

INSIDE

- Chennai's heritage during Covid-19
- Short 'N' Snappy
- Sir S. Subramania Iyer
- The story of Sweet Home
- T.D. Parthasarathy

# MADRAS MUSINGS

www.madrasmusings.com

WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

Vol. XXX No. 9

October 16-31, 2020

## Where are we on Covid?

As per our country's Finance Ministry, Covid is a thing of the past and all is set for economic growth. As per the Health Ministry, we are likely to have a vaccine by early 2021. A subsequent statement to the effect that we ought to follow the vaccines of masks and social distancing did not sound so hopeful though. In a fit of what was probably euphoria, our city's Corporation suddenly declared that there were no more containment zones. And then within a week, as many as 70 streets were barricaded, one half of them being in Ambattur zone alone. In the meanwhile, the series of Unlocks is unfolding relentlessly, the latest being the opening of cinema theatres with 50 per cent occupancy. All of these are sending out conflicting signals which does not give those in charge of administration a great image.

There may have been a strategy behind the lockdown

although giving people just four hours to prepare for it does not look so good in retrospect. The explanation for the closure is that it gave the State Governments time to prepare for the eventual outbreak. Whether that was achieved is a moot point – what is happening all around shows a state of unpreparedness and plenty of reactive and not proactive steps. This has only put a whole lot of front-enders – health

● by The Editor

workers, civic personnel and law enforcers – at enormous risk. In the city, the current buzz is that hospital beds can be had only with difficulty and that some of the health facilities have taken over hotels to cater to the surplus numbers. True, the number of fatalities is still reassuringly low but the number of those falling ill does

not seem to be in any hurry to taper off.

One major development of the right kind has been the decision of the Corporation to stop barricading houses containing those afflicted with the virus. A lot of news reports, including a lead in *Madras Musings* had appeared on how risky this practice is, and it is good that the civic body has taken cognizance. But there are complaints prevalent over the enumeration of those infected, with at least one lawyer filing a case in the High Court of Madras claiming irregularities in the identification of Covid cases, the documenting of the patient's economic status and then the decision of whether to keep the person under home isolation or recommend hospitalisation. In this particular instance, as per the plaint, there seem to have been considerable errors. The

(Continued on page 2)

## How the film industry is coping with Covid

● In the second article in our series on the pandemic's impact on Chennai's economy, *Madras Musings* takes a look at Kollywood, our vibrant film industry.

With Covid-19 necessitating a non-negotiable curb on social gatherings, the film industry has understandably taken a blow. The sector has been affected in myriad ways – production, until recently, was at a standstill with no shoots taking place; theatres find themselves empty and film content itself is learning to adapt to changing tastes.

The pandemic has made things harder for an already

struggling film industry. "Many movies take upfront advances and sometimes they don't do well at the box office. When these films fail, the consequences ripple down the line, affecting the finances of other stakeholders as well," explains

● by Our Special Correspondent

Jayendra Panchapakesan, co-founder of Qube Cinema. He went on to point out that the industry was also under strain from the challenge of keeping up with technological upgrades, ranging from sound

systems to laser projections. Like other industries, daily wage and contract workers are the most severely affected by the pandemic. "Tamil Nadu has around 800-1000 cinema halls, comprising both multiplexes and single-screens, with the latter making up the majority. Every one of these has a sizeable number of people working for them, from projectionists and ushers to ticket managers, parking lot managers, clearing agencies and concession stand managers. Almost everyone has had no employment for the past six months," says Jayendra.

Filmmaker Rajiv Menon echoes his concerns. "Cine



## Chennai's Heritage during Covid-19

(By The Editor)

I first got a call from L. Ramachandran immediately after the lockdown was lifted. He was a photographer he said, and he had been going around the city between March and June 2020 taking pictures of various places. He had shown the collection to Mr. N. Ram of *The Hindu*, who he said had asked him to contact me. I was so caught up in work thereafter that I quite forgot about my promise to meet him. And then one day in September, a hefty package from Ramachandran arrived at my residence. It took quite an effort to lug it to my study and there I opened it.

Inside were two volumes of a glossy book – all in black and white. Titled *Chennai to Madras*, each part had around 230 pages containing what can only be described as magnificent photographs of Chennai's built heritage. They were all portrayed in grandiose isolation – can you imagine a Central Station or a Kapaliswarar Temple without people? Or a Kasimedu harbour with all the boats neatly lined up and no one in sight? This is Ramachandran's contribution to our city – a visual record of our monuments and historic buildings during lockdown.

While perusing the books, and they were so beautiful that they demanded immediate attention, I was constantly reminded of Biswanath Ghosh's *Tamarind City*. In it he pauses to leaf through S. Muthiah's *Madras – Its Past and Present* and notices how the old photographs have hardly any people in them. He then wonders about it. Who would have thought then that the scenario would repeat itself in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Chennai?

(Continued on pages 4-5)

professionals like lightmen, for instance, get paid around Rs. 1,000-Rs. 1,500 a day for their work. With no jobs available, they have nowhere to go." While labour unions as well as the state government are trying to provide relief, even the fairly successful who enjoy a decent standard of living in normal times are struggling to make ends meet today. The situation

has prompted a few to abandon the profession altogether and take up other jobs to keep afloat. "I heard that some have started selling vegetables to bring in income," shares Jayendra. Rajiv estimates that if this trend continues, the impact of skill migration will be felt by the industry a couple of years down the line.

(Continued on page 2)

## WHERE ARE WE ON COVID?

(Continued from page 1)

Corporation will need to sensitise its workers on the importance of accuracy in reporting.

Unlike many its counterparts in many other cities, some of whose statistics are spiraling out of control, Chennai's Corporation has not compromised on its testing. Perhaps this is the reason for the numbers remaining steady. This is one aspect that the city's civic body will need to keep maintaining its focus on. However, that is only one side of the story. The other, which is where the citizen comes in, has come quite a cropper – and this pertains to the wearing of masks. Yes,

we understand that physical distancing is not possible at all times and is in no way feasible in congested localities. But the wearing of masks, and properly at that, is. And yet, many of Chennai's citizenry appear to think that they are immune to the pandemic and wander about sans mask. This is unforgivable for it displays a lack of concern about personal safety and also that of others. For some strange reason, our Government is going soft on this aspect. Is it a classic instance of the tough enforcement of unpalatable but necessary measures being unpopular with Chennai's public, especially in an election year?

## Film Industry & Covid

(Continued from page 1)

With matters more complex than they appear, the film industry is navigating uncharted waters with the pandemic. Films are not being produced, but audiences continue to consume content – perhaps more than ever. TV and over-the-top (OTT) platforms like Prime, Netflix and others are reportedly seeing their audiences grow, possibly due to the lack of access to theatres. OTT companies are ramping up production to release exclusive, quality content on their platforms – arguably, a key lifeline for the industry during these times. Rajiv too has worked on one such project, titled *Putham Pudhu Kaalai*, an anthology of short films slated for an October release on Amazon Prime. The filmmaking process had to be planned meticulously in conformance with safety guidelines. But ultimately, as Rajiv points out, creativity cannot be locked down. “When there are constraints, one pushes the envelope to find new ways of telling stories,” he says. With audiences welcoming content-driven stories, filmmakers are thinking out of the box to explore new narratives and content formats – the recent Malayalam hit *CU Soon* is a shining example.

However, Jayendra feels that the film industry will not be able to rely completely on TV and OTT platforms to thrive in the long run. “Consider a large film with a budget exceeding Rs. 100 crores. One typically collects 60-70 per cent of the business from theatre revenue and the balance from OTT and satellite TV. It's not possible for the business side of cinema to depend entirely on OTT.”

Theatres are expecting to re-open soon, with the central government greenlighting the move with a 50 per cent occupancy cap. “Conventionally, theatres see an average occupancy of 35 per cent over the week, with numbers spiking on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. If audiences spread out across the week, it may be possible for theatres to reach pre-covid revenues even with a 50 per cent occupancy cap,” estimates Jayendra. “Of course, this depends on how many people are willing to go to the cinema in these times.” With many missing the experience of watching a film at the theatre, it is possible that a significant number of people will be open to patronizing them when they reopen.

The film industry is also learning to adapt to the ‘new normal’. Rajiv feels that efficiency is one of the biggest takeaways from the pandemic. “People will have to learn to work with smaller units, in a more efficient manner,” he said. For Jayendra, the possibilities of innovation around programming are immense. “Everything changes cinema in some way or the other,” he points out. “Post-pandemic cinema will evolve, too. Perhaps a 100 like-minded people will get to choose the movie they want to watch on the screen, rather than the theatre deciding the schedules. Or, perhaps families and friends will be able to book 10-seater theatres to watch a movie together safely.” They're intriguing ideas. “Cinema has always innovated and it will continue to do so,” finishes Jayendra, on an optimistic note. “A pandemic can't dull it's magic.”

## Awarding posthumously

Simply Perfect Baritone (SPB) passed away earlier this month and *The Man from Madras Musings*, who is one of his countless admirers, mourned his departure along with everyone else. The man leaves a void in the heart, largely because of his singing prowess and also because of the way he came across – an ever smiling, jovial soul. The timing of his passing could not have been worse – a pandemic raging which prevents most from paying their tributes in person. To us, as people, faced with a sea of troubles, SPB's death is one more sling or arrow of outrageous fortune (that by the way, in case you are impressed, is not MMM's own but a paraphrasing of the Bard of Avon).

It is but natural that a man who sang over 40,000 songs, set in several Indian languages, should have touched many. And a demand is now gaining momentum among these fans that their idol ought to be conferred the highest award the country can bestow – Indian Gem. Not surprisingly, there is opposition to this from artistes themselves.

You see, ever since Melodiously Sublime Singer was conferred this award ever so many years ago, musicians have generally begun to fancy their chances. And when the award was granted to a few others in the art, the buzz became all the more. MMM personally knows of at least three artistes, now all playing the harp up in the heavens, who during their lifetime tried their level best to be so honoured, only to be bitterly disappointed with officialdom proving unresponsive. Melodiously Sublime Singer was in what Chennai would describe as another level – moving millions with her music, moving with grace among the titled and ennobled, having Lords temporal and spiritual fawning on her, and above all, giving considerable amounts in charity. None of those other aspirants had those qualities in the same quantity as she had. Now coming to Simply Perfect Baritone, while he may not fit all those criteria, did have plenty of attributes to be recognized as a national gem. His music was pan Indian and he had fans across the nation. After all, if the Lark (of Mumbai) could get it, why not our man? MMM wishes the move all Godspeed.

But what he is unable to understand is the pettiness among the artistes themselves in opposing such a move. MMM was quite shocked to receive an email purportedly written by a fairly well-known personality in the field of arts, questioning the validity of the move. The person, knowing full well the avalanche of scorn such a missive directly opposing the conferral of

the award may provoke, worded the communication very cleverly. O who better than the late Simply Perfect Baritone for such a wonderful honour gushed the letter. It then went on to question the value of posthumously awarding people, when “alas, they are not around to enjoy it.” Would it not be much better therefore to recognize people who are still around in the flesh and blood? And then, in order to quell any doubts people may have that this message was an exercise in self-promotion, the person concerned went on to state that he did not have himself in mind but was thinking more of X, Y & Z, all of whom in his view deserve such an award and are, “dying” to receive it so to speak.

But MMM, having spent quite a few years among artistes and their wives was not fooled. A close look at the intended recipients of the mail revealed quite a few in the highest echelons of power. This coupled with the fact that the artiste had prefixed his name with a full panoply of titles, revealed that the whole letter was nothing but a sordid exercise in garnering publicity for himself and testing the waters for his chances of the award.

### SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

#### The Masked Avenger

Remember the month of March? Oh how halcyon all of those days seem. We were told that the battle against Covid would be won in 21 days, the numbers were so small that we were congratulating each other for bucking the trend and wondering about where those advanced nations had gone wrong in handling a pandemic that we had managed so well. And some lit lamps, and dutifully clanged pots and pans. But *The Man from Madras Musings* does not wish to dwell on those things. He prefers to move on, just as the man behind those activities and statements too has.

On the other hand, MMM would like to compliment a man whom he hardly knows but whom he sees practically every day during his morning walks. This person, judging by the prominent G painted on the number plate of his car, is clearly a Government servant and his outfit for walking is always white – a white T shirt and full trousers in white, with matching shoes, and no doubt, socks. In those rosy days of March, when MMM sincerely thought we were pretty much immune to this disease or could become so by drinking rasam and swallowing garlic, this man would wear a mask and whenever he spotted any one not sporting one, would

lower his and bark out that the least the person could do was to cover his or her mouth. He more or less became the terror of the locality and MMM for one, out of fear of being addressed by this person, began to religiously wear a mask. Soon the entire set of walkers was masked, and resembled a conference of surgeons. And for want of the man's real name MMM began referring to him as the Masked Avenger.

Time went on. The pandemic boomed and has since settled at a high in Chennai. You will not be far wrong in stating that it has come to like this city by the sea and is here for a nice, long stay. And the masks too have come to stay on our faces. In fact, MMM has become so used to it that he feels practically nude if he has to remove it. And whenever he sports a mask, MMM thinks of the Masked Avenger, partly in gratitude for his prescience and partly in awe of his evangelical zeal.

But of late, MMM has come to realise that his idol too is human and has feet of clay. There are days when MMM sees the man walking around with his (the Masked Avenger's and not MMM's) nose in the air, well outside the mask. It in fact juts out like a pennant on a ship. True, he does pull his mask up whenever he sees any of his former victims about; after all he does have a status to maintain as a reformer. Sometimes he has long conversations on the phone, with his mask down, when no doubt his open mouth takes in a whole lot of polluted air, full of microbes and water droplets. During such times he does not bother to pull his mask up, perhaps he is instructing whoever it is at the other end to wear his or her mask.

But the worst was last week when he actually emerged without a mask. And on noticing MMM advancing to take a closer look, he ducked into a side street and remained lurking there till MMM had moved on. It must be tough being a role model.

#### Tailpiece

One of the most common queries *The Man from Madras Musings* receives these days is as to why the latest copy of *Madras Musings* has not been delivered. MMM wishes he has an answer, but he does not follow the postman on his beat, and he does not play postman's knock, which if you recall was a favourite game with the late Chief. All he can tell such people is to keep an eye on their neighbour for they may be pinching the latest issues of the magazine. But MMM must admit it feels good to be in demand.

– MMM

Cleanliness and Chennai

Your article on Chennai (MM, September 1st) is certainly thought provoking. The article ended by stating that clean Chennai requires the cooperation of citizens too. It is sadly lacking here.

During last December we were on a pilgrimage to Ujjain through Indore. We had glimpse of what it makes to be a number one city.

When I had told my friend who took care of our pilgrimage that I would like to visit a toilet – preferably his office toilet – before starting to Ujjain, he advised me to use the public toilet, just in front of the place where we were instead of his office toilet which was some distance away from our place.

I attach the photo of the public toilet. You could see it has provision for gents and ladies, handicapped (notice the wheel chair outside) and for children separately.

On the left side, it was painted “We would stay Number One!”

First point, the toilet was very clean, a five-star quality and in use.

Second, this is possible,

**OUR READERS WRITE**



because of the sense of pride of the people.

My Indore resident friend, the driver, the salesman in a saree shop, the security guard at a Ganesh temple, whoever you met and talked to, said “We did it” and WE WILL for the fourth time too.

In my view the toilet is a test stone. One dare not enter in Chennai even Pay and Use toilets. It is a pity.

Like the Corona precautions, which were dinned into our ears, i think we need to educate the masses in a massive way and inculcate a sense of pride in what we do and practise.

T.Anantha narayanan  
tan.vijaya@gmail.com

**Remebering N.S. Ramaswami**

I was overjoyed to see the “gem” of a piece written by N.S. Ramaswami in 1956 in the latest issue of MM (Mylapore vs Triplicane). As one who worked with him during my formative years in the Indian Express from the late sixties to the late seventies (when he retired) I always used to appreciate his scholarly approach to writing whether it was history or archaeology, cricket or editorials. This article certainly brought back happy memories of those days when I had the good fortune of going through several of his copies as a sports sub-editor immediately after they were hammered out on his old typewriter. There were times when he had us subs scurrying to the dictionary to find out the meanings of some of his words and phrases by which we were ultimately enlightened.

Partab Ramchand  
partabramchand@yahoo.com

Besant Nagar, then and now

As Nagars go, Besant Nagar is still one of the younger lot. We moved to the area in mid-June 1976, to a flat allotted by the TNHB. My friends had dissuaded me from opting for Besant Nagar. “Angay yaaravathu povaala?” – Will anyone choose to live there, they asked. In those days, it was an area in the back of the beyond! It was largely marked by vast, empty spaces, with not many buildings and hardly any traffic. There was only one bank in Besant Nagar at that time: the Canara Bank. There were only two bus routes connecting the locality to the rest of the world: 21A, which went to Parry’s, and 23A, which plied from Tiruvanmiyur to a destination that I forget. Both were infrequent.

But we fell in love with the place. It was serene, calm and tranquil. The fans in our house ran on wind power for the most part: such was the breeze blowing from the sea, which we could see from our terrace. All this is past history, perhaps hard to believe for a newcomer.

There were no music sabbas in Besant Nagar. Not even now. In the early years, one had to go to Mylapore or T’Nagar. In the late eighties (or was it early nineties?) came Hamsadhwani in Indira Nagar, a well-run institution with a large membership.

And then came along ‘development’, with housing tenements fast-filling up the vacant spaces. Mercifully, there are no skyscrapers yet – most buildings are no taller than 4 or 5 floors. Today, the area is connected by innumerable bus routes and frequent buses; traffic has also increased, and so have traffic jams. But nothing that cannot be efficiently managed by the traffic police. There are only two traffic signals in the entire locality – one at the crossing of the Seventh and Sixth Avenues and Tiger Varadachari Road leading to Kalakshetra; and the other in front of the Theosophical Society entrance! While the latter seems unnecessary, the former does not work all the time.

Elliot’s beach or Bessy, as its fond moniker goes, is a truly ‘happening’ beach. Apart from the crowds that throng the sands, the beach is a paradise for morning walkers (less so for evening walkers). Sunday mornings are car-free and walkers can walk care-free without the fear of being hit by moving vehicles, children play happily and visitors even play games like shuttlecock. The beach exudes an air of new-found freedom! It is also the favourite venue for protest marches, rallies promoted by businesses and NGOs, the Vintage Car Rally and much else. At the far end of the beach lies Orur Kuppam, a bustling fisher colony. In recent years, the Kuppam celebrates its annual fest of music, dance and drums, ably aided and abetted by Nityananad Jayaraman, an inveterate environmental activist and TM Krishna, noted musician. The sands of the beach is the venue! The Kuppam’s fest has, of late, crossed Besant Nagar boundaries to include other venues in the city.

The beach and nearby streets offer plenty of choice for gourmets. You name the cuisine and you will have it.

Besant Nagar has reached the limits of its expansion potential. Thank God for that! There simply is no possibility of horizontal expansion because Besant Nagar is bounded on one side by the sea, on two other sides by Kalakshetra and its extensive grounds, as well as the Theosophical Society and its forested grounds. I fervently hope the authorities do not grant permission for vertical expansion. Let there be at least one locality in the crowded city free, relatively speaking, from noise and noxious pollution.

Now, I have lost count of the banks, public and private sectors, dotting the area. And innumerable ATMs. I wonder if there is adequate business for all of them. Save for daily necessities and groceries, one has to go to Adyar for any serious shopping; this is good for the Nagar because it keeps it relatively traffic and pollution free. For the religiously inclined, there are a number of temples: Vara Siddhi Vinayakar, Ratnagiriswar, Arupadai Shanmugha, and Ashtalakshmi, virtually close to the sea. And, of course, the famous Annai Velankanni Church.

All said and done, Besant Nagar remains one of the better residential colonies in the city.

Gopalakrishnan Sankaran  
gceess@gmail.com

**● Pavithra’s Perspective**

The Old Curiosity House



As a little girl and then later, getting to know Madras, the first thing my mind conjured up at the mention of St Thomas Mount was the church, and the stories connected to said church. Later, when I explored the area, I discovered that it was far from just a church and its environs; this place, with its old world colonial homes and its clear aura of British residency, was fascinating – perhaps because in no other neighbourhood I’d seen was it so obvious. It was like being transported into another world; dimly, I knew I was still in Chennai, but amidst these wide streets and palatial homes, the city I knew seemed rather far away.

It was as I was turning a corner of the road that led to the base of the Mount that I glimpsed this house. I had no idea who had lived there; who had built it – or if even anyone lived in it now. All I knew was that its proportions, juxtaposed with the tree and the skyline, made it a lovely subject. Which is how I captured it.

I’d still love to know its story.

Description: 2.5” by 4” approximately  
Medium: Black and White Micron Pens; 0.20mm and 0.35mm.

Thank you, Donors

We today, publish donations received with thanks for the period upto January.

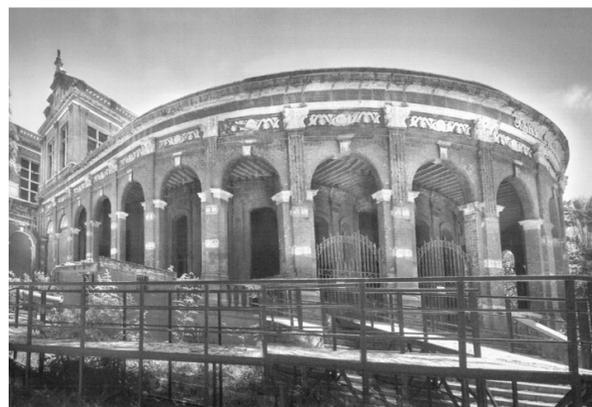
– The Editor

- Rs. 100: Jessie Edwards
- Rs. 150: E. Elangothai
- Rs. 400: T Ananthanarayanan, R.T. Namasivayam, C.S. Mahesh, Dr. Sharada, Govindasamy, C.V. Nagarathinam
- Rs. 500: N.S. Parthasarathy, V. Ramnarayan
- Rs. 750: Marilyn Gracey
- Rs. 900: N. Krishnan, P.M. Belliappa, U.S. Dinesh, M. Unni
- Rs. 1000: Jyotish Rajan
- Rs. 1900: Dr. S.S. Rajagopalan
- Rs. 9900: Dr. B. Biswakumar

(Continued from page 1)

I called L. Ramachandran at once and we met up thereafter. He gifted me with a few blow ups from his Chennai collection. During the course of my chat I discovered that he is a fashion photographer, and apparently the only one from India to be approved by *Playboy*. From there to capturing our buildings on camera is quite a shift but then as we know very well, Chennai's edifices too can cause heads to turn, eyes to pop out and mouths to hang open. *Madras Musings* is happy to present a few of L. Ramachandran's collection in this issue, with his permission.

— The Editor



Museum Theatre.



National Art Gallery.



Agurchand Mansion.



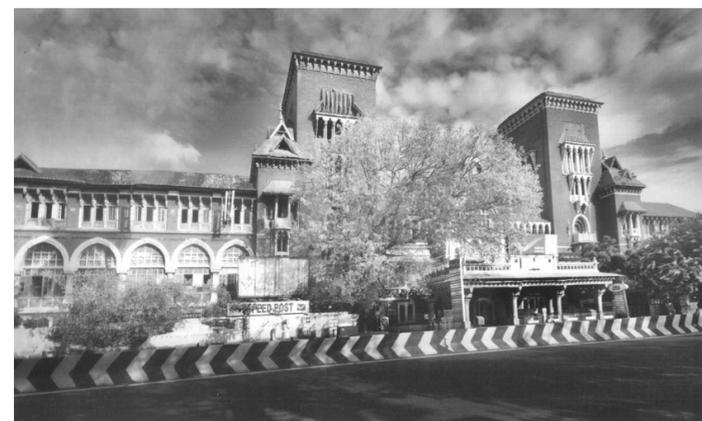
Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium.



Dare House.



Gove Building.



General Post Office.



Higginbothams.



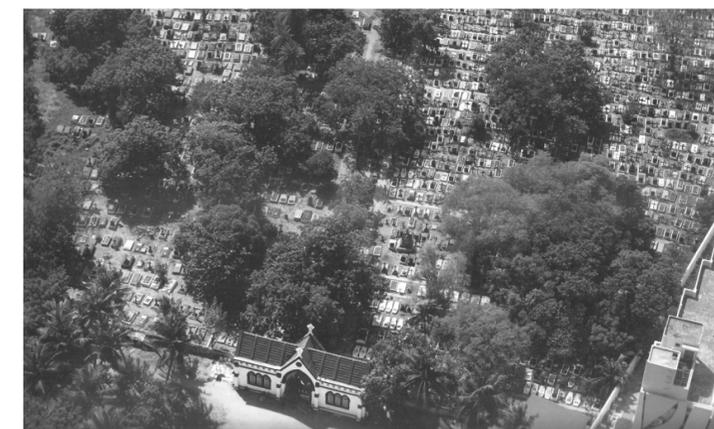
The Law College.



Madras Central Railway Station.



Napier Bridge.



Quibble Island Cemetery.



Ripon Building.



The Government College of Arts and Crafts.



The Victoria Public Hall.



PWD Building.

## Quizzin' with Ram'nan

Quizmaster V.V. Ramanan's first 10 questions are on current affairs and next 10 on festivals and celebrations.

1. By claiming the NBA championship for the 17th time, with which team has LA Lakers tied for the most titles won?
2. Which UN body has been awarded the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize?
3. By becoming the Captain Regent of which small European republic has Alessandro Cardelli become the youngest incumbent State leader in the world?
4. Which feisty marsupial was recently released into the wild on Australia's mainland 3,000 years after it went extinct there?
5. Name the high-profile Union Minister for Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution who passed way recently.
6. With which online giant did IRCTC recently partner to let passengers book train tickets?
7. Which State/UT's airport has become the Airports Authority of India's first entirely solar-powered airport in the country?
8. Name the legendary guitarist, revered by peers for perfecting the two-handed tapping technique, who passed away recently.
9. Name the prize launched by Prince William where five £1 million prizes will be awarded each year for next 10 years to support environmental solutions.
10. Which famous naturalist clocked up a million Instagram followers in the fastest time, in just four hours and 44 minutes, according to Guinness World Records?

\*\*\*

11. Which Eid honours the will- ingness of Ibrahim (Abraham) to sacrifice his son Ismael as an act of obedience to God's command?
12. Which festival has three types – Rongali, Kongali and Bhogali?
13. Which celebrations in western India has a personality called King Momo?
14. On which day of Durga Puja does the 'Sindhoor Khela' happen?
15. Name the Theravada festival that commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha?
16. Name the fun-filled event held every last Wednesday of August, during a week of festivities in the Spanish town of Bunol.
17. Fill in the blank: \_\_\_\_\_ was started to celebrate the marriage of the crown prince of Bavaria, who later became King Louis I, to Princess Therese von Sachsen-Hildburghausen
18. The distinctive feature of which liturgy is the blowing of the Shofar or the ram's horn?
19. Which religion's founder's birthday is celebrated as 'Khordad Sal'?
20. 'Tulsi Pujan Diwas' is observed every year on a date which is important to Christianity. What date?

(Answers on page 8)

# Sir S. Subramania Iyer

## a life of public service – Part 1

Sir S. Subramania Iyer, legal luminary and former acting Chief Justice of the Madras High Court was a noted public crusader, a nationalist at heart and an ardent Theosophist. Though he commanded much respect amongst the British for his legal acumen and public spiritedness which resulted in several titles and also a knighthood, he did not shy away from speaking out against their policies and actions concerning the governance of our country on many occasions. One such resulted in him renouncing his knighthood and Dewan Bahadur title in the face of the hostile reaction of the Government of India to a letter written by him to President Wilson of the USA. This two-part article is a brief profile of this remarkable personality and the incident, which represents one of the early instances of a high-profile protest against the Government by a man who was once part of the establishment, so to speak.

Born in 1842 in Madurai, Subramania Iyer lost his father when he was just two years of age. He grew up under the care of his mother and elder brother Ramaswamy Iyer, who was in Government service and had risen to the post of head-clerk. Having completed his school education at the Zilla High School in Madurai with distinction, Subramania Iyer followed in the footsteps of his brother and joined Government service as a clerk. While working, he cleared the examination to appear as a Pleader but was denied permission to practice by the District Judge, R.R. Cotton, a man of irascible temper and arbitrary in his judgements. Subramania Iyer's offence seemingly was his failure to salute the Court when he appeared before it to apply for permission. However, with the coming into force of the Criminal Procedure Code in 1862, Subramania Iyer's legal qualifications found recognition and he was appointed Public Prosecutor by the District Magistrate. With the writ of R.R. Cotton still running large, Subramania Iyer did not find himself inclined to take up the assignment and chose to continue as a clerk. The practice of law was however not away from his mind and he was in search of ways to pursue it.

Chancing upon the Madras High Court Rules wherein it was stated that a person who had passed the B.L Examination and had served as an apprentice under a Barrister or a Vakil could practice as one,

Subramania Iyer chose to obtain the degree from the Madras University. This required him to take up studies again, as he had to pass the Matriculation and F.A exams before being eligible to take the B.L exam. He passed all examinations with flying colours and apprenticed himself to J.C. Mills, Official Reporter of the High Court.

Subramania Iyer began his career as a Vakil at Madurai and soon began to make a name for himself with his erudition and deep knowledge of law. Amongst his earliest cases was the Ramnad adoption suit, where he assisted the legendary J.D. Mayne. Much impressed by his work, Mayne suggested to the Government that he would rather leave the case to be prepared by Subramania Iyer himself.

His growing stature as a lawyer meant that he soon began to get involved in several public

japati Rao who had served continuously for 14 years. It was also the year he came into contact with the Theosophical Movement which would become an integral part of his identity for the rest of his life. The association however did not come about in pleasant circumstances. Drawn into religion and philosophy following the death of his wife that year, Subramania Iyer came into contact with Colonel Olcott, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society, marking the beginning



SIR S. SUBRAMANIA AIYER, K.C.I.E., D.L.

### ● Karthik Bhatt

causes in Madurai. In 1870, he was appointed a Municipal Commissioner and a member of the Local Board. It was an association that would last for nearly 15 years. During this time, several improvements were made to the town, including the development of water-supply. In 1873, he instituted a suit against the Devasthanam Committee of the Madurai Meenakshi Amman Temple for its failure to account for Rs. 40,000 of its funds. Thanks to Subramania Iyer's efforts, the sum was retrieved and he was appointed a member of the Committee in appreciation of his services. In 1875, he was appointed the Chairman of the Reception Committee formed to accord a civic reception to King Edward as Prince of Wales during his visit to the town. The sum of Rs 14,000 that remained unspent out of the funds collected for the occasion was later utilised in the construction of the Albert Victor Bridge across the Vaigai river. It is interesting to note that M.S. Subbalakshmi's great-grandmother danced on the occasion of the inauguration of the bridge in 1889.

The year 1884 was a momentous one in the life of Subramania Iyer for many reasons. He was appointed a non-official member of the Madras Legislative Council in the place of Rajah Goday Narayana Ga-

of a long association that would also lead to an active participation in the political movement.

In December 1884, Subramania Iyer was one of the 'band of seventeen' which met in Madras to discuss the need for a body that would serve as the representative voice of the public in politics and governance. This resulted in the formation of the Indian National Congress, which held its first session in Bombay the following year. Subramania Iyer was an important delegate in the Session and seconded a resolution on the reform and expansion of Local and Imperial Legislative Councils. He moved to Madras permanently in 1885.

In 1888, Subramania Iyer became the first Indian to be appointed as the acting Government Pleader, a post that he held until 1895. His tenure was marked by several notable cases such as the Nageswara Iyer Forgery Case, which was tried at Tanjore and had taken more than sixty sittings of the Court. Thanks to Subramania Iyer's expert conduct of the case, it resulted in the conviction of the accused. He had been up against the redoubtable Eardley Norton who had appeared for the defence. Yet another sensational case was the one against the Mahant of Tirupathi, who was accused of placing copper instead of gold

coins at the base of the newly erected flagstaff of the temple. The value was estimated at a staggering two lakhs of rupees. The Mahant was probably counting on the fact that being an issue concerning religious sentiments, no action would be initiated by anyone nor would the Government act on complaints. He however did not contend with Subramania Iyer, who had been appointed as a Special Prosecutor in the case as his tenure as Government Pleader had ended. Subramania Iyer's passionate plea before the Judges C.J. Collins and Sir T. Muthuswamy Iyer where he addressed them stating that "Surely, Your Lordships cannot be deterred from doing justice here because the mere trifle of a thing, a flagstaff is to fall" found resonance with the Court, which ordered the foundations to be dug up. The Mahant was found guilty.

Subramania Iyer was appointed a Judge of the Madras High Court in 1895 following the death of Sir T. Muthuswamy Iyer. He would go on to become Acting Chief Justice three times in the next few years. Official recognition of his services followed in the form of the Dewan Bahadur title in 1891 and knighthood in 1900. These titles would form the bone of contention during the First World War, when the political scenario of our country too was gaining momentum with the formation of the Home Rule League and other developments. What transpired forms the concluding part of the article.

(to be concluded next fortnight)

# The Story of Sweet Home

Today, the property is a landmark of the city, for it is where the Music Academy stands. But what is interesting is that this is one parcel of land that has maintained the same contours since 1875 or so. And it has a long and interesting history even before the Music Academy came to buy the place. For the record, the old colonial bungalow that stood there was named *Sweet Home*. In the Academy archives there are some surviving photographs of it, from which it is possible to imagine its grandeur.

The Corporation records show that this property in 1875 belonged to George E. Pazold and was bounded on the west by lands belonging to the Mathu (Madhava) Perumal Temple and by farms on all other sides. In 1881 it was acquired by Eudora, wife of Alfred Faciole, "a merchant of Broadway." This was clearly the proprietor of M. Faciole & Co, which firm appeared to have dealt with piece goods and bric a brac. *Sweet Home* was not for long with the Facioles and by 1888 we find the new owner to be Mount Venugopala Pillai, son of Mount Annasami Pillai, Telegraph Master of the Government of Madras. While it is not clear as to why the family had the prefix Mount, what is known is that after the progenitor who was into telegraph his descendants were businessmen with interests in Madras and Vijayawada.

In 1900, Venugopala Pillai having died, his descendants partitioned the property among themselves but it was all consolidated soon thereafter in the hands of his sons Mount Ethiraja Pillai and Parankusam Pillai. It is not known as to whether Venugopala Pillai constructed *Sweet Home* or whether it dated to the time of George Pazold or the Facioles. But there is no denying that it was a stately home of Madras, set in as per the reminiscence of Sangita Kalanidhi R. Vedavalli, extensive grounds full of trees. Interestingly, in what appears to be a forerunner of the Music Academy setting down roots here, the house was a centre for music performances even while the Pillai-s were in residence. Justice W.S. Krishnaswami Nayudu in his memoirs recalls attending concerts of artistes such as Bangalore Nagarithamma and M.S. Subbulakshmi at *Sweet Home*, in the 1930s.

The magazine *Madar Manoranjini* in its issue of May 1901 carries a report in Tamil of a wedding that took place at the house. A rough translation is given below chiefly for the image it evokes of a Rad-

hakrishnan Salai around 120 years ago –

*We publish the report sent by our correspondent of a wedding at Sweet Home, the residence of Rao Bahadur Ethiraj Pillai who is well known for all the work he has done in the towns and zilla-s on the east coast of India. His son M.A. Gajapati Rao Pillai married Devaki, the youngest daughter of Thiruvenkatam Pillai. The costly presents and the presence of Pillai's prominent friends, both local and international, only went to establish his prowess and fame. The house has been freshly painted and the garden spruced up. The first courtyard of the house was beautifully decorated with seats for the guests, serial lamps and punkahs wrapped in muslin hanging from the ceiling. Around 300 guests could be seated to listen to a music performance.*



## LOST LANDMARKS OF CHENNAI

– SRIRAM V

*Another room was made up for the event proper and this was decorated with beautiful paintings. This had a Japanned screen for ensuring the women guests had privacy. Among those who attended were the Hon'ble Sir V. Bhashyam Iyengar Kt. CIE, Raja Sir Savalai Ramaswami Mudaliar Kt. CIE, Dewan Bahadur S. Raghavachariar, Rao Bahadur M.A. Singarachariar, M. Veer-araghavachariar, Rao Bahadur Pattabhirama Iyer, Krishna Rao and others. All Annadana Samajam-s in Chennai were ordered to feed their inmates for three days at the family's expense. Hundreds in Bezvada were fed and clothed while temples in that town had special worship conducted.*

The property passed into the hands of Parankusam Pillai's daughters, the subsequent documents describing Ethiraja Pillai as being without issue. It is likely that the couple who wedded in May 1901 did not live long. The inheritors were all married and living in T. Nagar by the 1940s and *Sweet Home* was empty. This was when it was offered on sale to the Music Academy. That august body was most reluctant, for the price was a steep Rs 1,12,000! It was the persuasive skill of Basheer Ahmed Sayeed, then a Committee Member and later a Vice President, that tilted the scales. The Academy borrowed from the Indian Bank and the property changed hands on May 15, 1946. The actual shift took more than a year though what was the cause of the delay is not clear. On August 15, 1947, the Academy observed Indian

Independence by hoisting the national flag at the premises, a practice that continues till date on each Independence Day. It had a grihapravesam ceremony on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August. The Teachers' College of Music, run by the Academy, shifted in and classes began to be held in the first floor thereafter.

Having taken possession, the Academy struggled to retain *Sweet Home*. It found the repayment of the loan quite tough. To augment its income, it rented the ground floor to the Shakti Press of V. Govindan, the pioneering publisher who did much to compile all of Subramania Bharathi's poems and bring them out as one volume. This tenancy was not a happy one for Govindan's finances were parlous at best and finally he had to be asked to leave. The Academy however did not use *Sweet Home* for its December conference, used as it was to auditoriums by then. The concerts continued to be held at the R.R. Sabha as they had been since 1942 while the academic sessions happened at the prayer hall of the Lady Sivaswami Iyer Girls School. But monthly performances were held at *Sweet Home*, with the doors and windows kept open – the surroundings were so quiet that concerts could happen without any disturbance. On such occasions, the building, lit up at night, would present an ethereal sight.

It had all along been the vision of the Academy that it would one day pull down *Sweet Home* to build an auditorium.

That became feasible by the mid 1950s and on October 5, 1955, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru laid the foundation stone, followed by a concert by M.S. Subbulakshmi. By then it would appear that *Sweet Home* had been fully demolished for the photos show the event being held at an open site. Earlier on the morning of October 5, Secretaries Dr. V. Raghavan and C.K. Venkatanarasimham had officiated at a formal bhumi puja. The Academy's auditorium would be completed by 1962 and in the interim, it held its annual conferences at a pandal in the P.S. High School Grounds.

*Sweet Home* it would appear had some music to see it off the premises. The movie mogul S.S. Vasan who lived next door and

who was also the Academy's Vice-President, hired the empty site to conduct the wedding of his son Balasubramanian. The event was filled with music, the nagaswaram being by the maestro T.N. Rajarathinam Pillai. He was a dying man but he made it and gave of his best. There was also a concert by Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar.

Surviving photographs of *Sweet Home* reveal plenty of slatted windows, wooden flooring, high ceilings, trellis work on the verandahs and a balcony with bellied balusters. There was also a large courtyard surrounded by pillars and as Vedavalli recalls, a kitchen the size of a modern-day flat. There were also magizham trees whose flowers carpeted the entire ground. Today all that remains of that old building is a perennial well.

### You can contribute to CHENNAI HERITAGE

As a token of your support for the causes of heritage, environment and a better city that *Madras Musings* espouses, you can subscribe to *Madras Musings* – the annual subscription is Rs 100 and we welcome additional donations too to keep us going. You can make your payments to our bank account as below:

**Chennai Heritage**  
**Indian Bank, Alwarpet Branch**  
**CA No. 413158606 IFSC : IDIB000A013**

Please make sure you send an email to [Chennaiheritage2017@gmail.com](mailto:Chennaiheritage2017@gmail.com) with transfer details so that we can acknowledge receipt. If you are a new subscriber, you need to send us details of your name and address as well. If you are renewing your subscription make sure you quote your subscription number as reference. This is the number that is on the wrapper of your copy of *Madras Musings*.

### Letters to the Editor

Dear Readers,  
 Please email all your letters, comments, additional remarks, brickbats and bouquets to [editor@madrasmusings.com](mailto:editor@madrasmusings.com)

– THE EDITOR

# He reported on sports – in India and from abroad

Watch a match live on TV, read minute-by-minute updates on the web, catch all the action on an app, check tweets from players, and like their pictures on Instagram. That's how the present-day sports fan follows his or her favourite game. The newspaper is, perhaps, the least preferred source to find out how that match ended. But, there was a time when the written word dominated the discussion. The hard-core sports lover's quirk was to flip the paper over and read the Sports section first before turning it around to read the front page. And, if you grew up in the 1940s and 50s, the newspaper was your only window to the world of sport.

S. Sadanand's *Free Press Journal* was the first newspaper in India to devote a full page to sports, way back in the 1930s. *The Times of India* followed suit. Although many readers disliked this move, it was considered a bold and revolutionary step. *The Hindu* was not far behind. Under the editorship of Kasturi Gopalan, it began to devote a separate section to sport in the daily newspaper. Ever since, *The Hindu's* commitment to sports writing has been both consistent and legendary. In 1947, the group launched the first sports journal in India, *Sport & Pastime*, headed by S.K. Gurunathan, a celebrated cricket writer of the time.

In the early 1940s, a young man named T.D. Parthasarathy had just graduated from The Presidency College of Madras. He had played both cricket and hockey for the college and had won many accolades for his performances. After a brief stint as an Assistant Physical Education Instructor at Madras Medical College, he joined *The Hindu* as a sports reporter to cover hockey and athletics. And there began the illustrious career of one of the finest sports scribes of all time, who would go to great lengths to get an exclusive article for the sports fan.

● by  
**Deeptha  
Vivekanand**

There were many writers who specialised in cricket and other sports, but when it came to athletics and hockey, there was no substantial writing. T.D. Parthasarathy sought to fill that void. S. Thyagarajan, Former Deputy Sports Editor, *The Hindu* recalls, "Being close to the faculty at the YMCA and his own experience with Athletics gave him unparalleled contact with the athletics federation and athletes. His enterprise and dynamism made him establish contacts at all levels in authority in the Indian Olympic



T.D. Parthasarathy

Association. He was the first and possibly the only sports journalist to be a part of the Amateur Athletic Federation of India."

In those days, *The Hindu* was filled with Parthasarathy and Srinivasans from A to Z. The only way to avoid mixing up the names was to stick to calling them by their initials. And so the nickname 'T.D.' stuck. Throughout his career that is how he was known to his colleagues in sports circles in India and abroad. T.D. was the first journalist at *The Hindu* to be sent abroad to cover sporting events. His first overseas outing was to the 1958 Asian Games in Tokyo. He was not only writing about the various track and field events there, but also photographing them at the same time – a task few journalists

could balance with ease. Armed with his recorder, camera and notebooks, T.D., pulled no stops when it came to getting a good story. He had developed the knack of predicting

winners and being in the right position to capture the perfect moment.

(To be continued  
next fortnight)



TDP on a media bus ride in Rome.

## Answers to Quiz

1. Boston Celtics, 2. World Food Programme, 3. San Marino, 4. Tasmanian Devil, 5. Ram Vilas Paswan, 6. Amazon India, 7. Puducherry, 8. Eddie van Halen, 9. Earthshot prize, 10. Sir David Attenborough

\* \* \*

11. Eid-ul-Adha, 12. Bihu, 13. Goa Carnival, 14. Vijaydashami, 15. Wesak, 16. La Tomatina where people get involved in a tomato fight, 17. Oktoberfest, 18. Rosh Hashana, 19. Zoroastrianism, 20. December 25.

Madras Musings is supported as a public service by the following organisations



Amalgamations Group



ASHOK LEYLAND

Bata

Aapki Jeet. Hamari Jeet. Bata India Limited



Brakes India Private Limited



CHATRATH TRUST

FLSMIDTH

F.L. Smidth Limited

THE HINDU

The Hindu Group of Publications



MRF

murugappa

NIPPO

Rane

Rane Group

RAYALA GROUP

SAINT-GOBAIN  
The future of glass. Since 1665.

SANMAR

SF

SUNDARAM FINANCE  
Enduring values. New age thinking.



Sundram Fasteners Limited



Hotels Resorts and Palaces

TAKE  
Enabling Business Efficiencies



TATA CONSULTANCY SERVICES

TVS

TVS MOTOR COMPANY

Since 1856,  
patently leaders  
— A WELLWISHER