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MADRAS MUSINGS

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WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

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Does Dipavali HAVE to be celebrated?

The numbers have finally begun to come down. Just as residents of Chennai had assumed that the daily COVID-19 figures would forever hover around the high 900s or low 1000s, the virus has shown signs of relenting. The statistics have taken a turn for the better, with the city registering around 750 numbers each day. The number of containment zones is less than 20. All of these are something to rejoice about. Unfortunately for us, many in the city have begun to assume that the pandemic belongs to the past.

That this is a very foolish notion will be made amply evident when we consider what is happening in Europe and in several parts of the USA – the numbers are climbing once

again. All of these nations had experienced a peak, then a dip, and when the situation appeared to be improving, the pandemic chose to return. It would also be wrong to blindly believe pronouncements such as those made by the Finance Ministry, which declared that

● by The Editor

the COVID peak had passed. That was meant from an economic point of view – with factories, commercial establishments and shops opening up, business would look up anyway. It certainly cannot be interpreted to mean that the pandemic has gone. Similarly, while it is good to be optimistic about a vaccine, we cannot

forget that as of now there is no such preventive intervention. True, Russia did make an announcement to this effect, as did China, but these are countries whose credibility is low at best. India too is in the race for developing a vaccine and the signs are hopeful, but it is still early days.

Which is why it comes as a surprise that residents of Chennai have chosen to throw caution to the winds and throng shops, ostensibly as a prelude to Dipavali. Of course, on the one hand it is understandable – prolonged lockdowns have failed the world over and have at best delayed the spread of the epidemic. And not everybody lives in palatial

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How the hospitality industry is coping with Covid

● The third article in a series exploring the pandemic's effect on Chennai's industries, this piece takes a look at how the city's restaurants have been braving the crisis.

According to industry estimates, Chennai and its suburbs are reported to have around 8,000 eateries of varying sizes. With a curb on social gatherings, the pandemic has hit the city's restaurant industry quite hard, causing a significant number of hotels to shut down permanently. Dine-in services capped at 50 percent occupancy were allowed to resume in the month of June, but the number of customers choosing to eat out are understandably

nowhere near pre-COVID levels. Even though food delivery services have fared better – a Zomato report published in August estimates that food delivery orders across the country has reached around 80 per cent of its pre-pandemic business – restaurants are reportedly

● by Our Special Correspondent

earning less than half of what they used to before the crisis.

Kiran Rao, a restaurateur who manages premium eateries such as Wild Garden Cafe (Amethyst) and Chambers recalls the panic that followed the initial lockdown

announcement in March. "It was a nightmare. We had to give away all the perishables – food, fruits, vegetables. We were also concerned about the staff. We instructed them to stay put and assured them that their salaries would continue to be paid." Many hotels had to make arrangements to ensure that the spaces were secure and well-maintained even when not in use. Kiran reached out to staff who lived close by. They visited the spaces when they could. They aired the place out and cooked their meals on premises, too. "Cooks became gardeners," said Kiran. "It was crisis management across the board – everyone pitched in."

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HERITAGE WATCH

(with some Old and New)

OLD



The Beach House

In the last issue of *Madrass Musings* and the present one, we have serialised Karthik Bhatt's two-part article on Sir S. Subramania Iyer (see page 6), an early legal luminary, who gave up his knighthood in protest against colonial policies though this is not remembered or celebrated the way Rabindranath Tagore's return of his title is.

Subramania Iyer resided in the latter part of his life at *Beach House*, which is now integrated into the Queen Mary's College campus. Not much is known as to whether he built this bungalow or whether he was a later occupant. In style, it follows the architecture of *Capper's House*, which was the first residential building to come up on the beach, was the core of the QMC campus, and which was sadly allowed to deteriorate and collapse a few years ago. It also closely resembles a second structure, also on the QMC campus and variously

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NEW



Do we need to celebrate Dipavali?

(Continued from page 1)

accommodation to opt for remaining locked up forever. However, a people fed up of remaining indoors would, it would logically be expected, through the open spaces. Our Government has of course strangely enough, preferred to keep beaches and parks out of bounds indefinitely. And so, the people through shopping complexes, than which there can be no worse option – an enclosed environment with several people in proximity has all the makings of a super spreader.

Last fortnight, despite repeated warnings, shops and establishments in T. Nagar in particular, witnessed record crowds. The police had to finally step in and seal one outlet. That has served as a deterrent. It is understood that the others, still open,

have agreed to a token system to allow entry. But that does not in any way control those waiting outside, and they can cause as much risk as those allowed in. All of this is at a time when suburban trains are yet to operate. If and when they do, the crowds can double and push up the risk manifold.

Which brings us to our lead question. Are we that uncaring a society that when thousands have perished and several others have lost their livelihood, we see it fit to celebrate, complete with the purchase of new clothes? Of course, some may argue that this is one way of boosting the economy. But at what cost? What if a fresh round of the pandemic breaks out as a consequence? Let us learn to be responsible citizens.

Dipavali will come again next year. It is important that we should be around to celebrate it, in a disease-free environment.

Hospitality sector & Covid

(Continued from page 1)

Restaurants are finding it hard to manage financials as well. While revenues have reduced, operational expenditure and other costs such as repayments on bank loans, commercial rent and staff salaries remain due. In fact, it was reported that the Tamil Nadu Hotel Association applied to the government for rent relief in March. Despite a reported manpower shortage – a significant percentage of employees at specialty cuisine restaurants are not locals – many hotels have had to either lay off their staff or reduce their salaries.

With customer surveys suggesting that most plan to order in rather than dine out in the near future, food delivery services such as Swiggy and Zomato have been an alternative source of income for hotels. They provided an easy platform to immediately digitize ordering and outsource delivery, even in legacy restaurants. In fact, quite a few hotels in the city registered themselves on food delivery platforms during the lockdown. Restaurants and food delivery services are also working closely with each other to help customers feel safe and secure while ordering online. They provide transparency into the safety measures taken by the hotel and the delivery professional as well. However, some point out that the margins retained by the restaurants are much lower, since the model involves a commission pay out to the delivery platform.

In a bid to recover dine-in customers, restaurants are taking multiple measures to reassure patrons of their safety. Most hotels ensure that

their properties are sanitized regularly, while the staff wear masks and wash their hands on a regular basis. Air conditioners are left switched off in accordance with mandated guidelines and customers are seated as per social distancing norms. Restaurants are turning to technology to minimise human contact, as well – from touch-free transactions to robot servers, they have brought new ideas to the table to secure the safety of customers and staff alike.

Menus have also undergone innovation, of course. The number of items on offer has been optimized, with hotels making dishes that comprise ingredients that are easily available and are easy to store, too. Evergreen items like the biriyani are finding a place in hotels that didn't offer them earlier – people are turning to favourites and comfort food in these troubling times. There's also been a rise in home entrepreneurs in response. Many are offering customers home-cooked meals, desserts, breads or condiments such as pickles or podis to great response. Hotels, of course, have followed suit with their own strategy – some have begun to offer customers the option of buying ready-to-cook versions of their signature dishes as well as condiments like sauces or gunpowder.

As the city's restaurants work up an appetite for growth, they're doing their best to adapt to the new normal. That the sector will recover is in no doubt – after all, a good meal will always be in demand. What remains to be seen is how long it will take to get there.

What 'New Normal'?

The *Woman from Madras Musings* is bemused. It's been eight months since the March lockdowns, so it's safe to assume that most, if not all, are aware of the dreaded coronavirus, how it spreads and the most effective preventive measures to safeguard against it. Wear a mask and keep your distance from one another – these instructions are easy enough to follow, one would think. And yet, a significant number of people seem to simply refuse to put on a mask or practice social distancing. The number of unmasked people (Wo)MMM sees on the roads is staggering. They stroll around without a care in the world, some skipping around arm-in-arm with their friends like lambs in a green field. Others congregate around tea and snack shops, energetically jostling one another or peering into their neighbour's newspaper to read the headlines. (Wo)MMM once even saw a group of young men taking a selfie together, putting their arms around each other in brotherly affection as they struck a pose – no masks hiding their happy smiles, of course.

(Wo)MMM wonders if they live in a different world than she does, one in which the city isn't being ravaged by a

between people, let alone a two-arm distance. Going by the video, one wouldn't have imagined that our city is currently fighting a pandemic.

(Wo)MMM recalls a *Thirukural* that she thinks is worth reflecting upon in this crisis – “One who does not take precautions to guard himself is like straw before fire,” it warns. If that sounds pedantic, it's also worth remembering that one's care or carelessness, as it were, has a direct impact on the safety of another in times like these. Take Kerala for example – with a reported spike in covid-19 infections post Onam, the State has paid a heavy price for ignoring preventive norms during the festivities. (Wo)MMM hopes that we buck up soon and behave with social responsibility – the holiday season is upon us and the only thing she wants to see skyrocketing in the near future are colourful fireworks, not the infection rate.

Traffic Woes

The *Woman from Madras Musings* remembers how in the early days of the lockdown, there was much talk of nature healing itself in the absence of human activity. While that particular claim ended up being discounted by experts,

signals. They honk impatiently, irritated at being made to wait when they would rather be well on their way to wherever they're going.

An old friend of (Wo)MMM used to have the habit of making up excuses for such fast, rebellious daredevils. “Perhaps they need to urgently visit the lavatory,” he would suggest, hoping to strike a chord of compassion in (Wo)MMM. However, (Wo)MMM remains highly dubious of such exercises in empathy – traffic violations hardly seem to be the exception and instead, seem to be quite common in our fair city. A 2019 NCRB report shows that Chennai already tops the country when it comes to road accidents, for the second year in a row in a fact. From a layman's perspective, (Wo)MMM fears things are worse now, post-lockdown. One feels that our city can do without this distinction.

Trending

The *Woman from Madras Musings* noticed that idlis were a hotly trending topic until recently. Upon investigation, she discovered that an unassuming British gentleman had posted his personal review of the food item, label-

SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

pandemic. She finds it hard to believe that this *laissez-faire* attitude is a by-product of innocent ignorance – surely, authorities have made enough noise underlining the absolute need to wear a mask properly in public. (Wo)MMM ended up asking an acquaintance – a vegetable seller who was ambling down the street, pushing her cart with a song on her unmasked lips – why she doesn't feel the need to wear a mask. “Ah, I won't get covid,” came the cheery reply, as she passed to dab her nose with her pallu before sauntering to the next building to sell her wares. Her response left (Wo)MMM in astonished silence. The story of Typhoid Mary sprang to mind and she shuddered, praying fervently that things wouldn't come to that.

The problem is, the vegetable vendor isn't the only one of her kind – there are many who seem to espouse her approach of merry confidence. Take for instance, a recent viral video of crowds thronging a popular clothing retailer in T-Nagar. Save for a couple of heroes, most shoppers were unmasked; as for social distancing, well – there didn't seem to be enough space to wedge a sheet of paper

(Wo)MMM wonders if it holds true for another natural phenomenon in the cities – our chaotic traffic ecosystem. With the prolonged lockdown, traffic discipline seems to have adopted a cheerful attitude, celebrating the freedom to move about once more.

Pedestrians and cyclists, for instance, don't seem to be too bothered to keep to the sides of the roads. Though (Wo)MMM recognizes that they've been done hard by, given the lack of a viable sidewalk in most places, she thinks actively using a mobile phone while walking on the road is taking things a bit too far. In one memorable instance, (Wo)MMM found the need to honk at a lady who was standing in the middle of an intersection, arguing with the person at the other end; piqued at being interrupted in the midst of her sentence, she cast a glare at (Wo)MMM before crossing the road to the other side.

Then there are the motorcyclists, speeding and taking sharp turns around blind corners with nary a care in the world. A few have done away with the precaution of wearing helmets, too. The most curious are the ones who are annoyed by (Wo)MMM stopping at red

ing it 'boring.' The analysis instantly drew the attention of idli-lovers all over the globe. Some suggested he's been eating it wrong all along, others urged him to give it another try with their favourite condiments and the rest responded by cleverly insulting British cuisine as a sort of tit-for-tat. The poor gentleman, rattled by the flood of responses, tried to calm things down by pointing out that he doesn't like puttu either – all that admission served to do was to enjoin indignant puttu-lovers to the protests as well. He ended up ordering a meal of idlis and posted a selfie of himself at dinner, informing the world at large that his views remain largely unchanged.

(Wo)MMM rather admires the doggedness of the whole thing – the gentleman, for sticking to his point of view, and the gastronomes, for insisting that he's never tasted the perfect sambar-chutney and so hadn't actually eaten idlis the way they ought to be. There's a lesson here, she feels – we'd all be better off making peace by agreeing to disagree with each other when the situation demands it.

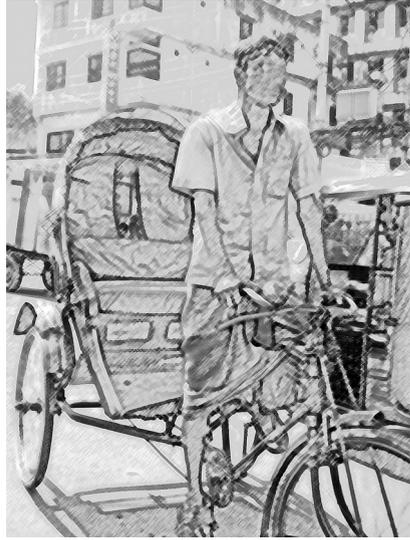
– (Wo)MMM

**OUR
READERS
WRITE**



Hilarious tales of a cycle-rickshaw protagonist

In many families there will always be a person known for his funny accounts. From the paternal side of our family, there was one Krishna Iyer or 'Mappillai Krishnan' as he was fondly known, being one of the two sons-in-law. He cut a rather imposing figure, with his fat and large frame, but his voice was unsettlingly feeble and thin. He was fiscally supportive to the bus transport department as he would often travel around Madras city in PTC buses (now MTC) by purchasing holiday tickets.



Krishna Iyer was most famous for his unbounded love of a cycle rickshaw, light green in colour. His affection for the vehicle was nothing short of divine – he absolutely adored it. His bonding towards it was so deep

to the extent that both were inseparable by any means. Such was his penchant for the vehicle that he was ferried in it for decades. If Lord Ganesha walked around his parents Shiva and Parvathi three times to win the wisdom fruit, justifying they are the whole universe, our Krishna Iyer would go around Madras royally in that rickshaw in celebration of it. Perhaps, he would have been the only person under the sky who must have celebrated 'rickshaw bandhan' every year.

For Krishna Iyer, the unmistakable cycle-rickshaw was his chariot. His sitting posture on the uncovered pedicab would remind everyone of a monarch sitting on his throne. Be it for attending a marriage or to condole a death, he would promptly travel in it with his trademark attire of veshti and light blue half-sleeve shirt, and with the protruding hand-kerchief tucked under the collar.

Once during Krishna Iyer's visit to our family, my aunt also was present in the house. Seeing his broad frame, with his belly resembling a flyover, she whispered from a distance, asking him, "Have you left your trunk at home by oversight?" Her subdued comment evoked instant laughter around.

My cousin and I would always rag Krishna Iyer for humour when we met on occasions. We once decided to compare him with the late justice V.R. Krishna Iyer. Though we knew that such a comparison would be inane and fatuous, we still did so for the sake of humour by drawing comparisons:

- If V.R. Krishna Iyer was concerned about the poor being taken for a ride, our Krishna Iyer let the poor (rickshaw puller) take him for a ride.
- While VRK Iyer was the vehicle of law, as a law rickshaw was the vehicle for our KI.
- For VRK Iyer court was his daily way of life. For our KI cart was his daily way of life.
- Though both used to wear dhoti mostly, VRK Iyer's never went up, while our KI's never came down.
- Last but not the least, the first was 'justice' Krishna Iyer, and the second was 'just' Krishna Iyer.

With his passing away some years ago, the humble cycle-rickshaws also slowly faded into oblivion. But through his munificent patronage, Krishna Iyer left a strong imprint of his own for the vintage vehicle.

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Savitri Vaithi attains 'Vishranti'

● The old-age home she founded was called Vishranti (relaxation) but for Savitri Vaithi who passed away recently at the age of 91, life was one busy round of activity, all in the social cause. We publish a tribute, penned by Kamala Rangachari, Managing Trustee of the Vishranti Charitable Trust – The Editor

When I reminisce, it seems like it all happened just yesterday, when in fact, it has been 50 glorious years. It is true that time stops for nothing and none, not even for the wonder woman called Savitri. Over this half century, Savitri penetrated the hearts of so many women, unveiling to them the truth of social service, in turn inspiring them to spread the truth of social service to the world. Her capacity to take the right decisions spontaneously is only one of many examples of her remarkable leadership. She was the very epitome of simplicity, compassion and poise, beautifully complemented by a throbbing enthusiasm, transparency in words and actions, and modesty. Savitri, who inspired so many ordinary women into believing that nothing is impossible, motivating them to form an organisation (NGO) called the Monday Charity Club, rendering great social services by implementing successful projects over a period of 50 years, is no more with us. They say that the poet may die, but not the poetry. Words fail me in expressing her accomplishments. Innumerable needy students and old people benefited through the trust she founded, which extended helping hands and financial support to children for education under the scheme *Puttaga Vangi* (Book Bank), *Vidya Daan*, besides providing support and health to the elderly under the scheme *Undru Kol*. The trust also provided financial support for innumerable marriages besides relieving suffering by providing medical support for the sick and deserving.

The culmination of all her social services was the founding of Vishranti, an old age home – the first such in our city. It all started with a small subscription of Rs.3, fifty years ago which has now grown into the strong and stable tree named Vishranti. It was inspired by Ms. Mary Clubwala Jadhav who promoted the cause of welfare for the elderly. With humble beginnings way back in 1978, with the blessings of Maha Periva Sri Chandrasekarendra Saraswati Swamigal, and inaugurated by Justice S. Mohan, with only one old woman inmate, Vishranti has now grown into a big banyan tree sheltering hundreds of old people. The land for Vishranti was acquired by the tireless efforts of the trust members, and with the support of AVM Trust and Helpage India. It started off as a small project where money was collected through 42 school children in a small way. The building for the trust was constructed by the tireless efforts of G.K. Shetty, a renowned builder. The trust received help from unexpected quarters as it grew, and needless to say, all this was possible only due to the able leadership of Savitri and the timely support of innumerable good-hearted people. We also recall with great respect the periodical and timely

advice we received from geriatricians whenever we approached them. Vishranti enables the elderly to lead a dignified life with proper care and support, free of cost. This is truly a home away from home. Older women who were abandoned by their families and society were brought to Vishranti and given the assurance of food, clothing and shelter until their last breath. They were also offered a life of dignity by making them feel included with others in society. They were given opportunities to participate in spiritual discourses, dramas and other engagements, in addition to being given quality medical support. Srimati Savitri embraced these people, who were neglected by society, and gave them the invaluable gifts of security and happiness by celebrating all the major functions like Dipavali on the Vishranti premises, making them feel like they've been reborn into this special home.



It is only fair to mention here the selfless service rendered by nurses and caretakers in the home who have been tirelessly but cheerfully nursing the elderly as per the doctors' advice, besides supporting them at the time of admission to hospitals for treatment. We are proud to mention here that at Vishranti, we have been successful in making these elderly women understand the nobility in donating their eyes when they pass away. With their permission, we have managed to make this donation successful in many cases. Vishranti has collaborated with educational and medical institutions, arranging for integrated services like training for nurses, awareness programs for children, etc. Vishranti is represented by its selfless members who engage themselves wholeheartedly in the service of society.

Last but not the least, when an inmate passes away, we inform the relatives so that they can perform the final rituals if they wish to. If there was nobody to attend to the departed soul, Savitri stepped in herself and performed the last rites many a time.

Savitri was the reason behind a lot of elderly people leading a healthy life, forgetting all their sorrows in the final years of their life. She was ever cheerful in the service of god, who she served tirelessly day and night, thus creating a temple in the form of an old age home. Alas, this great soul has now departed. It is not often that great souls like Savitri are born. Coming from a respectable family, she was self-motivated towards service right from her early years. She lived a selfless life, dedicating herself only for the cause of the welfare of the downtrodden and needy, the old and abandoned. We salute her and feel duty bound to follow her footsteps and continue the noble work she left for us through Vishranti.

Awarding posthumously

This refers to 'Awarding posthumously' in the Short 'N' Snappy column (MM, Oct 16th). Awards/rewards are given in recognition of exceptional service, performance of the highest order in any field of human endeavour without distinction of race, occupation, position or sex. These often act as a motivating factor. Hence the award is indubitably an honour showered upon a per-

son in recognition of his service and whoever receives such awards equally feels elated.

But the awards/rewards must be given during one's life time so as to make the award really prestigious and the awardee equally proud. There is no point in awarding even the most deserving ones when they are not around either to appreciate or feel honoured. One's talent/ service to the society/Nation must be recognised when he is alive and

not after his departure from this world. Conferring awards posthumously on someone amounts to honouring him out of sympathy. At a time when politics, more than anything else, play a vital role in the very selection of people for the awards, why wound the feelings of those who are dead by way of conferring the awards posthumously?

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The man who wrote his own obituary

Ejji K. Umamahesh was a ray of sunshine in the world of *Madras Musings*. A frequent caller over the phone on matters concerning the city's history between the 1950s and the 1980s, he would always have Mr S. Muthiah laughing with his many unprintable reminiscences of otherwise respectable pillars of society. He introduced himself to people with a visiting card that was designed like Google's home page, with the word Ejji typed in the search box. People were then told that all they had to do was to search for his profile online and sure enough, typing Ejji retrieved his website as the first result.

He drew me into his inner circle of friends and he never missed reading his copy of *Madras Musings*. One of his last acts was to leave instructions that his subscription for the magazine had to be renewed no matter what happened to him. Ejji to many of us represented Madras – he knew everyone, was familiar with almost every part of the city and above all, embraced everyone with love and affection, irrespective of caste, colour, creed or gender. His facebook page had a daily update identifying one public figure or the other and lampooning them for their hidebound and reactionary attitudes. This was titled *A—H – of the Day*. It never failed to evoke much laughter. A few years ago, Sushila Ravindranath and I invited Ejji to speak on the history of motorsports in Chennai. It was an unforgettable event, with record crowds, some veterans from the sport coming to attend, and repeated claps and cheering. At our request, his cousin, the actor Mohan V. Raman, has penned this tribute.

— The Editor

Many of you may have seen the movie – *My cousin Vinny*. Joe Pesci, plays the unconventional, bold, creative and savvy cousin. I am reminded of this cousin of mine – Ejji as he was popularly known or Umamahesh as he was officially named. Many versions are there for this rather unique nickname but one that was (sort of) corroborated by his parents stems from the fact that his father Dr. Krishnan used to refer to his wife Janaki as the Mother Goose of the family and when she gave birth to Ejji,

he was referred to as the “Egg” which became Ejji. As far as the “Cousin” bit goes its simple – his paternal grandfather and mine were brothers. More often than not Ejji always advised me not to advertise this fact to everyone lest they shun me thereafter. It is always amazing how such a colourful personality could only see things as Black or White. His famous phrase was – One is either pregnant or not pregnant, there is no in-between stage.

There are two major difficulties I am facing in writing this firstly I am unable to write about Ejji in the past tense and secondly how to write a sort of obituary when he wrote his own and had the same published, creating a trend in social media? I had friends of mine from Delhi and even New Zealand posting it in WhatsApp and to all of them, despite your advice, Ejji, I proudly declared – He is my Cousin.

I am reproducing what he wrote as it best describes him.

Congenital Sybarite, Recycled teenager, Rat race runner (ret'd), Whole time house husband and home maker, Compulsive party host, Theatre and movie actor, International car rally driver and organiser, Omnitarian, Rationalist, Humanist, Atheist, Free thinker, Hasher, Past Rotarian, Past Round Table, 41 er, Freemason, Founder Ejji Domestic Services and Ejji Maintenance Contracts, Deputy Secretary Formula 1 Indian Grand Prix 2010 to 2013 (other interests, associations and occupations left out on purpose since they are never publicly disclosed)

Dear Friends, enemies and those in between

Thanks for sharing my exciting life. My party is over and I hope there is no hangover for those I leave behind. Time is running out for everyone. Live well, enjoy your life and continue the Party. As John Lennon said “Life is what happens to you while you are busy making other plans”. Cheers and bye forever and please Live, don't exist – Ejji.

This piece that he wrote has made him a famous name posthumously much like two other eccentrics Van Gogh and Bharathiyaar – I am not comparing them or in any way belittling the other two but only speaking in the context of posthumous fame. Ejji lived life precisely and

exactly as he wanted, did just what he pleased and cared two hoots for what Society would say. In this he probably took after his grandfather's youngest brother Dr A. Srinivasan. The good doctor on his demise left his entire wealth to the “Dogs of Madras”. The legal conundrum took years for my father to resolve till the amount was handed over by the Court to the Blue Cross / Veterinary College. Despite having strong opinions Ejji was always open to new ideas and never hesitated to accept that his view was wrong. After a late night party argument with my wife he went back home and wrote her a note that said that he was incorrect to assume that HIS view was the ONLY correct view and that he was sorry. Only the truly honest and brave like Ejji apologise.

Ejji had a great ability to live a dream and dream a life. His life as an entrepreneur started with the



● by
Mohan V. Raman

toilet cleaning and housekeeping of his friend Yeshwanth Veccumsee's Theatres – Safire, Blue Diamond and Emerald. Soon multinationals like Metal Box and Philips sought his services – Ejji Maintenance contracts went from strength to strength. He found that homeowners in Madras were in dire need of the services of competent Electricians, Plumbers, Carpenters, Pump mechanics and others in maintaining their homes and thus was born Ejji Domestic Services. It was in many ways the forerunner of Urban Clap (now Urban), the popular app for hiring help with household maintenance. From 1971 to 1991 he ran the business and then retired though the entity continued to operate for a decade plus thereafter. He refused lucrative buyout offers from many overseas investors as he felt that his name “Ejji” may take a beating if they did not do business the way he did. A true marketer identifies a need in the market and fulfills it. Ejji was one.

Having retired, he turned to his other passions. He was

involved with several stagings of the Madras Players and acted in films. He was always a lover of Motor Sports and was involved with MMSC and later the Indian Federation. He was a regular at Sholavaram and kept abreast with the Sport and the Cars. His proud possession was a

meat of Ostrich, Giraffe, Wilderbeest to name a few. All perfectly legal fare. He constantly shocked people when he landed up for a party with fried, winged, white ants known in Tamil as *eesal*. Once he even passed them off as hors d'oeuvres to all of his nephews and nieces.

In anything, he always chose to dive in head first and swim. I remember him telling my Dad that he was taking me out to teach me to drive a car. He took me to the beach and taught me the basic clutch, gear and brake operations (a few reversing manoeuvres too). He allowed me to drive there for an hour and straight we were off to Pandy Bazaar, with me at the wheel.

Ejji and my dad had a wonderful relationship that can never be defined. I quote from his website – “V.P. Raman, my friend, mentor, and guide, who taught me to be straight in life and actions and never bend my head to anyone. The person who introduced me to the cream of society. The person who taught me to work without compromising on principles to make a name and a living. The person who taught me that good friends stay with you, while fair-weather friends come for the whisky and bank balance. The person who made me a Freemason and who treated me as his “unborn son.” The person who taught me the nuances of good English. The person who inculcated the love for reading in me. The person whose very name opened doors for me in society and business.”

Cheers Ejji – the party will go on though we will miss one of its most colourful guests.

An insider's view of the Safire Theatre Complex

During my official travels to Madras from Mumbai, as a young executive, I always felt that I belonged to this city. I dreamt of settling down here, post retirement. I never imagined that this would happen when I was only 32. Madras welcomed me with open arms and in the last 46 years it has seen me grow not only professionally but also as a human being. Of the many interesting memories I have of the city, my brief association with the Safire theatre complex stands out. Before I elaborate on my story a few words about the theatre.

Started by the Veccumsee Family, the well-known jewellers of the city, this was India's first multi-theatre complex located on Mount Road (now Anna Salai), close to the old Gemini circle. It was run by H.V. Shah & his sons. It was the idea of the eldest son Yashwant to start the multi-theatre complex and also Silver Sands – the first-ever beach resort in the country. The complex was an imposing building with parking space for about 40 cars. It consisted of three screening halls, viz. Safire, Blue Diamond, and Emerald. Safire, the biggest with a seating capacity of over 1,000, was also the first 70mm theatre in India, opening to the public in 1964, with the screening of *Cleopatra*. Many other block busters of the time followed. Blue Diamond had the unique concept of continuous shows where you could buy a ticket in the morning and stay inside the theatre throughout the day watching the same film several times. It is another matter that most of the visitors, young and old couples, came to Blue Diamond not to see the movie but to indulge in amorous pursuits in the dark, air-conditioned comforts of the theatre. It was also patronized by salesmen who were looking for an air-conditioned resting place between appointments.

I came to Madras in 1974, to take up a job with Grant Kenyon & Eckhart as the Resident Director. Since Grant was handling the advertising for both the theatre complex and the beach resort, we were given an office space in the second floor so that Grant could be at the beck and call of the client. It was a long corridor located adjacent to the projection room with two rooms at the far end of the office. While the administrative offices of the theatre complex were

located in the basement, the first floor was used as the city office of Silver Sands and the third floor was occupied by one of the family members running his own business.

My introduction to Safire happened under unusual circumstances. I was to relieve HW – a pipe smoking Anglo-Indian, who was always suited and booted and spent more time in the Madras Gymkhana Bar than in the office. My boss Vijay Menon from Bombay who had come down to Madras to install me in my new job, asked me to report at Safire theatre, at 9.00 am on a particular day. Instead of taking me straight into the office, Vijay asked me to wait in the foyer of the theatre, as HW had not been told that he was being sacked! I was feeling bad and embarrassed. After waiting for nearly 30 minutes, which seemed like an eternity, Vijay took me and introduced me to HW. Surpris-

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ingly he was all geniality, as the sacking had come as no surprise to him. He seemed to be happy that the management finally had the courage to relieve him for non performance!

I was shocked beyond words to see the items on display on the table and walls of the Manager's office. Apart from finding several objects arousing sexuality, the walls were full of nude model pictures, used in the annual calendars which the agency had produced for the liquor division of a well-known Madras company. While going around the office, I was intrigued to find a room behind the manager's office with an attached bathroom, a cot and few other fixtures required for living. Later I found out that the multipurpose room was used by HW for his nefarious activities. Whenever he had a big fight with his domineering wife, who was obviously always questioning him on his philandering ways, he would spend the night in the office with some company. The facility was also offered to friends in need.

As we came out of the office, I told Vijay that I was not moving into the office without performing a puja. It was almost a week before I actively took over the reins of an empty office with hardly any business. My tryst

with both Safire and Madras had begun. Every morning I would come to the office by 9.30 am. After working in a big office in Delhi with a large staff, it was quite depressing to be seated behind a 25-year-old mahogany table (which had multiple drawers on both sides) and find that I had no work to do! Then it dawned on me that the challenge of the job was to revive an almost dying Madras branch of Grant and that I had to start building the business from scratch. Based on a plan of action I started calling on prospective clients. In the next two years I had brought in enough business to ensure that the branch was self sustaining and I would retain my job! As the business grew I had to employ additional staff. I decided to allocate the rear room to the copywriter, whom I had hired so that he could work peacefully. But I didn't realize it would disturb my peace because every visitor to



ing old films both Indian and foreign. Sometimes when I was early to work, I would see couples hanging around waiting for the booking counter of Blue Diamond to open. It was shocking to see some of them coming out of the theatre only around 2 or 3 pm when I was leaving in my car to visit some client. While they looked fresh waiting in the queue, they looked exhausted with crumpled dresses when they came out, looking sheepishly around to ensure that they did not encounter any familiar faces. It was indeed a sight to behold! It was not unusual for me to catch some known faces indulging in such acts. To save them the embarrassment I would act as if I had not noticed them.

Safire cinema, like many other big cinema halls of the time, had family rooms (Boxes) above the balcony area which were patronised by rich and famous people including popular film stars. Many of them would invariably keep the manager informed in advance of their visit so that adequate security arrangements were in place for them. They would come a little late and leave before the film ended to avoid being mobbed by the crowd. Thanks to our connection with Appunni we would be tipped about the visit of a celebrity star, leading to some of our star-struck staff (sometimes that included me) waiting at the landing of the steps to the Box. Our day was made if we could shake hands with the popular stars.

Though Grant had been provided an exclusive parking space, it was tough getting in and out of the parking area when the block busters were screened. At the end of every show there would be pandemonium both inside and outside the complex, with cars trying to enter or leave, resulting in a big traffic jam on Anna Salai. I had to plan all my client meetings keeping in mind this factor. In spite of all the planning, sometimes I would get stuck in the office unable to get out because of unexpected

While Emerald with a seating capacity of 300 seats featured Tamil & Hindi Films, Blue Diamond with a seating capacity of just 150 specialised in featur-

processions by political parties on Anna Salai.

I can never forget 2nd October, 1975. The day the popular Congress veteran K. Kamaraj died. There was a massive procession on Anna Salai accompanying the mortal remains of the popular leader which took more than four hours to cross the Safire point. While I could watch the procession from a vantage position in the building, I could not leave the office until the road was cleared for traffic.

Watching fights for tickets was another source of entertainment for me. But one fight I wish I had not seen. One Sunday morning I was shocked to see a fight on some family issue by the warring sons of H.V. Shah, in the foyer. The heated arguments between two brothers led to fisticuffs, watched by a motley crowd. When the old man tried to mediate, he was also roughed up. This public humiliation affected the old man very badly. I felt bad because H.V. Shah was a good soul and one of my well-wishers.

Within six years of my taking over the reins of Grant Madras the business had grown to such an extent that I had to appoint more staff. Apart from the need for bigger office space, the problems posed by the theatre complex to my clients who wanted to call on me at the office necessitated my moving out to another office on Graemes Road in 1980. Though my day-to-day association with the complex had ceased I continued to keep in touch with Appunni so that I could get tickets at Safire whenever I needed it.

In 1994, the Safire complex was sold to the AIADMK but the proposed party headquarters was never built. Today the empty space where the theatre stood looks forlorn, full of weed and wild plant growth and is used by many as a public toilet. Every time I pass the area, I am filled with nostalgia of the good times I had there. I can never forget that it was at Safire that I first tasted professional success.

Quizzin' with Ram'nan

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

1. Whose record did Lewis Hamilton recently break for the most race wins in Formula One?
2. Which Chinese company recently raised \$34.5 billion in the world's largest IPO thus far, valuing it at \$313 billion?
2. A massive geoglyph of which animal was recently discovered among Peru's famous Nazca lines?
4. What disclaimer is Disney adding to its older films on its streaming service?
5. According to The World Bank, how many million people are likely to be in extreme poverty by 2021, due to the coronavirus pandemic?
6. Why were Bihar's Kabartal Wetland and Asan Conservation Reserve in Uttarakhand in the news?
7. In which part of the human body have Dutch scientists discovered a new organ measuring 1.5 inches and named it Tubarial glands in reference to its anatomical location?
8. Which pungent spice used as a condiment is to be cultivated for the first time in the country in the Lahaul valley of Himachal Pradesh?
9. With which US-based company has Jio announced a major tie-up to develop indigenous 5G tech?
10. In one of the biggest lawsuits, the US Justice Department has accused Google of doing what illegally?

11. What is the study of flags called?
12. Name the freedom fighter who came up with the design on which the Indian National flag is based.
13. What is the significance of the 50 Stars and 13 stripes in the US flag?
14. Simple one. In what way is the Nepal flag different from normal flags?
15. Which Asian nation's flag has the Shahada (Islamic creed)?
16. Which natural feature appears on the flags of Bangladesh, Kiribati and Niger?
17. What five-letter word describes the edge of a flag nearest to the flagpole and also sometimes refers to the vertical dimension of a flag?
18. What honour/distinction does the Karnataka Khadi Gramodyoga Samyukta Sangha (KKGSS) in Garag village near Hubballi have?
19. In Formula One, which colour flag indicates that the driver in front who is one or more laps down must let faster cars behind pass?
20. Which Asian country's flag would one get if the Polish flag is turned upside down?

(Answers on page 8)

The Judge who renounced his knighthood

(Continued from last fortnight)

Sir S Subramania Iyer's contribution to the world of law went beyond his career as a lawyer and his tenure on the Bench. He played host to several meetings of the Saturday Club, an informal think-tank comprising lawyers, at his residence, *Beach House* (which is today part of the Queen Marys College campus) where several aspects of law were discussed. It was at one of these meetings that the idea to bring out a periodical dedicated to law germinated. This resulted in the founding of the *Madras Law Journal*.

He retired from the Bench in 1907 citing failing health, which he felt came in the way of effective discharge of his duties. The Government of Madras paid rich tributes to his career stating that 'the high judicial qualities, the independence of character and the profound learning which he has at all times displayed throughout his long and honourable career have earned for him a name which will long be held in reverence and esteem by the Government and public'.

Post his retirement, Sir S. Subramania Iyer started dedicating himself to causes close to his heart, especially that of temple legislation and reform. He founded the Dharma Rakshana Sabha in 1908 to tackle ineffective temple committees and work towards administrative reforms. It was thanks to the efforts of the Sabha that several temples including well-known

ones such as Rameswaram, Srirangam and Tirupati were placed on a more secure footing with regard to management and control.

Subramania Iyer's association with the Theosophical movement brought him in close contact with Dr. Annie Besant. Between 1907 and 1911, he served as the Vice President of the Theosophical Society. Later, when the Triplicane Lodge of the Theosophical Society built a hall in Hanumantha Lala Street in the 1920s, they named it the Mani Aiyar Hall in memory of Subramania Iyer. His close association with Dr. Annie Besant also meant that he would soon be involved in the freedom movement.

In 1916, Dr. Annie Besant along with her trusted lieutenants G.S. Arundale and B.P. Wadia founded the All India Home Rule League, a movement which aimed at

able to bring upon the British public 'the pressure which alone will convince it of the reality of our political demands'. He was a great advocate of taking the Swadeshi vow and spoke of the need to provide for the purchase of Swadeshi goods and articles and to afford help for starting of home industries. When Dr. Annie Besant, G.S. Arundale and B.P. Wadia were arrested and interred at Ooty in 1917, Subramania Iyer started a Fund to help the trio manage their legal expenses. It was however his act



Sir S. Subramania Iyer's statue outside the Senate House.

● Karthik Bhatt

obtaining self-governance for the country. Sir S. Subramania Iyer was appointed the Honorary President. He passionately took up the cause of the League and addressed a letter on the subject to the members of the Subjects Committee of the Indian National Congress held that year, exhorting it to welcome the 'new-comer as a son and co-worker' by which it would be able to infuse into itself new blood and before long would be

of writing a letter to President Woodrow Wilson drawing his attention to the arrest of Dr. Annie Besant and also seeking support to the cause of the Home Rule League that ruffled feathers in the highest echelons of the Government.

In a letter dated June 24, 1917 addressed to President Woodrow Wilson, Sir S. Subramania Iyer wrote of the resolutions passed at the conventions of the Indian National Congress and All India Muslim League asking His Majesty, the King of Britain to issue a proclamation announcing that it was the aim of the British Government to confer Self-Government on India at an early date, adding that there had been no official response in this regard. Drawing attention to India's contribution of both 'blood and treasure' at various places such as France, Mesopotamia and Gallipoli, he stated that the men were sacrificing their lives to maintain the supremacy of a nation which used it to dominate and rule them against their will. He also wrote of the oppression and misrule in India, where officials granted themselves exorbitant salaries and allowances, sapped the country of its wealth, imposed crushing taxes without consent and cast thousands in jail for uttering patriotic sentiments. He exhorted the President to prevail

upon His Majesty the King and the English Parliament, who he believed were unaware of these conditions and help further the cause of the country.

The letter raised the hackles of the Government of India, which found fault in act of correspondence directly with the head of a foreign power by a man of the stature of Subramania Iyer, a man who had been knighted. The Secretary of State E.S. Montagu and the Viceroy Lord Chelmsford used the opportunity afforded by Sir S. Subramania Iyer seeking a meeting with them at the *Government House* to discuss political reforms to express their displeasure in no uncertain terms. In a detailed discussion on the subject at the House of Commons, Montagu called the allegations in the letter 'too wild and baseless to require or receive notice from any responsible authority'. Things took a personal turn when Sir J.D. Rees called Sir S. Subramania Iyer's letter a senile production, while drawing attention to his age. Back home, the *Madras Mail* launched a scathing attack and called for his knighthood to be revoked. The Government of India however deemed the personal rebuke expressed by the Viceroy sufficient and no further action was contemplated in the matter.

In a letter to the press in June 1918, Sir S. Subramania Iyer detailed the timeline of the events and laid out his justifications for the correspondence

(Continued on page 8)

THE BEACH HOUSE

(Continued from page 1)

known as Military Engineer's or Shankara Iyer's Bungalow, the two names and the history of that building still remaining a mystery.

OUR OLD features *Beach House* in all its glory and dates to 1918. OUR NEW was taken a few years back. Declared 'structurally unsafe' (always a prelude to neglect and eventual demolition), it has remained standing for more than a decade after that!! It is given a periodic coat of whitewash both physically and figuratively for that is the way the authorities would like us to believe that they are caring for the heritage building. Closer inspection from the road reveals that the roof of the upper storey is missing but the structure is quite solid.

Why this historic property cannot be conserved and put to use as a classroom for QMC students is a mystery. Alumni recall the joy of attending lessons in this structure. Ironically, the entire QMC campus is recognised as a Grade I heritage precinct by the High Court of Madras.

Reporting in style

(Continued from page 7)

Although he never wrote about cricket, his ability to hobnob with the greats of the game gave him the opportunity to get exclusive pictures and interviews for S&P. Ray Lindwall rode pillion on his motorcycle for a photo shoot! When the West Indies came to Madras in 1959, T.D. managed to get up-close and personal with Sir Gary Sobers and Lance Gibbs. He rubbed shoulders with the likes of Vijay Hazare, Hanif Mohammed and Clyde Walcott. All this, in an effort to get only the very best stories for S&P and *The Hindu*.

T.D.'s enterprise in putting together many such features and bringing in several contributory sports writers from abroad to write for S&P, prompted the management to ask him to concentrate more on the entire process of the production of the weekly journal. However, in 1968, T.D. left S&P in a huff following a disagreement with the top brass. "He was the soul and spirit of the weekly," says K. Sundarajan, in the *Madras Musings* article mentioned earlier. Shortly after, S&P had to shut down. The very same year T.D. joined *Deccan Herald* as a contributing correspondent.

In 1972, when it was time for the Munich Olympics, there were no publications to fund his travel and stay but they were willing to mandate him to write for them. That could not stop the insuppressible writer in search of his stories. T.D. undertook the trip on his own. He took a train from Madras to Delhi, flew from there to Kabul, rode a bus to Istanbul from where he got on the Orient Express to reach Munich. He ended up reaching Munich a whole week ahead of the Games with no place to stay. But, no worries! He managed to befriend some local Germans

and stayed in their homes till the Games Village opened. His capacity to network and forge friendships opened doors for him wherever he went.

In Munich, T.D. would go on to interview ace-swimmer Mark Spitz, who had won seven golds, moments before he was whisked away to the U.S. in light of the Black September attacks, which he witnessed live from the Games Village. This interview however, remained unpublished and the tapes were with him for a long time. When *Des Pardes*, a weekly Punjabi newspaper based in Britain and Europe learnt that T.D. was in

Munich, they requested him to write a few articles on Indian hockey. These articles were then translated into Punjabi and published. Such was T.D.'s following.

T.D. did not have a smart-phone. Neither did he have a Twitter handle nor an Instagram account. But, in his time, he was doing everything the Gen-Z sports-writer probably does: breaking news quickly, producing content in different formats, being social, befriend-ing and following players, albeit in the real world. He did everything possible to give his readers the finest stories and was ahead of his time. In the world of sportscribes, T.D.'s name will trend forever.

(Concluded)

THE JUDGE WHO RENOUNCED HIS KNIGHTHOOD

(Continued from page 6)

which had caused such furore. Referring to the remarks of the Secretary of State where he had insinuated that the holder of the title of KCIE ought to have conducted himself more gracefully, Sir S. Subramania Iyer remarked that none could agree with him (E.S. Montagu) in supposing that the 'possession of this title debarred him from criticising misrule in the country'. Tracing the events leading to the conferring of knighthood on him, Sir S. Subramania Iyer said that the title had been announced as a matter of routine following the practice to make every Indian High Court Judge who officiated as a Chief Justice for however short a time, a

Knight, as a compensation for the inability in elevating Indians as Chief Justices. He added that he had preferred that the insignia be conferred on him by post, which had however been unostentatiously delivered to him by the acting Collector of Madurai and his peon while he was on holiday in his cottage on the Palani Hills. Referring to the attack by the *Madras Mail*, he remarked that it should probably 'formulate the process by which the dis-knighting should be carried out', adding that 'A Durbar, of course would be indispensable as well as a mourning costume to be worn on such an occasion'.

Two days later, in a letter to the press enclosing his address to the Chief Secretary, Govern-

ment of Madras he stated that he had returned the insignia received on his being made KCIE and the Dewan Bahadur medal, as under the circumstances he felt it 'impossible to continue to avail himself of the honour of being the holder of such a title, or that of Dewan Bahadur'. He also resolved not to receive any communications thenceforth addressed to him with the prefix Sir and the suffix KCIE or the title Dewan Bahadur.

It was a stunning act of defiance by a man of great conviction who firmly believed that 'among western inventions, none operates more seductively and to the detriment of public interests than these titles', and that it was to shunned by every honest man if by 'accepting

them he is to be debarred from the legitimate exercise of his civic rights'.

Subramania Iyer passed away in 1924, bringing to close an illustrious life full of remarkable achievements, none more than the renunciation of his titles.

Acknowledgements:

1. Speeches and Writings of Dr. (Sir) S Subramania Iyer, Part I.
2. *Sir Subramania Aiyer* by S.M. Raja Rama Rao, Wednesday Review Press, 1914.

Answers to Quiz

1. Michael Schumacher, 2. Ant Group, 3. Cat, 4. Warnings for racist stereotyping, 5. 150 million, 6. They have been included in the Ramsar Sites list, bringing the India total to 39, 7. Throat, 8. Asafoetida, 9. Qualcomm, 10. Abusing its position to dominate search and search advertising.

11. Vexillology, 12. Pingali Venkayya, 13. The 50 stars stand for the 50 States of the union, and the 13 stripes stand for the original 13 States, 14. It is made of two stacked two triangles, 15. Saudi Arabia, 16. The Sun, 17. Hoist, 18. It is the only unit in India that is officially authorised to manufacture and supply hand-woven Khadi National flag, 19. Blue, 20. Indonesia.

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