

INSIDE

● Short 'N' Snappy

● Dr. R. Krishnamurthy

● P.N. Kumar

● Plastic Pollution

MADRAS MUSINGS

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WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

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A wish list from Chennai to the new government

By the time this issue is in circulation, the results of the Tamil Nadu assembly elections will be out and a new government in place. It does not matter as to who wins as far as we are concerned. We only hope that the elected representatives do what is right when it comes to governance. We at *Madras Musings* are therefore sending this partial wish list on behalf of the city for their consideration –

Can we please have elections to the Greater Chennai Municipal Corporation? While it may all be fine for a city to be administered by bureaucrats, ours being the oldest modern civic body in India needs to have an elected council. Councillors are far more accountable to the public than faceless officials. We have got on without a council for

five years now which is a crying shame. And while holding the elections can we ensure that we abide by all safety protocols given that we are battling a pandemic of epic proportions?

Can we please come to grips with Covid? We are seeing state governments across the country being exposed for their pathetic handling of the

● by The Editor

situation. There are shortages of beds, ventilators and oxygen, apart from a huge stress being placed on medical personnel. Tamil Nadu and Chennai have not yet reached the high levels of infection that other states are reporting but chances are that the situation will spiral out of control. We need a proactive government that anticipates

shortages on one hand and on the other is firm about outlawing unnecessary political, religious and social gatherings. Harsh though this may sound, much of the present chaos on Covid is due to lax implementation of safety regulations and a sense of false security that we have conquered the virus. We need to fight against such hubris.

Can we not waste time on investigating all the previous government's actions? This point of course becomes valid only if a new party comes to power. But if it does, it would be far better off focusing on matters of governance than spending precious resources on how it can fix the opposition. In the past couple of days, we have seen all parties come

(Continued on page 2)

Planning open spaces for Covid-19

Tamil Nadu is seeing a steady increase in fresh coronavirus cases, with the number of active cases in the state touching 1,05,180 on April 25. Chennai reportedly accounts for 30 per cent of all active cases in the state, recording 31,535 cases. In fact, the city's covid positivity rate is said to be almost twice that of the state, making it a crucial battleground in the fight against the pandemic.

Tracing the surge to non-compliance of safety norms, the authorities re-introduced restrictive measures to keep the virus in check. The April 8 government order reads, "... the very reason for the increase in the number of positive cases is due non adherence COVID-19 appropriate behaviour [sic] viz., wearing of face masks in public places, maintaining social distancing,

following the Standard Operating Procedures etc., by the General Public."

The first set of restrictions introduced in early April were cautious – customer capacity at commercial and entertainment establishments such as provision stores, restaurants and theatres were capped at 50 per cent and public worship at religious centres was given a curfew of 8pm even as religious congregations were prohibited. As covid cases rose, an additional set of restrictions soon followed a couple of weeks later – night curfew is now enforced with movement prohibited between 10 pm-4 am, Sundays are designated as 'full lockdown' days and the public is forbidden from gathering at parks and beaches.

The closure of public open

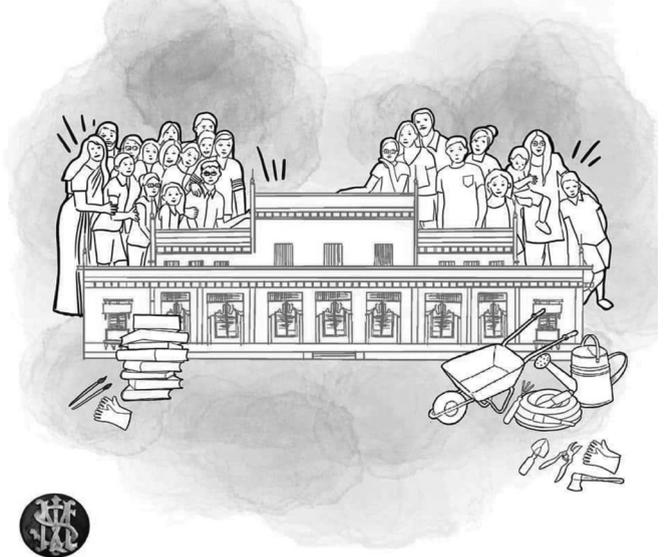
spaces is rather disappointing, especially given that they're safer than closed commercial spaces that continue to function with a cap on seating capacity. In fact, it is the closed environments that many studies have specifically identified as potential super-spreaders. Further, open spaces like parks and beaches enable citizens to breathe fresh air, exercise and refresh themselves – crucial activities that help people maintain good health and combat stress arising from quarantine, confinement and curfew norms. Readers may recall an earlier report in *Madras Musings* which carried similar concerns voiced by a school teacher, who worried that children may be deprived

(Continued on page 2)

HERITAGE WATCH

The Madras Literary Society steps into the e-age with #KnowMLSIn30Days

MLS Volunteers



How does a heritage institution modernise and become relevant to the times. That is a question that plagues most of our historic entities. In fact the inability to change with the times is most often the reason why many iconic institutions of the past vanish. In such a scenario, it is heartening to see the Madras Literary Society (MLS) showing us the way.

Any entity reflects the personalities of those that run it. In the case of the MLS it is lucky that it has youthful members even though it is by itself more than 200 years old. These young volunteers have embarked on social media campaigns to gather support for the MLS and the response has been encouraging.

"#knowmlsin30days campaign on social media, and as an email drive to members and well-wishers, is continuous," says Tripurasundari Sevel. "A series of posts has made netizens understand what MLS is and what it stands for. The communication is not just text, we combine it with art.

Years of support and patronage, members, well-wishers, staff and earlier committee members are represented through stories and letters. All the initiatives are volunteer driven. The full #knowmlsin30days campaign can be seen in our social media handles.

Those willing to support are encouraged to help – by renewing subscriptions even though they may not be able to access the books till the situation eases – with a donation..... no amount is too small.

MLS is a team effort and this social media campaign was our way of putting the MLS story out for others to know and also be part of the volunteer-led fundraiser and contribute.

The response has been very encouraging and those interested are welcome to follow the campaign on our social media pages. You can see us on Facebook at facebook.com/MadrasLiterarySociety and Instagram at instagram.com/mls_1812 respectively."

Wish list to the new government

(Continued from page 1)

together in a healthy precedent in order to allow the reopening of the Sterlite plant in Thoothukkudi for the manufacture of oxygen. Can this same mature consideration and thought prevail for the greater good?

Can we please have an industrial policy that looks not just at Chennai but at the state? While it is true that Tamil Nadu has its industries spread out quite well, the city has historically cornered much of it. If at all the pandemic has taught us something it is the necessity to decongest. Can we therefore focus on infrastructure building across the state so that IT and manufacturing industries spread out so that there is less of migration to the city?

Can we get going with Metro rail phase II? We understand that in these uncertain times it is difficult to see such mammoth projects through but the delays plaguing the Metro are more indicative of official lethargy. It is well known that the first phase currently in operation can never become

sustainable without its sequel which is much larger and has the potential to transform the city's image when it comes to commuting. Can the new government focus on this and get it done?

Can we act on the Heritage Act? Our state has one on paper and we rather naively believed that it would result in immediate action. Six years have passed since then. While talking and sporadically acting on heritage has since become politically fashionable, what we need is consistent policy and long-term planning. We at *Madras Musings* believe that the state is missing out on a huge amount of tourist income by not showcasing the city's heritage. We sincerely hope that our leaders will see our point of view.

There are plenty of other points that we would like to highlight – the question of rampant freebies is one but we are sure that fiscal prudence will come knocking some day or the other. In the meanwhile, may the elected representatives govern responsibly, and well.

Covid proofing open spaces

(Continued from page 1)

of the stimulation they need for healthy growth.

It must be mentioned that Chennai is not the only metro to shut down access to public spaces in this pandemic. Concerns over the lack of social distancing and masking practices presumably played a key role leading to the ban on parks and beaches. It is, of course, undeniable that this is a grave concern; widespread non-conformity to preventive guidelines is a big reason why the city is facing such a virulent second wave of covid-19. However, it is also true that lukewarm enforcement of anti-covid guidelines is to blame as well. In fact, the Madras High Court recently underscored the responsibility of the authorities in enforcing norms when it pulled up the Election Commission for its failure to maintain covid protocols during the recent elections. There is arguably a case for keeping public spaces open to the people while working towards better implementation of covid guidelines.

In fact, there is scope to go a step further and renovate open spaces to be 'covid-proof' – after all, our city isn't designed to facilitate physical distancing. Our sidewalks, where functional, are narrow; most parks have precious few benches and small ones at that; our beaches don't have enough toilets that are func-

tional and properly maintained to serve their visitors. Given this state of affairs, it is not entirely fair to put the responsibility of social distancing wholly on the shoulders of citizens. The problem of covid may not recede completely anytime soon, either – lockdowns and prohibitions are unsustainable in the long run. The need of the hour is sensitive city planning that designs and builds the necessary infrastructure that evokes covid preventive behaviour from the public. Let's take our city parks as an example. In addition to guideline enforcement patrols, steps can be taken to implement temporary caps on visitor capacity like the ones currently in force at closed commercial establishments. Walking or jogging trails can be designed and chalked out to help maximise distance and minimize interaction among visitors. Seats and benches can be earmarked to adhere to social distancing guidelines, like the protocols followed by public transport authorities. Surfaces which pose a risk of transmission, such as playground swings or gym equipment, can be cordoned off. Touch-proof sanitizer stations can help people implement hand hygiene.

Covid-proofing our public spaces would be a great smart city project that serves the interests of the public. Hopefully, the plan will find itself on the department's agenda soon.

Living with the Corona virus

Last year, *The Woman from Madras Musings* had been rather optimistic about 2021. Like many, she nursed hopes that we would leave the worst of the pandemic behind as we stepped into a new year, better informed and better equipped to fight the virus. However, it looks like the war against COVID-19 will rage on for the foreseeable future. We must learn to live with the coronavirus until the tide turns, and so, (Wo)MMM has made a useful list of lifestyle trends for our readers to follow.

1. Masks are in

Face masks are quite possibly the trend of the decade; you could be wearing exclusive, high-end fashion, but the ensemble will fall flat in the public eye if it's not accompanied by a face mask. It has to be a proper one, too – no hankie or saree pallu can actually replace a proper mask. There's little reason not to buy a good quality mask – they come in a rainbow of colours and patterns suited for every pocket, so you're sure to find ones that suit your aesthetic and budget. The kid down the street from (Wo)MMM has a supervillain face mask that she is frankly quite jealous of, even though she's a little too old to wear it herself.

It goes without saying that masks must be worn properly, of course, so that they cover the nose and mouth in entirety. Anything else looks plain weird – masks are simply not meant to cover your chin or dangle from one ear. They look much cooler when worn properly, to be honest – you wouldn't catch a ninja with a slipshod mask, would you? Remember, when it comes to masks, conformity is hip.

2. Social distancing is in vogue

Gone are the days when hugs and air kisses signalled sophistication. Today, the chic thing to do is to maintain a physical distance from others. In these touch-taboo times, the ways of our elders are making a comeback – for instance, a simple *namaskaram* serves to establish politeness quite effectively.

Further, it's considered rather gauche to be seen seated close to another in a public space, especially in a closed enclosure – it is generally recommended to maintain a two-arm distance. In fact, the best thing to do would be stay home and head outside only for essential work. We live in the digital age, after all – you know you're with the times if you log into Zoom to catch up with friends or watch a movie on Netflix.

3. Kindness and empathy are cool

Perhaps the hottest trend of all, being considerate to others is more important than ever right now. Your brand of kindness is all yours – you

can make it as simple or elaborate as you want, it will be stylish just the same. You can choose to forego watching a much-awaited movie in the theatre; check in on the elderly or vulnerable in your locality; or donate to a trusted NGO helping people who need support in these times. Every little bit helps.

Living with the coronavirus isn't easy. But tough times call for tough people, to paraphrase an old adage. (Wo)MMM has every faith that we can beat this scourge together.

Hitchcock's Birds, Chennai style

The Woman from Madras Musings was enjoying the morning coffee when the pater-in-law made an entrance with a spring in his step. It transpired that he had noticed a dog following a terrified pedestrian on our street and helped chase it away with a shout of warning. Good deed done for the day, the pater-in-law turned his attention to the newspaper, quite self-satisfied.

SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

The canine in question was actually a familiar dog on our streets. It had never gotten up to mischief as far as (Wo)MMM knew; this sinister stalking behaviour was rather uncharacteristic of the animal. The pater-in-law's theory is that public activity has reduced so much that our street dog is going behind anyone it sees in a desperate bid for company.

It got (Wo)MMM thinking – while she can't speak for other animals, she has noticed bolder behaviour from the city crows in recent times. It was just the other day, in fact, that (Wo)MMM found herself in the unwelcome company of a crow which had hopped onto the garden table seeking to share a plate of biscuits. (Wo)MMM had no intention of doing so, of course, but it held (Wo)MMM with a glittering eye with the head cocked to one side, completely unconcerned by all the frantic hand-waving and shouting. In the end, it took three biscuits to get it to leave (Wo)MMM in peace.

Truth be told, (Wo)MMM has always harboured a deep distrust of Chennai crows. While the aforementioned incident was the closest shave she's had with these bally birds, there have been enough instances in the past to justify the suspicion she views them with. The crows of Stella Maris College for example, were particularly infuriating as (Wo)MMM remembers them. They were not scared of the students at all, hatching multiple plots to sneak away lunches and snacks with alarming success. (Wo)MMM once saw a flying crow land upon a friend's head presumably to rest its wings before flying away to a branch. The whole thing was quite terrifying.

Once – and (Wo)MMM swears that this is a true incident, unbelievable as it may sound – a crow flew into (Wo)MMM's car as she was driving down the Marina beach road. (Wo)MMM had woken up early that day to take a drive with the nephew, so she had let down the windows to enjoy the cool morning breeze. God knows what possessed that blighted bird, but it flew in through the driver's seat without warning and – again, this is pure, unfiltered truth – sat in the back seat.

(Wo)MMM had just received her driver's license at that time. She was quite new to this whole business of driving a car and the crow in the backseat did nothing to boost her confidence. Gathering her courage, (Wo)MMM drove into a side street and calmly stopped the car before making a quick escape from the car along with the nephew. The crow was still visible in the backseat, likely expecting to move along again soon. It was gravely mistaken, of course. (Wo)MMM collared the first gentleman to come walking along, entreating him to remove the crow from her car. Though it took him a few minutes to comprehend the matter, the gentleman was admirably efficient; he strode to the car without a word of protest, opened the back door and removed the crow with the flair of a VIP releasing doves at the Olympics. (Wo)MMM and the nephew were scarred for a few weeks after the event though; it was impossible to see a crow even in the distance without flinching.

(Wo)MMM hopes the lockdowns and quarantines are not emboldening the city crows. They're fearsome beasts as it is and the last thing we need is a crow revolt on our hands.

Share Beware

The Woman from Madras Musings found it greatly amusing when last year, eager investors bought up shares of the wrong Zoom company, presumably wanting to cash in on the spiking demand for video conferencing software. Readers may remember that investors pushed up the stock price of the wrong company by about 1,800 per cent before the SEC stepped in to remove it from the stock market.

History repeats itself they say, but (Wo)MMM wasn't expecting it to happen so soon. With medical oxygen in short supply, investors are seeking to purchase stocks in companies that serve the demand. Consequently, they've been buying up the shares of a certain Bombay Oxygen, to augment their portfolio. The company's name belies its purpose however; it is a non-banking financial company and does not manufacture oxygen at all. That hasn't stopped its share price from rocketing by more than 250 per cent in recent times – now that's luck!

– (Wo)MMM

Voices of Chennai: Living through a pandemic

A vegetable a day keeps the doctor away: Vijaya

For most residents of Alwarpet, Vijaya is a familiar face. She's been selling vegetables in the locality for 25 years, covering Venus Colony, Ambujammal Street and Maharajah Surya Rao road in her daily rounds. "I took over the business from my mother when she began losing her eyesight," she says, proudly adding that she's worked hard to bring up her children, a son and a daughter. "My son has studied a computer science course and has a job, but he helps me out sometimes," she smiles.

The routine that she's followed for all these years hasn't changed much with the pandemic. She leaves home at 2.45am in the morning to board a mini truck that takes people to the Koyambedu market. She finishes purchasing the wholesale vegetables she needs by 5 a.m. and begins selling them in her locality on her cart, or tray cycle as she calls it, by 5.45 a.m.

Her routine earns her a daily income of roughly Rs. 500; sometimes, she barely breaks even. "Business was booming last year during the lockdown though," recalls Vijaya. "Some customers had switched to placing orders online, but most continued to buy from me since they trusted me and knew I brought quality stock. They would even call me on my phone to list the vegetables they needed and transfer the money directly to my bank account."

Concerned about rising cases, her son had sent her to her daughter's home in Tam-

baram last year in a bid to give her some rest from work. "I couldn't stay put for more than two months," laughs Vijaya. "I resumed work and even today, I take leave only on Sundays."

The shifting of the wholesale vegetable market from Koyambedu to Maduravoyal was harder for her. "It was so far off and the place was full of muddy, flooded ditches and crowded to boot," she shudders. "I'm glad we're back to Koyambedu. It's clean and well maintained now. The number of wholesale shops have reduced so it's less crowded than before. Our temperatures are checked everyday, we're reminded to wear masks and keep our hands clean. Even the transport vehicles are sanitized on a regular basis," she says.

When asked if she received

not particularly worried about the situation. As long as we're mindful of the preventive hygiene measures and have each other, we should be able to handle this," she finishes.

Still searching for a silver lining: Damodaran

One can usually find Damodaran a.k.a Damu at the auto stand opposite the Thiruvanniyur bus stop. He's hardly on the road these days though. "People are scared to come out and even if they do, they're reluctant to get into an auto," he says.

The latest government order has only made things harder. "We're not allowed to take more than two passengers in an auto. So when families with more than two people come by, they decide to take the bus

● by Varsha Venugopal

sufficient government assistance to tide her through the pandemic, she shakes her head. "I received a one-time payment of Rs. 2,000 allocated to my ration card, nothing beyond that," she shrugs. "I did get a lot of help from customers. They chipped in with cash or provisions like rice, lentils and oil to support me in times of need."

Vijaya has received both doses of the covid vaccinations at Agarwal Eye Hospital in Alwarpet. "My son took me. In fact, it was a customer who gave me the money to buy the doses," she says. "I am perfectly happy right now, I'm

instead. Why would any family take two autos when they can travel together?" he asks. He estimates that he is able to earn only 40 per cent of his regular income these days.

The increase in gas prices have crunched his profit margins further, too. "Last year, when the pandemic hit, gas prices were at Rs. 33.80. Today, it's shot up to Rs. 53.70," he points out. Damu also says that he hasn't really benefited from government help in these tough times. "Auto drivers haven't received any sort of cash assistance from any party as a matter of fact," he says. "All I got was the usual provisions that we receive through our ration cards."

When asked if he's considered tying up with apps like Ola or Uber, he shakes his head. "They're not doing great either," he shares. "Things are getting harder to manage, but I don't know any other business. I simply have to continue to do my best," he finishes.

Keep calm and carry on: Sindhu

Sindhu came to Chennai after completing her nursing course in Kerala. It's been 14 years since she started working here. But things have never been as hectic as they are today.

"Work has been demanding. The hours are longer and I have to take care of worried patients, too. They tend to read all sorts of things from various sources and work themselves into a panic," she explains.

The current strain on medical resources has only made things worse. "People begin to



Damu.

panic the minute they see a small dip in their oxygen levels. I have to calm them and educate them on self-monitoring protocols," she explains.

Sindhu typically reports to work at 8 a.m. and continues working until 6 p.m. on most days. "We have to suit up in PPE kits while treating patients. It's so hard to wear them - it gets incredibly hot and sweaty but we don't really have a choice," she says stoically. As I hear her words, it's hard not to think about people who complain about wearing masks - that hardly seems like a discomfort compared to Sindhu's daily ordeal.

In fact, Sindhu can't enter her home after finishing duty, given that she works in close quarters with patients all day.

She calls her son in advance on her way home so that he is prepared for her arrival. Luckily, her room is right next to the entrance so she takes a bath the minute she reaches and washes her clothes too, before joining her family.

"I have to be extra careful, it's true," she says. "But my work isn't an ordinary one. I see it as social service. The situation is hard and we must rise to the occasion." When asked if she had anything to add to the interview, Sindhu jumps in with a few pieces of advice. "Double masking is the need of the hour," she says. "Wear double masks, sanitize your hands regularly. If you find yourself tested positive, do not panic. Follow doctor's orders, eat well and remain calm," she finishes.



Vijaya, with her vegetable cart.

Thank you, Donors

We today, publish donations received with thanks for the period upto April 2021.

– The Editor

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Dr. R. Krishnamurthy – Journalist-turned-Numismatist

IN MEMORIAM

Remembering P.N. Kumar, the Murugan in Avvaiyar

Dr. R. Krishnamurthy – RK to his friends and admirers in India and abroad – Editor of the popular Tamil daily *Dinamalar*, passed away on March 4, 2021, at his residence at Besant Nagar. He was 88. Not many are aware that apart from being a journalist he was also an archaeologist, epigraphist and numismatist.

RK was born on January 13, 1933, at Vadiveswaram near Nagercoil that was then a part of the kingdom of Travancore. His father T.V. Ramasubba Iyer owned agricultural lands and salt pans in the area. Iyer was also a social worker who later founded the newspaper *Dinamalar* at Tiruvananthapuram.

RK had his early education at the Sethulakshmi English High School at Nagercoil and later, the Scott Christian College in the same town. Subsequently, he obtained his B.Sc. degree in Geology, with a First Class, as a student of the Alagappa College (now University), Karaikudi. He obtained his master's degree in the same subject, with a First Class-First Rank, from the Presidency College, Madras, in 1956. He wanted to pursue higher education in the United States but his father instructed him to join the family businesses.

In 1956, RK joined the *Dinamalar* and shifted its main office from Tiruvananthapuram to Tirunelveli. Soon, he was also in-charge of the newspaper's new edition brought out from Tiruchirappalli. In 1977, RK became the Editor of the newspaper and began to work full-time from Chennai.



RK speaking at World Tamil Conference, Coimbatore, 2010.

RK was elected the General Secretary of the All India Newspaper Editors' Conference in 1991. He occupied this post till 1996. As a member of the Print Media Group that accompanies the President and Prime Minister of India on official visits abroad, RK visited several countries such as Malaysia (1977, 1987), China (1988, 2001), U.S.A. (2002, 2005), Pakistan (2004), Iceland and Switzerland (2005) and Myanmar (formerly Burma) and Mauritius (2006).

After having established *Dinamalar* as a leading newspaper in this part of the country, RK began to seriously pursue his interests in art, archaeology and numismatics. His interest in Tamil language, grammar and literature gradually led him to the study of the ancient scripts, inscriptions and coins of southern India.

Around the year 1976, resisting opposition from several traditional Tamil scholars, RK boldly introduced a reformed or simplified form of the Tamil script in his newspaper *Dinamalar*. This avoided the use of cumbersome loops for certain letters. It eventually came to be called the 'Pariyari Script' as it was first advocated by Pariyari E.V. Ramasamy, the great social reformer and leader. In due course, several other Tamil newspapers and magazines adopted it. In 1979, the Government of Tamil Nadu adopted it for use in some of the school textbooks.

RK's interest in Tamil script led him to research the origin of the Tamil language. Thus, he studied Vattezhuthu in which the Tamil language was written a few centuries ago. He authored three major books on his findings. Subsequently, he studied Tamil Brahmi script – in which Tamil was written around two thousand years ago.

RK discovered, studied and published several coins minted by the Chera, Chola and Pandya kingdoms of the Sangam Age (around 300 B.C to 300 A.D.). Some of these displayed interesting legends or inscriptions in the Tamil language and Tamil Brahmi script. For example, a coin of the Pandya kingdom bore the legend *Peruvazhuthi*, the surname or last name of several Pandya kings. Similarly, a coin of the Chera kingdom exhibited the legend *Makkotai*, the name of a Chera king. RK also discovered and studied the coins of the Malaiyan chiefdom of the Sangam Age. These Malaiyan kings ruled

from Tirukoilur or Kovalur in northern Tamil Nadu as their capital. His researches on the coins of the Sangam Age kings led to several monographs and catalogues in Tamil and a comprehensive book titled *Sangam Age Tamil Coins* in English. The latter book was first published in 1997 and a second edition was released in 2003. This is the sole publication on this subject in English and is rightly regarded as his *magnum opus*. Prior to these publications by RK, historians and archaeologists were totally unaware that these Sangam Age kingdoms had a flourishing coin-based economy and trade.

RK had an enviable personal collection of old coins including coins of the famed Pallava dynasty that ruled from around 300 A.D. to 800 A.D., with Kanchipuram or Kanchi in northern Tamil Nadu as the capital. Based on the Pallava coins in his collection and those in the museums in London, Colombo and New Delhi, RK authored the book *The Pallava Coins* in 2004. Profusely

● by
Suresh Sethuraman*

illustrated, this volume is again the only comprehensive publication in English on this subject.

Besides studying the coins of the various local dynasties, RK studied and published monographs on the ancient Greek and Roman coins found in Tamil Nadu, mainly in and around the historic town of Karur. He also studied and published certain interesting and rare Chinese coins discovered in Tamil Nadu. These had obviously reached Tamil Nadu during the course of trade centuries ago and impacted the local economy and art. Indeed, some of the Sangam Age Tamil kings produced coins modeled on the Roman coins.

RK was closely associated with the Numismatic Society of India, headquartered in Varanasi, India's oldest academic organisation devoted to the study of the coins. Many of RK's research findings on ancient coins have appeared in the Society's journal.

With a view to promote and encourage research on the coins of southern India, mainly Tamil Nadu, RK established the Tamil Nadu Numismatic Society in Chennai in 1986. Around 1991, he, along with a few other senior scholars, founded the South



RK receiving Tholkappiar Award from Dr. Pranab Mukherjee.

Indian Numismatic Society. It has now emerged as a major academic organisation in our part of the country and is particularly known for its journal *Studies in South Indian Coins*, published annually. Several of RK's research papers have been published in this journal.

RK's path-breaking studies and discoveries earned him several coveted awards and honours in India and abroad. On invitation, he delivered lectures and presented his research findings at several international conferences, mainly in Europe. In 1996, he presided over the Annual Conference of the Numismatic Society of India held at Pune in Maharashtra. The same Society also awarded him the C.H. Bidulph and T. Desakachari medals. In 1998, he was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Numismatic Society in London. A year later, he presided over the Annual Conference of the South Indian Numismatic Society held at Kanyakumari. In 2004, the Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Science (*Honoris Causa*). In 2015, RK received the prestigious Tholkappiar Award from Dr. Pranab Mukherjee, the then President of India.

As a journalist and a scholar,

RK had a personal library of over 5,000 books and periodicals in English and Tamil. Most of these publications were on Tamil language and literature, History, Archaeology, Numismatics, Paleography and Epigraphy.

Not many are aware that RK was a philanthropist who supported genuine academic research and heritage-related activities. He has funded several academic conferences, workshops and publications, mainly related to numismatics. He instituted a medal, named after P.L. Gupta, the renowned numismatics scholar, to be awarded by the South Indian Numismatic Society to distinguished scholars working in the field of numismatics. Whenever foreign scholars visited Tamil Nadu, he arranged to receive them at the Chennai International Airport and made all arrangements for their stay and visits to archaeological sites and museums all over Tamil Nadu, all at his cost.

RK was an admirer and supporter of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), Asia's largest voluntary organisation for the promotion of art and culture. In March 2000, he partially sponsored a unique workshop on Indian Numismatics organised

After all these years, and no matter what Rajaji thought of it, Gemini's *Avvaiyar* remains a landmark film. Much of its success was in the way S.S. Vasan transformed a series of disjointed episodes concerning the lives of various ancient women Tamil poets into one seamless film, featuring a composite Avvaiyar as it were. It established K.B. Sundarambal as the quintessential Avvai, the learned and wise woman, and she lived thereafter in the shadow of that image. One of the reasons for the abiding charm of the film is the way Avvai is portrayed, as a warm-hearted grandmother figure that most viewers could associate with.

Among the many memorable moments in the film is Avvai's meeting with Lord Murugan. In fact most people would probably recall just this one scene from the entire production. Avvai has finished much of her work on earth and is sitting under a tree when a young cowherd arrives and asks her if she would like fruits from a tree nearby. On her saying yes, he asks her if she would prefer them hot or cold. Avvai is puzzled and perhaps even somewhat contemptuous of the question. How can fruit fresh off a tree be hot or cold? She would have the cold ones she says. The child then shakes the tree and the fruits fall to the ground. Avvai on picking them up proceeds to blow on them to remove dust whereupon the boy asks her as to whether the fruits were hot and if not why was she blowing on them? Her ego punctured, Avvai asks as to who he really is, and he reveals himself to be Lord Murugan, first as a child, then as an adult, astride a

peacock, in the company of his two consorts.

A song attributed to Avvai that runs as follows is held up as proof of this incident:

*My eyes will know no sleep
For I lost to the young bull that
shepherded black buffaloes.
The axe that did not flinch while
cutting hard wood
Has been dented by a tender
plantain*

In Vasan's *Avvaiyar* the success of the scene was as much due to the child artiste playing Murugan as it was to KBS. The sequence ends with the very popular song, *Mayilerum Vadivelame*, which KBS thereafter sang at most of her devotional music performances. This is preceded by a delectable free verse *Velane Sentamizh Vitthaga*. The entire scene lasts ten minutes or so in a nearly three-hour film but it remains the highlight.

Not many will know the young boy who played Murugan. That was P.N. Kumar, who passed away on April 9, 2021. While his role in *Avvaiyar* may have brought him fame, there was a lot more to Kumar than just that for his was a life dedicated to the arts.

Born on August 20, 1940 to P.S. Narayanan and Lakshmi at No 3, East Chittrakulam Street, Mylapore, Kumar came under the influence of his maternal grandfather, the famed writer of science in Tamil, P.N. Appuswami. Having studied in his early years at the Children's Garden School and later at the P.S. High School, he enrolled in 1950 at the Besant Theosophical School, Adyar when his grandfather shifted home to the then newly established colony of Gandhi Nagar.

According to his sister, Dr. P.N. Aruna, Kumar was inspired to take to dance after witnessing a performance by Rukmini Devi

by INTACH at Chennai. It was primarily meant for school and college teachers and coin-collectors and renowned scholars like B.N. Mukherjee of the University of Calcutta and B.D. Chattopadhyaya of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi were among the faculty. Later, from 2013 to 2015, RK sponsored several Heritage Awareness and Documentation Programs of INTACH's Tamil Nadu State Chapter at Kanchipuram, Madurai, Nagercoil and Kanyakumari.

* Dr. S.Suresh, Consultant – Archaeological Tourism and Museum Management, Tamil Nadu State Convener – INTACH, Chennai.

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A close up of P.N. Kumar as Balamurugan.



Arundale at the Rasika Ranjani Sabha, Mylapore in the 1940s. "He was dancing all the time with proper steps, araimandi etc. with a perfect sense of timing," says Dr. Aruna. Noticing this, P.N. Appuswami arranged for formal training in dance, this being imparted by Picchai, a niece of the redoubtable Mylapore Gowri Ammal, the last hereditary Devadasi of the Kapaliswarar Temple who taught Rukmini Devi, Balasaraswathi and Vjayanthimala among others. The household was also full of music, with T.L. Venkatarama Iyer teaching Dikshitar kritis. Soon Kumar could sing well and also play several instruments.

His talents in acting were noticed by scholars such as Dr. V. Raghavan who regularly featured him in the productions of the Samskrita Ranga, which staged classical plays in Sanskrit. V.C. Gopalratnam got him to act in the plays of the Suguna Vilasa Sabha as well. Lakshmana Aiyar, a talent scout for the All

India Radio obtained permission from Kumar's grandfather to have him act in a radio play and when it was broadcast S.S. Vasan came to hear it and was impressed.

Gemini's *Avvaiyar* was many years in the making and at the time of the radio play the family was still in Mylapore. Vasan came calling and convinced P.N. Appuswami to

allow Kumar to act as Murugan in the film. The responsibility of ferrying him every day to the shoot and bringing him back was entrusted to R. Ganesh, who was then a Gemini staffer and also acting as Deivigan, a prince in the same film. Gemini Ganesh as he would become known later, fulfilled his responsibility faithfully and became a close family friend.

By the time *Avvaiyar* hit the screens in 1953, Kumar had moved to Adyar as mentioned earlier and joined the Besant School. The title credits give his name as Kumar. He received offers to act from studio houses

such as AVM and Vijaya-Vauhini but his grandmother decided that one film was enough. The boy had to get serious about his education. While at Besant School, he also studied dance at Kalakshetra under teachers such as Rukmini Devi, Sarada Hoffman and Jayalakshmi. He graduated to performing lead roles in Kalakshetra's productions, playing Lord Rama. Because of a resemblance between the two, the role of the child Rama was entrusted to V.P. Dhananjayan, who would later blossom as a great dance exponent. The performance featured Rama Ravi and Shanta (Dhananjayan), singing and dancing as the young Lava and Kusa!

Did he ever look back at the moment of glory when the Indian cinema-going audience applauded his Murugan? We will never know. But his continuous search for artistic refinement did seem to indicate that he lived by another dictum of Avvaiyar – What we have learnt can be compared to a fistful of sand. What we do not know is the size of the universe.

(With inputs from Dr. P.N. Aruna and P.N. Srikant – Kumar's siblings.)

The iconic suttu pazham scene in Avvaiyar.

On completing his schooling, Kumar enrolled at Vivekananda College where he was a regular in plays and competitions, routinely winning prizes. The scholar Anna (Subramaniam), who was associated with the Ramakrishna Mission got him to act in plays and participate in oratorical contests. His ability to read three languages and his eidetic memory helped greatly in these assignments. It was no wonder therefore that on graduating and taking up a job in the private sector, Kumar became a part of Cho Ramaswami's Viveka Fine Arts and acted in several plays. "He was a quiet person who excelled in female roles," says 'Burma' Shankar who was a regular in the same troupe. "The audience welcomed him and before the arrival of Sukumari and a couple of other female actresses, he was our mainstay for women's roles."

In his later years, Kumar immersed himself in books and the arts.

Did he ever look back at the moment of glory when the Indian cinema-going audience applauded his Murugan? We will never know. But his continuous search for artistic refinement did seem to indicate that he lived by another dictum of Avvaiyar – What we have learnt can be compared to a fistful of sand. What we do not know is the size of the universe.

(With inputs from Dr. P.N. Aruna and P.N. Srikant – Kumar's siblings.)

John Shortt and his works on Indian cattle

John Shortt (1822–1889) of the Madras Medical Service also practiced as a veterinary surgeon in Madras after qualifying as a Member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons of England. Based on his veterinary practice in Madras Presidency, he wrote an invaluable book *A Manual of Indian Cattle and Sheep – Their Breeds, Management and Diseases*, the third and last edition of which was published in Madras, soon after his death in Yercaud (Salem). Besides talking of the etiology and management of cattle and sheep diseases, Shortt also extensively writes of the phenotypic variations among cattle and sheep in southern India in particular. This article validates Shortt's notes and the historical significance of this monumental work by referring to the biological diversity of southern Indian cattle in the light of modern cattle research.

John Shortt born February 26, 1822, started as an 'apothecary' after training at the Madras Medical School (Madras Medical College from 1850) in January 1846. He travelled in 1850 to Scotland to earn an M.D. (Medicinae Doctore) and M.R.C.S. (Member of the Royal College of Surgeons of London) titles. He also qualified for M.R.C.V.S. (Member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons). He returned to Madras and joined MMS as an Assistant Surgeon in July 1854. He was admitted into M.R.C.P. (Membership of Royal College of Physicians of London) in 1859 and was elevated as Full Surgeon on September 20, 1866. Crawford lists Shortt in *Indian Medical Service*, but in none of his books does Shortt use 'I.M.S.' after his name, although several of his other academic titles figure in his books.

He was the Superintendent of Vaccination in Madras, held fellowships of the Linnean Society of London and the Zoological Society. He was the Corresponding Fellow of the *Société d'Anthropologie* (Paris) and *Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie, und Urgeschichte*. As an elected member of the Obstetrical Society of London, he was the Secretary of the Madras Chapter of the Obstetrical Society of London. He retired as Deputy Surgeon-General of Madras, holding the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, when Edward Green Balfour was the Surgeon-General. Unverifiable notes on Shortt indicate that he held an L.D.Sc. (Licentiate in Dental Science).

Shortt wrote many books and papers. Besides those in medicine and biology, he translated C. Maclean's *Treatise on Smallpox* (1857) into Tamil, edited H(enry) R(hodes) Morgan's *Forestry in Southern India* (1884), and wrote the *Handbook of Coffee Planting in Southern India* (1864), *An Account of the Tribes of the Neilgherries* (1868), *The Hill Ranges of Southern India* (1871), *A Manual of Vaccination for the Pupils of the Vaccination Department, Madras* (1874), *A Manual of Family Medicine* (1875), *Snakes of the Several Districts of the Madras Presidency* (1875), *The Coconut Palm or Cocos Nucifera* (1888), and the *Manual of Indian Agriculture* (1889), in addition to a volume on veterinary medicine. His paper, 'The Armenians of Madras' in the inaugural issue of *Journal of Anthropology* (London), is noteworthy. He experimented with cobra venom. He retired on February 12, 1878 and died in Yercaud (Madras Presidency) on 24 April 1889, a little before the third edition of *Manual of Indian Cattle and Sheep – their Breeds, Management and Diseases* appeared.

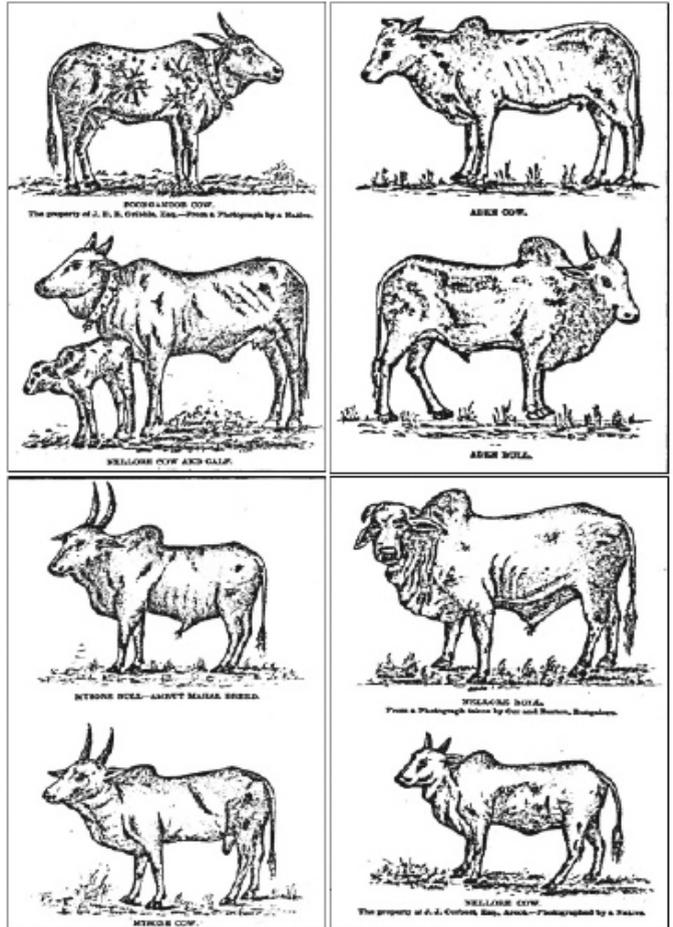
The range of titles he has written on – from human and veterinary medicine to anthropology and natural history – is amazing. These pieces reveal his acumen and capacity to deal with varied subjects with authority. His monograph on the culture and manufacture of indigo (1862) includes a parallel text in Urdu (Hindoostani), speaking volumes of his versatility in Indian languages. He impresses as a polymath. John Shortt was the earliest overseas-qualified Indian medical doctor and a veterinary surgeon in India.

Shortt's *Manual of Indian Cattle* (1889) states in the preface that he had been practising veterinary medicine and surgery for more than 30 years and whatever information was included in the book relied on his veterinary practice. The section

concerned with indigenous breeds is the outcome of another task, which he explains:

'To the Board of Revenue I have to tender my best thanks for their courteous permission to make use of an Essay on the "Indigenous Breeds of Cattle," for which a prize of one hundred rupees was awarded to me at the Agricultural Show of 1874 at Sydapetta (Saidapet).'

This 179-page book is divided into three sections, the first dealing with cattle, the second with buffalo, and the third with sheep. The section on cattle consists of (i) cattle (pp. 1–61) and (ii) cattle diseases (pp. 63–106). Details on indigenous breeds occur in the subsection 'cattle'. The section on buffalo runs from p. 107 to p. 114. The one on sheep consists of (i) sheep (pp. 115–129), (ii) sheep diseases (pp. 129–151), followed by a 7-page section on goats. Pages 153–179 include several appendices referring to multiple details of veterinary importance. His remarks essentially refer to the cattle of the Madras Presidency, which included parts of Andhra



Phenotypic variations of selected breeds among southern Indian *Bos indicus* from Shortt (1889).

A Mysore bullock is 12–15 hands (= 120–150 cm) tall with a compact carcass, straight and long horns. Horns are 2–3 feet long (a 3-foot long horn is hard to imagine).

Animals are gray (light–dark gray) and occasionally white. Shortt comments on the temperament of this breed: "It is generally a high-spirited animal, and requires kind and conciliating treatment to break in."

His remark (p. 3) is worthy of note: "Almost all other cattle seen in the country are importations or crosses between the above-mentioned breeds."

The sturdiness and stamina of the Mysore cattle (in high probability, the Hallikars) are best indicated in D. Davidson's report (Bombay Column of the English Army in Afghanistan) made sometime in the 1850s (Gunn, 1909):

"No draught cattle was sufficient as the 230 Mysore bullocks which accompanied the Bombay troops to Afghanistan. It was entirely from this very superior cattle that no part of the Bombay Park was required to be abandoned when the troops were returning to India over the almost impracticable road through the Tobab mountains. These cattle were frequently upwards of 16 hours in yoke. The draught bullocks with the Bengal Army were the property of the government, but were not, in my opinion, as fine animals as the Mysore bullocks."

(To be continued next fortnight)

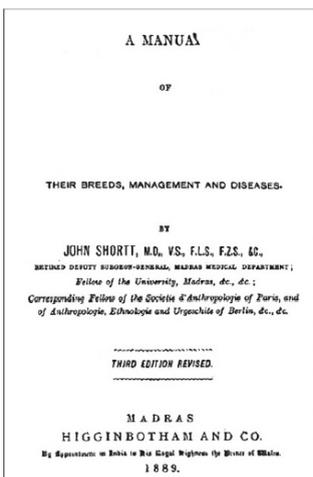
● by Ramya Raman, Chitra Narayanasamy, and Anantanarayanan Raman

Pradesh, Kerala, and Karnataka of modern India, although the justification for the title 'Indian cattle' is reasonably met by occasional references to cattle breeds of other parts of India.

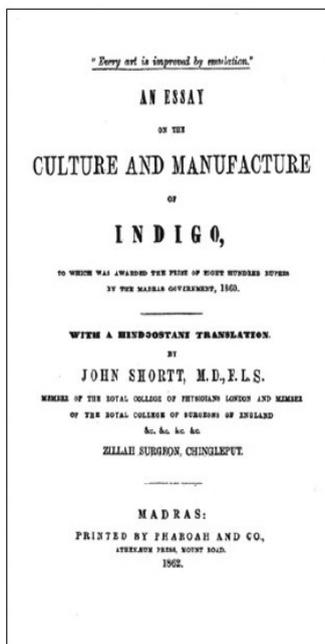
His references to cattle in what is now Tamil Nadu include the following:

Shortt refers to Indian cattle breeds by the regions they are confined to, such as 'Mysore', 'Nellore', 'North' and 'South

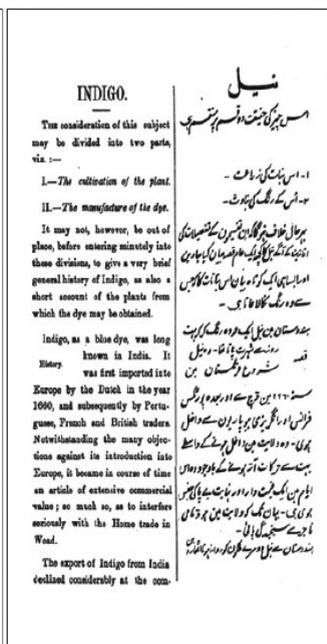
Arcot', 'Tanjore', 'Trichinopoly', 'Salem', and 'Coimbatore'. He refers briefly to the exotic 'Aden cattle' as well. The section on Mysore cattle is extensive. According to Shortt (pp. 2–3): "These draught cattle are celebrated for their power of endurance, active and quick in their paces, somewhat restive, and fiery in disposition."



Cover page of *Manual of Indian Cattle and Sheep* (1889).



Cover page of monograph on the culture and manufacture of indigo (1862) (left); and (right) page 1 from the same monograph showing two columns of text in English and Urdu.



Plastic pollution becomes a reality in Chennai

It is utopian to imagine a world without plastic, and it has its uses. At the same time, excessive utilisation of plastic without safeguards for disposal of waste can do immense harm. It is likely to cause various health issues affecting hormones, lungs, nerves, and the overall immune system. Sometimes, it may even lead to cancer.

Over the years there has been a felt need for more information on how Chennai fares with regard to microplastic pollution in the air. To find out about this, a group of researchers from Pondicherry University embarked on a mission to estimate the strength of this 'enemy' in the air over Chennai, proving that people are breathing plastic. It was found that South Chennai was more polluted by plastic than the North.

They found that the street dust contained plastic in the form of tiny microplastic particles in the city. "These are plastic particles which are smaller than five millimetres in size. They are formed due to the fragmentation and weathering

of plastic objects in the environment as a result of various mechanical, chemical, and biological processes," explains Kaushik Dowarah, one of the primary authors of the study. These pollutants are generated mostly out of plastic that goes to waste. In 2015, out of 407 million tonnes of plastic that was produced globally, three-fourth of it became waste, according to the United Nations Environment Programme.

Microplastics in street dust indicate the urban environment of the city. "It means they are also present in the air we are breathing, as the particles that have settled in the dust are also likely to be resuspended in air. They may also resettle on household surfaces," clarifies Dowarah. Children are more susceptible to inhale or ingest microplastics as they may play with dirty toys which have deposits of contaminated dust.

Urban road littering, surface abrasion of tyre treads, road paints, construction and building materials, artificial turfs as well as aeolian transport of debris are potential sources

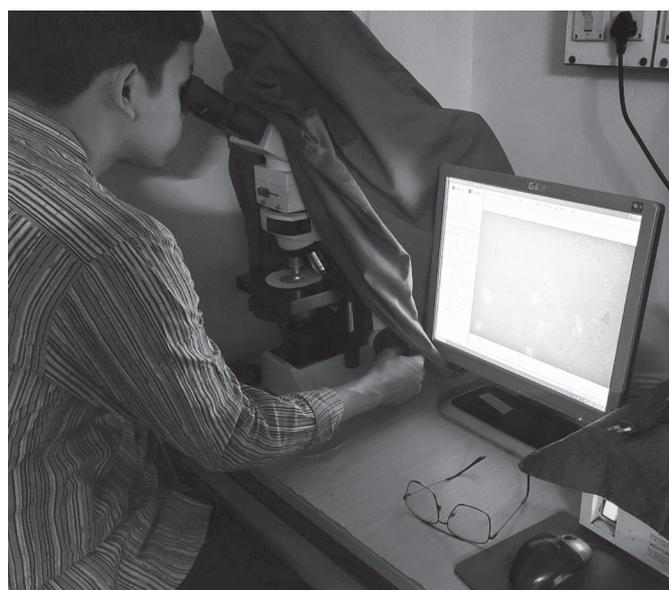
of microplastics in an urban setting, according to the research. The study used various scientific techniques to identify nine types of polymers that the microplastics contained viz. polyvinyl chloride (PVC), polyethylene-co-vinyl-acetate, HDPE, poly tetrafluoroethylene (PTFE), cellulose microcrystalline, lyocell, superflex-200, wax-1032, and AC-395.

PVC is used in packaging, floor and wall coverings, furniture coverings, etc. PTFE is used in non-stick pans. "A PVC door may undergo scratches and tear on the surface, maybe at a very microscopic level and hence produce microplastics," simplifies the researcher.

● by
Padmaja Jayaraman

The study involved sampling of street dust from sixteen locations in Chennai. According to Dowarah who was responsible for all the analyses of the study, the places included are some of the important hubs in terms of industrial, commercial, recreational, and residential aspects. Eight sampling points came under the northern region viz. Ambattur, Aminjikarai, Ayanavaram, Kasimedu, Koyambedu, Moolakadai, Poonamallee, and Sembium. The southern region included Anna Salai, MG Road, Guindy, Guindy Industrial Estate, Besant Nagar, Sardar Patel Road, Tidel Park, and Velachery.

The average microplastic abundance in these locations across the city was estimated to be 227.94 ± 89.82 particles per 100 grams of street dust sample. The lowest count of microplastics for a sample was recorded as 17 particles per 100 grams in Moolakadai in North Chennai, while the highest was 408 particles per 100 grams in Velachery in South Chennai. The average microplastic abundance in the areas in the Northern part of Chennai is 190.46 ± 83.38 particles per 100 grams of street dust; whereas for the southern part, it is 265.42 ± 76.76 particles. "It was not surprising. The southern part has commercial areas, malls as well as industries. It is an emerging IT hub. More 'development' means more 'plastics,'" elucidates Dowarah about the microplastic pollu-



Kaushik Dowarah observing microplastics under a microscope in Pondicherry University.

tion trend in South Chennai. Furthermore, North Chennai contains residential zones and traditional industries only. This explains the lesser extent of microplastic pollution in the zone.

Microplastics are way more toxic than one can imagine. On breaking down from larger fragments, they acquire a greater surface area, thus being a leeway for other toxic contaminants to sit on the particles. Together they can form inhalable toxins, leading to severe health hazards.

Health hazards caused by microplastics are not something unheard of. The presence of microplastics was discovered in seven species of fish in the coastal areas of Chennai by the National Centre for Coastal Research (NCCR), in March 2021. Microplastics were present in the gills of the fishes sold in Pattinapakkam. Indian Mackerel, Greater Lizardfish, Barracuda, Humphead Snapper, and Golden Snapper were other fish varieties that had microplastics in their guts. "What is in our air shall settle on the roads and other surfaces, which shall again get resuspended in air. From there, they [microplastics] make their way to other areas like food, sea, then marine organisms, back to our food again, and so on. In other words, the fish ingest microplastics, and are then caught by fishermen. Then they intrude on to our plates," says the researcher from Pondicherry University.

If this situation of microplastic pollution persists, Dowarah feels that the quality of life is going to reduce. Nevertheless,



Density separation of microplastics from street dust samples in Pondicherry University.

he feels it is not checkmate yet. "There is hope. In the past three years, I have seen shopkeepers and customers being strict about carry bags. But this is not enough. Mere awareness among people is not going to stop the use of plastic," remarks Dowarah. He urges the government to ramp up the recycling of plastics, ensuring that not a single plastic article is allowed to be left unattended in the environment. He feels that some revenue should be allotted for proper waste disposal systems, and to prevent the burning of plastics.

"Government and industrialists need to work together to push for eco-friendly alternatives. It is not prudent to stop the use of plastic without making a better alternative available. To achieve that, some important financial decisions need to be taken by the stakeholders, along with creating awareness among people," recommends the researcher.

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– THE EDITOR

Meeting up with boyhood heroes

As a teenage sports fan in Madras in the 60s I had my boyhood heroes and as luck would have it they were all-time greats. I followed closely the feats of Gary Sobers, Rod Laver, Muhammad Ali and Pele on the radio and read about them in the magazines and newspapers. Like all young fans I longed to meet them but I was quick to realize that could well be an unfulfilled dream.

I did however have the good fortune of seeing Sobers in action in the Test between West Indies and India at Chepauk in January 1967. It was a sight never to be forgotten. The languid grace with which he emerged from the pavilion and walked to the crease, his silky strokeplay, his mesmerizing bowling in two styles, fast and slow and his electrifying catching in close-in positions were all seen in abundant measure during the five days with the Test ending in a closely contested draw. In cold stats he scored 95 and 74 not out, took two wickets and four catches but his performance transcended figures for he actually played the rescue act to perfection on the final day batting through the final session of 90 minutes with Charlie Griffith after Bishen Bedi, Erapalli Prasanna and BS Chandrasekhar threatened to script an Indian victory.

As regards the other three, I followed Pele's exploits in two World Cups besides the other matches he played for Brazil. To me Laver was the greatest tennis player of all time winning the singles title at

Wimbledon four times besides being the only player to complete the Grand Slam twice. As for Ali he transcended not just boxing but also sports. As a boxer he was already being hailed as "The Greatest" but it was his heroic stand against the Vietnam war when he refused the draft – an action that saw him stripped of his world heavyweight title – that made him the most recognizable sports personality of his time.

It was nice to be aware of all this but meeting up with these larger than life personalities had to remain a dream. Fortunately in 1968 I joined *The Indian Express* in Madras as a sports reporter but even as my profession brought me closer to eminent sports personalities a meet-up with the quartet looked out of the question. First of all they had to come to India, then come all the way to Madras. But then fate can be kind and it has to be this factor that helped me realise my childhood dream at least in three of the four sportsmen.

In January 1980, Ali arrived in Madras on a sponsored visit and I made sure I was with him from the moment he arrived at the airport till a couple of days later when he left the hotel for his departure. There was a press conference besides which I was fortunate to interview him for television, a couple of other engagements and an exhibition bout at the old Nehru stadium. Meeting up with his lovely wife Veronica was a bonus and she had her round of social engagements. Needless

to say Ali lived up to his reputation as an extrovert as he played to the gallery and was a pressman's dream, prepared to answer all questions.

So that was one down and three to go I counted. And five years later I was lucky again. The Amritraj brothers had started BAT, the programme to unearth future talent for Indian tennis and Vijay's close ties with Laver saw the maestro at the MCC HS courts in 1985. There was an informal meeting

● by
Partab Ramchand

with the press, a reception at a hotel and an exhibition match at the old Egmore tennis stadium involving Laver and the Amritraj brothers. Even at 47 the great left-hander displayed his skill and agility on court in no uncertain terms. Talking to Laver was a revelation as he came across as a man of humility with no airs about him which was a pleasant surprise considering his achievements.

In the late 90s Sobers landed in Madras for an assignment with the MAC Spin Foundation. The few days just flew by as Sobers regaled the audience at a reception held in his honour at the MCC with tales of yore and had the reporters in splits with jokes at an informal meeting with the press. A young reporter who absolutely hero worshiped him seemed to be always around



Sir Garfield Sobers. Picture Courtesy: The Hindu Archives.

wherever Sobers was present and on the last day just before leaving seeing the youngster he exclaimed "you again?" with a hearty laugh which the pressmen shared.

So that was three down and one to go. Unfortunately that's the way it has stayed and four out of four is unlikely to happen with Pele now 80 and not

exactly in the pink of health. The iconic footballer did make it to Calcutta on a couple of occasions but there has been little chance of him making it to this city so I guess that will remain an unfulfilled dream. I am not complaining though. Three out of four is something I have to be grateful for and I am.

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