomji accepted with grace.

By the 1930s it would appear that Rustomji was dead. Burjorji Dorabji, his elder son inherited the Wellington Cycle Co and the eponymous cinema while Framji, the younger took over West End which he later sold to A.K. Ramachandra Iyer who renamed it Midland. Under Burjorji, Wellington flourished. He appears to have not shared his father's horror



Wellington Plaza – where once stood the Wellington cinema.

He had found it execrable. And yet why did he see it twice? He does write something about how he had to do it with so much at stake. Vasana was a Congressman and perhaps Rajaji was arm twisted by someone up top in the party to see it a second time.

Sometime in the 1930s, the land on which Wellington theatre stood and much of its neighbourhood, comprising 126 grounds, was acquired by Dinshaw Dadabhai Italia, a prominent businessman of Hyderabad, who would later become a Member of Parliament from that city. The entire stretch of land was named the Dinroze Estate and was soon plotted, built up and rented out. A part of the land was also leased from the Parthasarathy Temple, Thiruvallikeni. It seems that sometime in its history, Burjorji Dorabji or his descendants opted to sell their interests in Wellington to the Italias. By the 1970s, the theatre's best days were over and it had settled down to showing reruns. Vasana was dead, and his Gemini Studios was tottering too. It soon closed. So too did Wellington. Those who recall its interior then remember it to have been quite rundown. It was a far cry from the time when a fastidious Rustomji refused to cater to anyone but the European elite or when a Chief Minister stood in its lobby while his driver bought a ticket.

The Italias opted to demolish Wellington and build a commercial complex on the 20 grounds of land on which it stood. Nobody would have then believed that the days of the neighbouring cinema theatres too were numbered and within three decades there would be just one or two left.



K.B. Sundarambal in Gemini's Avvaiyyar.

thereby qualifying the theatre for an endurance prize according to writer Ashokamitran. But the hits are remembered more, and it was here that Chandralekha released as did Avvaiyyar. The latter production gave Wellington something more than just a successful release. It was here that a Chief Minister of Madras came to see the film, and what's more purchased a ticket for it.

Avvaiyyar released in 1953 and as a marketing exercise, Vasana organised a series of special screenings for the prominent figures of Madras society, their opinions being duly recorded and released to the press. One such screening was for Rajaji's benefit. He was then the Chief Minister. According to Ashokamitran, the CM sat through the film and left, without saying a word but his mere presence was enough publicity. That however was not the end of the story. Post the film's release, Rajaji came one evening to Wellington to watch the film for a second time. His driver bought the ticket and Rajaji was ushered in and soon, on being alerted, Vasana and most of the senior Gemini staff had arrived. The CM once again watched the film in full and left, in silence. But it was enough for the world to know that Rajaji had seen it twice. By then, the film was on its way to becoming a huge success. Years later, Rajaji's real views on the movie surfaced in a diary entry.

United India Colony Days – I

Prelude: This story was made possible due to the COVID-19 situation as a group of close-knit friends met after 25 years over a Zoom call and recounted good old memories from their teenage days in Chennai. We were a set of easy-going teenagers raised in lower-middle-class homes in the United India Colony area during the late 80s and early 90s. Though we were 3-4 years apart, we did most things together. The core gang included:

Arvind: A happy-go-lucky guy, good cricket player, loved to talk a lot, had a big grin, and was thrilled to gain a sudden increase in height at the right time.

CS: Relatively silent unless provoked and that made him explode with the mildest of swear words, known to come up with exotic excuses for not reaching the ground in the early mornings.

Karthik: The noisy simpleton, always ready for a fight and could quickly end up in tears, but always a team player. Had a penchant for movies and street snacks.

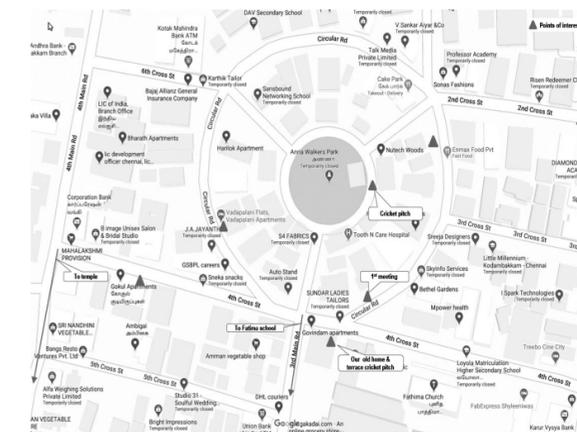
Kunal: The then portly Sehwaq of our group, all slogging and no running. Well-read, could talk non-stop, especially in English, and the origin of many light-hearted arguments.

Keshav: He was the fulcrum of the group and a true all-rounder, talented cricketer, great at hand-tennis, good with indoor games and very good at studies too, oh and yes, a huge Thalaivar fan too.

Srikanth: The only leftie in the group, the shortest and youngest but also the loudest, known to have a colorful language that put us seniors into shame.

My two brothers: The elder one would prefer to read a book than come and play, he was the intellectual of the group, had to be prodded to join us and never liked to occupy the crease much like Kunal, old Hindi movie song buff and shouldered a lot of responsibility at home. The younger one was carefree and was always a part of the group, but less vocal and let others talk, also a huge Thalaivar fan like Keshav. Also known for a big appetite, he could devour a whole loaf of bread in one sitting, leaving the rest of the gang in awe of the achievement.

Self: A dreamer who tried to meddle in too many things and thus was a master of none, was the quizzier of the group, a better athlete than a cricketer, good knowledge of all sports, short tempered and a loud-mouth too.



A bird's eye view of the activity centre.

great fun playing cricket on the street. We chatted a lot, fought a lot, made fun of each other, but had a great time overall. Every evening we'd go home only after it became dark. Most days we played short 6-8 over games, but during the summer break, we'd play full test matches stretching over days, though Kunal would be in no mood for them as he was always in the T20 mode back then. I loved my gaaji (occupying the crease) and preferred the old style. Keshav was the toughest to get out and usually ended up on the winning side, and I was always paired opposite him and as you guessed would end up on the losing side more often than not.

if you hit outside it was not a six but you were out, and that was not it, you had to climb down four floors to fetch the ball and then haul yourself all the way up. You could get a reprieve if there was a kind person walking on the road who was willing to throw the ball back at us over four floors, which was always a 50-50 chance. A good straight drive had a high likelihood of the ball going over the parapet wall and on to the neighbouring Loyola school. Then you needed the expertise of either Keshav, Srikanth, or me to climb delicately over the walls topped with colorful broken bottles and jump over, get the ball and then carefully climb back without getting hurt. If any of our moms saw us doing it, that was the end of the game, but luckily that never happened as we had guys watching over our back. The reverse sweep was the most productive shot as most scoring opportunities were square off the wicket on the offside, except for the lotte (leftie) in Srikanth who could play to his leg side. Bowling was usually underarm spin. I still wonder at how those who lived on the 3rd floor never complained about the noise of the big kids jumping around. It did help that the younger Unni and Mukul were staying on the 3rd floor, so that took care of two families out of four. We had fun with the simple things in life, starting the day early with the morning newspaper, chatting with friends devoid of any devices, enjoying whatever food we get to fill our stomach, watching TV as a group on the only channel we got and of course playing cricket wherever we find space.

(To be continued next fortnight)

As I jumped the short walls to run after the tennis ball that ricocheted off my lower palm on to Circular Road, a girl coming in the opposite direction nonchalantly picked it and threw it back at me with a smile. My attention was not on the ball, but the hazel eyes of that not so coy beauty. I'd be lying if I did not admit to being blown away by her. It took a while to continue the intense hand-tennis game with Keshav, who also sensed that something had hit me in a nice way.

That road where it all started, Circular Road, happens to be the outer ring road of United India Colony, a quaint well laid out middle-class locality tucked at one end of Kollywood aka Kodambakkam, Chennai. A 15-minute stroll would bring you back to your starting point. The radial roads at 120 degrees connected you to the inner ring road called Park View road, which you could walk in under five minutes, and in the middle was a small nice park. It also had three long vertical roads and a bunch of horizontal roads, the most famous among the latter being the 4th cross street which is where a good part of the action took place in this story, the other being Circular road itself. The 4th cross street stretched right from the old Uma lodge (which

was a landmark for Malayalam movie stars in their early days) and across the Loyola school and Fatima church, all the way to the end of the other side with Gokul apartments, one of the first flats in that area. The Circular road was tangential to the 4th cross street. It was such a beautiful layout and could bring out either the romantic or the mathematician in you. I guess I ended up with the former more than the latter.

Our cricket games were played in one of the 120-degree sectors of Park View Road. Traffic would be neatly diverted to the other side using a set of bricks and people around that small community were used to this at certain times of the day. Would people have trouble with what we did? No. We are talking about the late '80s and early '90s when vehicular traffic on those roads was light. The brave were allowed to walk through though, and we had a good set of brave regulars who would field for us as well. We played cricket in front of Arvind's house, along with our star player Keshav, Srikanth, Karthik, Kunal, CS, and my two brothers. We were sometimes joined by the swash-buckling batsman Gopu, and his two younger siblings. The core group was between the 8-12 grades and was sometimes

joined by three first graders – Unni, Mukul and Pravin. They were brave to play with us older kids, and would feign ignorance at some big talk. I guess they graduated sooner thanks to our influence. You see, those were

the days when teenagers would include the smaller kids and also give them their batting gaaji (time with the bat).

Space was never a constraint for cricket and we had rules for all situations. You were out if you hit into any house or into the park. Most residents were cooperative and let us go in and retrieve the ball anytime, except for the one at the corner. It was a six if you hit the walls of that house, but you were out if the ball crossed the walls into the house, go figure the logic. Once it cleared the walls, there was no guarantee of the ball coming back as the Marwari family there was strict, except for a daughter who would throw the ball back to us. Oh no, this is not Her, and I will come to that soon. It was

● Ramanuja Iyer
(Ramanuja.Iyer@gmail.com)

Quizzin' with Ram'nan

Quizmaster V.V. Ramanan's first 10 questions are on current affairs and next 10 on Presidents and Prime Ministers of India.

1. What meteorological mark did Death Valley's Furnace Creek in Southern California set recently?
2. Which tech giant recently became the first US-listed company, the second in the world, to reach a \$2 trillion market capitalisation?
3. Joe Biden's running mate for VP, Kamala Harris, has mixed parentage. What were the countries of origin of her parents?
4. Which country made news as the first in the world to approve a possible vaccine for the coronavirus?
5. According to *Forbes*, who was the world's highest-paid male actor, between June 2019-20, with earnings of \$87.5m?
6. According to annual Swachh Survekshan 2020, which is the cleanest mega city (over 40 lakh population)?
7. Name the three AAI airports that are to be leased, for 50 years, under private public partnership to Adani Enterprises?
8. Which company has bagged the IPL title-sponsorship rights for 2020?
9. What is the title of Shashi Tharoor's new book in which he shares 53 unusual words from every letter of the alphabet?
10. Name the former Indian cricket opener and a BJP politician who passed away recently?

11. Who apart from Babu Rajendra Prasad has had two or more terms as elected President?
12. Who was the acting PM after the demise of Jawaharlal Nehru?
13. Who was the first to be an acting President and President of India?
14. Who was the first non-Congress PM?
15. Originally called the *Viceroy's House*, what name was given to the Rashtrapati Bhavan on August 15, 1947?
16. Between 1989 and 1991, India saw three PMs. If one was Rajiv Gandhi, who were the other two?
17. What is the monthly salary of the President?
18. Excluding the acting PMs, who had the shortest tenure of Premiership at just 170 days?
19. Pratibha Patil, the only woman President, had served as the Governor of which State?
20. What is the official name of the PM's residence complex?

(Answers on page 8)

War memories from the annals of the Madras Christian College magazine

The two global conflicts of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 were fought with advanced science and technology, sophisticated armoury and unprecedented ferocity that threatened the very existence of humanity. They were turning points in the history of many nations as the old-world order crumbled and the new masters emerged. For many the world wars may look like the distant past but their impact is still felt. War memorials across the globe such as the Cenotaph in London, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Paris, Tannenber Memorial in Germany, National World War II Memorial in Washington, India Gate in New Delhi, the Victory War Memorial in Chennai, scores of war cemeteries and the tributes paid during the anniversaries remind us of the great wars, and the colossal loss incurred by humanity. India, then still a colony, was also driven into these world conflicts. It sent a staggering number of volunteers who sacrificed their lives for the cause. Indians fought shoulder to shoulder in various theatres of war in Europe, Mesopotamia, the Mediterranean, East Africa and North Africa.

The impact of the wars touched the lives of members of Madras Christian College also. This article is a documentation of the life at Madras Christian

College during the wars. The MCC Archives, especially the college magazines, have many untold stories and are the main sources for this article.

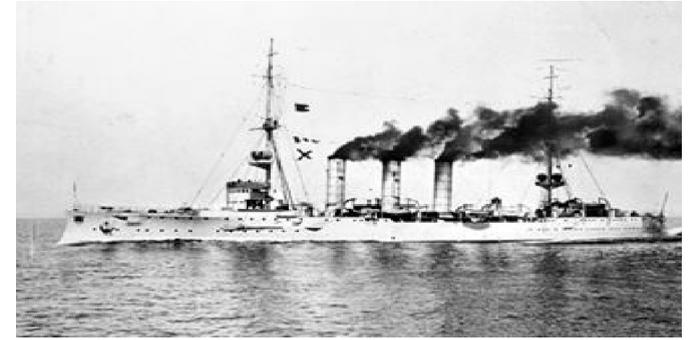
MCC and World War I:

Though the First World War began as a European conflict, it soon involved the entire world. The number of casualties, loss of property, and advancement of technology were so enormous that it is also known as the Great War. Since the inception of the war, the College closely monitored the situation in Europe. Detailed reports on the beginning of the World War had been well documented in the College magazines under the heading Notes of the Month from the year 1914.

● by Marilyn Gracey Augustine

Assistant Professor of History
Madras Christian College

Anxiety swept Madras and the College, then in George Town, on September 22, 1914, when, Madras, a tiny city on the world map, was shelled. On that day, SMS *Emden*, a light cruiser built for the German Navy struck the peace and tranquillity of Madras and triggered an exodus.



S.M.S. Emden.

Emden, a darling among the German Navy, was nicknamed the 'Swan of the East'. On the night of September 22, 1914, it sneaked into the port of Madras and turned its ten 4-inch guns on the fuel depot. Within 30 minutes the German ship unleashed a 125-round barrage

tanks spouting smoke and flame and the people hurrying to the beach, on foot, on bicycle and motor cycles, in carriages and motor cars to learn what the matter was without quite realising that it was a bombardment – all this confusion and uneasiness made the night of the 22 September memorable in the annals of Madras."

The sinking of the *Emden* near Cocos Island was received with joy and relief by the College. One of the many ships and boats that *Emden* sunk was the B.I. Boat *Chilkana*. It was carrying a box of prize books for the College to be distributed among the young graduates following the convocation ceremony. This incident led to the postponement of the prize distribution for the academic year 1913-14. However in February 1915, the bookseller Mr. James Thin from Edinburgh sent a second set of books which were later distributed among the students. Some students asked for permission to give up their prizes so that the money could be sent to the Belgian Relief and to other funds associated with the War. In 1916 the students of the College collected a sum of Rs. 700 as a contribution to the war fund. Some more money was added to it with the help of the staff both Indian and European and came to Rs. 1,050.

A series of articles, poems and other literary works was also published in the College magazine regarding the Great War. To quote a few: *Poem of Michaelmas*. However, a considerable number remained in Madras and it was a new experience for those in the city. The report from the College Magazine for the year 1914 gives a vivid description of the scene that immediately followed the bombardment. The following is an excerpt from the report:

"a look out from the College House tower enabled one to witness the excitement caused in Madras by the bombardment which did not last much longer than fifteen minutes. The Kerosene oil



Building damaged by the *Emden*'s shelling. Courtesy: The Hindu.



Oil tanks on fire in the harbor of Madras (Chennai, India) following the bombardment by German light cruiser S.S. *Emden* on September 22, 1914. (Courtesy: Wikipedia.)

(Continued on page 7)

War memories from MCC college magazine

(Continued from page 6)

to India from Marseilles by a ship Magnolia. The vessel was mined by a German ship near Bombay on 23rd June 1917 and Mr. Machphail was severely wounded and was rescued by another steamer. He was later admitted in the St. George's hospital.

The College had a prayer and thanksgiving service at 11.00 am on 4th August every year to mark the day when Great Britain declared the war on Germany. On that day the first hour of class was devoted for a discussion and review of the causes and the progress of the war. Moral issues involved in the war were also considered and discussed. On September 1, 1915, a special lecture was organised on the topic Finances of the War delivered by Mr. A. Rangaswami, Sub-editor of *The Hindu*, at the inaugural meeting of the Associated Societies held in the Anderson Hall. The Chair was taken by Mr. W.B. Hunter, Secretary of the Bank of Madras and a member of the College Council.

The College Magazine also carried an appeal signed by Principal William Skinner asking students of the College both past and present to join the Defence India Force. The Associated Societies of the College met in Anderson Hall to obtain a clear picture of what is exactly needed from them and were addressed by Principal Skinner. Many then present students and the alumni participated directly in the war by rendering their service at the war zones. One striking example was F.W. Henderson,

who was the Superintendent of the Fenn Hostel who took a commission in the army during his furlough and proceeded to fight in France. He was also injured in 1916 when he was in charge of heavy guns in the firing line. Some of the other students who fought in the war from Fenn Hostel were V.M. Thaver, Anderson Iswariah, P. Poonoose, P.V. Kallat and Edward Kallat. Poonoose was also injured during combat operations and was admitted in a hospital in London. He wrote a letter detailing the experiences he had in the war zone to the College which was later published in the magazine.

A good number of the then current students participated in the war. The college extended suitable concessions in fees and attendance to them. The following is a list of students who volunteered to join the army as given in the College Magazine in 1917.

Mohomed Abdul Hamid	5th year Philosophy (Honours)
P. Kothandaraman	5th year History (Honours)
P. Mahadevan	5th year English (Honours)
N.R. Venkataraman	5th year English (Honours)
S. Sundaram	4th class Physical Science
C.A. Ganapathi Iyer	4th class History
P.C. Kunhiraman	4th class History
V. Subramanian	3rd class History
C.P. Doraikannu	3rd class History
C. Natesan	2nd class Natural Science

Finally, the 1918 October issue of the College Magazine under the Notes of the Month brings in the information regarding the ceasing of the Great War on all fronts on 11 November, 1918 at 11 a.m.

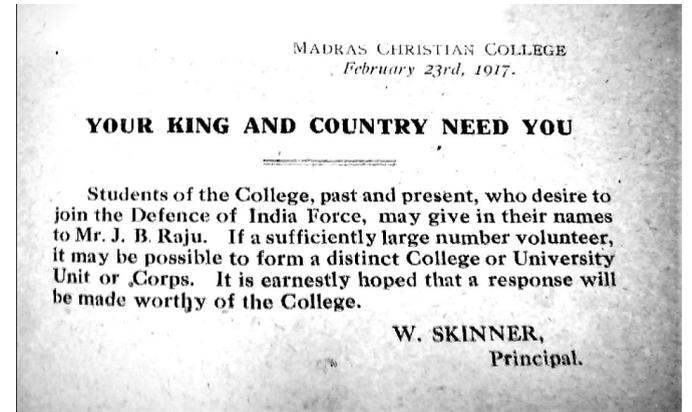
Madras Christian College and World War II:

The College magazine underwent many changes in the inter war era. In 1921, the magazine ceased to be a monthly and became quarterly. In 1927, a separate section for the contributions of the students was introduced and by 1930 the articles of the students were printed along with other articles. In 1931, a new policy was adopted by which it was decided to make the magazine student centric and a record of what is actually happening in the College. Thus the College magazine was not used as a medium to convey the happenings at the war front.

The magazine refers to the death of three former students of the College while serving the Royal Air Force during the war. S.A. Gnanamuthu lost his life while serving in England, his brother, Pilot Officer Bhaskar Daniel was killed in a flying accident in Northern India and Pilot Officer Frank Moses died after his machine caught fire during an attack by hostile tribesmen.

Brief references to the War were made in College Notes, Christmas message and commemoration address, etc. In the September 1940 issue of the College magazine, under College Notes, the Editor describes the various reactions prevailing among the people regarding the War and how it had created an environment of uncertainty.

The Principal's report of 1945 with much relief announced the closing of the war, the victory of the Allies, and also places on record that the College during the six years of the fighting of the war functioned undisturbed except for the roaring of the fighter planes overhead. The report also mentions the temporary establishment of a Naval Air Station, 'HMS Valluru' (the present Indian Air Force Station, Tambaram) on the Southern boundary of the campus. For the construction of this aerodrome approximately 60 to 70 acres (in one instance it is mentioned as nearly 100 acres) of the College land along the southern fence was used. Since this land was earmarked by the College for future developments, the Principal in his report insisted that the land be returned to the College. He also appreciated the friendliness and courtesy of the new temporary



neighbours and said that the college would miss the noise of the aeroplanes. The College Notes also voices the same concern and appreciation for the Naval Air Base established on the College's southern border. It also expressed gratitude to Capt. H.M.S. Mundy, R.N. and his officers for their unfailing courtesy and helpfulness. The station provided employment to the people of the surrounding villages.

The direct impact of the World Wars was deep in the hearts and minds of the people living in Europe, Africa and Asia. However in spite of being a part of the war, countries like India in general and Madras Christian College in particular did not face the tormenting conditions that prevailed in many other countries. Peace and tranquillity existed on the campus although coated with anxiety and desperation. Life

went on as usual unperturbed by the happenings of the outside world. In conclusion I would like to quote a paragraph from Prof. Ernest John Bingle's speech during Commemorative College Service delivered on 4th February 1944 which sums up the life at Madras Christian College during the War years:

"War has not reached us, despite our blackouts and the noise of friendly bombers. We are tolerably well-fed and we have never gone short; our food situation has never been anything like what has been happening to people we know outside. We have continued to go to lectures, to play games, to have Hall days and tea parties when the world outside is violently disturbed by war, economic distress, political upheaval, under a cloud of doom and uncertainty".

Chennai and Swachh Survekshan survey results

(Continued from page 1)

dropped, with conservancy workers helping disinfect buildings to help keep the corona virus in check. The use of disposable protective equipment such as masks, gloves and sanitizer bottles is also on the rise. Such waste is not segregated by users, even though they are requested to dispose it in a separate bag – some have the unfortunate habit of throwing such items on the ground once they are done with them. In addition to spreading public awareness, perhaps it is time that our local authorities implement a model that discourages such behaviour – a fine, perhaps, like the ones levied in some cities.

We're fairly fortunate that Chennai is home to quite a few citizen initiatives that work on bettering the city – the city is home to fledgling ventures which work on repurposing

solid waste like plastics into useful goods such as furniture, for instance. These initiatives must be encouraged by local authorities – such collaborations give the city an opportunity to not only reduce landfill waste but also nurture local green businesses that are good for commerce and community alike. It may also be prudent to conduct a comparative analysis between Indore (the cleanest megacity in India according to the recent survey) and our own Chennai to understand how we can improve city sanitation and hygiene.

However, one thing is certain from a preliminary analysis of the Swachh Survekshan reports – improving city sanitation depends not only on local authorities, but also on the cooperation of the citizens. It is a thought worth chewing on as we bask in the afterglow of Madras Week.

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– THE EDITOR

A fine squash player, fitness fanatic and a frugal businessman

TRIBUTE

In the early hours of the morning of the 23rd of July, one of Chennai's finest sports persons passed away in his sleep. Syed Ali Ispahani, 82 years of age, was known well amongst his family and close friends, mostly at the Madras Cricket Club, and of course his contemporaries in the Chennai and Bangalore property development business, but to the public at large he was unknown and unsung despite his various achievements in the late 1960's and early 1970's. He won the National Men's Squash Championships twice, in 1969 and in 1972 and captained India at the 1971 World Championships in Australia.

Little was known in India of Ali's proficiency in Squash since he played most of it in England alongside the finest in the sport then, Jonah Barrington, Geoff Hunt, Ken Hiscoe, to name a few who ruled World Squash. The British Open was, and perhaps still is the tournament every squash player aspires to win and in the years between 1967 and 1972, Ali made it to the last eight twice. He was a regular at the RAC and the Queens Club in London and played at the top of the league for these two clubs. Apart from playing and competing with the best in the world during his time, he built enduring friendships with the players that have all lasted a lifetime.

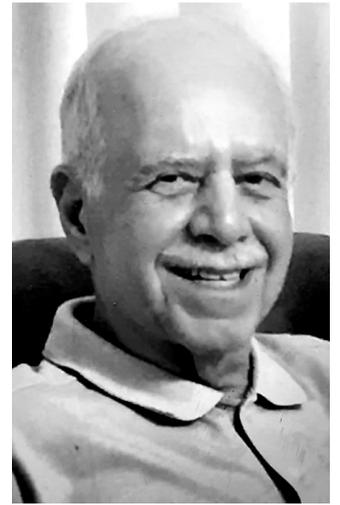
Ali played at the Madras Cricket Club courts whenever he visited India, mostly to see his parents in earlier years but over the last three decades split his time between London and Chennai, attending to his business interests in leather products and real estate in Chennai and Bangalore. While training in Chennai during his tournament playing days he would work on his fitness more than his game since the facilities at the MCC were old and limited with courts still with concrete

seriously but always had time to knock a few balls and also run around very quickly with just a few rallies many a friend who asked him for a game. They soon moved on and left the court to Ali.

Ali was serious about training both on and off court. We would engage in different court drills and he would be very patient not to interrupt a rally to advise me of the correctness of stroke and would always emphasise that the game was played in the four corners of

play but he always had the time to watch a youngster play on court and give him or her a little guidance. He was regular at the MCC pursuing swimming and fitness training until in recent times health did not permit him to train with vigour but he never let his spirit wane. Ali was equally involved and excited with his business interests and until his last he was discussing his next few projects with his team with childlike enthusiasm. The Ispahani Centre in the Centre of Chennai will remind the city not just of a fine family legacy but of an eminent sportsman and energetic businessman.

As he rests in peace our condolences, sympathies and support go out to his gracious wife Ranjini, delightful daughter Firuzeh, her wonderful husband Vinay and Ali's older brother



Syed Ali Ispahani.

Mehdi who is now in Chennai but makes his home in Holland, and the entire Ispahani family. Ali was indeed a unique personality who mixed sport and business with equal dexterity.

● by M.M. Murugappan

floors whereas the world had changed to wooden floors. Yet he never complained, trained by himself since there was often nobody of his calibre to spar with, but always sought advice from the legendary marker Kuppam at the MCC who played bare footed but could give the champion Ali a tip or two relative to stroke selection and court positioning.

It was in the early 70's that I was fortunate to come under Ali's tutelage. He would often play with me, Meyyappan Jr., and Rabi Venkatesan quite

the court and how important it was to keep sight of the ball at all times. Little tips that stand even today when fitness has overtaken elegant stroke play and scoring has moved to either serve, in line with a world standard rather than British or American. Equipment has changed from finely crafted wooden racquets to polymer fibre material and the little rubber ball with the yellow dot remains but a shade faster than in yesteryear's.

Squash took a toll on Ali's back as he withdrew from active

Answers to Quiz

1. The temperature there reached 54 degrees Celsius, making it (arguably) the hottest reliably measured temperature on Earth in recorded history, 2. Apple, 3. Indian (mother) and Jamaican (father), 4. Russia, 5. Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson, 6. Ahmedabad, 7. Jaipur, Guwahati and Thiruvananthapuram, 8. Dream11, 9. 'Tharoorosaurus', 10. Chetan Chauhan.

11. No one!, 12. Gulzarilal Nanda, 13. V.V. Giri, 14. Morarji Desai, 15. Government House, 16. V.P. Singh and P.V. Narasimha Rao, 17. Rs 5 lakh which is non-taxable, 18. Charan Singh, 19. Rajasthan, 20. Panchavati.

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