

INSIDE

- Short 'N' Snappy
- The Sachet Man
- Temple Inscriptions
- Suburban Theatres
- Pongal Matches

# MADRAS MUSINGS

www.madrasmusings.com

WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

Vol. XXX No. 14

January 1-15, 2021

## Another hazy year ends for heritage

It cannot be denied that 2020 had much to occupy the powers that be and also the rest of us, in this our city of Madras that is Chennai. Given that matters concerning heritage receive scant attention even in normal years, it is no surprise that there has been even less in the one that has just ended. But if we let matters drift this way, we may soon end up having very little to show as far as our built heritage is concerned.

There have been some positive developments – the Chepauk Palace restoration is going on though the precinct has become more or less out of bounds unless you have matters pending before the National Green Tribunal. The work on the National Art Gallery in the museum complex is nearing completion. The High Court of Madras, and the Metropolitan Magistrates Courts are being

tended to, as are some of the historic police stations in the city. The Raja Sir Savalai Ramaswami Mudaliar Choultry is looking resplendent though it is now just a sham structure, the portions to the rear that actually defined its purpose having been pulled down. That was done under the shelter of a

● by The Editor

judgement of the High Court of Madras that conveniently interpreted an earlier order to restore around 400 heritage buildings as pertaining only to the facades.

But a survey of several other heritage structures in the possession of the Government reveals a complete lack of a consistent policy. Victoria Public Hall remains a ghostly shell, as does Bharath Insurance Build-

ing, owned by the LIC. The Bank of Madras building on Rajaji Salai is awaiting restoration after a disastrous fire and nothing will convince us that the owners, the State Bank of India, lack the funds for getting on with it, several years after the conflagration. The faculty of the Government College of Fine Arts, Egmore, speak under strict anonymity that the buildings in the premises have begun developing cracks after the Metro became operational several feet below. On the beachfront, the Lady Willingdon Institute now sports an ugly new arm, stretching from west to east. It is yet to be completed, but it promises to be an eyesore when done. Not far from here, the Director General of Police's headquarters, has in a classic instance of excess zeal, extended its colonnaded

(Continued on page 3)

## HERITAGE WATCH



After a brief hiatus of a year or so, it appears that the heritage skyline facing the Marina is once again under threat. An entire new wing of the Lady Willingdon Institute is under construction, stretching west and east and it blocks off a part of the view of the older structure. It makes us wonder what the High Court of Madras, which under Justice Elipe Dharma Rao ruled that the earlier judgement of the same court ordering the protection of heritage buildings only pertained to their facades, would make of this.

There is an unidentifiable monstrosity of some kind coming up just opposite the University Examination Hall. We sincerely hope it is not a public convenience – there are plenty of these that are now available in the sunken road just beyond.

Lastly, at the DGP building, it would appear that the promise to build in a sympathetic style has been misunderstood. With an almost misplaced zeal, the colonnaded façade is being extended till it covers other gracious structures on the campus.



The commercial segment is reportedly seeing better days as well. "Commercial establishments were forced to shut for a long period during covid, around 6 months or so. So, a lot of commercial spaces were vacated since businesses couldn't pay the high rent," explains Suresh. Things are getting better, however. "The requirement for commercial space is picking up," he says.

However, challenges remain. For one thing, even as the appetite for new homes is healthy among first-time buyers, housing loan eligibility norms have become stricter. Averse to giving a loan, banks and financial institutions have tightened the process, strictly reviewing the customer's

(Continued on page 8)

## COVID's impact on real estate

● Madras Musings reached out to P. Suresh, the Managing Director of Arun Excello, to understand how the city's real estate industry has weathered the pandemic.

The first impact of the pandemic on the city's real estate industry was when the lockdowns were enforced – construction came to a halt and a large chunk of the sector's migrant labour force returned to their home states. "There were no sales at all," recalls Suresh.

The situation has improved markedly over the year, however. "Things started looking up in September – we clocked around 30 per cent of our pre-covid sales. In October, we hit 90 per cent and we're almost

back to pre-covid levels in December," informs Suresh, a growth he ascribes to a steady increase in first-time home buyers. "People who lived in rented accommodations went through a turbulent time when the pandemic hit - most home-

● by Our Special Correspondent

owners wanted renters to vacate, for instance. So, quite a few have made owning a house their top priority," he explains. The need to own homes is also an outcome of the work-from-home trend that surfaced last year. Professionals increasingly prefer to live in larger accommodations where they can set up a dedicated workspace free

from the hustle and bustle of the household. "They're willing to move to suburban areas for larger homes," says Suresh. Ready-to-occupy apartments are moving quickly. "Bankers disburse the loan amount in a single instalment when there is no waiting period. This means that buyers don't need to pay pre-EMIs, they can make the payment and take possession immediately," says Suresh.

The industry is currently enjoying a good climate to buy new homes, too - interest rates are at their most attractive, with home loans available at 6.9 per cent. The government's Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana scheme is also turning out to be a boon for first-time home buyers, who receive a Rs. 2.67L cash subsidy under the plan.

# The man behind the sachet revolution in India

A recent news item announcing the demise of Dr. C.K Rajkumar of Veltete Shampoo fame caught my eye. It brought back memories of my long association with rural marketing.

As a guest faculty on the subject of rural marketing at management institutes across the country, I always devote a class to the sachet revolution of the 80's, which helped open rural markets to FMCG companies. The trend made it possible for a poor villager to buy expensive brands of daily consumables like soaps, shampoos etc. in small packs at

the potential of the idea.

Chinni Krishnan was an agriculturist who was also into the pharmaceutical business. He used to get perturbed by the sight of poor children with unkempt hair walking on the streets. He dreamt of a day when the common man could enjoy everything a rich man does. He often used to say, "Whatever I make, I want the coolies and the rickshaw pullers to use. I want to make my products affordable to them."

In those days, talcum powders were packed in tin containers and priced high. He repacked the contents in smaller

● by R.V. Rajan  
rvrajan42@gmail.com

prices he could afford.

Unlike urban folks who bought their provisions on a monthly basis, a farmer who lived on a weekly salary bought items that lasted him just for a day or a week. When I went on field visits in the '70s, I would notice the village shopkeeper splitting a cake of the popular Lifebuoy soap into six pieces and sell each piece at a price that was a little more than the price of a one-sixth piece – satisfying a customer demand, and at the same time, making some extra money for himself.

In classes, after introducing students to the concept of the sachet revolution, I would ask them to name the inventor. The answer would be invariably be either C.K Rajkumar or his younger brother, C.K. Ranganathan, the current CMD of CavinKare which markets the popular Chik Shampoo. Neither is the right answer. In fact, it was their father Chinni Krishnan, based in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu, who introduced the sachet concept to the Indian market, long before multinational companies woke up to

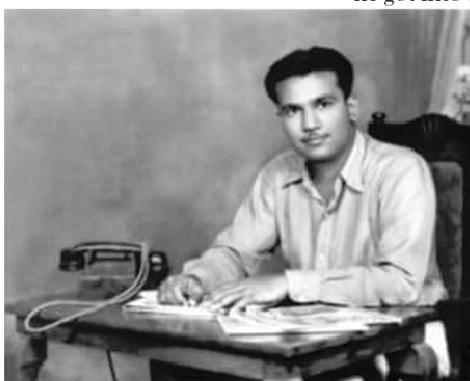
100gm, 50gm and 20gm packs and sold them at a cheaper price. He did the same thing with Epsom salt. He was confident that even liquid items could be packed in sachets.

How did Chinni Krishnan first develop the sachet? He first modified a machine that sealed PVC folders and then took a transparent hose pipe that was used to water plants. He sealed the transparent plastic at one end and filled it with water and then sealed it at the other end. The first experiment was not successful. He tried alternative materials using the same idea until he got the right solution. Thus the sachet idea was born. The first items he sold in sachets were hair oil, honey and shampoo, in and around Cuddalore.

Chinni Krishnan was a great innovator, but a poor marketer. Selling products in sachets was his mission and he used to tell his sons that "this is going to be the product of the future". Unfortunately he did not live to see his dream come true.

Chinni Krishnan died in 1979 at the relatively young age of 48, a couple of years after he got into the sachet business.

When he died, it was discovered that he had taken a bank loan of Rs 2 lakhs from the State Bank of India. The bank threatened to auction the family house which was mortgaged if the loan was not repaid. To save



Chinni Krishna.

(Continued on page 3)

## Hello 2021 - A 'new normal' Wishlist

The new year is here, and one hopes the covid vaccine will also be here soon. The *Woman from Madras Musings* has been reflecting on how strange 2020 has been. While one is happy to bid it – and the coronavirus – goodbye, one can't help but hope that some changes stick on in 2021, too.

Take social distancing, for instance. (Wo)MMM feels it would be nice if people continue to maintain one-arm distance from each other, pandemic or not. After almost a year of social distancing norms, (Wo)MMM has grown rather fond of her personal space – it's not going to be easy to revert to untidy queues and milling crowds that push and shove, especially when one's elbowing and dodging skills are rusty from disuse. (Wo)MMM has also come to prefer the trend of digital meetups in the 'new normal' that we live in. It's surprisingly easy to carry on a conversation online rather than in person, she finds – one isn't quite so conscious of one's body language (what does one do with their hands while talking?!) and the option to switch off one's video is so useful on bad hair days.

(Wo)MMM has become quite grateful for work-from-home systems, too. Frankly, it's getting harder to rationalize why one even went all the way to office in the first place. For one thing, working from home allows one to avoid the annoying daily commute. (Wo)MMM knows some who use the time to do productive things like read books, listen to podcasts or even take meetings but she isn't blessed with that kind of attention span, unfortunately – she ends up wasting time gazing outside the window the whole trip. And then when one does reach office, what does one get? A seat that one is generally confined to, unless summoned to a meeting. When one works from home, however, a universe of possibilities opens up. One can solve a crossword puzzle with *paati* to take a short break. Eat healthy, freshly made meals on time. Or one can work from the garden, instead of a boring cubicle. Actually, there are quite a few reports showing that employee productivity hasn't decreased because of working from home – in fact, some studies are showing that people do more when working from home. As for collaborative work, digital technology is enabling teams to work with each other from home, helping them meet their deliverables.

In fact, office meetings haven't changed all that much in the new normal, if one thinks about it. They've gone

digital, of course – but apart from that, most meetings are as joyously digressive as they are in real life. On one memorable occasion, (Wo)MMM recalls, the attendees spent a lively half-hour discussing the markers of an authentic *mishti-doi* from Kolkata. (Wo)MMM quite likes the freedom to be able to join in meetings from different venues – on days that she visits the parents, for instance, she can log in from their home and continue to work, easy peasy.

And of course, it can't be denied that in the past year, hygiene has improved in general with regular hand washing and sanitizing and the like. Public hygiene, specifically, seems to have become so much better. (Wo)MMM is rather glad to see that the habit of spitting in public seems to have become taboo (high time!) as has the practice of coughing without

temperature and was not down with a fever after all. The better half found this quite puzzling, since (Wo)MMM was rather warm to the touch. In fact, in a scene diametrically opposite that famous folk tale *The Princess and the Pea*, (Wo)MMM was lying on the bed with a series of blankets stacked on top of her, and was refusing to switch on the fan to boot. And so, the next twenty minutes went by in testing the thermometer. (Wo)MMM insisted on aiming it at her forehead, nose, right ear, left shoulder, right toe, left knee and so on and so forth. Astonishingly, the result was exactly the same every single time – not only was (Wo)MMM in perfect health, the thermometer declared, but she was also blessed with an incredibly even body temperature that a tray of freshly-baked cookies would be envious of. The optimistic thermometer was quickly ditched for another one, which confirmed that (Wo)MMM did indeed have a fever. (Wo)MMM was directed to sleep, which she gladly did.

That was all it took, really. (Wo)MMM was back to her normal self the next morning – the blankets were thrown off, the fans were switched back on and she found herself wanting to eat an apple. Much rejoicing ensued as the family spread the word that it was not the coronavirus but a simple flu. Life is back to normal. (Wo)MMM hopes she doesn't come down with another cold or cough anytime soon.

### Trending

The new year is upon us and with it, a flurry of new year resolutions, too. Like most, *The Woman from Madras Musings* also makes a checklist of goals for the new year. They're all typically quite ambitious in the beginning until reality sets in by March, and the grand checklist is culled to half its size. Come June, one begins to tell oneself that meeting one item on the checklist is a laudable feat. By the time September arrives, the joys of living in the moment feel more important than chasing goals. It is usually only in December that one's ambitions are kindled once again to make a list of new year's resolutions for the next year.

This year, however, (Wo)MMM has hit upon a clever way to break the cycle – she has made just a single, bite-sized new year's resolution and plans to stick to it. Here's wishing MM readers a very happy new year and may all your new year's resolutions come true!

–(Wo)MMM

### SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

closing one's mouth – at least, these instances don't seem as common as they used to be, in (Wo)MMM's observation. In these pandemic days, these are rightfully looked upon more severely as a public hazard.

*The Woman from Madras Musings* fervently hopes that we don't let go of the good things we've learned from the pandemic. Work-from-home luxuries apart, it's well worth holding onto good habits like hygiene and public discipline. Here's looking forward to a brighter, better 2021!

### Flu Blues

Last week, *The Woman from Madras Musings* found herself down with a low-grade fever. Under normal circumstances, this would have called for sleep and a jaunt to the doctor if things didn't get better. With corona in the air, however, it set off panic alarms at home.

(Wo)MMM was firmly put to bed while a family meeting was convened. As it happened, (Wo)MMM had just tested negative for the coronavirus in recent times, which made it highly unlikely that the fever was a symptom of covid. The family nevertheless swiftly put together a corona plan of action, identifying a room for (Wo)MMM to be quarantined in and all the accompanying logistics, too. Presently, the better half surfaced by the bedside carrying a non-contact digital thermometer.

The thermometer declared that (Wo)MMM had normal

# OUR READERS WRITE



## Understanding Bharati

The article by K.R.A. Narasiah on *Understanding Bharati – differing perceptions* (MM, Dec.1st, 2020) makes interesting reading. It is well-researched and well presented.

Bharati was recognised by the discriminating few during his lifetime. It was only after his premature death that his rep-

utation developed. Even *The Hindu* of 13 Sept 1921 (The day after Bharati's demise), in its editorial mentioned him as "An ardent nationalist, a great thinker, a shining speaker and a powerful writer" without touching on his poetic genius and his creative energy.

**R. Soundararajan**  
1/46, Sivasakti nagar  
South Palpannaichery  
Nagapattinam 611 103

## A confident approach during uncertain times

My family and I wanted to send some gifts to my aunt in the US for a very special occasion. This was the first time I was sending a parcel to another country. I asked around and a very reliable person in office wrote me a number as the 'abroad' packer and the name of the person and company.

I called and the voice at the other end was eager and enthusiastic. I asked him if I needed to come to his office. He said he would come home. The next day he arrived on a two-wheeler and had come prepared with a digital spring balance, packing material and sealing machine. He was probably in his mid forties.

I asked him his name and the company he worked for. "Sivaraman", he stated. He surveyed the stuff that was to be sent and started carefully packing the textile materials ensuring that it was creaseless. The other sundry items were also packed and skillfully arranged. He shared his knowledge about the international courier services people who could be quite unconcerned when they rummaged through the carton for security and x-ray scans.

"Anything else Madam", he asked. "You can even send pickles and I can assure you that not a single drop of oil will spill over". He was well versed in the subtle cultural home-made foodstuffs carried in these parcels. "You can even send some sweets". He said adding some lines on how parcels send emotions. "They will be happy".

"You are coming from this company right?" I asked him. There was this niggling doubt at the back of my mind which I needed to clarify. He looked at me "Madam please believe me, I will ensure that it will be sent today". He said. "I do not work in that company anymore. I was asked to leave in April. I looked around for another job but we are in a very tough situation. Finally with the help of a very special person, my guru, who guided me through these troubled times, I applied for an agent's license in July and I am now operating on my own." He pulled out his phone and opened whatsapp. "These are my clients. Yesterday I handled 9 parcels, including medicines. Today I have six requests," he emphasised.

He had finished the packing. "I will need your Aadhar number." He offered to get a photocopy of my Aadhar card. I gave it to him and he returned, writing the label addresses in neat handwriting, following certain procedures.

He had finished his work. Before leaving he sought for more business. "Please let me know for any contacts Madam," he stated. "I hope to open my office somewhere soon and who knows I may even employ two or three people," he shared his professional dreams of a not too distant future. "Next time I will definitely give you my card Madam," he told. I wished him well and was moved by his spirited will to work on his own during these uncertain Covid times.

– Latha Ramaseshan

## The man behind the sachet revolution in India

(Continued from page 2)



Chik products in sachets and containers. Courtesy: The Hindu Business Line.

the family house, his sons Rajkumar and Ashok Kumar, a doctor and lawyer respectively, resigned their jobs and took over the business even though they had no prior knowledge of the domain. They introduced Velvette Shampoo in a sachet pack which they sold at Rs. 2 a sachet. The credit for making Velvette Shampoo a famous brand must go to Dr. Rajkumar. As the business started picking up, he took help from Godrej Soaps to reach markets not only in India but also abroad.

While it was Dr. Rajkumar who made his father's dream come true initially, today it is Chinni Krishnan's younger son C.K. Ranganathan, the Chairman and Managing Director of CavinKare, who has shown the world that it is possible to beat the multinationals

even in the most difficult market of fast moving consumer goods. Though he was not academically well qualified like his brothers, the entrepreneurial spirit which he inherited from his father made him break away from the family business very early because of a difference he had with his brothers over how the business should be run. He started his own company Beauty Products and started selling the now famous Chik Shampoo at Rs. 1/- a sachet. It was directly in competition with Velvette shampoo. Interestingly, the name 'Chik' was coined using letters from his father's name Chinni Krishnan.

He was to take the brand Chik to great heights using interesting promotional ideas aimed at rural markets. Within a couple of years, Chik overtook Velvette and became the top shampoo brand in South India. The success of Chik motivated Ranganathan to diversify into other fields like dairy, personal and professional care, food, snacks and beverages with brand names like Chik, Nyle, Karthika and Cavin, all marketed under CavinKare, the new name of



C.K. Raj Kumar, the man who pioneered the concept of sachets in India.

his company. With a turnover nearing Rs. 1,500 crores, the Chennai-based CavinKare is today one of the leading players in the FMCG segment in India. Chinni Krishnan would have been proud of his youngest son's achievements.

The inspiring story of Ranganathan & CavinKare is well known and Ranganathan has won many industry awards. But his father, the original innovator of the sachet, was never recognised for his revolutionary concept until recently, when at the Disruptors Tamil Nadu 2018 event hosted by YourStory.com he was posthumously conferred with The Legend of Disruption Award. The award was received by his four sons at a glittering function in Chennai.

The award was a long overdue recognition for a man whose invention not only revolutionised rural marketing but has penetrated even urban markets such that every conceivable product, is now available in sachet packs. Like Karsanbhai Patel of the Nirma detergent fame, Chinni Krishnan was a pioneer who proved that anyone, irrespective of his economic status or background, can come up with new ideas which can disrupt the market place.

## Another hazy year ends for heritage

(Continued from page 1)

façade to completely hide the graceful outline of the art deco Forensic Department. Why this was done beats all logic but had there been an active heritage committee in place, this would not have happened.

The record when it comes to private buildings is even worse. Many have just vanished, the order preventing their demolition being circumvented by means, fair and foul. Binny's headquarters has gone, as has Gordon Woodroffe. The old D'Angeli's Building is mere rubble. Several smaller structures, that dotted the Mount Road skyline and delighted the eye have also vanished, their absence being noticed by just a few. Several more will slip through the cracks.

It is not as though there are no laws in place. The State has a Heritage Act. It also has a Heritage Conservation

Committee though as to what it does and how often it meets are all matters of conjecture. Certainly, there are no records of its proceedings in the public domain. The Indian National Trust for Arts and Cultural Heritage has been dormant on the heritage activism front ever since that rather disastrous litigation concerning P Orr & Sons, when your editor was the Convenor. With nobody questioning the Government on matters concerning conservation, arbitrary rules and regulations and contravening decisions are the order of the day. Perhaps it is time for INTACH to approach the Court requesting from the Government a report on what has been the action taken since the Justice Prabha Sridevan judgement in 2010 that mandated the restoration of heritage buildings in the city.

## Thank you, Donors

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

– The Editor

**Rs. 4900:** Thomas Philip

**Rs. 1000:** Deeptha Vivekanand

**Rs. 900:** Dr. K. Shanmugavelayutham, Snigdha

**Rs. 500:** V.K. Parthasarathy, V. Ramnarayan, Pala Palaniappan

**Rs. 400:** M.C.T. Pethachi, Shabbir Rangwala, Meena Koilpillai, Arunajatesan Ramamurthy

**Rs. 200:** A. Uthandaraman

**Rs. 100:** G. Sundaram, E. Umapathy, K. Ravichandran

# Memories of suburban theatres

## Saturdays were for Eros

The wedding was grand, and I was given a warm and pleasing reception by the parents of both the bride and the groom. Santha Sundara Mahal, the marriage hall, was spacious, well-decorated and could accommodate more than 800 guests. The food was exquisite and the *aval payasam* lavishly sprinkled with fried cashews was heavenly. But I felt a twinge in the corner of my heart, a curiously melancholic feeling of *déjà vu*.

Today, if you turn left at the Ambika Department Store signal and proceed south, you will hit a series of establishments that include Nilgiris, Wang's Kitchen, GKB Opticians and so on. Circa 1970, however, there was no road here! It was a muddy stretch that lazily joined a sleepy Guindy road with its thin traffic. It was through this muddy road that we walked every day to our school in Gandhi Nagar. It took just a little rain to fill the stretch with knee-deep water, in which case we would be compelled to take a roundabout route through the Kasturba Nagar Second Cross street – easily an additional 250 meters of walk.

At the Ambika Department Store junction used to stand two short squat pillars in memory of a Congress leader, looking for all the world like a poor man's Arc de Triomphe. It was on these pillars that you could get ready information about the movie running at Eros Theatre, plastered as they were with film posters. New posters would appear every Friday morning and my mother would remind me to take a look at them on my way to school. "Raghu, it's Friday. See what's running at Eros Theatre!" she would say, and I would happily undertake the task with warm expectations of a movie experience the next day. By evening, I would have duly conveyed the information and my mother would plan out the Saturday night programme.

"You please have your tiffin in office and come. Dinner is only *rasam* and *appalam*. We shall go to Eros," my mother would declare. My father would return from office by five and we would leave at six by foot. I remember a retired police constable who would sit behind the yellow painted counter to issue the upper-class ticket – it cost a princely one rupee and sixty-four paise! The front row seats were 48 paise and 64 paise,

and would be sparsely crowded. There would be just a handful of families in the seats costing Rs. 1.25. The theatre hardly had more than four or five families in the Rs. 1.64 class. The retired constable would finish the ticketing quickly and go out to close the main gate. It was only when *Mera Naam Joker* was screened in Eros that I saw a substantial crowd and believed, wrongly of course, that the crowd had come for the wonderful direction by Raj Kapoor!

Films at Eros always started with the T.M. Soundararajan song *Ullam Urukuthaiya*, played through a damaged gramophone record. The lights would suddenly go off in one magical moment and the song would meet with an abrupt end. The rotor motor sound would pierce one's ears and, with profound thanks to Thomas Alva Edison, a series of hand-written slides advertising a wide range of shops would appear on the screen. Poongodi Tailors, Venkataramana Sweets, Marutham Native Medicines, Srinivasa Technical Institute and Yuvaraj Siddha Clinic were some of the shops operating in Adyar in those days.

The interval was always looked forward to as my father would get me a no-longer crispy popcorn packet. One would hear animated sounds from the front benches, especially when local women and their children were in the audience – they were sounds of sheer happiness and excitement from recognizing friends and colleagues in the rows behind!

On one memorable Saturday, the retired constable at Eros refused to issue tickets for a screening of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* as there were only three families for the whole show!

I recall one Friday evening when I told my mother that there was an English movie to be screened at Eros that week. "Which movie?" she asked. "Pis-co!" I replied.

"What? Spell it," she demanded. "PSYCHO," I responded. "You idiot!" she replied. "It's pronounced 'saiko'. And we will not go see it because it is a horror film!"

Several years later, I watched *Psycho* at Casino and it in a matter of a few months I ended up watching all the glorious films by the master storyteller Alfred Hitchcock, who became such an icon to all of us that he was just one step short of being worshipped in our pooja!

I cannot forget the Tamil dubbed Telugu movie, *Pallava Selvangal*, which featured several leading Raos like Rama Rao and Kantha Rao. I did not understand why the theatre became half empty after the bathing scene by the heroine!

Another time, we were waiting for the gate at Eros to open when the retired constable caught hold of a small boy my age. He proceeded to beat him black and blue for trying to sneak into the theatre without a ticket. The sight of blood dripping from his battered mouth is an image that appears in my dreams even now!

I had several unforgettable experiences at Eros Theatre – walking back home completely drenched after seeing *Sharif Badmash*, witnessing an accident after returning from *Meendum Vaazhven*, watching *Deivam* nervously with my SSLC public exams due to begin the next day, walking out half way through *Ten Commandments* as my mother complained of chest pain, watching *Nandanar*

● Jayaraman Raghunathan recalls happy memories of the city's erstwhile suburban queens of theatres, Eros and Jayanthi.

on *Vaikunta Ekadasi* night, *Mouna Raagam*, the first film that I saw with my wife.... endless hours of sheer happiness!

Now, when I see Eros Theatre as the wedding venue Santha Sundara Mahal or when I see the place as a Mitsubishi Service workshop, something snaps inside me. It cannot be anything else – it has to be Eros Theatre where an adolescent boy derived innumerable hours of happiness. It simply cannot be anything else!

## Midnights at Jayanthi Theatre

It was one of those regular evenings in the early seventies when our group of friends was playing cricket. The sun was sinking in the west with its brassy rays and it was becoming difficult to see the cork ball. Anantharaman was the first to make the statement – "Two films shown in one ticket! Shall we go to Jayanthi theatre tonight?"

"Two films? Just one fare! What are the films?"

"*French Connection* and *Idhayakkani*!"



Jayanthi Theatre. Courtesy: Jayanthi Gopinath.



Jayanthi Theatre during its heydays. Courtesy: The Hindu.

We abandoned the game quickly and trundled to our respective houses for permission – night shows were a strict no-no for youngsters like us. It required specific marketing skills to obtain the family approval.

"What is this nasty habit of going to night shows? It's fine to go to matinee or evening shows but not night shows!"

"Who will wake up at two in the morning and open the door for you?"

"Tomorrow, you will be sleepy the whole day! No night shows!"

All the above googlies were batted deftly and we succeeded in getting the permission, not just on that day on but many such days!

The midnight return journeys from the theatre usually involved a long walk that was great fun. Once Kumar drowsily enquired as to why MGR fought with Gene Hackman – he had sleepily mixed up *French Connection* and *Idhayakkani*!

Another twin combo that we saw at Jayanthi was *Aradhana* and *Pattikkattu Raja*. As we walked along the Indira Nagar road deserted at that time of the night, a couple of us sang the hit songs from these films. Our

Hindi diction of the songs from *Aradhana* would have given S.D. Burman a heart attack should he have chanced to hear us!

Jayanthi theatre then was a thatched roof auditorium, pleasantly called Tent Kottagai! It had uniformly spread coconut and palm leaves woven neatly on top and dark blue bedsheets on all sides. The sheets would have suffered innumerable poking holes which would stream bright lights from outside, spoiling the beedi-smell permeated ambience inside. As MGR drew his heroine closer to his face, holding her chin and approaching her lips, the film roll would invariably snap and a string of bright yellow bulbs would light up the ceiling. When the operator reconnected the film and the action resumed on screen, a hundred and odd feet of film would have been skipped. Now the heroine would already be running around the trees and MGR would have commenced his throaty song. Audiences like us would be deeply disappointed not knowing what happened after MGR drew his heroine's face closer!

Our experience while watching *Apoorva Ragangal* at Jayanthi is another episode worth narrating. The show was crowded and after the four of us were

# When the native town was partitioned

The frequent disputes between the Left Hand and Right-Hand castes and their reconciliation presented the East India Company with its biggest challenge in the early days of their administration of the native town that had developed outside Fort St. George. This article recounts an interesting occasion from amongst the many colourful episodes of disputes, one that involved a major resettlement plan in the town.

According to Edgar Thurston in his seminal work *Castes and Tribes of South India*, the Left Hand (*idamkai*) and Right-Hand (*valankai*) castes were distinctions in society whose origins were not traceable, with no references being made to them in tradition or literature. The customs and privileges to which each laid claim however became the major source of contention on many occasions. These scuffles that arose as a consequence were not always trifling to be ignored and were a feature that according to the legendary historian H.D. Love dated to the time of the first President of Fort St George, Aaron Baker. As early as the 1650s, Sir William Langhorne, the Governor of Madras had made an attempt to resolve the conflicts by assigning separate portions of the town for the ceremonies of each caste and prohibiting them from carrying out incursions into the territories of the other. These orders however were not strictly enforced and soon there were streets which were occupied by members of both castes. Matters reached a head in 1707, when the disputes lasted for a full year.

It all began in June, when a large contingent of members of the Right-Hand caste descended upon a wedding procession held by members of the Left-Hand caste in their own street and attempted to disrupt the proceedings. They were repelled by the Peddanaick and his force. A change in the system of agency which had resulted in a more open system whereby merchants from both castes could participate had left the members of the Right-Hand caste, in a dominant position hitherto, seemingly disillusioned and had added to the simmering tensions between the two sections. The next day, the Governor of Madras, Thomas Pitt sentenced the ringleaders of the mob to prison. He then ordered that a delegation comprising members of the two castes (Narrain and Surappa representing the Right, Colloway and Vincatty representing the Left), the Paymaster and the Gunner of Fort St. George undertake a survey of the town and clearly demarcate the areas belonging to both the respective castes. The committee met several times and a short time thereafter reported two streets (the Bridge Gate and Chief Peon streets) which were predominantly occupied by the members of the Left-Hand castes should be reserved for their use and that stones be put up at the expense of the Right-Hand caste demarcating the limits.

This gave rise to a peculiar situation, as a few members of the Right-Hand caste were living in those streets now demarcated as belonging to the Left-Hand caste. The Council ordered that these people sell their homes

like Doggs, and tumble them down'. It also invoked the name of the Company and the King of England by way of a caution. At the bottom of the stones, a few pieces of skulls mixed with rice and 'other mixtures' denoting a 'sort of an enchantment' had been laid. This infuriated the Council, which ordered that notices be pasted on each stone and the gates of the English and the Native Town in all languages seeking information

seated, the next three seats were empty. Suddenly came three ladies – a mother and two young ones. Kumar sitting in the corner seat was lucky to have a young half-saree clad lass next to him. While all of us seethed in jealousy, Kumar, however, had another story to share after the movie. "Look at my luck! Throughout the movie, I had to be careful not to touch the girl by mistake and I could not focus on the film! Bloody waste of two rupees!"

When *Pathimaru Vayathinile*, the rage of those days, came to Jayanthi, we decided to go again even though we had watched the film in Midland Theatre.

and relocate to the streets meant for them and that these streets meant for the Left-Hand caste were to be particularly 'appropriated for them to pass in at their weddings and festivals'. Wary of further transgressions by both castes by feigning ignorance of the limits, the Council also ordered that the Paymaster put up 'four stones at the cost of the Left-Hand caste and insert thereon in English and Gentoos the purport of the order'. These orders were duly complied with.

Matters took an interesting turn when on the night of August 12, 1707, a mysterious group of persons placed papers written in the 'Malabar language' (Tamil) on the four stones. The translated version read that they (the stones) had been erected in 'contempt and derision of the Right-Hand cast, who will forfeit the Right of their Cast, if they do not destroy the others

● by  
Karthik Bhatt

like Doggs, and tumble them down'. It also invoked the name of the Company and the King of England by way of a caution. At the bottom of the stones, a few pieces of skulls mixed with rice and 'other mixtures' denoting a 'sort of an enchantment' had been laid. This infuriated the Council, which ordered that notices be pasted on each stone and the gates of the English and the Native Town in all languages seeking information

on the identity of the people behind this act and announcing a reward of a hundred pagodas to the informant. The heads of the Right-Hand Caste were sent for, who staunchly denied any involvement of their people in the matter. Interestingly, the Council suspected one of their own in the issue, for it recorded that 'from the Translate of the paper it is easily to be inferred that some Europeans have had a hand in it, there being expressions that these people are wholly strangers to'.

A few days later, further trouble erupted when a wedding procession of the Right-Hand caste wended its way through a street demarcated for the Left-Hand caste. The Governor immediately sent out a party of soldiers and arrested nineteen of them. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of August, a large delegation of the Right-Hand caste presented a petition to him, which set out their grievances in full. According to the petition, it was alleged that the streets demarcated for the Left-Hand caste in the present arrangement had originally belonged to the Right-Hand caste and that it was the French invasion of Santhome that had caused trouble, with a large number of immigrants from there building their houses freely within both the *pettahs* without the knowledge of the Government. It added that more than a hundred houses and 'several wells, churches, gardens and choultries' belonging to members of their caste existed within the streets in which the stones had been erected and prayed that justice be rendered to them in the matter. This petition was

My mother would chide me with those typical admonishing words – "Kadankara! Why can't you remove the damn tickets before putting the clothes for wash!"

Even though Eros Theatre was closer home, it would take a 100 years before a good movie would get released there. Being out of city limits, Jayanthi would often get much newer films and we would therefore make a beeline there at least once a month. More than watching the film, the planning that went into it, the long return walks from the theatre, loud reviews of the film, cheeky whispers about the good-looking girls we saw in the

theatre were all hours of pure fun worthy of nostalgia.

After a few years, the tent was demolished and, in its place emerged Jayanthi, the regular theatre. Our fun and frivolity of watching movies did continue for a few more years until we had to part ways in our race towards a worldly life!

These days, I am wary of meeting a stranger. I may have to ask him his whereabouts and he may say "You know where Jayanthi theatre was, I live in an apartment there!" I may instantly dislike him as if he were the one who ruined my pleasant and youthful memories of Jayanthi theatre!

followed by an exodus out of the Native Town of the members of the Right-Hand caste to Santhome.

The presenting of the petition was preceded by a speech by William Fraser which afforded Thomas Pitt an opportunity to guess the identity of the person behind the seditious note on the stones. With the purport of his address almost similar in content and word to the petition that followed, Pitt's suspicion that Fraser had a role to play in the proceedings was more or less confirmed. When confronted, Fraser neither denied nor agreed to the charge and instead challenged Pitt to prove the allegations. This was deemed sufficient evidence of his complicity in the matter and Fraser was duly suspended.

On August 25, 1707 Pitt called for a meeting of twelve principal heads of each cast who were 'shut in a room to adjust matters now in dispute'. After detailed deliberations, they arrived at a solution which comprised several terms. Peddunaickpettah would entirely belong to the Right-Hand caste, while Muthialpettah would belong exclusively to the Left. A massive relocation exercise was agreed upon, as per which members of a caste living in streets belonging to the other caste would start relocating their residences on or before December 1, 1707 with a cut-off date of June 1, 1708 being agreed upon for the completion of the exercise. It was also agreed that no one in a *pettah* could sell his residence to any person outside of his own caste. Peace was thus brokered. That even after the declaration of truce, the deserters to Santhome declared that they would not return until Fraser was reinstated identified the culprit beyond doubt.

The Council recorded on January 15, 1708 that the heads of the castes had after 'having been some days in Pagoda' settled all differences between them and had put them in writing and signed. The agreement involved the interchange of upward of 500 houses between the two parties.

Charges were framed against Fraser in November for abetting the rebellion and for his involvement in the matter. The Company however seems to have forgiven his role in the matter, as he would go on to be appointed Acting Governor of Fort St. George in 1709!

## Quizzin' with Ram'nan

Quizmaster V.V. Ramanan's first 10 questions are on current affairs and next on the month of January.

1. What is 'Variant of Concern 202012/01'?

2. In a rare instance, which famous European Capital city was fined 90,000 euros for breaking a law 'aimed at correcting gender imbalances in government service'?

3. Best-selling author born David John Moore Cornwell, known for his cold war spy thrillers, passed away recently. Under what name did he write?

4. Which 'Royal' couple has launched an audio production company called 'Archewell Audio'?

5. India recently achieved the dubious distinction of recording its lowest Test score (36) at Adelaide. What was its previous lowest total and against whom?

6. What was the 'Great Conjunction' that was seen in the night sky on December 21/22?

7. 'DakPay' was launched recently. What is it?

8. Tso Kar Wetland Complex in Ladakh has become India's 42nd Ramsar site, making our country the one with the most such sites in Asia. What are Ramsar sites?

9. Name the military award of the United States bestowed recently on PM Modi for his steadfast leadership and vision for India's emergence as a global power.

10. According to a status report released recently by the Union Ministry of Environment, the population of which vulnerable carnivore has increased by 60% since 2014 to 12,852?

\*\*\*

11. What is special about the appearance of Janus after whom the month is named?

12. January, which replaced March as the first month of the Roman year no later than 153 BCE, initially had 30 days. Which famous king added the extra day?

13. Name the two zodiac signs that feature in the first month of the Gregorian calendar?

14. Which date in the month is traditionally observed as the day when the Magi visited the infant Jesus?

15. Whose birthday on January 12 is celebrated in India as National Youth Day?

16. Why was January 26 chosen as Republic Day?

17. One for Shakespeare lovers. Name the only two plays that mention the month.

18. Except for leap years, January always begins on the same day as which other month?

19. Legendary cricketer Kapil Dev, music maestro A.R. Rahman, and fabled detective (according to experts) Sherlock Holmes share their birthday on which date of the month?

20. Simple one to round it off. Who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi on January 30, 1948?

(Answers on page 8)

# Inscriptions on a temple's walls bring alive another age

If walls could talk, the ancient temple at Thiruvotriyur in Chennai would have many a tale to tell – of kings and dancing girls, of a village and taxation, agriculture and trade. **Meenakshi Devaraj** provides fascinating glimpses into the past, that the inscriptions on the walls of the Thiruvotriyur temple provide. These epigraphs are treasures that must be preserved and the wealth of information contained in them should be documented and made available to more people, she says.

The congested Thiruvotriyur area in North Chennai is dominated by the Thyagarajaswamy Temple, known locally as the Vadivudaiaman (Goddess) Temple. It was once a magnificent centre of Saivism, and praises to Lord Adhipureeswara, the deity in the temple complex, probably dating back much before the 7th Century, were sung by Saivite poets Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar.

The 12th Century literary work, *Periyapuranam*, refers to Lord Adhipureeswarar as Ezhuthariyum Peruman (God who helps in the learning of letters). There were numerous *mattas* (monasteries) and *mandapams* (pillared halls) in and around the temple premises, testifying to its importance. The Vyakaranadana Mandapam was a renowned centre of learning.

The Adhipureeswarar Temple was once famed throughout the region and it attracted visitors and gifts from all parts of the land, including Kashmir. The details of such visitors and donations are recorded not in any ledger or literary work, but on the stone walls of the temple itself. Many of the epigraphs talk about the various services performed in the temple, starting from *thirupalliyezhuchi* (waking up the Lord).

Details of festivals are also documented elaborately. *Devaradiyars*, the dancing girls who devoted themselves to the deities, played a pivotal role in keeping alive the tradition of music and dance in Thiruvotriyur. The temple inscriptions document this in much detail. Here are a few examples:

In the 13th Century, Raja Raja Chola III, impressed with the performance of a *Devaradiyar* named Urvikna Thalaikoli, ordered the renaming of a piece of land in Manali after her, according to one epigraph. Thalaikoli was a title bestowed on a dancer during the early Chola period, according to the

Tamil epic, *Silappathikaram*. The inscriptions on the Thiruvotriyur Temple tell us the surprising fact that the title, Thalaikoli, was used even in the 13th Century.

Epigraphs record not only gifts given to *Devaradiyars*, but also details of the gifts the *Devaradiyars* made to the temple. An 11th Century inscription carries important information on the celebration of the Harvest Festival, Puthuyeedu, in Thiruvotriyur during the reign of Rajendra Chola I. A dancing girl named *Nakan Kodai*, says one inscription, gifted gold to the temple for a special food offering during the festival. Other inscriptions speak of *devaradiyars* who had the privilege of waving fly-whisks before the deity. They were called *kavari pimmakkal* (fly-whisk girls).

Recital of *Thiruvempavai* during the Tamil month of Margazhi is a common practice today. It dates back to the Chola period, as shown by one of the inscriptions, which says the king ordered the recital of *Thiruvempavai* during Margazhi in Thiruvotriyur. The king had also ordered appointment of more *devaradiyars* to recite *devaram* (devotional poetry). Gifts for the dancing girls and their *nattuvanars* (dance masters) are all documented on the walls. This makes it clear that *devaradiyars* were given the privilege of reciting *devaram* in temples during the Chola period.

The fascinating records are not limited to the dancers, but extend to dance forms as well. One 14th Century Vijayanagar inscription details a dispute between two sections of *devaradiyars* in Thiruvotriyur. It refers to many dance forms. Some of them are mentioned also in early Tamil Literature. For instance, the *Chokkam* dance is mentioned in *Silappathikaram*. *Kunippam* is referred to in various Tamil literary works like *Kalingathubharani*, *Kambaramayanam*, *Kalladam*, *Madurai Sockkanathar Ula*, etc. It is used in the same way as *koothu*, the Tamil term for dance in early literary works.

The 10th Century Tamil dictionary *Pingala Nigandu* also explains *Kunippam* as dance. *Varikoothu* is another dance mentioned in this epigraph which also finds a place in *Silappathikaram*. *Malaippu*, which the inscriptions say was performed by the *devaradiyars*, is mentioned in *Pingala Nigandu*. It is fascinating to note that the dances mentioned



Imposing facade: Entrance to the Thiruvotriyur Temple.

in fourth century epigraphs were practiced even in the 14th Century in Thiruvotriyur. Unfortunately, they are no longer performed.

*Thirumezhuku* and *thiruzhagu* are duties related to cleaning and decorating the temple premises. From the inscriptions, we learn that these services were performed by the *devaradiyars* in Thiruvotriyur. Temples were not just religious institutions in the early days, they were centres of administration. The walls of the Thiruvotriyur Adhipureeswarar Temple have hundreds of detailed inscriptions that speak of the rich social,

economic and cultural history of the place.

The temple's *sthala puranam* (history) found in the 12th Century *Periyapuranam* says that Thiruvotriyur was exempted from tax because of the acts of Lord Siva. Interestingly, an epigraph dating back to the 14th Century refers to Thiruvotriyur as a *ningal* village, meaning a village exempt from tax. Many inscriptions dating from the Pallava period talk about the village assemblies and committees which took care of various administrative activities, including those relating to the temple.

(Continued on page 7)

## 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

# 50 years and still promoting arts – Brahma Gana Sabha

The Brahma Gana Sabha (BGS) has been promoting classical arts, theatre and also encourages young performers to showcase their talents. Founded by like-minded friends, some of whom were also the original committee members of Narada Gana Sabha, BGS was established in 1969 and turned fifty in 2019. The sabha was inaugurated on 14 April 1969 by Justice K.S. Venkataraman, followed by a vocal concert by Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer. It was launched with Chitra Narayanaswamy as President, N. Sethuraman and M.S. Muthu as Secretaries and M. Krishnamurthy as Treasurer along with Vice-presidents M.V. Murugappan, Moolangudi Jayaraman, Nalli Rangaswami Chetti, Meenakshi Subramaniam, Sudharani Raghupathy, A.L. Lakshmanan and a few others like R.K. Tagat, Pattabhiraman, Kothandaraman, Viswanathan, Kasi Viswanathan and General Stores Sundaram. BGS initially hosted its programmes at the Children's Club and P.S. High School in Mylapore. Later, it made an arrangement with the Music Academy whereby it conducted its monthly programmes there at a subsidised rent, and in return, agreed to redesign the Academy's stage suitably for dramas and other big shows. Secretary, M.S. Muthu was instrumental in redesigning the Music Academy's stage under the guidance and supervision of veteran actor and dramatist, R.S. Manohar.

In the initial years, Brahma Gana Sabha had 1,300 members which soon grew to 1,600, as a result of which the organisation split the membership into two groups; each programme was conducted twice for two sets of members on two consecutive days. The sabha celebrated its 15-year milestone in 1984 by organising a 15-day programme which was inaugurated by the

then Governor of Tamil Nadu, S.L. Khurana.

After the demise of M.S. Muthu in 1989, Sethuraman and Pattabhiraman took over as secretaries. In 1995 after Sethuraman's demise, his son S. Ravichandran (Ravi), who was earlier a committee member, took charge as secretary along with Pattabhiraman. Due to the advent of other entertainment choices like television and the internet, the membership slowly came down to about 500. In subsequent years, the membership fell drastically, making it difficult for the sabha to survive. In 1998, noted industrialist and art patron, Nalli Kuppaswami Chetti, became the president of Brahma Gana Sabha since when he continues to head the governing body.

Between 2001 and 2003, Sankar, son of Pattabhiraman, also became one of the secretaries, after which N. Balasubramaniam joined Ravi as secretary.

● by  
V. Karpagalakshmi

All leading musicians, dancers and drama troupes have performed for Brahma Gana Sabha. It has organised several unique programmes like the duet kutcheri of Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata and his disciple K.J. Yesudas which was indeed a highlight.

The sabha has also hosted several Hindustani classical concerts by eminent musicians like sitar maestro Ravi Shankar with Alla Rakha, Parveen Sultana among others. Apart from classical programmes, BGS has presented several light music events such as Kishore Kumar Nite, Hemant Kumar Nite, and Usha Uthup's con-

cert, which were held at the University Centenary Auditorium.

Brahma Gana Sabha received the 'Best Sabha Award' from Mylapore Academy in 1994 and again in 2001. The Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram recognised Brahma Gana Sabha as the 'Best Cultural Organisation' in 1995.

To increase their visibility and improve membership, Brahma Gana Sabha decided to host the December music season in 2002 as suggested by their president Nalli Kuppaswami Chetti. The first year they held a festival for ten days at the



The Governor of Tamil Nadu, Banwarilal Purohit presenting awards to the artists during one of BGS' Art Festivals.

Sivagami Pethachi Auditorium, Luz Church Road, Mylapore, and from the following year, it became the norm for BGS to launch the season at the same venue on 3 December every year and conduct the festival for 30 days. Later, the sabha added a dance series and the number of days increased to 45, which has further swelled

with the inclusion of the nagaswaram festival. For a few years, BGS even held its December season concerts at three venues – namely Pethachi, Arkay Convention Centre and P.S. High School. However, in December 2019 it was decided to restrict it to the first two venues as it had become difficult to manage.

The secretaries confess that



A concert during the Nagaswaram-Tavil series.

it is because of the munificence of Nalli Chettiar that they are able to conduct the season, as sponsorship in general, has come down significantly.

Over the years, BGS has added to the list of titles conferred by it, which presently includes the titles of Ganapadmam, Natyapadmam, Natakapadmam and Vadyapadmam awarded to eminent artists during its December-January music and dance festival.

Talented, young nagaswara and tavil artists are also encouraged during the sabha's Nagaswaram-Tavil series which takes place soon after the December season. BGS conducted a competition last year which had 130 entrants, and the winners were given a chance to play during the series. There has been a reasonably good response to this from the rasikas.

The dance festival has three different slots – for juniors, seniors and for gurus who run their own schools. BGS has also been inviting dancers from north India to perform at their festivals in collaboration with the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi, though at times the expenditure on hospitality for some of the popular dancers becomes unaffordable, even if many of them are cooperative.

At times, BGS ties up with other organisations who feature the same artists, and the expenditure is shared. There are many aspirants these days in the various dance genres and the sabha gets a considerable number of applications from within India and abroad, including for their Adi festival.

While the sabha generally follows a rotation system to feature artists, it is not strictly followed as they believe in encouraging and promoting young talent. With the dwindling au-

dience response for instrumental concerts, the sabha has been forced to cut down on them, though they do get applications from instrumentalists even from outside Chennai.

Brahma Gana Sabha's golden jubilee celebrations were launched by Vice President of India, Venkaiah Naidu, on December 3, 2018 during the music and dance season in Chennai. The golden jubilee celebrations culminated in 2019 – Courtesy: Sruti.

## Inscriptions on temple's wall

(Continued from page 6)

Special officers were appointed to conduct periodic enquiries. Though they may have been geographically far away, the kings of these dynasties kept an eye on the welfare of the people. They ordered the cultivation of wastelands, for instance. An inscription of Kulottunga I provides important information about the irrigation methods practiced by agriculturists of Thiruvotriyur in that period. There are also epigraphs on salt pans and oil traders. Many inscriptions about merchants tell us that Thiruvotriyur was once an important trading centre.

The inscriptions are not limited to life in Thiruvotriyur either. They also talk about other places, including Chennai. For example, one epigraph tells us the original name of what is known as the Chetput area in Chennai was Serrupeddu (meaning 'special place' in Tamil) – Courtesy: Vidura, journal of the Press Institute of India, July-September 2020.

(The writer, a software engineer, is interested in history and Tamil culture and has researched on Tamil Sangam Literature, Chennai history and temples. She runs a YouTube channel in her name, focused on Tamil Literature.)



At the Golden Jubilee year celebrations – M. Venkiah Naidu, Vice President of India, honouring Malavika Sarukkai as Nalli Kuppaswami Chetti (President), S. Ravichandran and N. Balasubramaniam (Secretaries) and other dignitaries look on.

# Pongal matches – only a memory

One of the casualties of the packed international cricket calendar is tradition. In the past come what may Test matches in England started only on Thursdays and Tests in Australia would only commence from Friday. In India Calcutta (now Kolkata) would host the Test spread over the New Year period while Madras (now Chennai) would host the Test over the Pongal holidays.

With so many countries now playing international cricket and so many formats of the game around it is next to impossible to follow the old traditions. The Pongal Test match at Chepauk or for nearly ten years (from 1956 to 1965) at the Nehru stadium in Park Town is a thing of the past. If it is any comfort for those who believe that tradition should be strictly followed, Tests in England now start on any day of the week and the same goes for matches staged in Australia. About the only tradition still followed is the Melbourne Test starting on Boxing Day (Dec 26).

The Pongal Test in the city was more than just a match between two international sides. In keeping with the harvest season it had a festive atmosphere around it. The weather in January is generally pleasant and there was almost always a capacity crowd that enjoyed the fare. The Madras crowd is generally acknowledged to be the most knowledgeable and sporting in the country and its impeccable behavior and the faultless conduct of the match-

es by the Tamil Nadu Cricket Association somehow seem to have inspired the players to bring off their best. Indeed the venue has been the scene of several record breaking feats and memorable matches, the most unforgettable obviously being Tied Test II played in September 1986.

The Pongal Test tradition actually has its genesis with the Madras Presidency match between the Indians and the Europeans that started in 1916. The first game was actually to have been played in 1908 but

● by  
**Partab Ramchand**

was abandoned owing to rain. Apart from a break in 1934 the popular annual fixture was played every year till 1952. Out of 30 matches played, the Indians won 14, the Europeans eight and the remaining ended in a draw. It was played in the third week of January every year and was known as the Pongal match. Many great players including C.K. Nayudu, C. Ramaswami, M.J. Gopalan, A.G. Ram Singh, C.P. Johnstone, H.P. Ward and Ron Nailer regularly took part in the matches.

When Madras started hosting Tests the Pongal period was the obvious choice and from 1934 to 1988 with a few exceptions the match was held in January give or take a few days. Weather wise too it is the best time to host a Test in the south-

ern metropolis and at times when the matches have been held in November – December the monsoon has played havoc with the proceedings. One remembers how Cyclone Baaz ruined the India – Sri Lanka Test in 2005 when play did not start till midway through the fourth day while ten years before the India – New Zealand game held around the same time ended up

being one of the shortest Test matches ever played – its duration being restricted to a total of 71 overs over the five days. Indeed the very first Test in India to be seriously disrupted by the weather was the game against Pakistan in November 1952 when two full days of the scheduled four-day Test were rained off. By contrast Tests played in January have never been affected by wet weather.

But all that appears to be a thing of the past. The last Pongal Test match in the city was held in 1988 when debutant leg spinner Narendra Hiwari finished with a world record haul of 16 for 136 in bowling India to a 255-run victory over West Indies led by Vivian Richards. But vivid memories of the traditional Pongal Test match will always remain etched in the minds of cricket fans in the city.

## COVID & REAL ESTATE BUSINESS

(Continued from page 1)

income situation, credit score and loan repayment history. "It's becoming harder to get a loan, even though interest rates are favourable," points out Suresh. Additionally, while buyers have started to engage with the sector, investors remain shy. This isn't a covid-specific fallout, however - Suresh explains that the real estate rates have not seen much appreciation over the past three years. "Investors are safe operators - they prefer investing where there is appreciation. With prices remaining stagnant over the last three years, they were lukewarm towards the segment to begin with. We saw some investment before the pandemic, and now, of course, there is hardly any."

Construction costs have also gone up, a development that is fairly recent in the sector. "The industry is facing a

steep increase in material rates - steel rates have gone through the roof, as have copper and aluminium, for instance," says Suresh. This of course, drives up the cost for the end user, making it more complex for them to prove loan eligibility with an already reluctant financial sector. The silver lining, Suresh points

out, is that there is no dearth of manpower at the moment. "All the migrant workers who had returned to their homes in Bengal, Orissa or Bihar, came back by mid-September. Labour costs were briefly expensive when we had to temporarily tap into local labour, but they have stabilized now," he finishes.

## Answers to Quiz

1. It is the name given to the variant of COVID-19 virus that was recently discovered in the UK, 2. Paris after women were appointed to fill 11 of the 16 open top city jobs, 3. John le Carré, 4. Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, 5. 42 against England in 1974, 6. After 400 years, Jupiter and Saturn came closest to each other from Earth's point of view, 7. It is the Department of Posts and India Post Payments Bank's new digital payment app, 8. A Ramsar site is a wetland site designated to be of international importance, 9. Legion of Merit, 10. Leopards.

\*\*\*

11. He is two-faced, 12. Julius Caesar, 13. Capricorn and Aquarius, 14. January 6, 15. Swami Vivekananda, 16. It was on that date in 1929 that declaration of 'Purna Swaraj' was made, 17. 'Much Ado About Nothing' and 'Winter's Tale', 18. October, 19. January 6, 20. Nathuram Godse.

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



Amalgamations Group



ASHOK LEYLAND

Aapki Jeet. Hamari Jeet.

**Bata**

Bata India Limited



Brakes India Private Limited

**cenza**



CHATRATH TRUST

**FLSMIDTH**

F.L. Smidth Limited

THE HINDU

The Hindu Group of Publications



LOKAVANI

**MRF**



murugappa

**NIPPO**

**Rane**

Rane Group



RAYALA GROUP

**SAINT-GOBAIN**

The future of glass. Since 1665.



SANMAR



SUNDARAM FINANCE  
Enduring values. New age thinking.



Sundram Fasteners Limited

**TAJ**

Hotels Resorts and Palaces



TAKE  
Enabling Business Efficiencies



TATA CONSULTANCY SERVICES

**TVS**

TVS MOTOR COMPANY

**WILD GARDEN**  
Cafe at Amethyst

Since 1856,  
patently leaders

— A WELLWISHER