The city of Madras that is Chennai is now one large excavation. Every road resembles a surgery, with a patient having been opened up, awaiting an operation. There are three principal agencies at work – the Chennai Metrorail Limited, TANGEDCO and Chennai Corporation. While the first is a long-drawn project, to last over many years, the other two are (hopefully) time-bound and need to be completed before the monsoons set in. If the experience of the last few years are anything to go by and the rains are as intense, we need functional roads if we are to survive. The question is, are these agencies even addressing this? And how long-lasting will these solutions be?

The methodology of cutting trenches seems to be primitive to last over many years, the one who digs rarely is the person who executes the repair work to be completed in the trenches. The Corporation thus finds itself facing the task of relaying 1,737 roads in the city, and this needs to be completed by October when the rains come. But will the work on the storm-water drains be completed by then? Or is this yet another (Continued on page 2)

Chennai’s second airport at Parandur – A mixed bag of hope and apprehension

The construction of the city’s proposed second airport at Parandur, approximately 68 kilometres from Chennai Central, is expected to commence in a couple of years with a projected outlay of Rs. 20,000 crores. It has been a longstanding view that Chennai requires a new airport. The passenger traffic at the Meenambakkam facility is said to be among the busiest in the country, serving around 2.2 crore passengers a year; reports claim that it will reach saturation point at 3.5 crore annual passengers, even whilst taking into account current expansion plans. Unsurprising, then, that the usual employment of manual labour and a few machines and the process is slow, whilst the marking of places to be cut and the actual excavation there is long hiatus and as is usual, there are no plans in place for alternate routes for motorists or for that matter pedestrians. Rather than progressively cut through a locality and close up the same way, entire stretches of roads are dug up, leaving whole areas inaccessible. What was the necessity for this when the team that does the actual rectification post the digging up seems understaffed to take on such a large area? Would it not have been better to progress step by step? The problem lies in the contract system – the one who digs rarely is the person who executes the repair work to be completed in the trenches. The Corporation thus finds itself facing the task of relaying 1,737 roads in the city, and this needs to be completed by October when the rains come. But will the work on the storm-water drains be completed by then? Or is this yet another (Continued on page 2)

Wishing our Readers a Happy Madras Week

We are pleased to present the events we have lined up for Madras Week. The schedule for all programs (unless specified) is as follows: 6.00 pm – 6.30 pm: Refreshments, 6.30 pm - 7.30 pm: Programme.

1. Sunday, August 21 – A Tribute to SPB. Talk by actor and writer Mohan V Raman at GRT Convention Center, T. Nagar.
3. Tuesday, August 23 – Historian & Madras Musings Editor Srijan V, in conversation with pioneering social activist Poornam Natarajan at the Museum of Possibilities, Triplicane.
4. Wednesday, August 24 – Tête à Tête with Manuel Aaron. Anchor and commentator Sumanth Raman in conversation with chess legend Manuel Aaron at Hotel Maris, Cathedral Road.
5. Thursday, August 25 – Culinary Notes From Madras: Tracing the influences of communities that were integral to the city of Madras. Talk by Rakesh Raghunathan at Hanu Reddy Residences.
6. Friday, August 26 – Staging Kalki’s Ponniyin Selvan. Talk by artist and director Pravin Kannanur at Hotel Saver, Mylapore.
7. Friday, 6.30 pm - 8.00 pm – Activism in Tamil cinema Music. Live concert anchored by film-maker K. Hartharan and music producer Subhasree Thirumurugan at Goethe Institut auditorium, Max Mueller Bhavan, Rutland Gate.
8. Saturday, August 27, 4.00 pm - 6.00 pm – Digital Chennai: How Chennai companies are riding the digital wave. Panel discussion featuring Vikas Chawla (Co-founder, Social Beat) and Jagadeesh Kumar (Co-founder, Indus Valley) moderated by business advisor and IIM Ahmedabad alumni Chandu Nair at Chamiers, RA Puram.
9. Saturday, August 27, 8.00 pm - 9.00 pm – The Cryptic Chennai Quiz by Ashwin Bhandarkar, hosted online.
10. Sunday, August 28, 4.00 pm - 6.00 pm – Fuelling Chennai. Fitness experts Raj Ganpath, (co-founder and coach, The Quad), Vikram Menon, (co-founder and coach, Wild Warrior Race), Anusha Swamy, (Pole Art coach) and Ashwarya Manivannan (International Silambam champion) in conversation with pioneering social activist Poornam Natarajan at the Museum of Possibilities, Triplicane.

Most importantly, the 4,500 acres of land that Pannur has to offer does not come with the environmental complications that Parandur does – a pre-feasibility study conducted by the Airports Authority of India (AAI) has revealed that of the 4,791 acres of land marked for the new airport, 2,605 are wetlands. The city is no stranger to the fallout of paying scant attention to wetlands – in (Continued on page 2)
The natural bonhomie of Chennaiites never fails to set the scene for Madras Musings. We, much like the rest of the country, love to prove that the world we live in is a much more diverse and welcoming place, even if it is a new acquaintance and the conversation will invariably reveal that he or she is a close ally, a neighbor, a cousin, overseas colleague, or boss. This social correlation, however, is often a front art as a recent comedy of errors revealed.

The Eternals, have at present, taken up residence in a new abode at Padur since their home at Alwarpet is undergoing a thorough study on gradients. Rather predictably, what was meant to be a stay of 30 days is now in its third month—time enough for the Eternals to have made a set of new friends at the apartment complex they are currently gracing with their presence. The nature of the decision to leave at the time of principle of six degrees of separation made an appearance.

It all started when (Wo)MMM planned a small dinner party at the new home—it had been a while since the family had spent time with each other, she thought, so the idea was put forward to her parents (hence dubbed the Betterlums for sake of clarity) into a car and whisked them away to Padur. In hindsight, (Wo)MMM should have been braced for an evening of strangeness for pater Eternal-opposed to his Daisy’s Parandur in his; in fact, he practi-
cally hopped from one foot to the other, sharply turning to everyone inside, loudly claiming that he had a surprise in store. One of his neighbours, crowed pater Eternal, was none but a very close friend—nay, a long-lost comrade—of pater Bet-
ternal. The latter raised a brow questioningly. Here is your home on winged feet to resur-
cend a project as Chennai Metrotail but it will be worth-
while in the long run.

THE GREAT DIG

(Continued from page 1)
of those piecemeal solutions that our civic body is so well
known for? The pressure to deliver a solution that will prevent
flooding in various parts of the city is quite intense on the
authorities and all eyes are on the stormwater drain con-
struction that is ongoing. Its work does not complete by October, but
only goes on to complicate that by which we mean the absence of flooding, public
ire can be hard to bear. The present administration got by last year chiefly because it was newly elected then, but
the same consideration may not hold this October.

Chennai's flooding presents many challenges, the most obvious one being the lack of gradient. Over the years what we have had are a series of haphazard solutions that have only ever been short-term matters. Each relaying of a road or a footpath and each new construction alters the topog-
ography, leading to sharp changes in defining what were earlier sinks for rainwater. The
Corporation hardly ever looks at such details when it is meant to precisely that, and what is then
created is unbelievable chaos. The instances of streets where the gradient has com-
pletely changed direction over the years. The construction of just one high rise in a locality can have an altogether complex transformation for the worse. Having been silent on all of this, how does the Corporation hope to change the situation all on its own?

The problem of rising road levels is now a serious menace. Entire streets and buildings within them find themselves of roads, making them natural targets for flooding. The Corporation's latest attempt at relaying of roads indicates it has not mended its ways on this aspect too. How then can the problem of flooding be addressed?

Let's face it, while the present activity may be good enough (hopefully) for now, there needs to be a thorough study on gradients, slopes and violations therein. The Corporation needs to em-
brace more a sense of responsibility. The
Corporation hardly ever looks at such details when it is meant to precisely that, and what is then

CHENNAI’S SECOND AIRPORT AT PARANDUR

(Continued from page 1)

fact, neither is the Chennai airport itself, which was left devastated by the 2015 floods. Pictures emerged then of air-
planes floating in the floodwater; residential areas en-
forced the Chennai airport into closure for nearly four
days. It is surprising, then, that Parandur seems to have been finalised in the absence of an
environmental study that details the repurcussions of building such a facility on wetlands – as experts point out, it will affect the stability of the construction as well as leaving it open to possible flooding during the monsoon season. Further, it is undeniable that the project will have an impact on the local biosphere. Blessed with many water bod-
ies as it is, Parandur attracts a rich number of migratory birds which breed during the winter months in Vedanthangal. A new airport and the development that will follow in its wake will not only rob the local wildlife of pristine territory but also, the birds, many fear, may pose a threat to air traffic as well.

As for the residents of Parandur, they are reported to be quite unhappy with the
decision themselves. Parand-
dur is largely farmland and a majority of the population is said to rely on agriculture to make a living – a significant number are, in fact, reportedly employed under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Em-
nployment Scheme. Parandur has no other major industry, a fact that details the repercussions of those piecemeal solutions

SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION

The Woman from Madras Musings is always entertain-
ed by how inventive our city commuters can get when it comes to skirting traffic disruptions. They have all risen commendably to the current challenge at hand, which is that the roads in the city have been left dug up for some project or the other. In (Wo)MMM’s own locality, a stretch of road that help bypass main-road traffic are mangled, making their congestion as bad or worse than the main roads – but habits are hard to change, and most commuters are de-
termined to stay loyal to their favourite short cut. Every day, (Wo)MMM turns into the side streets hoping that others would choose to go by the main road – and every day she discovers that everyone else is doing the same. A great din of honking invariably follows, tempers growing quite indignant at the cheeky few driving against the traffic flow, until at last, she may revert to a less to untangle while the traf-

Pavement Pavement

The Woman from Madras Musings wishes all MMM’s happy 75th Independence Day! Did you raise a flag at home as part of Har Ghar Tiranga? (Wo)MMM’s home rallied to the call. A flag was bought from the nearest post office and the home now proudly displays it at a tri-

colour at the front. May we as citizens celebrate our fortunes and surge ahead to greater heights, bravely meeting faults and challenges with resilience and pride.

— (Wo)MMM

SHORT ‘N’ SNAPPY

Tampa’s Pavement Pavement

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ed by how inventive our city commuters can get when it comes to skirting traffic disruptions. They have all risen commendably to the current challenge at hand, which is that the roads in the city have been left dug up for some project or the other. In (Wo)MMM’s own locality, a stretch of road that help bypass main-road traffic are mangled, making their congestion as bad or worse than the main roads – but habits are hard to change, and most commuters are de-
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colour at the front. May we as citizens celebrate our fortunes and surge ahead to greater heights, bravely meeting faults and challenges with resilience and pride.

— (Wo)MMM
‘Parcel’ debate

In your Short N' Snappy column (MM, July 16-31, 2022) you have narrated the receipt of a bulky package (containing books) sent by a well-known diabetic clinic which was mistaken for medicines by your family members.

You state "Raging debates had reportedly ensued over the next few days about whether (Wo)MMM could have diabetes".

Are we the readers to understand that you received a package but did not (care to) open for a few days? Is this normal behaviour? A person receives a package and does not open it for a few days. I am tempted to insinuate – are you so busy? Or did you want to have some fun at the expense of your family members? That would be very churlish of me (to insinuate).

Nonetheless you owe your readers an explanation.

Gautam
gautham45@yahoo.com

A fair point, sir. The truth is that the courier was not brought to (Wo)MMM’s attention at all for quite a few days. Much like an ostrich, the family had hoped that turning a blind eye to the package would somehow resolve the troublesome issue at hand. It was the better half who brought the courier to (Wo)MMM’s attention and ushered in the long-overdue denouement.

– (Wo)MMM

Reg. neglect of trees

Shobha Menon bemoans the neglect of the trees in our city Madras, that is Chennai and rightly so (MM, July 1st, 2022). She has given numerous suggestions for the care and well-being of our trees. However there is one aspect that to the best of my knowledge has not been addressed.

I refer to the base of the tree, where it emerges from the ground. In most cases the cemented pavement encompasses the base of the tree completely. In other cities I have seen a steel frame and grille about four feet square that is fixed around the tree. The soil is dug for a few inches and replaced with small pebbles. I suppose this helps water percolation. The grille is flush with the pavement.

Shobha Menon can take up the matter with the Greater Chennai Corporation to install such steel grilles for our city trees. She states “trees that line our roadsides must matter to all citizens across professions, ages and income groups.” In residential areas, behind every tree is an apartment complex or house. Why not involve the residents to take responsibility for a tree that is just outside their compound wall. Will social media help? If such a move is initiated, it will be the joy of this writer to sponsor the first three grilles.

She concludes “Can more citizens come together to speak up for these gentle beings who are our lifelines, please?” She has given the clarion call but sadly there has not been much of a response. Citizen apathy?

Gautham
gautham45@yahoo.com

Obstacle race on Chennai pedestrian walkway

Chennai roads particularly the walkways (so called) offer a fascinating variety of obstacles that make a stroll down the walkways truly adventurous. The small stretch of walkway between our residence on Westcott Road, Royapettah and the neighbouring Wesley High School/Meston College compound offers a delightful mix of ordinary and rare obstacles. I am attaching photos of a few samples, captured this morning. The holy cow, of course, is a rare sight, one that made a special appearance just today.

Truly, nadai jauthai nadappatharke. Really!

Balakesari
3/1, Rams Kesari Kuteeram, 22, Westcott Road
Royapettah, Chennai 600014

Boating in the Canal

With respect to the article in MM, July 16th, please see the photo taken behind my apartment of the Canal below the MRTS line between Mandaveli and Greenways Road.

The picture shows two Corporation employees in a boat which shows the canal is deep enough. But the MRTS line on top and a road on this side of the canal will make the Canal as a regular waterway carrying heavy goods as in the distant past? At the most, a few pleasure boating is possible, provided drainage is not let into the canal anywhere in the city.

Dr G. Sundaram, IAS (R),
A-601, “Dugar Apartments”
Keshav Perumal Puram
Greenways Road
Chennai 600 028
In celebration of Madras Week, we’re pleased to present a series of photographs encapsulating moments of everyday life in our city. The photos are the work of Rekha Vijayashankar, a self-taught photographer and recipient of the Kanavu Fellowship awarded by the Chennai Photo Biennale Foundation.

-- The Editor

Rekha Vijayashankar
Memories of Luz Church Road

V. Sriram’s translated excerpts from, Ambujamal’s autobiography (A Long Lost Luz Church Road – MM, May 16th, 2022) prompts me to recollect my own memories of the road in the period 1943-1960. In May 1943, when I was five, my father died prematurely and my mother with seven children shifted from our house in T.Nagar to The Retreat, the bungalow then situated next to the Church where my grandfather lived with his wife and his sister. My late great-grandfather, Dr. H. Rangappa, who had bought the 12 ground plot with the bungalow, was one of the earliest and well-established doctors in Mylapore. For his visits, he had a proper horse-drawn coach and also a smaller version called ‘Llandau!’ We thus had two huge rooms for their storage and stables for the horses, with the one for the coach having an 18 ft high roof!

Both coaches were gone after he died. Grand-father was a retired government servant who was voluntarily collecting funds for the charitable dispensary run by the Ramakrishna Math. His sister, Yamuna Bai, was the Principal of the Madras Veer Sadan and a hand-drawn Rickshaw took her to the school daily, stayed there and brought her back. Another Rickshaw took us younger children to school and back. The two Rickshaw-men also acted as gardeners.

The spacious bungalow had a huge central hall with two big rooms on either side with an adjoining long narrow room. The flooring was about 5 ft. above the ground. A 20 ft. wide covered verandah formed the entire front of the bungalow with the central portion extended (See pic). A separate 3000 sq. ft. kitchen unit was located at a lower level behind the main house. It had a spacious kitchen with a big dining hall (where we dined, sitting on the floor) and space for hand-grinding and hand-pounding activity, a 30 sq. ft. open-to-sky area in the center with a netting-roof for drying condiments. On its side, separated by a passage, was the bath-room and a room for storing firewood as the only source of energy then for heating water or for cooking was fire-wood! A line of four Indian-type closets was located at the S.W. end with a water-tank at one end for hand-flushing. There was not even a toilet within the main house! This came only around 1955! There was a 12 ft Verandah abutting all the rooms on the south side where the servants rested. The first floor had four rooms with a covered verandah above the one on the ground floor but with no water supply.

In front was the huge garden with four huge mango trees, a huge neem tree, six coconut palms, a naartangha (citrus medica) tree, a silk-cotton tree, several flowering trees and plants spread along the three sides. Castor oil was made at home from the seeds of the castor plant (Ricinus communis) in the garden. A continuous fence of arali (Neurium oleander) on all three sides except the gate area protected the flowering shrubs and plants from depredation by cattle. In the center was a huge magniflumia (mimusops elengi) tree whose branches spread all around like an open umbrella. A huge number of flowers fell daily on the ground below and many a passer-by came, sought permission and collected them.

One of the games played by us along with our school-friends was one person had to catch others, with all on trees and one could move from one tree to another directly or by getting down from one and climbing on another! In the mango season, we enjoyed keeping track of mangoes ripening and eat them on the tree itself before the smart crows got to them! There was also a Rangoon Cherry tree which yielded small delicious cherries in plenty.

Only three buses were in operation in Mylapore – No.12 from Triplicane to T.Nagar, No.3 from Mylapore Tank to Parys and No.5 from Adayar to Parys. The only taxi available was from Karpagavalli Taxi Service situated on the bank of the Buckingham Canal on Brodies Road (now R.K.Math Rd.). Road lighting was poor. After dark, cyclists had to fix a small kerosene lamp with a wick to the front handle as if it made a difference! Those without it were fined a royal sum of one rupee!

Luz Church Road then housed several legal luminaries. As one moved from Luz, there was a big plot on the north side which housed the Issue Dept. of the Reserve Bank. Next was the home of the well-known cricketer, V. Baliah. Then came the home of the eminent lawyer, V. Krishnaswami Iyer and his two sons, lawyer-litterateur K. and Balasubrahmanya Iyer and litterateur K. Chandrasekharan. On the next plot was YMIA and the entire area behind it, where Karpagambal Nagar now stands, was empty and an R.S.S. Shaka used meet there daily. On the south side, after a large residential plot at the junction, was the Mylapore Club followed by the Ranade Library and the South Indian National Association. Many were the meetings in the Library Hall addressed by Litterateurs and Freedom Fighters. Its neighbour Sri Ragh, adjoining Luz Avenue, was the home of Nageswara Rao Pantulu, Founder of Amrutanjan. Then came Aarathoo Kutta, a tank which was a favourite haunt for fishing. Adjoining the tank was (and still is) Durga Bai Deshmukh’s Andhra Mahila Sabha. Next came Sir K. Sivipriya Iyengar’s house. Sir K.S. was a multi-faceted personality who had been a law member of the British Governor’s Council, Advocate-General, Vice-Chancellor of a University and a judge of the Madras High Court. Interestingly, according to Mr. Amrudil, the great-grandson of Sir K. Siviraya Iyengar, the Tank belonged to several of the neighbouring residents. Sir Iyengar owned a 12 grounds portion of it and Sri. Nageswara Rao owned the major part of it. All donated their shares to the Corporation which filled it up with all the litter it collect and Nageswara Rao Park emerged.

After the branching of Luz Church Street leading to the Church came an empty plot belonging to the Church and then a passage to it from Luz Church Road. Then came the beautiful house, The Retreat. The entire area on the north of our house, up to Oliver Rd., belonging to the Church (where St. Isabel’s Hospital is now located), was full of wild trees, of which the Church was called Kaattukkovi! It was home to wild cats, bandicoots and snakes. Many were the snakes and bandicoots that entered our compound and had to be killed. The main house was connected to the kitchen by a raised covered verandah open on both sides. This was a favourite spot for relaxing in the evenings and at night. As the roofing of the single-storey kitchen unit was made of curved tiles, scorpions and centipedes often visited this area and had to be killed!

Opposite our plot was a huge field, reaching Bheemanpet, on which grains were grown and harvested till the early fifties! Adjoining it was a passage leading to Sylvan Lodge followed by the Ranade Club and the Ramakrishna Mission. Then came our huge house, the home of the eminent lawyer, one of the chief architects of India’s Constitution. His son, Alladi Ramakrishna was the Director of the well-known theoretical research institution, “M-Science”, Next-door was Justice N. Rajagopala Iyengar. Then came D’Silva Rd. In the house opposite Alladi’s (and adjacent to our house) lived Justice M. Patanjali Sastri who later became the Chief Justice of India. Sastri’s neighbour was C.S. Ramana Saheb, a well-known lawyer. At the junction of Luz Church Rd. with Oliver Rd., lived Justice C.A.Vadyalingam of the Madras High Court and his brother.

After D’Silva Rd. came Ambujammal’s father’s mansion. My memory fails in recollecting the owner of the huge adjacent plot where the Madras State Apex Co-operative Bank and the M.Ct.M Scoll are now located.

In 1960, as grand-father was unable to manage the house, we got our T.Nagar house released from Government Acquisition (Continued on page 7)
Chakkarai, cheeni, askā in the 1970s Madras

Many of us in Madras may recall that white sugar, chakkarai (spoken Tamil), was popular as cheeni (rather than cheeni-ch-chakkarai) and askaa as well, in the 1970s. Gritty, crystalline, particulate vellam (jaggery), as against the urindai-vellam (mandai-vellam), is sarkarai—a term that originates from Sarkaraa (Sanskrit). Historically Sarkaraa meant 'gravelly', 'gritty', and 'dirty', although these meanings have lost currency presently. Sangam period Tamil people primarily used honey as the sweetening agent. The extraction of the unbleached, crystalline sugar from sugar cane (species of Saccharum, Poaceae) is indicated in the Rig Veda (1500-1000 BC). Patanjali’s Mahabharata (estimated 2nd Century BC) speaks of crystalline form of unbleached, crystalline sugar. International sugar technologists indicate this sugar type as ‘brown sugar’, although this term means differently in India presently.

The term cheeni started in usage in Calcutta and gradually spread to the rest of India, including Madras. Yang-tai Chow, a Chinese immigrant, and a few of his fellow Chinese, arrived in Calcutta in 1778 to work in the developing Calcutta harbour. In the next few months, these Chinese men established a sugar mill there, because China had already mastered industrial-level sugar production. Following the technique then known in Europe, Yang-tai and colleagues produced refined sugar, removing the particulate impurities in extracted sugar. Yang-tai et al.’s product came to be referred as cheeni in Bengal, because it was produced by the Chinese. However, it needs to be noted that the term cheeni originated from Arabic, and with the sugar produced by the Chinese in India, the term sugar spread throughout India via Urdu.

Now to askaa. Askaa (presently, Aska) is a small town in Ganjam, a district of the erstwhile wider Madras Presidency and now in Odisha. What is today known as the Aska Sugar Works and Distillery Limited (ASWDL) was established by the popular business group of Madras, the E.I.D. (East India Distilleries) Parry & Company (hereafter ‘Parry’-s) in 1856. The Parrys—started by Thomas Parry in Madras in 1788—established their sugar (jaggery) mill in Nellicuppam, presently under the Cuddalore city administration) in 1842. Shortly after, the Parrys established the Aska sugar mills to produce unbleached crystalline sugar, because Aska region farmed substantial volume of sugarcane, as was in Nellikuppam–Cuddalore region. However, transportation was a major hiccup for the Parrys administration in Madras and Aska sugar mills in Aska. One Frederick Joseph Vivian Minchin, a book-keeper with the Binny & Company in Madras procured the Aska sugar mills from the Parrys in 1856 and ran it successfully for the next couple of decades. Frederick Minchin produced refined, bleached sugar by introducing the available latest German technology. Minchin obtained the state-of-the-art European sugar technology known in the large-scale production of sugar from sugar beet. A six-page write-up on the production system and economies of the Aska sugar mills by Lt. Col. E. C. Cotton of the Madras Engineers is available in Madras Journal of Literature & Science, II (N.S., XVIII, O.S.), published in 1858 (dated 1857). The refined, bleached sugar from the Aska production unit marketed in Madras in the early decades of the 20th century came to be referred as aska, as with the silk of Kanchipuram referred in spoken Tamil as Kanchi, Kanchipuram in spoken Tamizh.

Industrial production of sugar from sugarcane in India and other south-eastern nations was largely stimulated by the industrial production of sugar from sugar beet in the mid-19th century. In 1747, Andreas Sigismund Marggraf of the Prussian empire discovered that sugar-beet tubers include as much sucrose as sugarcane did. Through selective breeding, sugar content in sugar beets was raised to 16 per cent in the early 1800s. Modern hybrids of sugar beet include up to 20 per cent sucrose, matching with the sucrose content of sugarcane. In 1801, Franz Carl Achen, a student of Marggraf, opened the world’s first beet sugar factory in Silesia (on the banks of the Oder, modern Poland). Production process was refined over time to make beef sugar production more effective. By 1850, beet sugar was able to compete with the production and pricing of cane sugar, essentially produced in warm countries such as the West Indies and Indonesia.

In the past, ‘bone char’ (natural, activated carbon obtained by burning animal bones) was used as a decolorizing filter to remove the coloured particulate impurities from raw cane sugar. Bone char filters enabled the sugar of sugar-cane source in particular to stay white. Modern technology has largely replaced the use of bone char by using granulated carbon instead. Because bone char used to be prepared by incinerating animal bones, obtaining the left active carbon—a bit like making wood charcoal, some of the highly conservative temple administrations in southern India, e.g., Guruvayur Sri Krishnan Koil, reject refined white sugar in the temple’s dedicated foods.

In spite of a rich sugar legacy and knowledge of sugar extraction from sugar cane in India, India experienced severe sugar shortage in the early decades of the 20th century. The knowledge that sugar content could be improved with selective breeding inspired Indian plant breeders to seek better options via selective breeding of sugarcane. Research centres to develop sugarcane hybrids were established in India and the Sugarcane Breeding Institute (SBI), adjacent to the Madras Agricultural College (earlier in Saidapet, Madras, and presently in Coimbatore) made great strides in changing the sugar production complex in India. The most remarkable science in this direction was by Tiruvadi Sanniasivam Venkataraman (1884-1963).

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Letters to the Editor

Dear Readers,

Please email all your letters, comments, additional remarks, brickbats and bouquets to editor@madramusings.com

— THE EDITOR
Amrutanjan and an American Chess Legend

The Chess Olympiad of 2022 has just ended. We, in Chennai, can be proud of having hosted an international event in style. But believe it or not the seeds for this event may have been sown fifty years ago.

How so? At the height of the Cold War, American Bobby Fischer, a self-taught genius, defeated the defending world champion Boris Spassky. This was in 1972. The World Chess Championship was held in the Icelandic capital of Reykjavik. Fischer showed the world that the Soviet Union could be beaten at chess. Manuel Aaron, who had become India’s first International Master in 1961, attests that the seismic event had reverberations even in distant Chennai.

“I started the Tal Chess club in the Soviet Cultural Centre in 1972,” Aaron toldScroll.in. "And I even studied Russian, I have a diploma, to be able to read the books. They saw that I was the national champion and that I was studying the language, so they asked me if I could start the chess club there. At that time, one has to remember they were the Soviet Union and they wanted to propagate their views everywhere and they looked at Chennai and me as a possibility for their propaganda.”

Before Tal Chess Club – named for the diminutive chess champion Mikhail Tal from Soviet Latvia – there were no serious chess clubs in Chennai. In his excellent article forScroll.in, How Chennai became the chess capital of India, Ashish Magotra writes that the IM began to give regular lectures about chess theory at the club in Alwarpet. A very young Viswanathan Anand attended these lectures regularly, Aaron recalls. The Tal Chess Club also organised weekend competitions – so the players could try and put all that chess theory into practice. In 1983, Anand, a 13-year-old, beat Aaron. The rest, as they say is history.

In 2006, just two years before he passed away, Fischer asked to meet Anand, who was visiting Iceland for a chess event. He sent word through the Icelandic Grandmaster Helgi Olafsson. By then, the American chess genius, who was in exile in Iceland, had grown reclusive, paranoid, and eccentric but his mind was still that of an elite chess player. Perhaps, the lonely genius wanted to meet someone who, like him, had never trained in any system, but took on the formidable Russians and won.

Anand has spoken of this memorable meeting in many interviews since. But what took the legend from Chennai most by surprise was this request from Fischer. “Did he happen to be carrying bottles of the pain balm Amrutanjan?” Apparently, Fischer first discovered this product in the Indian grocery stores of New Jersey. He liked this lemon-yellow pain balm. He had been looking for it in many cities the world-over. Could Anand and his wife help him lay his hands on some? Fischer even took down the couple’s address – although he took great care to ensure that they didn’t know exactly where he lived in Reykjavik.

He seemed to think that the CIA, the American intelligence agency was still closely tracking his whereabouts. Anand and Anu came back to Chennai.

Now, if you recall the come-back of Crazy Thieves, one of Crazy Mohan's finest plays, you may remember the character Chambal Gopi, who was a big user of Amrutanjan. The head of that gang of thieves – the mastermind, if you will – always needed a quick dab of the balm to think up of ideas for clever heists, bank robberies, and the like. His minions kept bottles of Amrutanjan in stock, because, of course, they did not want their boss to run out of ideas. Did Amrutanjan help Fischer think of clever moves, new chess-playing strategies? Or did he, like the rest of us, use it for bodily aches and pains?

Poor paranoid Fischer passed away in 2008 at the age of 65. We will never know if the American in exile was ever able to find his favorite pain balm in the last years of his lonely life. The freedom fighter who formulated the lemon-yellow pain balm, lives on in our memory, thanks to the Nageswara Rao Park in Mylapore, which is named after him. Perhaps, they should hold some informal open-air chess events at the park in memory of Bobby Fischer, Genius and Madman, user of Amrutanjan.