

WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

# MADRAS

## MUSINGS

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### INSIDE

- Teaching Thamizh to a Thamizh Child
- From Hand-Pulled to Cycle Rickshaws – A Forgotten Jubilee
- A Memorable Exhibit at Memorial Hall
- Squash Time

# Shifting the Yale Monument and how the ASI has bungled

The High Court of Madras in its order earlier this month has ordered the relocation of the Hynmer Obelisk. The monument in question, dating back to the 1670s, is the last remnant of the Guava Garden cemetery, where the British buried their dead till the 1750s. The High Court and the Law College came up on the site in the late 19th century, long after all tombstones barring the Hynmer Obelisk and the Powney Vault, had been removed to St. Mary's Church in Fort St. George. Of the two survivors, the Powney Vault, which had the tombs of several members of that family, vanished rather mysteriously when work began on the Met-

rorail. The Hynmer Obelisk is now in the news. This enormous piece of masonry was originally constructed to house the remains of Joseph Hynmer, second in command at Fort St. George. His wife then married Elihu Yale in 1680, and when that couple's son David died,

● by The Dy. Editor

he was buried under the same obelisk. Owing to Yale's greater prominence in history, it has since been known as the Yale Monument.

Why has the shift been necessitated? With the High Court needing greater space to deal with its congestion, it

has since been decided that the Law College building, now empty and undergoing restoration, will be used for that purpose. The presence of the Yale Monument, which being protected falls under the law that prevents construction within 100 metres of it, has proved a hindrance. The Court is eyeing the space for parking. It is in consequence of this that the shift has been ordered.

There are many aspects of the judgement that demand close scrutiny and study, for their long-term impact on built heritage. The first is the order stipulating the shifting and not demolition of the obelisk. While there are many armchair

(Continued on page 2)

# Vegetable prices grow burdensome, families struggle to plan nutritious meals

The last couple of months have been hard on consumers, for the city has been seeing a surge in the price of produce owing to a stock crunch. First, it was the heat-wave that restricted the supply of vegetables; then, the recent spate of heavy rainfall in southern states dampened availability. "I cannot remember a time when I bought green chilli for Rs. 200 a kilo at the wholesale market," exclaims Vijaya, gesturing towards her vegetable cart. "And ginger? A kilo of that costs Rs. 320. I am not

able to sell more than half the goods I buy at Koyambedu." The state meets a significant portion of its demand for produce from neighbouring states, but the supply has thinned. It

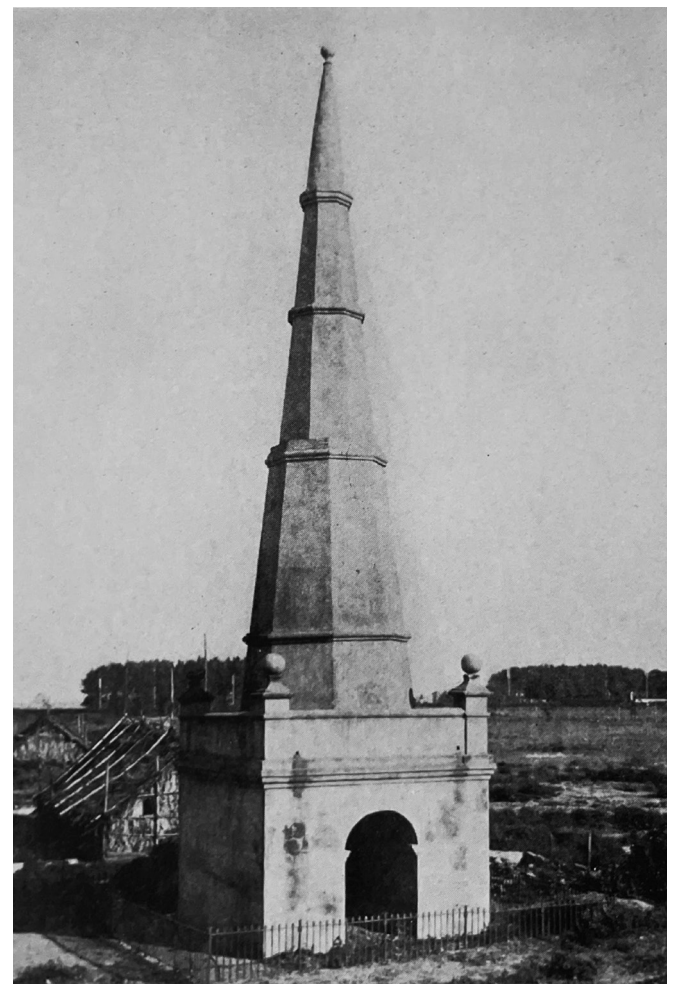
● by A Special Correspondent

is said that TN's own tomato crop, in particular, was badly affected by the downpours. At the time of writing this article, tomatoes cost Rs. 120 a kilo, sambar onions, Rs. 200, carrots Rs. 80 and beans Rs. 110-120.

It is to be noted that the increase in prices isn't endemic to Tamil Nadu – it is a trend that the rest of the country is battling as well. While some vegetables such as ladies fingers and radishes have thankfully seen a price dip since the last week, this has not provided much relief. "Drumstick costs Rs. 300 a kilo, you know – that's more or less on par with the price of chicken," informs Vijaya tightly. Eggs have gone up too, she says. A single egg used to cost between Rs. 3.50-Rs.4.50, but it now sells at Rs. 7.

## HERITAGE WATCH

Shifting the Heritage of Over 300 Years



Like it or hate it, you cannot deny that the Hynmer Obelisk, better known as the Yale Monument, has been a part of our city's heritage for over three centuries. It, and the neighbouring Powney Vault, which vanished mysteriously around the time the Metrorail began work in the vicinity, were the only remnants of what was once the Golgotha or place of skulls for Madras. Referred to rather euphemistically as the Guava Garden, it was where the British buried their dead at least till the 1750s. For more details on the same, please see *Madras Musings* Vol. 25, No 13, Oct 16-31, 2015.

The High Court of Madras has now ordered the shifting of the Hynmer Obelisk and the Archaeological Survey of India is faced with the challenge of getting this massive piece of masonry to move. Hopefully it will find a new home, and

(Continued on page 3)

Families are naturally finding it hard to plan nutritious meals. Vijaya says that low-income and vulnerable families unable to withstand the price shock are resorting to purchasing low-quality vegetables which

are priced lower. For instance, brinjals of good quality are currently selling for Rs. 80 a kilo but second-quality produce of the same quantity is going for Rs. 60. It is cheaper, but hardly

(Continued on page 2)

# SHIFTING THE YALE MONUMENT

(Continued from page 1)

patriots who may question as to why a colonial remnant needs preservation, it is necessary that both pleasant and unpleasant monuments of the past are retained, so that future generations can appreciate the freedom they enjoy. In this context this part of the judgement is to be welcomed. All over India, we have had instances of colonial memorials being shifted (not demolished) and this too is no different. The ASI will find the task a challenge, but it can perhaps consider its compound within Fort St. George, or the St. Mary's Cemetery on the Island, or the Government Museum premises as alternative sites.

The second aspect of the judgement concerns deeper questions. These relate the ASI, whose shoddy manner of representation has led to such as adverse judgement. The petitioner, an advocate, had written to the ASI that the tomb needed to be removed in the larger interest of the High Court and the response was a summary rejection citing that the monument had been declared protected in 1921 under section 3 of the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904. That the ASI chose not to point out that the 100 m law was under debate in Parliament is surprising. It also did not explain the historic,

archaeological or aesthetic reasons as to why this monument needed preservation. As a consequence, in its judgement, the Court declared that the obelisk does not meet any of the criteria to merit preservation. The Court has also pointed out that the ASI does not revisit its monuments list, which it is expected to do as per Section 20 (1) of the Act. Both of these are valid observations that the ASI would do well to ponder over.

There is also a passage that states that it is high time that the ASI "divest its slavish mindset carried on from the colonial era." This sets a new precedent – of the law choosing to interpret what is worthy of preservation and what is not. Once again, this has come about because the ASI did not present its case carefully. At a time when political regimes are choosing to deliberately wipe out history, the ASI needs to become more proactive in protecting what is under its control. If it were to function the way it is, with no regard to presenting its case, there is every possibility that more and more monuments that stand in the way of 'development' will be brought to court notice and then cleared. History will be the loser.

In the immediate short notice, it is necessary for the ASI to focus on shifting the Yale Monument to a safe location where it can be preserved.

# VEGETABLE PRICES

(Continued from page 1)

satisfying to the tongue. "I am in the trade, so I buy first-quality stock. But a lot of it goes unsold," says Vijaya. "I have no choice but to consume it myself – I can't figure out another way to cut my losses. My sister, however, is buying stale ladies finger and brinjal for her family. It's all she can afford." As for restaurants, most eateries are trying to re-organize their menus to avoid the usage of high-priced vegetables. However, it is not a sustainable strategy. If things continue as they are, the rates on their menus are likely to increase.

The administration has stepped in with short-term and long-term interventions to mitigate the situation. Early in July, an official meeting was held at the Secretariat with the State Minister of Co-operatives Mr. K.R. Periyakaruppan at the helm. The outcome was a move to sell tomatoes at subsidised prices below the prevailing rate at 82 fair price shops across the city. Under the aegis of CM M.K. Stalin,

TN is also leveraging the Universal PDS system to provide cardholders with toor dal, sugar and other essentials including rice and wheat, which are reportedly distributed free of cost. It is reported that the State Government has floated bids to procure some of the essential commodities in short supply from domestic or foreign producers. However, with costs remaining stubbornly high and at risk of further rise, the CM has reportedly written to the Union Minister of Food and Public Distribution Piyush Goyal, demanding an allocation of 10,000 MT each of wheat and toor dal per month from the central stock.

Unfortunately, erratic weather patterns brought on by climate change are here to stay. The city, nestled along the coastline as it is, is likely to face such crises on a more frequent basis. While the State seems to be doing an admirable job in tackling the current scenario, it is perhaps time to put together a committee or specialized centre to build resilience against such market shocks.

It is amazing how in this Madras that is Chennai, political colours always have a habit of manifesting themselves. For all that our leaders claim to be devoid of any hue, the Man from Madras Musings notes that each one has his or her favourite colour and the administration makes sure that this shade manifests itself in as many ways as possible. Knowing that this observation may be too abstruse let MMM make it plainer.

There was a time when public buildings of the city were always exposed brick or brilliant white. You could easily identify them and that helped as the populace was largely illiterate. Then, with increasing levels of education, signboards of the blue enamel variety fulfilled that role. That was until we became prosperous. And then we had to say it with granite, and what was worse, of the polished variety. In this the party of the Pater Familias, whose Fil now fills the office of power, was the undoubted pioneer. Red and black granite became the favourite mediums of expression. You had to have it everywhere – steps, hallways, meeting rooms, and even monuments. It was all most challenging for the elderly, given the slippery nature of the surface and the games the two alternating colours of black and red can play on the ageing eye. MMM knows, for he has now reached that venerable age where he often sees two of everything, especially around the edges.

Pater Familias also had a liking for yellow, in which he began draping himself as time went along but mercifully, he did not insist on having buildings painted in that shade. Then came Mater Dei who swung from colour to colour. There was a time when she loved purple and brown and then there was green of a light shade. Suddenly our city administration found it had tons of green paint. Every flyover was daubed with it. As were public buildings. Even plate glass, another favourite in our city especially among the political and administrative class, was ordered in that shade. The idea apparently was that if you could not green the city you could at least paint it green. MMM too had his brush with the battle of colours. There was a public institution of the city for whose centenary he was commissioned to do a book. This was during the Mater's final years. A most beautiful cover design in yellow was readied. The lower downs in charge of approval before the work was taken up to the Mater were flabbergasted. They asked MMM to change it to

# Red it is!

green and in place of the sun which had appeared on the cover as part of the sky they demanded that a photo of the Mater be placed. Fortunately the book never saw the light of day.

Which brings MMM to the present dispensation. Blood red seems to be the shade now. The other day MMM was driving along Chepauk when it hit him. The palace which is undergoing restoration is now blood red in colour. The Presidency College dome too is painted in the same shade. The worst hit is the PWD Guest House next to the PWD Building. This was always white but now someone has decided it needs to be in the shade that pleases. And so it is deep red. And mighty scary it is.

There is just one hope – the paint is unlikely to last. And with rain and sun is likely to fade to a more acceptable hue. MMM awaits the day when that will happen and what was once a serene stretch will cease to stun us with its new colour.

## SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

### Let's go Glocal

Think Global, Act Local was the first expression that came to the mind of *The Man from Madras Musings*. This hackneyed phrase used to be bandied about quite a bit when MMM was a junior executive in an advertising agency. At that time most people on the rolls had no idea as to what global meant and that included MMM. It eventually was shortened to glocal by Advertising Personified, who when he was not acting in plays was running the ad agency that MMM worked in. All of this came back in a flash. And it seemed to be pretty sage advice. But hang on, MMM realises he has jumped the gun and got on with the story without filling you in on the background. It is an old MMM failing, one that the late Chief often tried to correct.

MMM and his good lady, also known as She Who Must Be Obeyed were at an embassy dinner some months ago. The speeches had gone on for long and the stomachs of the audience were all collectively baying for the food on offer. In fact you could hear the growls – like a murmuring of an ocean. There were some others who were also fidgeting for the drinks, and the starters. Perhaps even the speakers soon felt the pangs for the talkathon ended and the host announced that the bar was open, as was the dinner buffet. The audience

cleaved in two – one large and solid pack heading to the dinner and the lesser group navigating towards the booze.

MMM, not being of the imbibing variety, circulated along with his good lady, waiting till the buffet cleared a bit. This usually takes time for MMM has noticed that the first movers at such events are usually voracious feeders who are satiated only after numerous helpings. But this time it was all different. Large chunks of the first feeders were breaking away and coming to the drinks section, disappointment writ large on their faces. It appears that the embassy, good host though it was, had decided that the menu would be what was served back home. Of the local biriyani, curd rice, butter chicken and paneer there was not a sign. Even gobi Manchurian was absent. It was a blow. Evidently, none of those assembled wanted to try various kinds of nuts, unheard of vegetables and some strange sea creatures fried in palm oil.

There is no greater fury than a dining populace denied the food it wants. The crowd fell upon the starters with a vengeance and soon it had all run out. The boozers were left feeling cheated and began harrying the hotel staff to hurry up with further supplies of wafers and other such munches. But the staff, having clearly been instructed by the embassy to offer only so much, was not obliging. They promised quite a bit and vanished into the pantry, not emerging till the all clear had blown.

This did not take long. Realising that not much would be forthcoming, the crowd began to leave. Murmurs of discontent could be heard, and the atmosphere was just right for the commencement of yet another global conflict. Fortunately, this being Chennai, a peaceful backwater, none of that happened. The invitees left, taking bottles of water as compensation. MMM is reasonably sure the embassy staff must have feasted on the piles of food left behind. It was perhaps an elaborate joke on the freeloaders or maybe it was a way of keeping costs down.

MMM and his good lady having prudently dined before setting out for the event were not so badly affected. On the way home, just to make sure that there were no pangs of hunger at midnight, a pit stop was made at Ye Olde English Club of the city. Mulligatawny was had and it came home to MMM that glocal had been perfected here long ago.

– MMM

# Teaching Thamizh to a Thamizh Child

“I don’t want to study Thamizh. I will learn Hindi” wailed Chelvan, whose full name was Thamizhchelvan. The name meant that he was the child of Thamizh. He was in his third standard and had got single digit marks upon hundred in his Thamizh exam. He had barely passed his other subjects. But had failed in Thamizh. He had got above sixty in Hindi. He was born to Thamizh parents who knew no other language. He too spoke the language fluently, could shout and throw tantrums in Thamizh.

How did such a problem arise?

And what made him fare better in Hindi, which he was being taught for the first time?

“Why don’t you want to learn Thamizh?” I asked him gently after comforting him and calming him down.

“Why should Thamizh have 247 letters? English has only 26” he queried. He was under the impression that Hindi had only 13 letters as he had been taught only the vowels in his third standard.

The magnitude of his problem dawned on me for the first time, and I had learnt, spoken, read and written Thamizh all my life. There began my quest for a way to teach the language to this child, who could neither read nor write it after having been taught for three years in a reputable school.

The task was as daunting to me as it was to him.

Once he was familiar with reading and writing the vowels, I started on the *uyirmei ezuththu*, which are formed, by combining each of the consonants with the vowels. I skipped the old method of learning the 18 consonants in the given order. Instead, I opted for the three groups *Vallinam* (hard), *mellinam* (soft) and *idaiyinam* (in between), so named according to the sound. Now it was jingle time and I taught him the sing song lines

*Vallinam ka cha ta tha pa Ra ena aarey*

*Mellinam gna, jna, Na, na, ma na. ena aarey*

*Idaiyinam ya, ra, la, va, zha, La ena aarey*

He loved belting it out as he rode his little bicycle or went back and forth on the garden swing. I sang with him till he got them right.

I prepared flash cards for each of the 247 letters, and grouped them into *uyir, mei*, and *uyirmei* of each of the 18 *mei* letters. With the aid of a slate where I wrote each letter and showed him the card, I started making him visually recognize the letters. A long process that lasted nearly three months. During this phase I

jumbled the groups and quizzed him again and again till he gained a certain amount of familiarity with the letters.

Then came the writing of the *uyir mei* alphabets, combining the vowels with the consonants. I started with the *vallinam*. It was easy up to the first four vowels *a, aa, I, and ee* where the letters followed a pattern. For instance, *aa* required placing the *pi* symbol like *kaal* next to the consonant. I sprouted a horn or *kombu* overhead and *ee* had a curl with the horn.

When we reached *u* and *oo* we reached a roadblock. We realized that the *u* s and *oos* were mavericks, law unto themselves and followed no rule. For instance, *ku* would do a curve all the way around and go overhead and come down. *Chu* would just sprout a short limb below its extended arm. *Tu* will drop its horizontal line and grow a long curve to go clockwise and end on the right. And so on. Chelvan just could not figure them out or remember their quirky ways.

I hit upon a sign language and devised an abhinaya to depict the letters. *Ku* had the left arm curved across the tummy and the right went in a curve above the head. *Chu* bent the right elbow across the tummy and dropped the left arm fully below the right arm. Soon we got better at these gestures and *Lu* which started with a bulge on the right where the curve started, found me puffing my left cheek.

We had hours of fun as we went on devising these gestures to represent the letters. We then proceeded in similar fashion with *Mellinam* and *Idai inam* letters. Once Chelvan got the trend the going was much easier. He started reading words from the text for the first standard. Alongside I had started writing out words using only *vallinam* letters like *Pappa, Thaththa, kakka* and followed it up by combining them with the vowels. Chelvan was made to form words on his own like *athu, ithu, ethu- aadu, eedu, aedu, odu, aRu, aaRu* and so on as the meanings of the correct words were given to him and he was encouraged to make sentences with them orally.

*Mellinam* and *Idai inam* followed in similar fashion until he was able to make short three letter words with them. In the meanwhile, stories and songs were read out to him as he followed the lines with his eyes. He was thrilled when he found that he could write poems and songs on his own on the cats that wandered in the garden, on butterflies and the rain, simple verses which were

set to music and sung. Soon he could write a song, set it to music and sing.

Reading aloud was an exercise that started painfully slow as Chelvan struggled to recognize letters in a bunch. As he went on, he gained proficiency and gained speed and accuracy. Writing took longer to settle down as he searched his memory for letters and made several errors.

I realised that writing of the alphabets also needs to be monitored and supervised when I found that he was using the single *kombu* where the double *kombu* was called for. Thus, *Koedu* became *kodu* and *poenaan* became *ponaan*. For the single *kombu* the curl must be started at the bottom while the curl has to start at the top for the double *kombu*. By starting both curls at the bottom he had automatically got to writing the single *kombu* at all times and was unable to write the double one. It is still a painful process to make him consciously switch his writing method and make him start the curl at the top.

As we raced through his old Thamizh texts of the second and third standards, the first unit test for the fourth standard was upon us. He could sing the poems and song prescribed and could write them with some difficulty with few errors. We concentrated on one-word answers like word meanings, opposites, fill in the blanks etc where he could score marks. He was pleasantly surprised that he had scored well above pass marks for the first time.

Reading, writing, storytelling, singing and watching a couple of old Thamizh movies like *Avvaiyar, Veerapandiya Kattabomman* reinforced his interest in the language.

His text gave meanings for only half a dozen words for the poems, while he had no clue to the rest of the poem. A summary was given, but he could not understand most of the poem by himself. I started on the age old method of *padha urai* and *pozhippurai*, where the meaning of each word is given and then strung together to form the summary.

His prose lessons were no better. More than fifty percent of the words were new and far advanced for his age. They were not written for children but were couched in an artificial language, formal and stilted. The topics they covered were not of interest to the children. Some of them reiterated what was taught in their other subjects like science, civics, social studies and so on. The stories were uninspiring and uninteresting. Humour was totally absent.

It was then that I realised that there were hardly any story books in Thamizh for children, that could make interesting reading. Our childhood reading of *Ambuli Mama, Kannan* and *Kalkandu* had enthralled our imagination and we devoured them week after week. Even weekly magazines like *Ananda Vikatan* and *Kalki* had pages as *Balar Malar* for children. And the jokes with pictures in those magazines were relished by us and shared with our friends. Unconsciously we imbibed the language in all its beauty. It was not a matter of surprise that most of the eleven-year-olds were able to read *Kalki*’s magnum opus *Ponniyin Selvan* and go for more such novels.

The Thamizh films of those days had sonorous, alliterative dialogues which every child memorized and took pride in reciting. “*Kutram enna seydhenn kotravane*” from *Manohara* and “*Vaanam pozhigiradhu, Bhoomi vilaikiradhu, unakkaen kodupadhu kisthi?*” from *Kattabomman* were the staple fare that rang aloud from loudspeakers in the neighbourhood.

All the children’s magazines of those times had stopped publishing and we have now come to a barren land for tales. After some search I was able to find a handful of books for children, poorly written, badly printed and unattractively brought out. Some children’s books were written in the colloquial spoken Thamizh, which defeated the purpose of learning the language.

Chelvan and I went on with our reading, repeated writing, singing, quiz, riddles, stories, poems and jokes to enliven the learning sessions. In the process both of us learnt from each other, as the language revealed so many new facets and joys.

By the time Chelvan reached the half yearly exams he had gained confidence and familiarity with the language and his lessons. Neither he nor I could believe it when he managed to come out on top of the class.

We now became aware that the real journey had just started for both of us.

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## HERITAGE WATCH



(Continued from page 1)

the precincts of the Government Museum suggest a ready space. Our OLD is the obelisk as it appears in Hiram Bingham’s *Elihu Yale, the American Nabob of Queen’s Square*, published in 1939. Our NEW, taken around a decade ago, was when a distant view was impossible, hemmed in as the structure is by construction. Maybe shifting it is not such a bad option.

# From Hand-Pulled to Cycle Rickshaws – A Forgotten Jubilee

There was a time when the cycle rickshaw was ubiquitous in our city. Now it has become a rarity, with the auto-rickshaw having more or less taken over. The mechanised or cycle rickshaw came to our city in the 1960s. Prior to that, we had the hand-pulled rickshaw. And then, fifty years ago, on June 3, 1973 to be precise, the State Government in a revolutionary step, replaced all the hand-pulled rickshaws with the mechanised variety. In a city where the debate on better and more reliable means of transport is never-ending, let us look back at these two forms from the past.

The hand-pulled rickshaw was essentially an idea borrowed from the Far East. It is said to have originated in Japan, with the word *jin ricky shaw* (human powered vehicle) being of Japanese origin. It probably was first used in India in the imperial summer capital of Simla. By the 1890s it was certainly a popular means of travel there with hardly anybody bothering about the prevalence of tuberculosis

among the pullers, brought on by steady weakening of the lungs owing to pulling heavy loads in rarefied hill air. By 1911 or so it had become a popular mode of transport in all urban centres, Madras residents quickly stifling any stirrings of conscience over sitting in a vehicle pulled by a fellow human. Kothamangalam Subbu's *Vaitheekar Pattana Pravesam* is a droll story dating to 1940 and deals with the first impressions of Madras on Vembanna, an orthodox villager. The narrator of the story receives him at the station. Vembanna is shocked at the prospect of boarding a hand-pulled rickshaw.

"What is this," he asked. "No bullock or horse and with such a short yoke! Does a turkey pull it?" On being told that a human pulls it he assumed it was used for the transport of goods. When



MGR in, and as, Rickshawkaran.

## LOST LANDMARKS OF CHENNAI

– SRIRAM V

told it is meant for transporting people, he was shocked.

"All right, for the rickshaw puller it is a question of survival," he said. "But can a passenger agree to this?"

On being told it is acceptable in the city, Vembanna remarks that like the monkey in the crocodile story of the *Panchatantra* fame, it best that rural folk leave their hearts behind in the village before coming to Madras.

Fights over customers were common among rickshaw pullers and quarrels over fares with customers were legendary. The rickshaw pullers were capable of some sharp practice too. Kothamangalam Subbu's magnum opus, *Thillana Mohanambal*, which he wrote under the pseudonym of Kalaimani, has a scene where Dharman and Muthuraku, percussionists in the nagaswaram ensemble of the hero Shanmugasundaram accompany him to the city for his medical treatment. Having admitted him into the General Hospital they decide to visit Moore Market. They hail a rickshaw not knowing that the market is just opposite the hospital. The rickshaw puller charges them a rupee, a mammoth sum for the 1930s, the period in which the novel is set, takes them on a roundabout route and deposits them finally at the market.

Being a rickshaw-puller was not easy. Most took to it due to dire poverty. Many of them were migrants from the rural areas where loss of land and livelihood had forced them out. This is best illustrated in Rabindranath Tagore's story *Do Bigha Jomi* in Bengali, which later in the 1950s was made as a Hindi film. "The rickshaw is a small two-wheeled gig, pulled by a coolie and it is not uncommon to see a wretched coolie struggling along with two heavy adults in his vehicle," wrote C.W. Ranson in his 1930s work on Madras – *A City in Transition*. "It is a cheap but slow method of transport and involves a type of human labour which is open to serious criticism. A sensitive person can hardly ride with comfort behind the strained and sweating back of a fellow human being or feel justified in thus employing him as a beast of burden."

Rickshaw-pullers lived on the fringes of society, earned a pittance and ruined their health pulling the vehicle. To top it all there were harassments from policemen. In the 1940s and 1950s the rickshaws needed two licences to ply, one each from the police and the Corporation. You can imagine as to how the poor men were made to run from pillar to post to get the precious documents. One of these was a metal

badge that the man had to wear prominently. Post-Independence there was serious debate over the continuance of such a mode of transport and in 1954, the Lok Sabha wound up one such discussion stating that it was up to the States to decide. Bombay, under Morarji Desai, was the first to ban hand-pulled rickshaws.

By then, the cycle rickshaw, once again a 19th century invention of Japan, had made its appearance in India. This was a more dignified vehicle for the driver could remain seated and pedal instead of pulling his load. The Madras Government began encouraging rickshaw-pullers to switch over to the new vehicle. It gave interest-free loans and made efforts to get the rickshaw-drivers to form cooperatives. Progress was slow. The DMK made it a key promise. Matinee idol M.G. Ramachandran, who in the late 1950s had famously gifted 6,000 rickshaw-pullers with raincoats, acted as one in the 1971 film *Rickshawkaran*. Posters of the hero pedalling away can still be sometimes seen at the rear of some rickshaws. The DMK's manifesto claim of banning the hand-pulled variety and MGR being a staunch member of the party made it a topical subject and the film was a huge hit. In 1969, when M. Karunanidhi became the Chief Minister of Tamil

Nadu following the death of C.N. Annadurai, one of his first acts was to hasten the demise of the hand-pulled rickshaw. On his 50th birthday, namely June 3, 1973, he took decisive action on it.

It was estimated then that there were 2,000 hand-pulled rickshaws in the State, of which 1,294 plied in the city. Replacing these with cycle rickshaws was expected to cost Rs 20 lakhs and the public was appealed to for funds. The party cadre was made responsible and it swung into action. There were complaints of coercion especially from party men and also tax officials. The money however was collected by June 1973 and on the 5th of the month, at a ceremony outside Rajaji Hall, the Chief Minister gave away 301 cycle rickshaws as a start of the project. Thereafter, the action shifted to the various police stations in the State. Licensed rickshaw pullers, who were plying hired vehicles were to receive cycle rickshaws for free. If the owner of the vehicle surrendered it, then he was given Rs 200 as compensation – a very generous settlement given that the old vehicle would fetch at most Rs 25 as scrap. By September 15 that year, on C.N. Annadurai's birthday, the replacements were all done.

It was a revolutionary move for its time and thereafter cycle rickshaws ruled the roost. Their heydays were the 1970s. Many families had fixed arrangements

# A hundred years of the handbook of south-Indian grasses

– by K. Rangachari and C. Tadulinga Mudaliyar

It bit my tongue when I realized that two years have elapsed without me remembering the centenary of the publication of the *Handbook of Some South Indian Grasses* written by K(adambi) Rangachari (a.k.a. Kadambi Ranga Acharyar) assisted by C(hinnakavanam) Tadulinga Mudaliyar. The Superintendent of the Madras-government Press published this 318-page handbook in 1921 and priced it at Rupees four and a half. Here it is! Better late, I suppose, than never!!

Grasses ('Poaceae', previously 'Gramineae') represent the largest, single, homogeneous group of flowering plants with nearly 12,000 species throughout the world and 1,500 species in the Indian subcontinent.

Many highly useful plants, such as rice, wheat, maize, barley, and millets are grasses. Many grass varieties are useful as fodder for cattle and other plant-feeding large mammals. Bamboo (species of *Bambusa*) and sugarcane (species of *Saccharum*) are amazing Indian grasses, although a non-botanist will find it hard to believe that they are grasses. A little more than 50 per cent of dietary energy is provided to us from edible grasses. However, I do not see a reason to regale those details here.

Scientific treatises dealing

with cycle rickshaw drivers for dropping children at school, taking the lady of the house shopping or the elders to the temple. The rickshawkaran became a family member over time.

But competition was already creeping up by way of the three-wheeled auto rickshaw, the creation of N.K. Firodia and made in India by Bajaj Auto Limited. By 1970, the city had 200 of them. In 2016 there were around 75,000. As the city expanded, it became difficult for cycle rickshaws to offer anything beyond local rides and this restricted their scope. There were besides many hazards associated with the vehicle owing to its design and the slow speeds possible on it. The auto-rickshaw overtook the pedalling variety by the 1980s.

Change as they say, is the only constant.

with the southern-Indian plants started appearing in the early decades of the 20th century. The earliest was by P(hilip) F(urley) Fyson, Indian Education Servant and botanist at the Madras Presidency College. Fyson published the *Flora of the Nilgiri and Pulney* (read as Palani) *Hill-Tops* (3 volumes, 1915, Superintendent, Government Press, Madras). It is important to note here that his wife Diana-Ruth, a versatile artist, helped Fyson with the illustrations included in these volumes. Close to these, J(ames) S(ykes) Gamble's multi-part *Flora of the Presidency of Madras* started appearing. Gamble (1847-1925) of the Indian Forest Service started work on Madras flora in 1912 and the first part was published in 1915. Before he could complete the later parts –

including an extensive treatment of the grasses of the Madras presidency – he died in 1925. C(ecil) E(mest) C(laude) Fischer (1874-1950), another Indian Forest Servant, completed the work of Gamble. P(allasena) V(aithi-pattar) Mayuranathan (botanical assistant, Madras Museum) published the *Flowering Plants of Madras City and its Immediate Neighbourhood* in 1929, which referred to plants – including grasses – in the then Madras city that extended up to Chinglepet, as a part of the Bulletin of the Madras Government Museum. The Mayuranathan volume was revised and updated by C(hrispus) Livingstone (Madras Christian College) and A(mbrose) N(athaniel) Henry (Botanical Survey of India, Coimbatore), published by the Commissioner of Museums, Government of Tamil Nadu in 1994.

In the early decades of the 20th century, during an intense knowledge-seeking phase in Madras and the rest of southern India, Rangachari and Mudaliyar brought out the *Handbook of Some South Indian Grasses*. In this handbook, Rangachari provides details of c. 100 species of grasses of the southern-Indian plains, mainly because of their high economic importance. By specifying that this book pertains only to the grasses of southern-Indian plains, Rangachari and Mudaliyar clarify that they had not explored the grasses

of southern-Indian mountains. The preface includes two critical remarks that are strikingly valid today: 1. Use of the term 'indigenous grasses', which is a brilliant spark of foresight. 2. Use of 'deterioration of grasses'. Obviously, it means the deterioration of grasslands and grass populations in different biomes of southern India due to overgrazing by cattle and trampling by cattle and humans. These two remarks, while setting the context for this handbook, are extremely valid and are being explored rigorously presently.

Kadambi Rangachari (1868–1934) was born in Madras, completed the First Examination in Arts (F.A.) diploma through the Madras Christian College

ethnographer. Co-operating with Thurston, Rangachari co-wrote the monumental 7-volume set entitled *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, published by the Government Press, Madras in 1909, a highly valued book on southern-Indian ethnology and which refers to some brilliant, but presently outdated, science of phrenology. Shortly thereafter, he joined the Madras Agricultural College, Coimbatore, as a lecturer in botany. In 1918, Rangachari was promoted to the Indian Agricultural Service. He was recognized with the title Dewan Bahadur. In the early days of sound recordings done using a wax-cylinder phonograph, Rangachari has recorded the songs of the Nilgiri tribal people

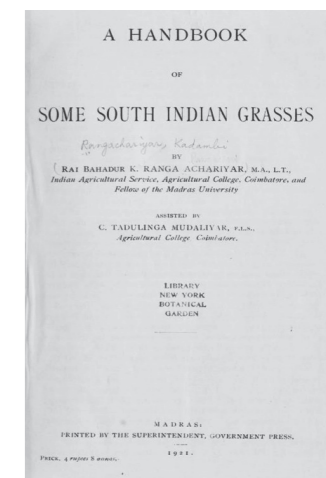
*Common Weeds Indigenous and Introduced in South India* (356 pages; Superintendent of the Government Press, Madras) published in 1932. He was an elected Fellow of the Linnean Society of London and recognized by the British government with the title Rao Bahadur. He was the Mayor of Madras in 1942-1943. Kadambi Rangachari acknowledges Mudaliyar's help, then an 'Assistant Lecturing and Systematic Botanist' at the Madras Agricultural College, Coimbatore, in the handbook as 'considerable'. In later years, Mudaliyar served as the Principal of the Coimbatore Agricultural College. It is highly likely Mudaliyar's help and support in writing and publishing the *Handbook of Some South Indian Grasses* was so profound that Rangachari decided to include Mudaliyar as a co-author of that book on the cover page, preceded by the terms 'assisted by'.

Grasses, per se, are a highly complex group of flowering plants, stunning even a trained botanist. Their floral parts are extremely minute and unrecognizably modified as slender, sharp, bristly, minute appendages. A majority of the grasses are herbaceous with their leaves including abundant calcium-oxalate crystals. A handy volume, therefore, such as the one published by Rangachari and Mudaliyar must have been extremely relevant and useful not only to botanists, but also to agricultural scientists of southern India at that time. In this book, basic details of many common grasses of southern-Indian plains are briefly explained.

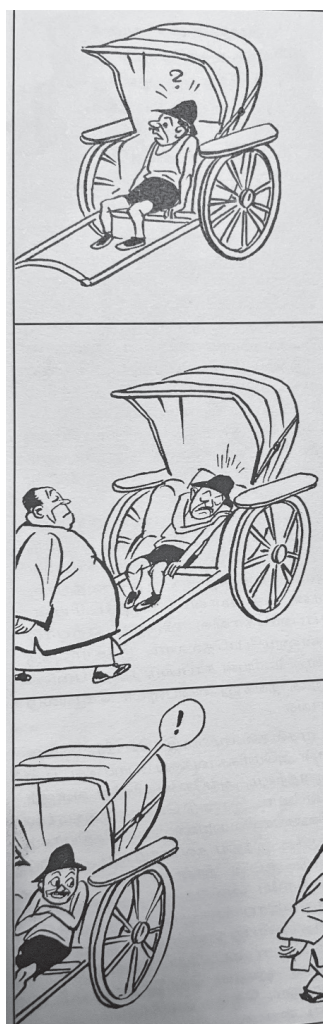
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K. Rangachari C. Tadulinga Mudaliyar.



Cover page of Rangachari-Mudaliyar handbook.



A clever rickshaw-puller avoids a hefty passenger – courtesy: Ananda Vikatan archives.

## BEYOND THE VENUE – 2

An occasional series on art breaking boundaries in the city

# A Memorable Exhibit at Majestic Madras Memorial Hall

The Vanam Art Festival was organised as part of the Dalit History Month celebration by the Pa Ranjith-founded Neelam Cultural Centre. The event was held at the Madras Memorial Hall at Evening Bazaar Road in George Town. The building – a structure of the iconic classical style – was constructed by the British in 1860 as a thanksgiving to the gods following the sepoy mutiny. I found myself overwhelmed by

the grandeur of its tall, soaring ceilings. When I passed through the gates to enter the festival, I was greeted by the striking image of exhibits displayed alongside a community kitchen set up by Untitled Kitchen. The Vanam Art Festival turned out to be a lively, interactive experience blending together art, music and food. Many talks and discussions were organised as well.



The plywood wall, painted by visitors.



20 artists and 23 photographers came together to create this impactful exhibition, which was presented to the audience

in different mediums ranging from ceramic, wood and stone to beads, paper and terracotta, to name a few.

positioned between the building's towering columns, close to the main entrance. Nearby is a plywood wall that borders the community kitchen, which the audience is invited to paint as they have a sip of lime tea. The day I visited the event, I saw that everyone joined hands to help out in the kitchen, be it artist, curator or visitor. Every single person who dropped by the exhibition left with memories of a hot meal or drink, made more enjoyable by warm

● by Thirupurasundari Sevel

in two parts – Dalit Art and Aesthetics, an exhibit curated by artist Natarajan Gangadharan and Nitham, a photography exhibit curated by visual artist Jaisingh Nageshwaran and photographers Palani Kumar and Steevez Rodriguez. The show was inaugurated by Athiveerapandiyan, Mariya Anthoni and Alphonse Roy. While the overall theme of the festival focused on the importance of the collective voice, each of the exhibits had a distinctive voice and character. The artists showcased works

The first exhibit that greets the visitor is one that explores the intricate links between power and media. It is strikingly



The photography exhibit curated by Jaisingh Nageshwaran.



The Nitham photo exhibit.



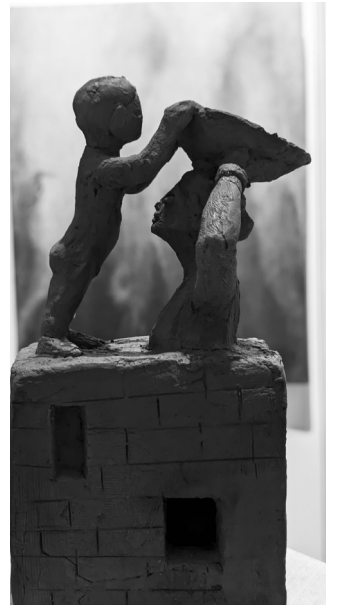
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conversation and chit-chat. And there was certainly a lot to talk about – each exhibit packaged its message inside presentations both passive and interactive to provoke thought and dialogue. For instance, one of the exhibits gave visitors the opportunity to make a beaded chain or accessory that they could freely take away with them – an exchange that deliberated on a recent incident in

Left: The Ambedkar statue.

the city where a family was denied entrance into a movie theatre even when they held bona fide tickets. There was also quite a unique, tactile sculpture of Ambedkar, surrounded by works of various artists.

The photography exhibit was wonderful, as well. When I spoke to Jaisingh, I discovered that the entries included oeuvre from states outside of Tamil Nadu as well, including Nepal. He stressed the importance of a collective voice and explained



A terracotta sculpture

that an ‘insider-outsider lens’ is crucial to any serious work of documentation. The photo exhibit also displayed the work of students trained by curator Palani Kumar, who himself presented a body of work based on their parents and homes.

The week-long Vanam Arts Festival was a celebration of art, literature and theatre. Personally, I found that a day was not enough to explore it!



A talk by one of the art show curators.

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– THE EDITOR

## The Legacy of Old Mylapore’s A.K. Vel Saloon



care the staff took to serve their customers. Some time later, when an ageing Angamuthu found that he could not continue to run the business, he handed over the entire responsibility to Kasi, his son-in-law.



T. Angamuthu.

shop extend beyond the mundanely commercial - a desire to contribute to society drove him to consider offering free services to underprivileged corporation school students, who receive haircuts at the saloon for no charge.

What a wonderful way to give back to society! Truly, our community runs on the service and support contributed by citizens from all walks of life and Thanigai is a shining example. Kudos to his kindness!

If you wish to make a visit to the saloon, now called Dhanush Hair Dressers, just stop by Kamaraj Avenue, 2nd Street, Adyar, where Thanigai continues to carry on his grandfather’s legacy.

– Baskar Seshadri

It was the early Fifties. Angamuthu of Mylapore took an interest in the business of hair-dressing, a field which, at that time, had no organised shops – most people groomed their hair in the house or in common spaces like the local temple tank. It was Angamuthu who took the bold step of opening a professional saloon, setting the stage for success for many years to come.

A.K. Vel Saloon was originally situated right next to the Old Sathyam Studio. Old timers may be aware of this shop of yesteryears, and the trademark

rose to the occasion. He did his job with great care and concern for many years. The shop grew in reputation under his able management. Kasi expanded the shop a bit and modernized it to some extent, too. Little did he foresee that the place would one day be vacated for the railway project. The saloon was shut down, but Kasi went on to open a new branch at Adyar where it continues to run as a successful business even today under his son Thanigai, who took over after father’s demise. Thanigai’s ambitions for the

# A shot in the arm for Indian squash

The leading lady of Indian squash, Dipika Pallikal Karthik makes only few appearances on the squash court these days. The first Indian woman to break into the top 10 in world ranking over ten years ago, Dipika had a wonderful run in the professional circuit and for India. Later she married India cricketer Dinesh Karthik and then motherhood

came in to force her to keep away from the tough grind of professional tours and participations. But family support and her well known grit combined to ensure her courtship with squash was still strong. Dipika switched to doubles play and what is more proved her strength when in the world doubles held in Glasgow last year, she partnered Joshna

Chinappa, the other leading light of Indian squash and won the title. Thereafter she joined her brother-in-law, Saurav Ghosal, highest ranked Indian in the men's section to clinch the world mixed doubles title

as well. Need anything more be said of this superbly talented player, a proud product of the Indian squash and triathlon academy?

Now a few days ago Dipika was again in the news. She and

ities to get past the top seeded Malaysian pair of Aifa Azman and Mohd Syafiq Kamal in the semi-final. That it took them just 29 minutes to finish off in style underscored the level of confidence that the Indians exhibited. And this came to the fore in the final where they were pitted against the Malaysian second seeds Rachel Arnold and Ivan Yuen, both experienced and higher ranked players in the world. Dipika and Harinder combined well, cut off the rival enterprise and in 26 minutes carved out a straight game win to signal a good augury for Indian squash as the Asian Games nears. To add to this happy tidings was the bronze medal win of the other Indian pair in this event, Abhay Singh, another trainee of the Chennai Academy and Anahat Singh, a top junior.

Overall, it was a memorable outing for the Indians, gearing up as they are for tougher challenges at the Asian Games. Indeed, a win of this kind could not have come a day too soon. Dipika, always a resolute player and Harinder, no less in grit, have reasons to feel optimistic of their chances at the same site, Hangzhou. A world title already, Dipika in particular will be keen to add one more to her precious collection of silverware.

● by S.R. Suryanarayan

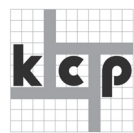


Abhay Singh, Anahat Singh, Dipika Pallikal Karthik and Harinder Pal Singh Sandhu.

her Academy mate Harinder Pal Sandhu combined to win the inaugural Asian Mixed Doubles event held in Hangzhou as a prelude to the Asian Games to be hosted by the city come September. Mixed doubles is being introduced in the squash programme for the first time in the Asiad and the current tournament was held as a test event with nine countries taking part. Dipika and Harinder have hardly played together in an event of this stature but what came to fore was not just their experience but the fruits of the strong grounding that they had at the Academy in their coming-up days. The Indian pair was not the favourite to win, going by their seeding (they were seeded three) but as they say, it is the performance on the day that mattered. Two Malaysian pairs were seeded ahead of them.

Dipika and Harinder showed their professional abil-

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