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**WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI**

# MADRAS

## MUSINGS

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## OUR PATRON



**N. SANKAR**

**19.11.1945-17.4.2022**

# Mentor par Excellence

N. Sankar was an unusual combination of business acumen and ethical conviction – upright, farsighted, innovative. He was responsible for some of the most original choices made in the field of PVC manufacture, including the highly integrated manufacturing processes at the numerous facilities of the chemicals division of The Sanmar Group, which he helmed for decades. His concern for the environment led to the concept and implementation of ZLD or zero liquid discharge in all of them, amidst a whole slew of steps taken to ensure sustainable growth.

This is not the first time I have written on Mr. Sankar, but I have so far refrained from striking a personal note while doing so. This time around, I have, with the permission of the editor, freed myself of such restraints. I shall begin by openly acknowledging the lump in my throat as I refer to him in the past tense. In this, I know I am not alone. Besides family and friends, the sizable community of Sanmar

● by  
Ramnarayan V.

employees is shell-shocked, dazed, while trying to come to terms with his passing. In his own quiet, undemonstrative way, he was the godfather of that large family that always felt safe and looked after under his scrupulously honest leadership. It ensured that every one of us learnt to do the right thing – not the most convenient alternative – in the most trying circumstances that tend to bedevil professional careers every now and then.

The son and grandson of trailblazers in the history of south Indian industry and commerce, Sankar became one, too. After he obtained his B.Sc. (Tech) in Chemical Engineering from the AC College of Technology, Madras, graduating with distinction, and a Masters degree from the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, he worked with Chemplast promoted by his family, for five years during a difficult time, before he started his entrepreneurial career in 1972. And he was proud to call himself an entrepreneur.

Determined to bring in technology to India to manufacture products of excellence, Sankar, all of 26 years old, was writing letters to foreign companies seeking collaboration with them. Durametall India at Karapakkam, Madras, resulted, growing into what is now Sanmar Engineering

Technologies Private Limited, catering to a wide range of process industries – even India's space missions. Several successful joint ventures have followed. Over the decades Sankar ensured that these joint ventures with global corporations were models for emulation, enunciating a philosophy regarded as the ultimate paradigm for international collaboration, winning him respect and lifelong friendships amidst technology leaders in many countries.

Ethics and corporate governance were an article of faith with Sankar. "Strictly follow the law of the land, so that we can all sleep well at night" could well be defined as his paramount mantra to them.

Though cold logic was the basis of Sankar's business decisions, they were often tempered by the human touch. Sometimes his perfectionism could be nerve wracking for those reporting to him, but at the end of a hard job well executed, he had a unique way of appreciating good work. I personally noticed that he would revert to Tamil at such moments, rather than the more official English that we spoke at work.

Sankar was a master of follow-up. His attention to detail and meticulous planning did rub off on his managers who were empowered to discharge their responsibilities fearlessly. So long as they did all that was required of them sincerely, failure would not be punished. He could be impatient with you if he felt you were trying to 'BS', in fact brusque even, but he was patience personified when your mistakes were despite sincere effort. On one occasion, I was expecting a severe reprimand if not worse, when he did not even mention the gaffe, perhaps because our whole team had been slogging it out for weeks on end.

How can I fail to mention that he gave me the most important break of my life when in the mid-1990s he opened Sanmar's doors to me based on the merit he saw in my freelance journalistic work? I started as a part-time resource with Kalamkriya, a creative agency associated with Sanmar, and joined the group as a mainstream employee five years later. "Sankar is waiting for you. After William Shakespeare and R.K. Narayan, you are the next big thing for him," said a senior colleague to me. Of course, he was being sarcastic, yet his words acted as a great morale booster.

One of my main responsibilities as Advisor-Corporate

(Continued on page 7)

# When *The Man from Madras Musings* met None Such

*The Man from Madras Musings* is somewhat disoriented – he has lost a mentor, a good friend and a dispassionate critic. MMM refers to None Such (NS) who passed on recently, leaving a huge void behind. In the years following the passing of the Chief, NS was a sheet anchor, who while he never interfered with the content of *Madras Musings*, brought all his energy to bear on every other aspect, in particular its financial well-being.

How well MMM recalls that day when the Chief informed him, MMM, that he, the Chief, was going to take him, MMM, to meet up with the big boss. Even entering the office building was an event by itself – you had diverse people lined up all of whom waited on you as though that was their sole purpose in life. MMM was making the first of his many visits to the NS HQ but even then the receptionist identified MMM by name, bade him welcome and assigned an escort to take MMM up to the NS sanctum by way of a special lift. In an era when Google was unheard of, MMM wondered how on earth the receptionist recognised him, MMM, by face.

The lift having deposited

fresh one supplied for the next meeting.

He pressed an unseen buzzer and a door opened to reveal a minion who having padded up silently whispered into your ear if you would prefer coffee or tea and if so of what kind. The sudden appearance of this apparition took some getting used to but over the years MMM got to know the man on duty very well. And the coffee was always good – it had to be. That then was MMM's first meeting with NS and from then on, he made several visits to the sanctum, always with the same ceremonial. It never varied. But the discussions were anything but predictable. You never knew which aspect of MM there would be questions about and over the years, MMM realised he had to be on his toes. If not, there would be a caustic comment or two, followed by NS retrieving the data required, from his faultless filing system – both mental and physical.

## Getting calls from the Boss

Very early on in his interactions with None Such (NS), *The Man from Madras Musings*



Cartoon of N. Sankar that appeared in MM, Vol IV No. 14, November 1st, 1994 long before he became associated with the magazine.

had referred to. Those were occasions when MMM saw the true NS – a benign and even sentimental man behind that cold and forbidding exterior that he carefully cultivated.

"Enna Sir," would be his standard opening if he had called to indulge in some fun. But MMM knew it was serious business if he addressed MMM by name as soon the connection was made. Then MMM had to be ready with all the information that could

## SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

MMM on the floor where NS and other top honchos roosted, the escort handed over MMM to another, and departed. MMM is now not sure if he saw the man move backwards after a low bow. Now it was the turn of escort 2 to take MMM forward – he was then handed over to escort 3 who ushered MMM into a waiting room. This had magazines and newspapers neatly arranged, with the pride of place being given to MM of course. From this room you got a panoramic view of the city. It fitted the mental image MMM had of NS – a kindly but sharp-eyed hawk who watched over everyone. After a while an escort 4 appeared and after the usual stately bows like an ambassador presenting credentials to a monarch, MMM was asked to follow and then we were in the sanctum proper. The Chief made the introductions and MMM met up with NS for the first time. He, NS that is, was an arresting presence, seated behind a huge desk. He was brandishing a ruler, which he laid down when discussions began – only he took up doodling in right earnest – he always drew cubes, which he shaded patiently. MMM was later informed that this was NS' way of focusing. He also came to know that the sheet was crumpled up and thrown away after each meeting and a

came to realise his, that is NS', awesome powers of tracking you down. This was done by means of a secretarial/ receptionist network which managed to get all your phone numbers on to its register and this included those of your immediate family members as well. And when these secretaries tracked you down they always made it sound as though speaking to you was the greatest joy in life. How could you not melt immediately? You then stood up from your seat and waited for the call to be put through to NS, after which conversation would happen. Not getting through was never an option and the formidable team of people somehow got to you. MMM often wondered if they were sleuths in mufti. Over the years he developed the habit of informed them in advance when he travelled so that they did not fret at MMM's disappearance.

But as MMM got to know NS better, he actually began looking forward to the calls – these would be great fun especially if it was about an issue of MM that he, NS, had just laid his hands on. Some article would have triggered his memory about some related topic and he would want to relate it. Or he would have noticed some mathematical error, which was all too common particularly if MMM was acting as editor. He would want clarifications on some coded names that MMM

possibly be asked for.

As technology improved, NS took to leaving voice messages and some of them MMM has saved. In particular he savours the words of praise that NS left on the voice mail shortly after the issue dedicated to the Chief's memory was published in 2019. It was the first that MMM handled on his own and these words from NS meant a lot to him.

## Being Collection Agent for MM

For all his exalted status as a captain of industry, None Such was a man who considered it his duty to get corporate sponsors for MM. *The Man from Madras Musings* has seen him go after prospects, sometimes even embarrassingly asking them if they could not afford to support such a worthy cause. And if there was a delay in payment from any donor, he would not hesitate to make a call. He was that passionate about the well-being of the paper.

An era has ended with the passing of the Chief in 2019 and now NS. MMM and MM can pay tribute only by ensuring that the high standards that those two envisaged for the paper are maintained.

– MMM

# Madras Musings loses its patron

Any publication of the niche variety needs content and support to survive. *Madras Musings* was fortunate in this respect. When it came to content it had Mr. S. Muthiah, our founder, who made sure that the magazine was a cut above others of its kind. But would *Madras Musings* have been able to survive on content alone? Certainly not. The magazine managed from 1991 to 1996 and then found the going tough. It would have

● by The Editor

certainly folded up then had not N. Sankar stepped in.

In his preface to our Silver Jubilee issue (ref page 4), Sankar has written in his customary self-effacing manner about what he did just then. But to give it its proper perspective, he used his personal clout with eleven other corporate houses of the city to commit themselves to an annual contribution to *Madras Musings*. When that was done and the paper's future was assured, he did not stop – he kept contacting other corporates who he

felt ought to also support the publication and the number ended at around 20, give or take one or two.

To him, governance was a creed and he felt that “it should never be said that *Madras Musings* was a paper that Sankar ran” (to quote his exact words). A not-for-profit company called Chennai Heritage was formed, with other directors on board and that began to run the paper. He restricted himself to making sure that the financials and other statutory aspects were complied, just as he would have with the numerous business entities he ran. What was amazing was that he brought the same attention to detail that he would have to his large companies to the running of *Musings* as well. The quarterly board meetings were actual events – not mere paper reports. Statements were produced on the financial health of the magazine, and he deliberated on them with Muthiah and other board members.

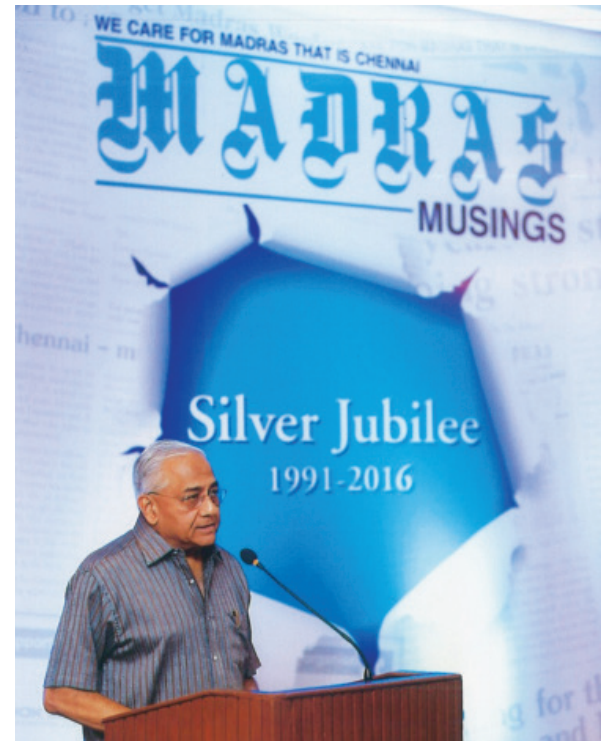
At his beautiful eighth floor office in the Sanmar Building on Cathedral Road, Sankar made sure that *Madras Musings* was prominently displayed. It

would share space in the visitors' area outside his office with prestigious business journals and other publications. He eagerly awaited each issue of the paper and read it within a day. If he liked something in particular there would be a call and word of praise. Sankar in particular liked the humorous articles. He never ever suggested topics for coverage or tried to push a personal agenda. The only aspect that he was keen on was that a page be dedicated to sports – after all that was one of his passions. Even within that topic if we ever featured some Sanmar-related news he would be hugely embarrassed and call to say that people would comment that he was using the paper as a publicity vehicle. We had to convince him that good developments deserved highlighting no matter who was behind it.

It was sometime in 2015 that Sankar made an important suggestion to the board – MV Subbiah and Tara Murali had left by then and S. Muthiah was getting on in years. In such a scenario Sankar felt that the continuity of *Madras Musings* in the future needed to be made more secure. He there-

fore suggested that Chennai Heritage be made a part of the Chennai Willingdon Corporate Foundation of which he was then the Chairman. This was duly approved and with that *Madras Musings*' continuity was assured for the foreseeable future. Most befittingly, he made sure that the Silver Jubilee of *Madras Musings* was celebrated in a grand manner in 2016. A compilation of selected articles was put together and there was a gala event where in typical Sankar fashion, all the corporate sponsors of *Madras Musings* were recognised for what they had done.

There was none like him when it came to institution building, and he did it all quietly. We salute this patron of ours. The good work he did will live on.



Sankar addresses the gathering during the Madras Musings silver jubilee.

Not for nothing do they say that the pen is mightier than the sword. Words are powerful drivers of new ideas, conversation and change, and N. Sankar – as avid a reader as he was a sports aficionado – had an astute insight into the transformative role of publishing. Besides enabling a clutch of key publications to stay afloat, he played an important part in empowering the team at Sanmar to bring out excellent in-house periodicals that both educate and entertain. The role that Sankar played in the histories of three journals in particular deserves to be told – *Aside*, *Matrix* and *Sruti*.

*Aside* was a Madras-focused

## N. Sankar, Patron of Wordsmiths

● by our Special Correspondent

features magazine launched in 1977 by historian and writer Abraham Eraly. Said to have drawn inspiration from foreign city magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *Aside* was hailed as the first city periodical of its kind in India. With contributions from well-known names such as Theodore Baskaran, Romulus Whitaker, S. Muthiah, Randor Guy and Janaki Venkatraman, the publication's aim was to “observe Madras with a fresh perspective with features, essays and pictures to understand the small things that go to

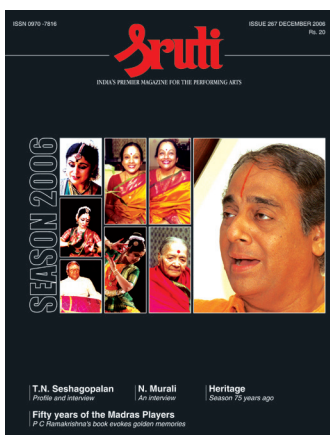
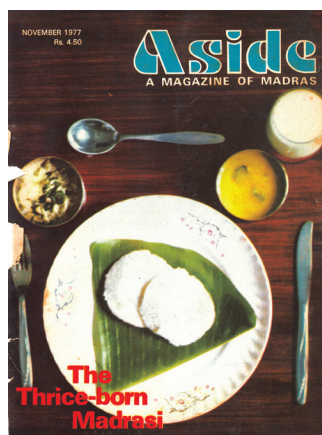
make a big city.” Excellent as its contents were, commercial success remained elusive and the magazine was put up for sale after a decade of operation. N. Sankar and his wife Chandra took *Aside* under their wings, acquiring not only the magazine's staff but also Interpress, the printing press that owned and produced the publication. With Chandra taking the reins of the whole operation, an elegant solution was devised

for the commercially-struggling magazine – Interpress would generate income by catering to the printing needs of corporate houses to fund *Aside* as a going concern. The printing business was a resounding success. There is little doubt that Sankar's involvement lightened the burdensome duty of profitability, allowing Eraly to focus on his role as Editor. However, the arrangement did not last long. Within a couple of years of acquisition, Sanmar found that it had to let go of both *Aside* and Interpress, for the editorial aim of the magazine had shifted from publishing features to current affairs – a move that put its corporate owners in conflict with the political and administrative bodies in power. *Aside* was sold to the *Daily Thanthi* group and not too long after, the magazine was wound up once and for all.

The experience with Interpress inspired the creation of *Kalamkriya*, an in-house

division at the Sanmar Group that was charged with producing the company's corporate reports. Much like Interpress, *Kalamkriya* took on commissioned work from corporate houses until 2005, when it decided to focus on meeting the communication and stationery needs of the Group's business units. It was in October 1998 that *Kalamkriya* published the first edition of *Matrix*, the Sanmar Group's internal quarterly magazine. The periodical catered to a specific cross-section of readers, available only to “employees of a certain level of seniority, business associates, industry bodies, JV partners, opinion leaders in different fields and so on.” *Matrix* was Sankar's pet project. He lent his full support to the fledgling venture, encouraging the team and closely working with them to bring the periodical to fruition. From S.R. Seshadri, M.N. Radhakrishnan and V. Ramesh to P.S. Jayaraman, Chakrapani and C.V. Subba Rao, the writers were afforded precious

(Continued on page 7)



# Institutions Great and Small

**Sankar was an institution builder in every sense of the word. Not only was this reflected in the way he ran his business, it also manifested itself in the way he shored up institutions that he was involved in outside of his business interests. The following article comprises extracts from three of my books – Integrity and Excellence, the Sanmar Story, Championing Enterprise, 175 Years of the Madras Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and 175, Not Out, the History of the Madras Cricket Club.**

– Sriram V

## Bringing the Danes to Madras

The influence of Sankar was felt when it came to attracting Danish investment to India. He was quite active as the first President of the Indo-Danish Business Development Council. A decade later there were many Danish companies in Tamil Nadu – Veritas, Danfos, Grundfos, etc. K.S. Narayanan and Sankar played vital roles in their capacity as honorary consuls in arranging meetings with representatives of Danish companies with officials in Tamil Nadu and acting as spokespersons for the State. Take for instance FL Smidth which came into the State a little more than a decade ago – it was Sankar who convinced them to look at the fast-developing OMR to locate their regional headquarters, rather than in the city. FLS was so happy with the location that, against their original plans of a couple of hundred people, they had within a year of inception 2,000 people working in the Madras facility – a spanking, new, modern, European style building. Today it is their largest employment centre anywhere in the world. Later the Danish Government went on to appoint trade offices in various cities. In all over 150 companies from that country have now invested in India but the larger organisations are still in Tamil Nadu.

## Taking an interest in Tranquebar

It was under Sankar and Prabhakar Rao, Executive Director, Corporate Affairs, Sanmar Group that the possibility of developing Tranquebar aka Tharangampadi, the erstwhile

Danish settlement, as a tourist destination was first mooted and given considerable fillip. The tercentenary of Ziegenbalg was celebrated and much attention was given to getting foundations located in Denmark to invest in promoting infrastructure at Tharangampadi. Sadly for Sankar and Prabhakar Rao, there was very little action from the Government to help with these initiatives.

## At the MMA and the MCCI

In 1981 Sankar became the Chairman of the Madras Management Association. It was then that he initiated the move to get premises for the Association, which had till then managed in rented space. He also began the practice of an annual convention, which besides giving the MMA a high profile, also brought it much needed revenue.

In later years, Sankar was to become an active member of the Madras Chamber of Commerce and Industry. He became the Chairman of the Chamber in 1985, the year that august body completed 150 years. A celebration committee was put together and a budget of Rs 6.5 lakhs was envisaged for the year-long festivities. It was decided that an additional year's subscription would be levied on all members by way of their contribution towards the celebrations. In addition to this, the Chamber also decided to bring out a members' directory, which would have details of the companies and also feature a few art plates that would highlight the art and culture of Tamil Nadu. Members had to sponsor their own pages and this publication also brought in the money for the celebrations on a suitable grand scale. Among the first decisions of this committee was the commissioning of a detailed documentation of the Chamber's 150-year history. The senior bureaucrat R. Tirumalai, who had already written a biography of T.T. Krishnamachari was entrusted with the task. Tirumalai scoured the records, the annual reports and other sources and brought out *The Voice of Enterprise*, an exhaustive work on the Chamber's contribution to the commercial growth of South India.

On 28th September 1985, the inaugural celebrations took place, presided over by the State Industries Minister K. Rajaram.



Sankar with V.P. Singh at the 150th year celebrations of the Madras Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The Governor S.L. Khurana inaugurated the celebrations. The British High Commissioner, Sir Robert Wade-Grey expressed his warm appreciation of the growth and activities of the Chamber and presented it with a set of reference volumes to aid in its work. On 14th March 1986, the Rotary Club of Madras paid tributes to the Chamber and its work with eminent jurist Nani Palkhiwala being the Chief Guest. The AGM for the year was another grand event with the Union Minister of State for Finance, P. Chidambaram addressing the members. On July 12th, 1986, the Union Finance Minister V.P. Singh addressed the Chamber. It was later recorded as a scintillating address though it began rather ominously. "The FM pointed to a lady in the first row and asked her if she knew where she had got a bracelet she was wearing," remembered Sankar. "He then went on to add, half in jest that he could raid her home if she did not!"

*The Voice of Enterprise* was ready for release in October 1986 and the Vice-President of India, R. Venkataraman was slated to release it on 9th October. The programme was combined with a two-day exhibition of the Chamber's collection of photographs, trademark registers and artefacts, held at the Park Sheraton Hotel. The Vice-President did not make it but N.S. Bhat, former Chairman of the Chamber read out his speech and AMM Arunachalam of the Murugappa Group and also a former Chairman of the Chamber, released the book. The Madras Management Association honoured the Chamber with a citation in a silver scroll-holder. *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express* brought

out special supplements on the occasion.

## Promoting Cricket at the Madras Cricket Club

If he had a favourite among the clubs that he was a member of, it was the MCC. Sankar was one of the youngest to be elected President of the institution, a position he held between 1982 and 1984. To shore up its finances he created a new category – corporate membership. A hundred new members came on board and the club was back on a sound footing. In 1998, Sankar was invited to head the club's 150th year celebrations committee. The historian and chronicler S. Muthiah was asked to put together two books – a detailed history and the second, a glossy one with pictures that was sponsored by various corporate houses of the city. That in turn brought in some much-needed money. To him, sport, and its financial well-being have been of equal importance.

## Promoting Education in Madras

In Chennai, the Sanmar Group is closely involved with the Indian Education Trust (IET), that runs two very well-known schools – The Sri Sankara Senior Secondary School, Adyar and the Sri Sankara Vidyashramam Matriculation Higher Secondary School, Tiruvanmiyur.

The Sri Sankara School was begun in 1970 with the blessings of Mahaperiyava of Kanchi, Chandrashekarendra Saraswathi. The Indian Education Society (IES) was formed in 1972 to administer the gradually expanding entity and P.R. Pattabhiraman, N. Kumar's father-in-law, became the General

Secretary. He shouldered the administrative responsibility of the Society from 1972 to 1977, by ably organising funds, instituting cost-effective measures and procuring necessary material. In 1972, the school shifted to land purchased in Adyar.

The Society was revamped in 1977 when Pattabhiraman left for Bombay on transfer. R. Venkataraman (RV), former Minister in the Government of Madras, then a Member of Parliament and later to become a Union Minister and still later Vice President and President of the Society. V.S. Dhandapani, a businessman and brother-in-law to KSN, became the General Secretary. R. Venkataraman was able to bring in much-needed funds through personal donations as well other sources. Dhandapani's nuanced and disciplined administration was responsible for ensuring the school's smooth functioning.

## Sriram V

KSN began taking an active interest in the school from 1978 onwards. As funds were coming in through donations, the Indian Education Trust was formed in 1986 to replace the Society. KSN became the Trust's founder Chairman and Dhandapani the founder Managing Trustee. N. Kumar, who was to later take over from Dhandapani, became the Treasurer in 1979.

In 1988, the Trust purchased a huge tract of land at Tiruvanmiyur. It's second school – the Sri Sankara Vidyashramam Matriculation Higher Secondary School, following the Tamil Nadu state's syllabus, came up on at this site in 1989. With V.S. Dhandapani and KSN passing away in 2012, the Trust saw N. Sankar taking over as Chairman and N. Kumar as Managing Trustee.

With V.S. Dhandapani and KSN passing away in 2012, the Trust saw N. Sankar taking over as Chairman and N. Kumar as Managing Trustee. A couple of years ago, a new and third institution, the KSN School was begun in Tiruvanmiyur. Another institution that Sankar took great interest in though it has essentially been Kumar's pet project, is the Madhuram

Narayanan Centre for Exceptional Children.

## Guiding the Chennai Willingdon Corporate Foundation

Apart from these, Sankar was also associated with the Chennai Willingdon Corporate Foundation (CWCF). This is a historic body, set up in 1921 as the Lady Amphil Nurse Institute and the South Indian Nursing Association, its primary purpose then being the running of the Lady Willingdon Nursing Home. It had as its members executives from several of the British-managed companies in Madras. With Independence the composition changed, both in terms of its management and usage, with many Indian corporate houses becoming interested. This continued till the 70's, and many well-known personalities of today saw the light of day at the Willingdon Nursing Home.

However, thereafter with the

choice and, gradually fell on difficult times, its woes compounded by an aggressive Union. It had to depend on several industrialists for donations whenever the hospital ran short of funds, which was quite often. M.K. Kumar, who worked in a senior capacity with several British-owned business houses of Madras, was active in mobilising support from different businessmen and corporate houses. At different times, he enlisted AMM Arunachalam, KSN, K.M. Mammen Mappillai, V.L. Dutt, and T.S. Santhanam, etc, both for support and help in managing Willingdon's affairs.

Many of these businessmen were co-opted as Trustees. N. Sankar and M.V. Subbiah, although not Trustees, were also actively involved in the management of the hospital and in working out a plan for its future. Several attempts were made to revive the hospital. One such thought was that perhaps, as was the flavour of the day, it might be appropriate to convert it into a joint venture with a professionally-run hospital chain from overseas. To assist in this, the Lady Amphil Institute was restructured as a not-for-profit company limited by shares with its equity holders being the erstwhile patrons and donors, all of whom got shares in proportion to their donations over the years.



Sankar (extreme left) applauds as AMM Arunachalam unveils the portrait of Sir Alexander J. Arbuthnot, founder of the MCC. Also in pic is T.T. Ashok, then President of MCC.

However, the effort to induct a partner did not succeed and in the second half of the 90's, it was decided to shut down the hospital. In 1998, the hospital was closed and the property sold through a competitive bidding process to Sankara Nethralaya. The Trustees decided that the proceeds of the sale amounting to about Rs. 24 crores would be utilised for charitable purposes

in and around Chennai. The institution was renamed 'The Chennai Willingdon Corporate Foundation', in line with its new objectives. It has since put the funds available to good use through a whole host of social projects. CWCF's Board represents the diversity of its promoters and reads like a Who's Who of the Madras business landscape. AMM Arunachalam,

the Chairman at that time, was succeeded by V.L. Dutt in 1999. Thereafter, Sankar, who had joined the Board when KSN stepped down, was the Chairman of the Board from 2013 to 2020 and was succeeded by L. Ganesh of the Rane Group. The Foundation currently has its offices at The Sanmar Group headquarters from where it is administered.

## NS on Madras Musings

**It was in 2016 that Mr. S. Muthiah together with Mr. N. Sankar planned the silver jubilee of Madras Musings. A special commemorative volume comprising articles compiled from past issues of the magazine, together with a commentary by various members of a special silver jubilee committee, was brought out. We got N. Sankar to write a foreword for the book. He was rather reluctant at first but this was one occasion when we got to him to accede to our request. He agonised over it for days as was his wont – polishing a phrase here, editing a paragraph there but he finally had it – and it was perfect, as all his speeches/writings were. We reproduce the Foreword as it appeared in the book.**

– Sriram V

Having spent my entire life in Madras, now Chennai, I have always had an interest in stories and articles relating to the city – its history, its culture, its character. Today we have a plethora of magazines and journals focused on Chennai, apart from the press regularly carrying city-specific supplements. However, the situation was very different in the 1960s and 1970s. *Aside*, which began in the mid-1970s, was the first Madras-specific magazine in English that I can recall. It was a regular read for me and my wife, Chandra. Abraham Eraly, its editor and publisher, was an acquaintance. When the magazine ran into difficulties in the 1980s, we got involved by lending some financial support, and management in the form of Chandra, who had time on her hands as the children were now grown up. This went on for some

years, but during that period I discovered, the hard way, that being a businessman and owning a publication that was often critical of the state of affairs in the city did not go together. But that's another story, and suffice it to say that we had to exit *Aside* magazine through sale around 1990. We thought we had found a good home for it where it could prosper and grow, but I guess it did not work out commercially for the new owners, and the magazine went out of existence a few years later, to my regret.

After this adventure, I was very pleased to discover *Madras Musings*, edited by Muthiah. *Madras Musings* was an indirect offspring of *Aside*, as Muthiah not only oversaw the printing of it for a while, but wrote a popular column *Once upon a City* in it. I felt *Madras Musings* continued where *Aside* left off and enjoyed reading it regularly.

Very early in its career, *Madras Musings* became a powerful spokesman for the preservation of the city's heritage. Anyone who grew up in the Madras of fifty or sixty years ago will know how much the cityscape has changed yielding to the bulldozer of urbanisation. It is an inevitable adjunct of modern living and the infrastructural needs of rapidly growing metros in any country, but a vigilant public can play a role in minimising the environmental and cultural damage it causes. This is where *Musings* came in-as a change agent and moulder of public opinion. The fighting spirit of Muthiah, as Editor of *Madras Musings*, has made the publication the voice of Madras, a crusader for the preservation of all that's good in the city's architectural and urban heritage.

I was therefore quite upset when in March 1996 Muthiah, as Editor, announced the imminent death of *Madras Musings* unable as it was to cope with mounting costs and inadequate financial support. *Musings* was then five years old. I felt something needed to be done to keep it going, but at the same time was acutely aware of the lessons learnt when I was seen as being in charge of *Aside*.

I therefore thought of a model by which *Musings* would continue as such, but would be lent regular financial support by a group of Corporates interested in the city's affairs. I spoke to many of my friends, business leaders of the city, and presented them a concrete opportunity to support a rare institution championing the cause of preserving the glory and historical significance of

(Continued on page 7)

# N. Sankar – Beyond Business

When N. Sankar, industrialist and Chairman of the Sanmar Group, passed away on April 17th, 2022, accolades flooded in. 'A born leader', '...a great patron of sports' – his life was described by one media house as 'an innings of understated achievement.'

The slogan of the Sanmar Group reads: 'Where integrity meets excellence' and N. Sankar symbolised those words.

For us at *Madras Musings*, N. Sankar held a very special place, and we will forever be grateful for his support and encouragement, his perceptive understanding of the place this little newspaper deserves in the landscape of the city so dear to him.

N. Sankar – the business magnate, the genius entrepreneur, the visionary...

But there was also N. Sankar the brother, the family man, the friend, the voracious reader, the movie buff, the man who enjoyed the company of friends, evenings of conversation and fun where all work was set aside, all formality given the go-by, where only laughter and camaraderie reigned.

For N. Kumar, his younger brother, Sankar was a protective elder sibling, not exactly a bully, but, Kumar adds with a wink, there was always that tacit understanding that "Big brother was always right – and that continued till the end."

Sankar loved reading, loved his books and, says Kumar, Sankar, ever territorial, was never really happy lending them, and was always particular about getting them back. He loved English movies – Westerns and comedy being his favourite genres. Kumar recalls instances when his big brother tried to sneak into theatres showing A-rated movies, getting caught and being summarily sent away. Adds close friend, R. Ravichandran (Ravi), "His movie/projection room in the basement of his house is one of the best in the city. We have watched countless movies here. One of his favourites was *Kathalikka Neramillai*. And Sankar was particularly fond of T.S. Baliah's role in the movie and could repeat his dialogues at will, doing a great job imitating Baliah."

Ravi recalls, "Knowing Sankar's adulation for Madhuri Dixit, his wife Chandra, with son Vijay's help, arranged a surprise dinner for Sankar for his 60th birthday. Every nook and cranny of the banquet hall was filled with photos and cut-outs of Madhuri Dixit. Many of us came in early to watch Sankar's reaction when he walked into the Banquet Hall. It was one of

the best Kodak moments I have seen. Our friend enjoyed the evening thoroughly with Madhuri everywhere he looked."

Very correct in demeanour always, Sankar could cut loose if required. Friends recall him turning up in Wimbledon colours for a friend's sports-themed birthday party. Another time, at a party thrown in honour of a columnist friend, he arrived sporting the theme colours and in addition wearing a tie fashioned out of a newspaper, as a salute to the friend.

Among singers, his favourites reflected his generation – Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, Harry Belafonte, Pat Boone, Petula Clarke, and Doris Day. He had a large collection of records, as he did videos, laser discs and CDs.

Was he a technology buff? Well, says Kumar, not exactly, but being Sankar, he always foresaw the impending arrival of change, and so made sure he was ahead of the curve, ensuring the latest in technology was installed in the offices. Theirs was the first company to link every office through telecommunications radar. Every office had a hotline.

He was a keen sportsman, with a special passion for Tennis. He trained under T.K. Ramanathan, Krishnan's father. A very ferocious competitor, Sankar won several tournaments. He suffered an attack of polio when he was around 17 and was in bed for six months. But he fought back, returned to tennis, and won tournaments again. C.G.K. Bhupathi said he was 'a beast on the courts', even though he could not move much. Full of grit, he wanted no sympathy, says his brother. His passion for the game led him to become instrumental in rebuilding TNTA to what it is today. He developed the city league (maybe the only league in India) and renamed it the Sanmar League. Ravi adds: "When Sankar suffered his illness when young, he was advised not to walk for a brief period. To keep him engaged, his father, Mr. K.S. Narayanan, rented movies for Sankar to watch at home. His fondness for movies started at that time and he enjoyed them all through his life."

A brilliant student, he was an engineer by degree, but just as good an accountant, and never shied away from responsibility, growing into a leader who rebuilt many institutions. For Kumar, his brother embodied 'Detached Attachment'

as preached in the *Gita*. 'This was his motto', says Kumar. Sankar was equally passionate about cricket, and when he took over Jolly Rovers, he built the team up quietly over the years, and developed the ground into one of the best in Chennai, as commented by Sachin Tendulkar. No money was ever spared in the development of the sports he loved. Charity comes as naturally as breathing with the Sanmar group, a trait inherited by both Sankar and Kumar from their father, the primary areas being sports and everything health related.

Sankar loved travelling, and as only to be expected, he was very particular about all arrangements, looking into every detail.

According to Ravi, the trips Sankar and his friends made to various cities the world over to watch cricket or tennis were truly memorable, with Sankar ensuring everyone had a blast.

He loved company, al-



Sankar with Sunil Gavaskar when the latter was made honorary member of the MCC.

Manas, had come out to meet him.

Other stalwarts like Rahul Dravid and Anil Kumble too never failed to make the effort to walk up to the Box to greet Sankar.

Sankar enjoyed good liquor, collected wines, and was very particular about food. In Chennai, his favourite haunt was

Sankar pointed to me and told the manager that I was a director of a Tata company, adding that if we were served immediately, we would not take offence and let bygones be bygones. Obviously unimpressed, the canny manager told us politely that he was so sorry, his hands were tied, and he could do nothing to help us. We understood. Loosely translated, the message was: "Your friend could be the Mayor of Chennai and you his faithful cohort for all I care, but you need to move now. Try your luck tomorrow." And so, the 'head honchos' of the city's leading business houses quietly slipped away, drowning their rejection at the dinner they were supposed to attend in the first place.

Ravi, an intrinsic part of many a convivial get-together, is in no doubt it is going to take a very long time to accept Sankar's loss.

The same is true of a group of friends who, as Sankar's health showed signs of failing, easily and organically slipped into the habit of visiting him every Sunday evening, a shared love for sports drawing them all together. In time, the group even acquired a name – The Sunday Group. The regulars numbered around twelve to thirteen, and the group met on most Sundays between 7pm and 8.30 pm. On days when India or CSK played, the evenings would last longer. As a general rule, there would be no dinner but several starters, at times specially curated by Sankar's daughter-in-law, Sukanya. Longer evenings meant pizzas ordered in along with home-made *thayir saadam*. Sankar's Sunday invitation went from SMS to WhatsApp to voicemail. Every Sunday, his invite began in exactly the same

● by Ranjitha Ashok

though he was very choosy. He preferred simply structured evenings, among his favourites being spending time at the Madras Cricket Club, in congenial company. And for him, his family came first. As a dutiful son, he looked after their father like a child, when illness and old age took over, says Kumar. He made an adoring grandfather.

Sankar always rented a Box for the IPL matches in Chennai, sometimes on his own or with his good friend, Venkataramani of India Pistons. The box had everything, including food and beverages. Ravi recalls one incident when Manas (Sankar's grandson) was around 4 or 5 years old. "He would come with us for the IPL matches. Around 9:30 dinner would be served. And Sankar used to feed Manas his dinner because he was too little to hold a plate and eat. Once, while we were all having dinner, somebody standing behind us said, "Mr Sankar, isn't that the most satisfying, fulfilling thing you have ever done? Feeding your grandson?"

It was Sunil Gavaskar. The Commentators box was right next to Sankar's. And Gavaskar, noticing Sankar feeding

Taj Coromandel, and he had a particular liking for light Italian cooking. According to Ravi, three or four starters were always a must, and predictably he made a meal of them. He was very fond of thin-crust pizza, loaded with veggies, easy on cheese, and no onions. After he was done liberally sprinkling chilli flakes all over the pizza, you couldn't spot the veggies beneath. And, it had to be Tiramisu to finish off the meal.

When two guys with zest for life have been friends for a long, long time, stories will abound, admits close friend L. Lakshman. He recalls one instance, either Deepavali or New Year's Eve. "Sankar and I had a formal dinner to attend at the Taj, Chennai, and we got there a little too early. So we decided to kill time at the bar. To our surprise, we found the whole place empty, and were informed the bar had been booked for the evening, for a private event commencing a little later. Seeing ourselves as head honchos in the fair city of Chennai, with brittle egos to match, this was not to be tolerated. Sankar asked for a word with the bar manager, who merely reiterated the same story. Time was going by, we were getting thirstier, so

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# HIS VIEWS ON MADRAS MUSINGS

(Continued from page 5)

our city. And I must say they rose magnificently to the occasion. A number of organisations, twelve initially, came together to breathe the new life into the fortnightly. The contributions were made as a public service with no advertising revenue or commercial returns, and no individual businessman or group was identified as having any influence over the publication. This avoided any impact on the contributors of critical articles published in *Musings*. Also since the idea was to spread awareness of the history, culture and heritage of the city, it was decided to make the publication a free mailer, and also improve its production values.

Happily the idea worked and continues to work today, *Musings* has not missed a single issue, and has gone from strength to strength over the past 25 years.

A small group of us selected from among the contributors promoted a non-profit company, Chennai Heritage, to take over the publishing of the magazine, and also look at other

initiatives related to the city. A few years ago, when Muthiah raised the issue of his eventual successor, we selected Sriram V. I don't think we could have made a better choice. Apart from his other accomplishments, Sriram's vast knowledge of the city and its history and issues, his inimitable humorous style of writing, and his great chemistry with Muthiah, make for a great partnership and will ensure a seamless transition.

With a devoted band of contributors, including die-hard writers of letters to the editor, *Musings* has managed to convert many a complacent city dweller into an ardent advocate of heritage preservation. With Muthiah and Sriram leading the way, it has spawned heritage groups in the social media, and heritage walks in which men and women of varying backgrounds take part or lead. Its crowning accomplishment is perhaps the Madras Week celebration every August. Started in 2004, it has grown into a full-blown Madras Month and more, fast threatening to rival the December music season in size and variety of

programmes. What *Musings* and the Madras Week have achieved is the creation of significant awareness among the residents of the city of its heritage and the need to conserve it and document it as well. Many of the most enthusiastic participants in all these events through the year and during Madras Week are young people, a most heart-warming development.

I am an avid reader. From Sriram's – or should I say MMM's humorous observations on the peculiarities of the city and its inhabitants, to the many stories of current descendants of Chennai dwellers of years past coming here from all parts of the world to trace their roots, from the constant and strident tirade against the gradual erosion of our heritage buildings, to the shortcomings in providing civic necessities by the city authorities, and so on and so forth, the journal makes for engrossing reading. I have recommended it to many friends with Chennai links living in different parts of India and the world.

Other than exhorting *Musings* to devote more attention to sport in the city, I stay away from influencing what is published, as do the other corporate supporters of the journal.

This Silver Jubilee edition contains some of the best writing on eleven topics chosen by a team of selectors who have obviously done an enormous amount of sifting of material from 600 issues of *Musings*. Each of the selectors has been an important part of the telling of the Madras story over the years, not necessarily as writers, but as enthusiastic travellers in the city's journey with their own individual search for excellence.

It is a book whose time has come with the Metro and other developments essential to the transformation of Chennai into a smart city posing new urban challenges. It will serve to remind us that Madras was India's first city in so many aspects, a leader in education, commerce and industry, health, culture, arts, sport, journalism, and many other fields. To me it promises to be a collector's item, rich in history and wide in its coverage. It is a moment for us to pledge our continued support to the *Madras Musings* movement.

Congratulations to Muthiah, Sriram and their team on this Silver Jubilee, and best wishes for their progress and march towards the Golden Jubilee.

N. Sankar  
Chennai, 23.7.2016

# PATRON OF WORDSMITHS

(Continued from page 3)

access to businesses and key dignitaries within the group to produce first-class, informative features. The team was also given the freedom to travel to various locations and younger colleagues of the Group such as N. Krishnamoorthy, S. Ravi and Ramkumar Shankar contributed articles of their own. Designed to cover every aspect of the Sanmar Group from a corporate giant to a peerless sports patron, *Matrix* is perhaps one of the finest internal publications produced by a corporate house, even today. Apart from *Matrix*, Kalamkriya also produces *Scribbles*, a bi-monthly internal newsletter.

Sankar was also instrumental in saving from oblivion *Sruti*, a publication dedicated to the performing arts and among the best of its kind. The

brainchild of UN official N. Pattabhiraman, *Sruti* flourished as a cultural magazine until its founder passed away. Sanmar stepped in to revive the publication in 2006. The Group saw to the revamp of the magazine's editorial board and helped it identify a new focus to drive engaging content. *Sruti* went on to celebrate its silver jubilee and brought out its 400th issue in 2018.

When it came to his role as the patron of wordsmiths, Sankar worked quietly behind the wings. The magazines he delivered from potential obscurity as well as the publication he built at Sanmar all have one thing in common: they aim to enrich their readers' lives through excellent content, a worthy ideal shared and strengthened by N. Sankar. May his tribe increase.

# BEYOND BUSINESS

(Continued from page 6)

way: 'Gentlemen, this is Sankar. I will be delighted if you can join me...'

If, in the heat of watching a game, some members forgot themselves and hurled fruity curses at the TV, Sankar was always cool and quite enjoyed the histrionics.

The purpose of the Sunday group was always '...fun, friendship, and fellowship - no serious stuff...' to quote a couple of regulars.

Chandra Sankar has expressed her belief that these meetings went a long way in helping Sankar stay positive and cheerful as illness slowly claimed him.

Ravi says: "Just two months ago, our Sunday group met at Sankar's house and had a wonderful, happy time. Little did we know then that it would be the last time that we were destined to be with this wonderful person. Each of us, in his own way, is struggling to accept this."

You listen to all they have to say, and then you have to ask: What is it about Sankar that made him 'Sankar'?

According to Kumar, Sankar was the very personification of an ideal mentor.

For L. Lakshman, Sankar, for all his hard-charging, professional demeanour, was 'Mr. Compassion personified'.

For Ravi, the answer is: Pure Class, Dignity, Charm and Charisma, and these qualities came both naturally and abundantly.

In spite of his tremendous success in business, he had somehow developed a tremendous sense of equanimity – Samatvam – staying in sharp focus, but also balanced in approach to work. While he certainly appreciated success, he never allowed it to get the better of him. Equally, he never languished in sorrow when things did not work out.

N. Kumar quietly states, "I will miss his company, his advice. I will miss sharing an evening with him."

This piece, in the interest of deadlines, is perforce but a cursory sample.

You know, of course, that there are many, many more people with countless more stories.

For N. Sankar was among those who, upon departure, leave very large shapes of emptiness in the lives they leave behind.

So how do you overcome such huge gaps in your life?

Perhaps in the way you live your life from this moment on.

In how you view life.

In the decisions, the choices, made.

Integrity, understated excellence, a quiet elegance of mind, measured speech yet a sharp, sometimes even wicked, sense of humour, and an ability to see value in every layer, every shade of life – qualities observed, learnt and incorporated into your life.

Perhaps then, the very real emptiness will fill with value, with meaning.

# MENTOR PAR EXCELLENCE

(Continued from page 2)

Communications was to bring out the quarterly house magazine *MATRIX*. It was 100% NS's baby. Published without a break since 1988, it is a high-quality publication with excellent production values. Some fine editors have been involved in it, but it always bore the unmistakable Sankar stamp. The group's website, and its annual and sustainability reports are likewise classy products, thanks to the chairman's total insistence on their excellence. Publications on the group's more-than-fifty-year-long association with genuine cricket promotion were other unique NS initiatives. My involvement with these gave me great satisfaction.

Sankar was one of the finest patrons of cricket in India. The golden jubilee of the Sanmar family-Jolly Rovers Cricket Club association was made memorable by an emotional gathering at Chennai of all living members of that first champion side in July 2015. A year later the great all-rounder Kapil Dev released a book to commemorate this association. The inaugural K.S. Narayanan

Memorial Oration was delivered on January 30, 2016 by former England cricket captain David Gower. Every year since then, the Oration has maintained its high standards, peaking with the K.S. Narayanan Centenary Oration by former British Prime Minister David Cameron on January 30, 2019.

Books on Tamil Nadu cricket and the Madras Cricket Club were the result of Sankar's passion for chronicling the histories of institutions. His leadership of such bodies as Chennai Heritage and the Chennai Willingdon Corporate Foundation are further examples of his vision that extended far beyond business. He gave more than generously to a variety of charities, and made extraordinary contributions to education. The Sankara Schools and the cricket facilities at IIT Madras stand testimony to this facet of his many-splendoured vision.

"Gone too soon," say many of N. Sankar's admirers. To paraphrase George Bernard Shaw, however, NS's life was "a kind of splendid torch," and he made it "burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

# Sankar and Sport

**“You must dedicate the last page of MM to sports,” was an oft-repeated dictum of N Sankar’s. In fact that was probably the only editorial aspect that he ever expressed an opinion on. We therefore dedicate this last page to his involvement in sport. – Editor**

The Sanmar family has been instrumental in developing domestic cricket for the past five decades. The Sanmar Group has been a serious champion of sport, one of the few Indian corporate houses to offer sustained patronage. The avid interest shown by the founders – K.S. Narayanan, Chairman Emeritus, N. Sankar, Chairman, N. Kumar, Vice Chairman, and Vijay Sankar, Deputy Chairman, has played a major role in the success of the two cricket teams managed by The Sanmar Group – Jolly Rovers (since 1966) and Alwarpet Cricket Club (since 2000).

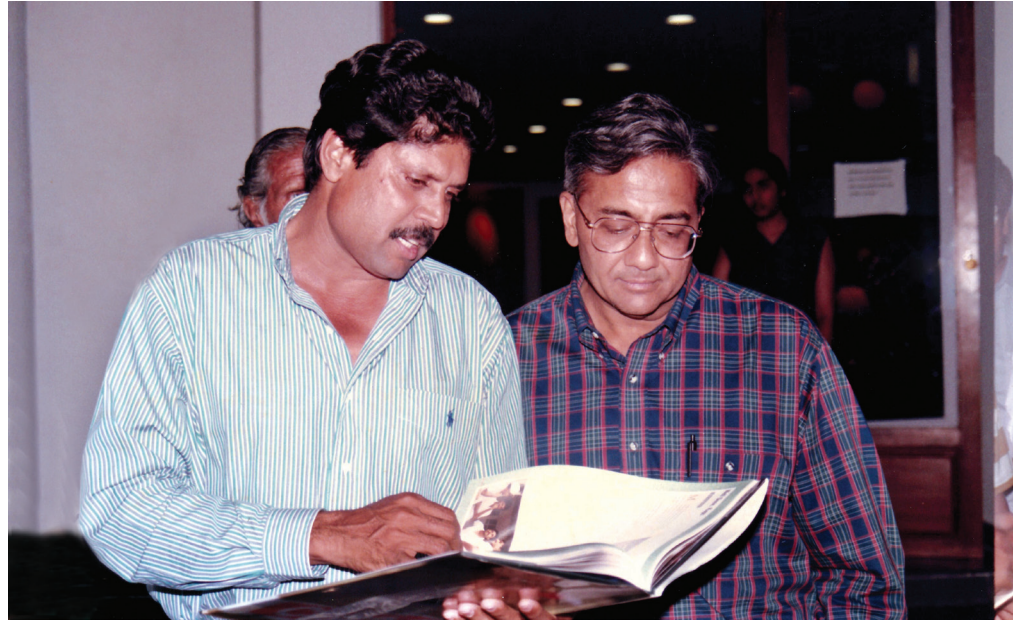
The sporting spirit owes much of its prevalence in Sanmar to K.S. Narayanan.

Both Sankar and Kumar became tennis enthusiasts, being coached in the game by T.K. Ramanathan, the father of R. Krishnan. Undaunted by polio which afflicted him when he was 17 or so, Sankar continued to play the game for as long as he was able. He went on to become the president of the Tamil Nadu Tennis Association (TNTA). “The way I got involved with this body is quite interesting,” begins Sankar. “I got an invite from

MAM Ramaswamy to have tea with him at Chettinad Palace. I went to find several other tennis enthusiasts present. A sumptuous tea was served and at the end of it I found I was the President. The TNTA needed money – it was in the red to the tune of a few lakhs. I hit upon the idea of asking Rs 10,000 from various corporate houses that were headed by tennis enthusiasts. I appealed to them to help this way for five years. I was however not promising anything in return other than the guarantee that the city would see some good tennis. We went about with the begging bowl. Support came and we turned the corner.”

During his tenure, tennis activity in the city took a distinct upturn. Several tournaments were run. The City League was revitalised, and prize money was introduced. Sanmar was the first sponsor, and continued to sponsor the TNTA City League for over 25 years. The League is now one of the most popular and well-run in the Indian Metros.

It was Sankar’s dream that top-ranking tennis players come back to play in Chennai, just as they had in the 50s and 60s when the National Hard Courts Tournaments and Davis Cup matches took place in the city. In 1992, this became a reality when the TNTA conducted a national level tournament styled ‘The Indian Bank Classic,’ with participation from the current top Indian players like Leander



Sankar with Kapil Dev when the latter was made honorary member of the MCC.

Paes, Ramesh Krishnan and others. Sankar was President of TNTA for two terms, totaling eight years.

Sankar was also President of the Tamil Nadu Cricket Association but it was his father, KSN, who steered India Cements towards nurturing a team, thereby making it one of the very first indigenous corporate entities of India to do so. In 1966, the company became the patron of Jolly Rovers, a first division cricket team of Madras. In 1977/1978, N. Sankar took control of Jolly Rovers. The team was strengthened by strategically picking players, assigning them to appropriate roles in Sanmar and ensuring the best by way of coaching, training, counsel-

ling and monitoring was made available. The bringing in of star cricketer Bharath Reddy made a big difference.

Serious, focused interest in the teams’ performance was led from the top with N. Sankar turning out at many matches and making his notes. Cricket was taken so seriously by the Group that it has a department of 75 people working on it!

Sanmar had attempted to sponsor different grounds like the University Union Ground and then the facility belonging to the Vivekananda College, but they didn’t last too long. However in 1995 Sanmar signed a deal with IIT-Madras. The IIT Sanmar Ground, was declared open by the cricketing legend Neil Harvey. All staff,

with respect to this ground, is paid by Chemplast. There are 10 employees, with a Supervisor, who are available at the ground round the clock. The Indian Team practised in this ground for the 2011 World Cup.

2016 marked 50 years of one family being involved with a single team and this was a matter of pride both for Chemplast and Jolly Rovers. The celebrations saw the release of a book on Jolly Rovers, written by V. Ramnarayan, a first class cricketer himself with a long association with Sanmar. The Group had earlier sponsored *Mosquitoes and Other Jolly Rovers, the story of Tamil Nadu cricket*, a book by the same author.

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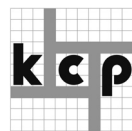


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