

WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

# MADRAS

## MUSINGS

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## Trouble at the Temple of Arts, and In The Arts

The Temple of the Arts, the historic school founded by the legendary Rukmini Devi, and for many years an institution of national importance, finds itself in the news now for the wrong reasons. This is not the first time this has happened – Kalakshetra has earlier been in the limelight over problems of succession, financial misdemeanours and rampant infighting among staff and interference from seniors who simply refused to fade away. All that was some years ago and it appeared that the institution was getting on with what it was mandated to do. But the latest is of a much more serious nature for it throws open questions not of an administrative nature but good human values. A member of the staff has been accused of predatory behaviour

and it would seem that the institution has not chosen to deal with it to the satisfaction of the affected parties. The question also throws open a larger issue that faces the world of arts in India. What scope of redress do victims have?

● by The Dy. Editor

It was in 2018 that the #MeToo movement surfaced in South Indian performing arts, and by that we mean cinema, theatre, music and dance. Social media became the platform through which victims expressed their distress. Several alleged perpetrators were named, tarred, feathered on social media. One institu-

tion, namely the Music Academy, barred seven artistes from its list of performers. Other bodies in the classical arts got together and founded an Internal Complaints Committee to look into the accusations. Several years later, with not a single complaint being received, most of the accused have returned to positions of power in almost all institutions barring the Music Academy. Some are concert organisers, others are performers, some are both with enough clout to make or break aspiring careers. The record is even worse when it comes to cinema and theatre. There was just no action. The question is, why do the victims remain silent?

The answer lies firstly in the porosity of the system.

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## Magalir Urimai Thogai – exciting, but ambiguous

While presenting the State budget, finance minister Palanivel Thiaga Rajan made a short announcement regarding the Magalir Urimai Thogai, a new cash assistance scheme under which female heads of eligible households will receive Rs. 1,000 every month from the State government. The program is a DMK poll promise and the second major welfare scheme for women from the reigning administration, the first being the provision of free bus rides. Magalir Urimai Thogai has been allocated a budget of Rs. 7,000 crores and will be launched come September 15th, marking Kalaignar Karunanidhi's birth centenary year.

It is to be noted that the administration is working on

the operational guidelines with respect to eligibility, an exercise that is said to be under the direct supervision of the Chief Minister MK Stalin with support from the Special Pro-

● by A Special Correspondent

gramme Implementation department and the Tamil Nadu e-Governance Agency. So far, sections such as Income Tax payees, vehicle owners, GST payees, government employees – Central or State public sector enterprises – and property tax assesseees have been ruled out as beneficiaries. Also ineligible are those covered under the Old Age pension scheme.

The Magalir Urimai Thogai has been warmly welcomed, with the Social Welfare and Women Empowerment Minister Geetha Jeevan dubbing it 'one of the happiest days for women.' It cannot be denied that cash assistance is a key social safety net for women; multiple studies – some during the recent covid crisis as well – conclude that empowering women with cash augurs well for the households for it helps them build a buffer against income shocks and when long-term, save for old age as well. It is hard, however, to ignore the twinge of uncertainty given that the actual beneficiary pool for Magalir Urimai Thogai is yet to be defined, especially considering that there are no

(Continued on page 2)

## HERITAGE WATCH

Mylapore and the Continuity of Tradition

VERY OLD



The Kapaliswarar Temple festival at Mylapore is underway and by the time you get this issue of *MM*, will probably be over. But never mind if you missed it, for there will be one

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OLD



## Trouble at the Temple of Arts, and In The Arts

(Continued from page 1)

It cannot be denied that it takes enormous resilience and a sense of having suffered enough for a victim to come out in the open to make such an accusation. Of course, a few may use it as an opportunity to embark on a witch hunt, but such instances will be rare. But the bigger challenge is of the fear to come out in the open. This is often at the risk of ending a promising career. Most often such a complaint rebounds on the complainant as has been seen at least in one prominent instance in cinema. The accused has got away while the accuser has been rendered jobless.

The second issue is on onus of proof. Where are victims going to get credible proof when many of these instances happened in isolation or at remote locations or several years earlier? The victim has to perforce furnish proof, and this is not likely to exist unless it is in written form which is

highly improbable. The serial predator is a very clever animal. As a consequence, even in Kalakshetra, after an internal enquiry, the complaint was declared closed. That the National Commission for Women is now interesting itself in the matter is small consolation for even that body is likely to be stymied by want of proof. Lastly, most victims are asked as to why they delayed the filing of a complaint. Those who field such a question need to first ponder over how difficult it is for an affected party to come out in the open. It may take years, or worse, never happen.

Ultimately, it boils down to integrity. Can organisations get by on the comfort of lack of proof and other such quibbles? Would it not be far better to take punitive action so that at least future predators know that the cost of such misdemeanours can be high? The answer lies with the so-called custodians of the arts. What if it were to happen to them or their family members?

## MAGALIR URIMAI THOGAI

(Continued from page 1)

further details regarding the scheme's architecture.

A question that arises, for instance, is that of spending guidelines. Will Magalir Urimai Thogai disbursements be unconditional? In his presentation, Palanivel Thiaga Rajan remarked that the scheme stands to be 'a game changer in the socio-economic life of women in the state' and added that 'women heads of families who have been affected adversely by the steep increase in cooking gas price by the Union government and the overall price rise will be benefited by this scheme.' These appear to be mere suggestions, not actual scheme guidelines. The ambiguity is rather surprising, as Tamil Nadu is acclaimed for its well-crafted benefit programs. Take the Pen Kalvi scheme that was announced last year - under this scheme, all girl students from classes six to twelve will be paid Rs. 1,000 a month directly into their bank accounts until completion of undergraduate degree, diploma and ITI courses. The corpus of money that women stand to build is strong encouragement for girls to obtain educational qualifications that hold them in good stead for the job market. The Magalir Urimai Thogai initiative does not seem to be as well strategized.

Of course, it has to be

conceded that the need for conditions on the spend of cash transfers is an ongoing debate - both conditional and unconditional cash transfers have been shown to help their beneficiaries. But it is certainly a key factor that will shape the scheme's intended impact.

Another question that arises is that of post-disbursement audits. Does the administration plan to study the spending trends of Magalir Urimai Thogai transfers? Perhaps more importantly, does it have a plan to encourage impactful outcomes such as a savings corpus? In some countries, unconditional cash assistance schemes are often accompanied by State forums that counsel beneficiaries on long-term financial plans. Which brings us to the next question - what will be the period of enforcement of this scheme? The budget has been allocated this year, but will it continue to be an item in future State budgets? Given that the amount disbursed to individuals - Rs. 1,000 - is arguably modest in the light of the current economy, it is only a long-term, consistent enforcement that stands to bring impactful change to beneficiaries. However, matters are unclear on this front as well.

Ultimately, cash assistance programs must be tightly aligned with the daily lives of their beneficiaries to deliver and sustain social change.

## Airport shenanigans

The Woman from Madras Musings was lounging about on the sofa when a brooding and surly better half emerged from his man cave. A couple of gratuitous arguments later, it transpired that he had to go to the airport to pick up one of the Betternals. Make no mistake - he was quite looking forward to receiving the pater familias; it was the thought of having to drive through the city airport that had put him in such a bad mood. Readers of this column may remember that the better half has seldom come away in cheer from a trip to the airport - something or the other invariably goes just wrong enough to darken his mood. (Wo)MMM offered to go along this time, hoping that her luck would be good enough to offset his own. Alas, lackaday, woe was him - this time too,

the fast tag on the car, which prompted the toll operator to ask the better half for a physical token which he didn't have since the first toll had worked. (Wo)MMM leaned out and put on her most charming smile to explain the situation to the operator, who saw reason quickly enough. "How long?" he asked, flashing her a smile of his own. On learning that they had been inside for less than five minutes, he allowed the car to pass through. Whereupon a rather black-humoured better half negotiated a path to the entrance toll a second time and honked his way to the Madras Coffee House outside the arrivals gate where the Betternal was waiting quite happily, wearing a pair of coolers and a cap. The suitcase was loaded into the boot and the car set off to the exit once again where (Wo)MMM's old friend

doubt - has always accepted their admiration with great grace, and invariably offers to take a selfie with them to their delight.

It happened last week, too. The pater, dressed to the nines in tennis garb, was hurriedly making his way to the car when he was stopped on the road by an ad crew. The ad director - a young woman who had just started an ad agency - was effusive in her praise for the pater, who consented to glow quietly as she told him how fantastic he was. It was only when she pressed forth a request to star in her ad campaign that the pater did a double take. She was to shoot a dog food campaign and now that she had seen him look so wonderfully charming in his tennis clothes, she simply could not think of casting anyone else. The pater

### SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

the Chennai airport got the better of the better half.

It all began with bumper-to-bumper traffic at the airport entrance and only went downhill from there. The crush of cars was worse than usual, to be frank - there seemed to be some sort of confusion about the movement of vehicles and people were trying to change lanes willy-nilly. It didn't help that the better half had to also contend with a black dog that had decided to welcome airport visitors with a series of scintillating stretching exercises - the animal seems to be a resident of the airport, for it was rather impressively unconcerned by all the cars and honking. The better half managed to ease himself into a toll lane with much grumbling, where he was afforded a brief joy - the fast tag operation which usually gives him grief worked without complaint this time and the boom was raised to let him through. Upon which he promptly took the wrong right turn and found himself trundling past the pick-up spot instead of the arrivals gate. There wasn't much to do but to go to the exit toll where it was discovered that the tolls were up to their usual mischief, after all - this one refused to recognize

the operator let her pass with a gentlemanly wave - it had only been another minute, after all.

The ordeal having come to an end, the better half was in much better spirits as he drove the group back home. The car had covered almost half the distance when the Betternal received a call from the airlines. An agent informed him - quite politely - that he had picked up someone else's suitcase and his own was waiting for him at the airport. It transpired that a Famous Actress had been on the same flight as him. "She was gazing at me in such rapt attention that it would have been rude not to look back," explained the Betternal. "That's probably why I picked up the wrong suitcase."

(Wo)MMM ended up driving to the airport this time and what do you know? Everything was as easy as pie; even the tolls worked perfectly. The exit toll operator was delighted to see her and greeted her as an old friend. Such is life.

### Of doppelgangers and delight

They say that each person has seven doubles in the world and the Woman from Madras Musings rather thinks that there is truth in the whole thing. She has been mistaken for someone else on so many occasions that it is hard to brush the theory aside. So has the pater; his encounters, however, are more glamorous for he is regularly mistaken for an as yet unidentified tv star. He has been stopped at the beach and in grocery stores by enthusiastic fans, who shake his hand and compliment him warmly on his extraordinary acting prowess. The pater - never one for self-

looked about shiftily. Sensing that her proposal was in danger of rejection, she said that she had located the sweetest puppy for the shoot and that he could play with it. (Wo)MMM rather thought the pater would rise to the bait, but prudence reigned after all. Could she get in touch with his office, his details are probably online? This was enthusiastically accepted and the pater hurriedly wished her goodbye, explaining that it was growing late for his tennis match.

(Wo)MMM thinks he will correct erroneous fans next time around, though the mater is not so sure.

### What we owe to each other - the Chennai edition

The Woman from Madras Musings was heading to the auto stand at the end of the street when a gentleman - one of a rather boisterous pair engaged in animated conversation - rammed straight into her, making her drop her bag, phone and all. Judging by the circumstances, (Wo)MMM did not doubt that the accident was innocent; she was about to assure him that no harm was done when he spoke up. "No problem," he told (Wo)MMM with an air of great mercy before resuming his conversation. You could have knocked (Wo)MMM down with a feather. A snort of laughter ensued from her, entirely unnoticed by the culprit, of course - he had already turned the street corner up ahead, not having bothered to help pick up her things.

- (Wo)MMM

Ambiguity on the beneficiary demographic as well as the scheme's lifetime makes it hard to understand its intended impact. Critics may well see the Magalir Urimai Thogai as a knee-jerk reaction to complaints from the Opposition on the non-deliverance of poll promises. Hopefully, the scheme framework will become clearer by September 15th and dismiss such cynicism.

# HERITAGE WATCH

(Continued from page 1)

the next year, and for years to come. The ten-day celebration is remarkable for its continuity of tradition. The first reference to it is in Sambandar's 7th century *Poompavai Pathigam*. References are non-existent thereafter till the 18th century but when the East India Company took over Mylapore, the importance of continuing with this festival was sufficiently felt for dubashes to fund it and in some years the Company itself organising its conduct. This itself is enough indication to show that the events had been held without break for a long period of time.

The ten-day celebration, the highlight of which is the Arupathu Moovar procession on the 8th day, has had a plethora of writing on it from the colonial period onwards. Apart from Tamil verse, song and literature, it also received the attention of European administrators and other observers. Some of those who have written on it include Colin Mackenzie, Lady Elizabeth Gwillim, ME Grant Duff and Laura Glenn (Sister Devamatha).

Much of Mylapore has changed over the years, at least from the 18th century when Kanakaraya Mudali fashioned the processional icons and funded a chariot and yet much has not changed. Come Panguni (Mar/Apr), the pandals over which the Left and Right Hand castes fought are still put up, the tanneer pandals and the peddlers of traditional wares come back and so do the adoring thousands. Mylapore relives its past in its present each year, year after year.

Our VERY OLD is a Vintage Vignettes picture showing the temple festival at Mylapore witnessed by Sister Devamatha in 1910. Our OLD is a photograph of the chariot festival featured in the Indian State Railway Magazine dating to 1929. Our NEW was taken in 2022.

**NEW**



**OUR READERS WRITE**



**Stray dogs menace**

‘Four-year-old boy mauled to death by stray dogs in Hyderabad.’ ‘Chased by stray dogs, 55-year-old woman riding pillion, dies in Chennai.’ ‘Stray dogs kill two brothers in national capital in span of three days.’

The above incidents occurred in a span of a month. Such incidents are not new and seem to take place periodically. How long will this continue?

When action is taken against stray dogs (an action which unfortunately is not conscionable), dog lovers rise in protest. A few years ago, in response to the stray dog menace in Porur, the civic authorities killed about 50 stray dogs and buried them. Dog lovers raised a hue and cry and held protests and demonstrations in the town. Nice to know that some people are so compassionate that they consider the inhumane act of killing 50 stray dogs comparable to the annihilation of a few million people.

About a year or so ago, IIT Madras took action against stray dogs on the IIT campus since they were attacking deer (and in some cases even killing them). Again dog lovers raised a hue and cry and even filed a case in court. Perhaps dogs have ‘friends’ and ‘rights’ but not deer. Is this animal unworthy of our attention?

I am just curious to know whether the stray-dog incidents mentioned above concern dog lovers or not. Do they think this is an issue that can and should be addressed by them? Or is it ‘beyond their scope’?

What can be done? The ‘solution’ is well known and not at all difficult to implement: just neuter the stray dogs. This is just what the Greater Chennai Corporation recently did. The civic body (may be in response to the pillion incident) caught and neutered 500 stray dogs in the city.

The lifespan of a dog is 10 – 13 years while some live up to 20 years. There is no reason why the neutering of dogs could not have been done years ago. If so, we would not have had the incidents mentioned above. At least in Chennai a good beginning has been made. Let us complete the task.

May I request dog lovers to work with GCC and help and assist the civic body and neuter all the stray dogs in the city with an easily identifiable collar. This will serve as a small measure of assurance that the issue is being addressed.

**B. Gautham**  
137 Wallajah Road  
Chennai 600 002

## An interesting correspondence

A friend of mine (Samir Pathak, based in Pune) who is an avid historian, shared the below extract from Newton's correspondence.

I am sharing this since it pertains to the first mint presses (presumably) sent from England to Fort St George.

I wonder if the original presses sent by Newton have survived somewhere in the Fort or anywhere else in the city? They would look something like the picture below.

– N. Balaji  
nuthalapadi.balaji2719@gmail.com

**X.619.2 NEWTON TO THE TREASURY**

EARLY 1700

From a holograph draft in the Mint Papers<sup>(1)</sup>

In obedience to your Lordps order of reference of ye 28th of Nov. 1699<sup>(2)</sup> we have considered ye annexed Petition of the Governour & Company of ye East Indian Merchants for procuring by your Lordps leave two Mills & two Presses wth ye Utensils there unto belonging to be sent to Fort St George for facili[t]ating their coynage there: and upon enquiry we find that the said Merchants by their Charter<sup>(3)</sup> have a Mint at ye said Fort for coyning Pagodes Rupces & other East Indian money by the Hammer & it is represented to us that their money so coyned is not so fair & specious as the like money coyned by the Dutch & for that reason not so much coveted by the natives, for wch reason & for making dispatch in their coynage the said Merchants desire Mills & Presses as they represent.<sup>(4)</sup> We find also that by a late Act of Parliament mentioned in ye said Petition, it is made High Treason for any person to make, procure or knowingly to have in his custody any Press for coynage or Cutter for cutting out ye Blanks by force of a skrew unless by your Lordps Licence but ye making & having of Mills is not forbidden nor requires your Lordps Licence. We do not find any barr to the erecting of a mint by ye mill & Press at Fort St George by ye said Merchants excepting ye said Act of Parliament wch barr your Lordps have power to remove by giving them leave to procure two Presses & Cutting Engins. But we humbly conceive that ye opinion of ye Council of Trade should be first had in this matter least the erecting of such a Mint should promote the exportation of money out of England or hinder ye importation of Gold & Silver into his Majties Mint in this kingdom & also yt the opinion of ye Attorney Gen[era]l should be had concerning the legalness of their Mint & the form of a licence, & lastly that sufficient security be given to your Lordps that the instruments licensed by your L[ordship]s be not put to any other use then ye coyning of East Indian money at Fort St George & for yt end be snupt away to ye said Fort upon their delivery from ye Tower

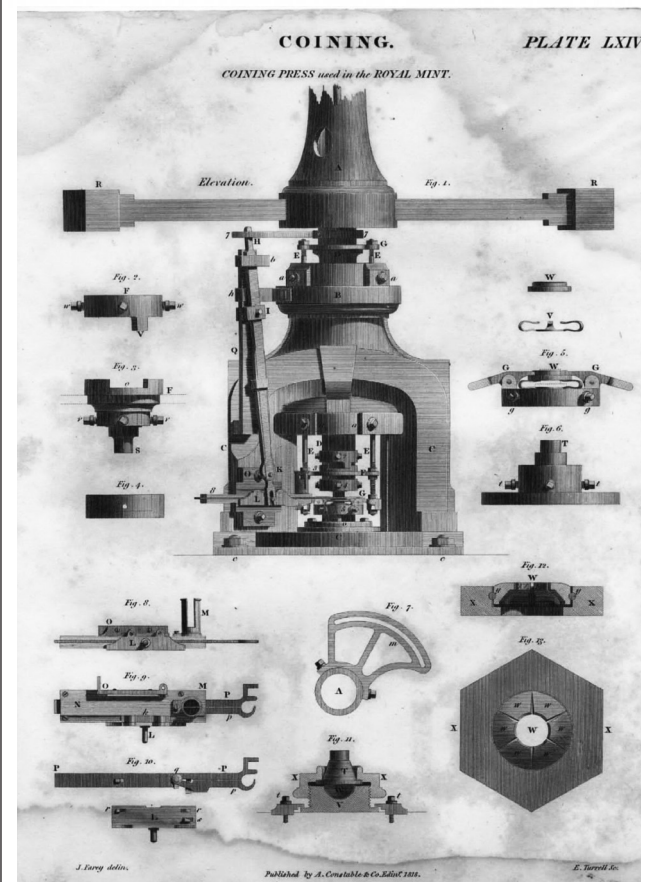
**NOTES**

(1) 1, fo. 509. This is apparently the later of two drafts concerning the Mint set up by the East India Company at Fort St George, Madras. Compare Letter 618, vol. iv; we assume this letter was written shortly after its receipt. The earlier draft (Mint Papers, 1, fo. 507) gives more detail about the legal prohibitions against the operation of such a Mint, but only in the draft we print here are to be found the closing sentences concerning the flow of coin and bullion to and from England.

(2) See *Cal. Treas. Books*, xv, 1699–1700, p. 219.

(3) Newton has inserted a question mark over the word ‘Charter’.

(4) On 23 January 1700 the Treasury issued a Warrant to the Mint to ‘sell to the East India Company two mills, two presses and two cutting engines to be sent to India for the service of their coining of pagodes, rupces and other species of money of that country.’ (See *Cal. Treas. Books*, xv, 1699–1700, p. 258.)



# More on the Round Tana and other Subways

Last fortnight's article on the Round Tana, its name, what happened to it and its eventual metamorphosis into a subway led to many emails from those who remembered many aspects of the subway. Lots more comments came on a YouTube channel that I record episodes on Chennai history for. That led me to some further research and I hit a goldmine of sorts – archival issues of a magazine named *Civic Affairs* dating to the 1960s. From a reading of some issues, I am giving a few updates pertaining to the underground subway at the Round Tana and its construction.

The idea of such a subway appears to have emerged at a meeting of the Traffic Committee for Madras City. *Civic Affairs* has the following details in its issue of April 1959 –

“The Traffic Committee for Madras City on March 19 under the chairmanship of the Home

Secretary, Mr. S.K. Chettur, decided to redesign the traffic roundabout at the Round Tana and to construct a subway at Mount Road between the Indian Airlines Corporation building and the Old Bosotto Building. The redesigning of the Roundabout will be done by acquiring a portion of the land of the Government Estate on Mount Road so as to provide a 42 ft. carriage way on all sides.”

SK Chettur ICS, in his memoirs, *The Steel Frame and I*, has written in some detail on his role in the creation of underpasses. I am grateful to Karthik Bhatt for supplying me with this reference –

“On the whole I liked the Secretariat work. The files that came to you were not too complicated, the tempo of the work was light and smooth and I had the additional kudos of being the youngest Secretary to the Government at the time. I remember that the scheme to which I really ap-

plied my mind with considerable zest was a scheme which many people had touched and left unfinished, namely, the proposal to build three over-bridges over the railway line for traffic at the Chetput, Periamet and Beach level-crossings. The public had been crying out for a long time at the consistent delays to traffic at these three points. I myself had been held up at the Chetput level-crossing for fifteen to twenty-minutes on several days owing to a succession of steam-driven trains and electric trains coming one after the other, making it impossible for the gateman with the best will in the world to open the gates. Meanwhile on each side traffic had accumulated for nearly half a mile.

Having studied the file I (arrived at how the funding could be) – one-third of the sum required as loan and another one-third as grant and the

my attempt to get the scheme sanctioned.”

The Chetpet subway remains one of the busiest in the city even now. We now come to the Mount Road subway. That the work on the subway was delayed for long was referred to in the previous article. It would seem that even after commencement, the project was delayed by several technical snags. *Civic Affairs* dated September 1966 has the details and is worth quoting from in full. It would seem that the conflict between multiple agencies when it came to execution of civic projects in the city is nothing new.

## Madras – Work On Mount Road Subway Held Up

Work on the subway at the Round Tana, Mount Road, has been held up for some weeks now because the Corporation of Madras has not been able to

divert the water mains, carrying supplies to Triplicane, along a new alignment in time.

At present work on two of the shaft tunnels with entry respectively at the Government Estate end and the New Elphinstone end is over, and the workmen are giving finishing touches. Already fluorescent lighting has been installed underground.

But on the third side, leading to the Ellis Road, work has come to a jarring halt. When from the central shaft, 25 feet of the tunnel shaft had been completed the City Corporation stepped in and asked the work to stop, as the existing 27 inch main to Triplicane had to be diverted first. The contractors then blanked off that part with iron plates.

During the period of enforced idleness, the contractors left out 44 feet from the blanked off portion and then finished the stair-case part farther on at the Ellis Road end.

Work on the subway which



commenced on June 25 last year should have been completed exactly in one year. The work was progressing smoothly until some weeks ago. In this connection, it is stated by those engaged in the work: “We have completed

on schedule all what we could. Whatever is remaining cannot be executed by us until the 27-inch main is diverted. This work is being handled by the Municipal Corporation.

“As a result of the delay in the

# QR, UR...not for the faint-hearted

**You:** (calling up Long-Suffering-Offspring): Hullo, nice lunch place you suggested for me and your aunts today.

**L.S.O** (self-defense mode snapped on): Now what?

**You:** Such a problem we all had. Didn't know how to order. Those patchy-messy, Rorschach-type things.

**L.S.O:** QR?

**You:** KO, more like. Aunt Drama-Queen had a mini meltdown, and began speechifying about how this is why she hates stepping out of the house these days as life is too difficult for our generation, with even credit cards becoming obsolete what with all this This-Pay and That-Pay, and in any case all she needs is a little toast and a glass of mostly tepid water because not one flask in her house stays warm, and she, (unlike certain other people who shall remain unnamed but are at this table) doesn't have her children living in the same town, or even country as her, you see, and it amazes her how some people just don't know how lucky they are, and while this background score rumbled on, your Aunt I-Know-Everything (I swear, that woman never runs out of self-akshathai) tried to prove

she can handle the squiggles, but couldn't (obviously), plus wasted 20 minutes arguing with the younglings at the bistro (how's that for fancy-schmancy?) who were more than willing to help, but she wouldn't listen, then finally blamed her cell phone for not bending the right way. Is that even a thing? Finally, the bill-person found an old menu hidden in the third drawer of her desk and brought it to us, by which time everyone was frazzled and nervy and ended up having too much dessert. Next time...

another call. Talk later.

Yeah, right.

The 'Why?' however remains.

Why can't we go back? Back to those wonderful, far-off days when acolytes either ceremoniously or hurriedly placed menus in your hands?

Yes, systems had to be revamped during the pandemic. All that no-contact stuff.

But now?

Look, as it is those pesky screens are everywhere. But having to peer at them while deciding what to eat? 'Scrolling'

● by Ranjitha Ashok

**L.S.O:** (exhausted but firm) No. No next time. You just stick to good old Tried-and-Proven Sapad Bhavana Vilas or whatever, with the same menu over decades... literally, because the last time you got the very one you had spilt sambar over two weeks earlier. Remember? You said you recognised that peculiar-shaped stain.

**You:** So basically, you are both a snob and a foodist. But why can't...

**L.S.O:** Sorry, Ma, getting

up, 'scrolling' down, forgetting where you saw what?

Doesn't spending so much time poring over screens completely ruin family connectivity (touch of irony there) which is the whole point of a dining-out exercise? Incidentally, what about all that lecturing on 'no screens at the table', when that's precisely what's going to put food on said table?

Nightmare situations – extreme hunger pangs, and no network.

diversion, the public will not be able to use the subway for at least six months.”

The completed part of the subway is a handsome affair with a striking massive central pillar at which the three tunnel shafts converge.

A walk round the area reveals that the Corporation has laid its

giant 44-inch pipes from Blackers Road side across the Mount Road, and along Wallajah Road at the Ellis Road junction. But parts of this pipe line, which branches off straight from the Kilpauk water works, are left unconnected at various stretches enroute. For example though the pipes have been laid under the Cooum River near Harris Bridge yet the shoulder sections on the banks of the Cooum are yet to be linked up and pipes laid down.

Besides, it is stated that some parts – “specials” – for linking pipes together and other vital equipment have to be obtained by the Corporation.

Only when the Corporation

attends to all this and closes all the gaps in the pipe line, can water be let into the 44-inch pipes. When that happy day arrives, the existing 27 inch pipe in front of the Elphinstone Theatre would be removed, and water would go along the bigger 44-inch main to Triplicane.

An engineer expressed surprise that work on the pipe diversion should have been halted because of lack of vital equipment, as the project had been talked about for the last four years. The Corporation should have placed orders for the equipment in time.

There is, however, a silver lining to the cloud. It is gathered that there is a proposal for the two completed shafts, i. e. on the eastern, Government Estate side, and the western, Elphinstone side, to be thrown open to the public. If the authorities approve of the proposal, then the unfinished Ellis Road branch of the subway would be barricaded for the present.

The subway might be left

open until about 10 p. m. when it would be closed for the night. The idea is to prevent squatters or bad characters getting into the tunnel.”

So much for the subway as late as in 1966. But with an election looming large the next year it would seem that the project was speeded up and completed in 1967.

What is of interest is that with the Round Tana subway hogging all the limelight, the RBI subway was executed quietly and completed on time, more or less concurrently. It must have had its fair share of challenges but documentation on this has not yet surfaced. What we do know however is that when planned it was known as the Lighthouse and not RBI subway. *Civic Affairs* reports on its completion in April 1966 –

## New Subway

“On April 29, Madras Chief Minister Mr. M. Bhaktavatsalam formally declared open the

Or, having been subjected to endless messaging and aimless surfing for hours, your phone chokes and dies on you at the precise moment a yummy-looking list of dishes you want to plunge into rises magically from the squiggles.

In addition, this system demands a sacrifice – a scapegoat - upon whom, for having committed the crime of understanding techie-stuff, the mantle of Chief Menu Handler falls. This poor soul is now like a traffic cop...or maestro... conducting the comings and goings of food. Tough job, as very few groups can handle the what-to-order process in a harmonious, smooth manner. No wonder some 'sacrifices' feel the only reason they are included in dining-out plans is because they are the only ones who can...er... crack the code. Hey, insecurities are never far away, people.

Now imagine accessing choices through a 'portal' that does not involve batteries or networks, which will never betray you by 'not opening' and doesn't require at least one tech-savvy member in any given group... just pick up and read. Paper. Print. Remember?

Bliss.

Lighthouse subway built at cost of Rs.60 Lacs in Madras City. From May 2 the subway is in use of the traffic. Work on the subway commenced in March 1964. It has two carriageways, separate cycle tracks and also pedestrian footpaths. Formerly the level crossing gates here used to be closed 120 times a day and caused great inconvenience to the public. An average 1,200 vehicles an hour used to pass through this point. A sub-way had to be built in preference to an over-bridge, in order not to spoil the appearance of stately buildings like the Reserve Bank, the High Court and the Port Trust, said Mr. O. Sivasankaran the Highways Chief Engineer.”

Such sensitivity in 1966! Decision taken to construct an underpass and not a flyover to give heritage its due! And separate pedestrian and cycle tracks! What has happened to us thereafter?

People are out more; dining spaces are packed. Half the fun lies in poring over menus, sharing, going back and forth... somehow a small screen is not quite the same.

It isn't just food, is it, with these pesky codes? They're everywhere. The other day, a well-known theatre group staged a play where all tickets were via QR codes. All very zeitgeist and tech-enabled... but – bunches of theatregoers who chose to do this as one big happy party were scrunched up on one code which apparently needed all parties to be present at the same time to be allowed in.

Why wasn't the QR code sent to all members of any given group on their respective phones, you ask? No idea. But you'll never forget the sight of one supremely harassed gentleman who had 16 people on his particular plate... or code. All he did for what must have seemed like hours, was stand sentinel next to the kid who was doing the scanning, calling up people and checking them off as they arrived. 'Person one, person two, person three...!' All the while making frantic phone calls: 'Where are you? Come soon. Stuck in traffic? Anna Nagar arrived. Porur and Thiruvanniyur, not yet. Stuck in traffic. Neelankarai unreachable. Must be...'

Yep...stuck in traffic.

He was visibly older by the time the play began, and if anyone had subjected him to a chest X-ray at that point, the words 'Stuck-in-traffic' would have appeared, carved on his heart.

Oh, for the old days of reading menus, complaining of dim lights, or getting old-fashioned movie or play-tickets, (and misplacing them on the evening of the show and being spoken to sharply by the entire family) ... those were the days.

Gen-Now will probably do that signature eyeroll of theirs at all this lamenting, but, much as you hate to admit it – Aunt Drama-Queen was right.

Getting tougher for those who either missed the techno-bus or were just too scared to get on board in the first place.

(Note to Editor: No QR codes were hurt during the writing of this article, and the author distances herself from any and all technical errors, pleading sheer ignorance... which is still not a crime in this country, when last checked.)

## LOST LANDMARKS OF CHENNAI

– SRIRAM V

Secretary, Mr. S.K. Chettur, decided to redesign the traffic roundabout at the Round Tana and to construct a subway at Mount Road between the Indian Airlines Corporation building and the Old Bosotto Building. The redesigning of the Roundabout will be done by acquiring a portion of the land of the Government Estate on Mount Road so as to provide a 42 ft. carriage way on all sides.”

# Castor, Pollux, and T.R. Rajakumari

Growing up in Chennai, I rarely looked heavenward. Consequently, as an adult, I could not identify any celestial object in the night sky except for the moon. I never gave the matter much thought.

Earlier this year, a research article in the journal *Science* reported that light pollution has been skyrocketing planet-wide in the last decade. Excessive artificial lighting disrupts entire ecosystems and impacts human health. Light pollution also obscures a stargazer's view of the night skies. Suddenly, my indifference vanished.

What did I do? I googled furiously. Apparently, the iconic Milky Way, home to our solar system, can no longer be seen by one thirds of humanity. Before light pollution, this accessible, breathtaking view had inspired artists, songwriters, and story tellers for millennia.

As a boy, Mumbai-born Salman Rushdie, the author of *Midnight's Children* and a dozen other novels, recalls looking up at the night sky to see "the thick stripe of the galaxy there." In a delightful essay for the *New York Times*, he wrote, how in his childhood, he had heard a tale from the Mahabharata about God Indra churning the Milky Way with Mount Mandara, to force "the giant ocean of milk in the sky" to yield the nectar of immortality. "Maybe if I opened my mouth, a drop might fall in and then I would be immortal, too," he wrote.

For city-dwellers to see the Milky Way in the 21st century, in many cases, it could take

nothing less than a city-wide power cut. It is getting harder for urbanities to see anything with the unaided eye except for the brightest celestial objects, researchers report. Was there anything left to see over Chennai, except the moon, I wondered. I optimistically downloaded an app called The Sky Guide. Just as Google Maps give us the names of the streets in any locality, complete with landmarks, free apps map out the sky for stargazers.

One evening, as I entered the compound of my building, I looked up towards the grey-orange sky. Almost immediately, my eyes fell upon a blue-white star – scintillating madly, like that cartoonish "diamond in the sky" from the nursery rhyme. The smartphone app said I was looking at "Sirius," the brightest star in the night sky.

Call it beginner's luck if you will, but Sirius was the perfect foil for what I would see next – an unwinking brownish-red dot. This was the planet Mars, "chevvai" in Tamil. In the next decade, NASA plans to send astronauts to Mars. The journey will take the astronauts approximately six months, but that evening Mars seemed to be parked right over our compound. I could not believe my luck. The urge to grab passersby – or the sleepy watchman – and show them our neighboring planet was strong.

Over the course of a week, I could identify some stars in the sky. I was delighted when I saw this row of three medium, bluish-white stars, which formed

the belt of Orion. Named for a hunter from Greek mythology, Orion was one of the most conspicuous constellations in the night sky. The red supergiant star Betelgeuse (betel juice, if you will, because we know that the juice of betel leaf is red in color) marks the hunter's right shoulder; the blue supergiant Rigel marks the hunter's left foot.

Tracing out constellations in the sky is not hard – it is all about connecting some of the most conspicuous dots of light. Away from the city centers, in the absence of severe light pollution, there will be many more dots for you to connect. From where I stood, I could, at best, see a dozen stars.

One moonless night, I ventured up to the mottai-madi early, to welcome the onset of darkness. The sun was still

● by V. Vijaysree  
v.vijaysree@gmail.com

an orange-red ball. Flocks of rose-ringed parakeets, whizzed towards their nightly roosts, squawking loudly. Lone flying foxes were setting out silently for the "day" – they would be out till dawn. I waited for the nightly sky show to start.

In the distance, I saw a building, which looked like an abandoned parking garage. A theatre, owned by T.R. Rajakumari, a star of her times, had once stood in that spot. As a child, I watched the film *Chan-*



Picture courtesy: The Hindu.

dralekha, in which Rajakumari had played a dancer. This was on television, one Sunday evening. If you ever saw that 1948 classic, chances are, you still remember that spectacular drum dance. You may also recall Ranjan, who played the swashbuckling villain, and that interminable sword fight after the drum dance.

As I reminisced, the celestial stars came out on that clear Chennai night. The old familiars from the Orion constellation were all there. Then, I saw this distinct pair of stars. My trusty app told me that the yellow star was Castor, the slightly brighter one was Pollux. They were the main stars in the constellation of Gemini (the word means twins in Latin).

Most of us know these twins, from the logo of Gemini Studios – two little boys with bugles who used to play a signature tune on screen. Suddenly, I recalled that *Chandralekha*, the hit movie, was produced by Gemini Studios of Madras. Seeing the Gemini constella-

tion in the skies above, with the forgotten Rajakumari Theater in the background, was such a quintessential Madras moment for me.

When I came down from the terrace, I was ready to google again. What was the equivalent of Orion in Indian mythology? In the movie *Ponniyin Selvan-I*, there was a comet going around even in broad daylight – surely, there must be a comet for us to see in the night skies soon. Where is that star Arundhati they keep asking the bride and groom about during the marriage ritual? Which constellation will take center stage next month?

The few stars left to see over Chennai, clearly, do have the ability to spark curiosity and simple delight. The limited views could make us journey to dark sites, suburban or rural, to catch a glimpse of the famed Milky Way. Most importantly, the few stars could even inspire some of us to become activists against rampant light pollution.

## The inspiring saga of an accidental entrepreneur

He rose "from the humblest beginnings to become a path-breaking entrepreneur, a philanthropist and a cultural pioneer", says author S.R. Madhu in his absorbing biography of R.T. Chari. After initial reluctance, Chari agreed to the idea of a biography because he thought it would demonstrate that "our country, despite all its challenges, provides opportunities for all, however disadvantaged". Opportunities knock at many doors, but only a few grab them and turn them into inspirational stories, as Chari did.

The 175-page book comprises an eight-page profile of Chari, and chapters on his family roots, his birth and childhood, his admission to the College of Engineering, Guindy, and his exploits there, his professional career with the Sesahasayee Group of companies,

and the success story of Tag Corporation which he founded. There are three guest articles, and a few other brief chapters. Half a dozen appendices provide factual details on his many philanthropic contributions.

Chari's life is presented in the form of both biography and autobiography. The opening pages of the book contain a profile of the subject which is meant to provide glimpses into Chari's personality, attitudes and opinions. It includes a Q&A section on Chari's favourite likes and dislikes. Chari mentions four major breaks in his eventful life. The first was his joining the Corley High School in Tambaram, which made him excel in sports, and transformed his personality, his attitude and self-confidence. The second break was his admission to the College of En-

gineering, Guindy, which had almost been scuttled by bias and casteism. The third big break was entrepreneurship. The fourth was his fascination for Carnatic music and his grand foray into arts and culture.

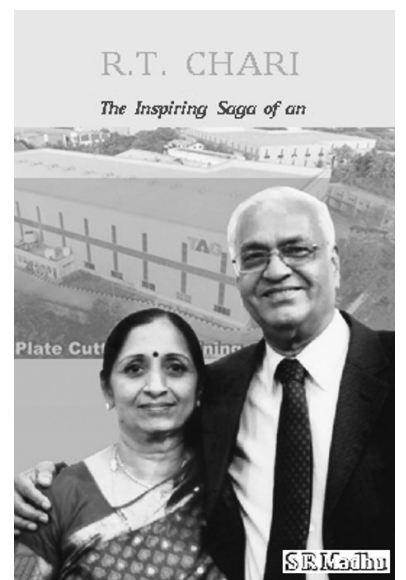
Chari was born in a very large family, the fifth among nine children. The family lived a hand-to-mouth existence but all of them were provided with a decent education. Chari imbibed a spirit of fairness from his father and several attributes from his mother, including a resolve never to waste food. His memories of childhood in Mylapore are fascinating. They offer glimpses of the lifestyles and workstyles of 'TamBrams' in the 1950s.

"Life was never dull in Kesava Perumal Sannidhi Street" according to him. All houses had court-yards of varying sizes. Most of them had three or four tenants with common shared facilities. Inmates argued, quar-

relled with and shouted at each other, and yet there was bonhomie and they came together at times of crises. Cultural activities abounded with many sabhas providing a rich fare of dance, music and drama.

After schooling, Chari joined AM Jain College in Meenambakkam for his intermediate because this college was considered a stepping stone for admission to engineering colleges. Chari had set his mind on the College of Engineering, Guindy. But despite very good marks in intermediate and achievements in sports, his admission to Guindy almost got scuttled by vested interests – a gripping chapter indeed.

Chari describes his time at CEG as "the best period of my life". He praises the quality of education there. No wonder



Guindy alumni have held top positions in governments and the corporate world in several countries. Chari also had great fun then. He saw 400 movies in four years – Tamil, Hindi and English. He saw some films

(Continued on page 7)

# Banyan Tree recollections

Before we moved our residence to Adyar in 1962, life was as usual in Thyagaraya Nagar. It was a Sunday mid-morning when my father announced the day's programme.

"We are going somewhere today!"

My mother was curious.

"And where would that be?"

"Oh, not so soon. Wait and come with me!"

We took bus route 5B that plied between T Nagar and Mylapore. After twenty minutes of a very pleasant ride in a royal window seat, we alighted. It was a fairly broad road with sparse traffic, a scooter once in a while and a car, more rarely. We crossed to enter a twin-pillared smaller road that wound its way to yonder.

After a ten-minute walk we reached a four-road, well to call it a road would be an insult to roads, a four-strip junction and stopped.

"Turn left here and look!"

We did and found nothing!

There was an east-going strip of tar topped muddy road with dry paddy fields on both sides. A single storied house stood in one corner and the rest were passed-over ground that once ought to have been paddy fields. They were criss-crossed by uneven bunds and bordered on the northern side by a few palm trees and a lone date tree.

My father proudly walked along and stood before a south-facing piece of land and

declared "our own house will come up here!"

His words of pride were met with silence for a minute because then in those days, owning a house was a big deal. My mother could not believe it and finally managed to blurt out, "What are you saying?"

My father, with pride written all over his face, nodded with happiness.

"Yes! I have bought this one-and-a-half ground plot and we are going to build our house!"

I am writing this piece from the very same house where I continue to live till this minute.

Well, I have not touched the subject I intended to write, and I already seem to have exhausted 350 words!

"Let us also go and see the school you are going to study!"

Father took us along to Gandhi Nagar and showed the Rani Meyammai High school that till date is my treasure trove of happiness and that which imparted me untold wisdom.

The first impression was of the majestic flaxen coloured-with-a-shade-of-amber building and more significantly, the three banyan trees. I had not seen a banyan tree before, and I was all curious.

"Amma! What is this big tree and what are those dropping ropes?"

"This is called banyan tree and those are its prop or column roots!"

The banyan tree became my first love in the school!

There were three of them in the school premises. The first one, not so big, was just behind the Shantha Memorial Hall where the school bell was hung. There was another near the elementary school section right near the fence that separated our school from St. Patrick's. Its trunk with liberal girth used to be the stump for the innumerable cricket matches played

● by Jayaraman Raghunathan

by the boys. The third one, the largest of the three, stood majestically near the crafts room. There was a cement structure beneath it, that served as the stage for all the school functions and celebrations.

The Headmaster Mr. George, attired in neatly pressed suit and matching trousers, conducted the Monday prayers. At the end of the prayer, the whole school would be waiting with bated breath for his words

"Saturday and Sunday will be holidays" – this was because there were many Saturdays when school functioned for a five-period duration, perhaps to make up for the lost time to cover the syllabi. I have noticed even teachers walking away all smiles when the headmaster announced a five-day week.

That cement stage served as the lunch place for many students as the banyan tree spread its benign shade atop and provided a pleasant cover from the scorching sun. I was the victim of, no not the crow excreting, but strangely, the banyan fruit, that looked like a playing marble, falling into my tiffin box more than a few times. The sight of its yellow fibres spoiling my crystal white curd rice did not go well with my sense of nausea and I avoided having lunch under the banyan tree.

There used to be a pond adjacent the banyan tree where now the Bala Vidya Mandir school stands. Children coming from Kotturpuram saved a considerable walking distance by turning left into the narrow pond-lane. They walked along

its bank, reached the banyan tree and then the school. On many summer days, Meenakshi teacher would herd the students from the thatched room to the banyan tree for conducting her English language sessions. I am sure many of my school mates will fondly recall the booming voice of this amazing teacher who, later in life, was an unfortunate witness to a rail accident and in traumatic shock, lost her speech. She died within a few years without recovering.

The banyan tree stage was the scene of performance for all our school cultural shows when, year after year, the attractive senior, Bhanu danced to the tune of Mary Poppins. Another regular was our classmate Vasundhara belting some poignant numbers of Tamil film songs. We looked forward to these performances not just for the artistic merit but also to watch the girls in colourful dresses, a welcome change from the drab magenta skirt uniforms!

Thanks to my fear of heights, I would keep a safe distance

(Continued on page 8)

## The saga of an accidental entrepreneur

(Continued from page 6)

seven or eight times – such as *Sabash Meena*, *Nau Do Gyarah*, *My Fair Lady*, *Sound of Music*. The theatre visits invariably ended with masala dosa at Dasaprakash and ice cream at Jaffer's.

Chari joined the Seshasayee Group of companies as an apprentice engineer at their plant in Vadalur near Neyveli on a meagre salary of Rs 150 per month. He proved his mettle there, both as an engineer and as a salesman, and surprised his superiors by collecting huge dues from clients that had almost been written off. He rose to the position of techno-commercial manager. He recommended that the Seshasayees set up the manufacture of hardware and accessories for high-voltage transmission lines, and slogged on the idea for three years. The company management astonished him by asking him to set up such a unit himself, with the group's backing and support.

Thus, Chari was at once a senior executive of a company and an entrepreneur. Tag Corporation was born in 1972. The book describes the trials and

tribulations that Chari faced in mobilising partners, acquiring land, establishing infrastructure and securing orders. A few landmarks: an order of 400 KV hardware in 1974, manufacture of 4R Dampers in 1976, and spacers designed and developed by his own team in 1977. Tag got an order for Rs 2 crores for the spacers, a whopping sum in those days. Chari fondly recalls the great help provided by Sathikh, a professor at MIT, Chromepet.

In 1979, Tag Corporation set up its own high voltage testing laboratory which made it the undisputed leader and pioneer in this industry. Several achievements followed. In 2003, Chari's sons Vivek and Prakash joined the company. Today, the group has five factories and exports to around 20 countries.

Tag Corporation set aside a portion of its profits to set up a charitable trust, Ramu Endowments. It has since funded several institutions dealing with health-care, education, social welfare, music and fine arts, and touched thousands of people directly or indirectly.

Chari has redefined the cultural map of Madras with a

broad spectrum of activities. The Music Academy – Tag Digital Listening Archive was established in 2008 followed by 14 more archives in various cities, including five abroad. Sophisticated modern auditoria were set up for 14 educational institutions. A comprehensive 630-page book on South India's Heritage was published. The South India Heritage Program started by Chari ran for 18 years and conducted some 330 events and lectures. Outstanding achievements as well as young talents were recognized through awards.

For a person who claims "average intelligence", Chari's achievements in technology, philanthropy and culture boggle the mind. The author should be commended on researching and presenting his life and achievements in a book that's most engaging and readable. – Reproduced from Vidura – A journal of the Press Institute of India, October-December 2022.

(Reviewed by Prof K. Chandrasekaran, who is dean and professor of Mechanical Engineering, RMK Engineering College, Tamil Nadu.

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– THE EDITOR

## LOST LEISURE

# The strange case of the solitary Dayakattam Board with six squares on each arm – A house near Kapaliswarar Temple

Not far from the Kapaliswarar Temple is an old house. There's nothing really to distinguish this house from many other old homes you'll find around temple tanks and temple areas. It's a typical old home. It had a green door when I first saw it. Perhaps the colour of the door has changed. But what I found interesting about the house is that when you enter, in what is almost the central area of the house, cut on the old floor is the game of dayakattam.

This game is six squares long on each of the four arms, and is perhaps what most South Indians believe, is quintessentially

the version of dayakattam that they used to play. So, what's surprising about this?

The fact that this is the only board I have seen in Chennai. That's not to say there are not others. There probably are, which I am yet to see. But I have seen numerous other boards of dayakattam that are eight squares long on each arm resembling the game Chaupad played in the north. This though is the only board of this version.

Assuming this was the favorite version of the people of Tamil Nadu, would it not be logical that we would see more of these? Granted, many peo-

ple merely would draw these boards with chalk on the floor or with a stick on the sandy ground. I myself remember my grandparents playing on a board drawn with chalk. Yet, when one explores the temples of South India, one rarely sees this board. The fact that you can find it in the home of a

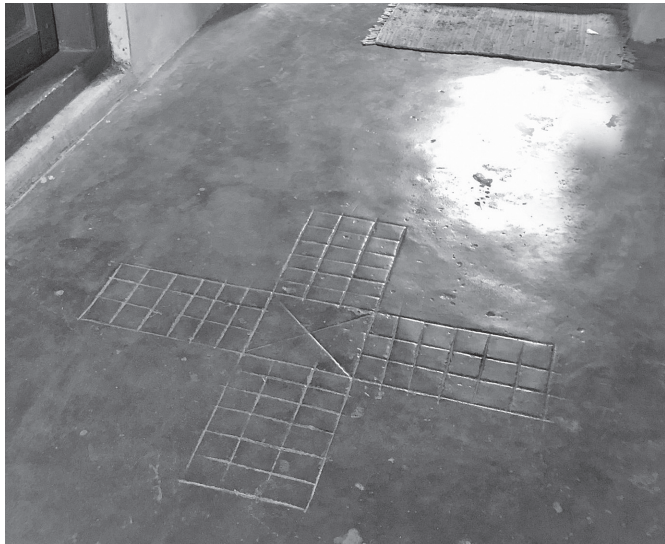
● by  
**Vinita Sidhartha**

traditional Tamil family, perhaps attests to the genuineness of the board being the favorite of the Tamil people, and yet strangely it seems to have disappeared everywhere else.

One would like to imagine the family grouped around this board, playing together laughing together. Where have they all gone? Who was the instigator of the games? An

old grandmother with little to do? The bustling women of the house, when they wanted to settle down after a long day's work? One will never know. The board though, stands as a testament to this wonderful version of the game, very beloved to the people of this state.

To know more write to me at [vinita@kreedagames.com](mailto:vinita@kreedagames.com)



## BANYAN TREE RECOLLECTIONS

(Continued from page 7)

from many boys who would be hanging like monkeys on the prop roots of the banyan tree during the interval breaks.

There were many banyan trees in IIT campus that I had seen whenever we went there to play street cricket matches. Somehow, they did not attract my fancy like those in my school, maybe they were thinner, the foliage not so bushy and may be, my perceptive association with my school was missing.

Now after almost six decades, on a dull and dreary afternoon, walking down mem-

ory lane, I realized that those banyan trees in my school had merged into my subconscious and etched an indelible image or more appropriately, a collage of emotions.

The Monday prayers, the unique liturgical Tamil pronunciation of the headmaster, glittering dance movements of Bhanu, lilting voice of Vasundhara, banyan tree classes of Meenakshi teacher are all vivid memories. How can I miss mentioning my senior Raguraman, who, on a day after Diwali, while swinging merrily on the aerial root of that banyan tree, lost his balance, fell squarely against the sharp cor-

ner of the cemented stage and in a few seconds, with a thin thread of blood oozing from his ear and his mouth open, died? – memories that engulf me on some lonely nights.

There are days even now when I feel the urge to just go across and visit the school but then the banyan trees are no longer there.

As is with my father and mother and the beloved teachers, Karpagam, Meenakshi, Padma and Seethalakshmi, the banyan trees have also died.

Well, I prefer not to use the term perished, it doesn't sound appropriate, you see.

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