A time to introspect on our mistakes

Cyclone Michaung has come and gone. It left behind a trail of destruction. It also seemed tailor-made to expose all our inadequacies. It showed up the city for what it is – built on shoddy infrastructure, with poor planning laid on it, and a willing citizenry that has co-operated with vested interests in bending every rule in the book as far as town planning is concerned. If such a metropolis does not get flooded, what else will?

It was ironic to see the way political parties reacted. The ruling entity, which riding on a weak monsoon last year had touted its so-called stormwater drain rectification a success was left with much mud splattered on it. Of course, politicians being what they are, everything turned into a photo opportunity – councillors jumping into plastic-filled drains to remove blocks (why allow it to get that way in the first place?) and being praised sky high, ministers and others wading through water to offer succour and relief and of course the spin doctors on social media immediately publicising everything. And when everything failed the tone and tenor changed to how Michaung was handled far better than the 2015 floods.

The Opposition begged to differ. Conveniently forgetting that it had thoroughly messed up reservoir management in 2015 and caused untold suffering owing to the consequent floods, this group went hammer and tongs at the Government, accusing it of large-scale corruption in the stormwater drain project, which had failed completely. The social media wing of the Opposition went to town on the Government's inadequacies. The truth lay somewhere in between these two extremes and the common man/woman bore the brunt of it all.

Will Michaung change the way we handle our city and its environs? Unlikely. But it, and its predecessors have shown that extreme weather systems are going to be the norm in future, and we better be prepared for it. And if we are serious about it, and not placated by sops such as Rs 6,000 per ration card, we need to really demand action. The first of these is a proper stormwater drain plan for the city that considers topography and natural gradients. The second is the immediate stoppage of continuous raising of main road levels. This folly by itself has caused what were once

(Continued on page 2)

Floodwaters carry oil spill into water bodies; Ennore residents suffer fallout

For the residents of Ennore, Cyclone Michaung has been disastrous in more ways than one. The floodwaters have carried an oil spill from the nearby CPCL refinery at Manali into the eco-sensitive Ennore Creek, affecting the community in Ennore and surrounding areas as far as 25 kilometres from the neighbourhood. The Tamil Nadu Water Resources Department and Indian Coast Guard have noted that the oil spill has extended to roughly 20 kilometres, coating the Buckingham Canal and encroaching into the Kosasthalaiyar River to reach up to Kasimedu Harbour. The disaster, following as it does in the wake of the cyclone, has resulted in extensive property damage – the oil has stained homes and vehicles, and damaged belongings such as electronic appliances and documents. The fishing community is discovering that they’re unable to return to work even after the rains have stopped; oil contamination has affected their catch and the Kosasthalaiyar is heaving with hundreds of dead fish, prawns and crabs. The impact could well be devastating – Prabhakaran Veerarasu, an environmental engineer at Poovulagin Nambargal, pointed out in a

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A TIME TO INTROSPECT ON OUR MISTAKES

(Continued from page 1)
elevated areas to become flood prone. The third is to demand de-silting of drains and water channels and prevent them from being encroached upon. And let us add here that encroachments are not by slums but fat cat industrial establishments. Fourth, the natural sponges that surround our city, by way of the Pallikaranai Marsh and reservoirs need to be left alone. Their continued shrinkage cannot be permitted. Lastly, it is high time Chennai has an inviolable boundary drawn around it, making sure urban expansion takes place elsewhere in the State. There is a certain limit to what a city can bear, and we seem to have reached that.

And next time we throw a piece of plastic waste on to the street let us pause. And before we feel tempted to buy that plot of land marked out on what was once a lake let us think twice. And each time we see water bodies being encroached upon let us inform someone in authority and what is more, follow up on action. And when we see our road levels being raised let us not immediately contemplate raising our plinths but go out there and ask as to why road levels cannot remain the same. The future is dependent on us and not the politicians.

Some Things Just Don’t Change

Cyclone Michaung has come and gone and The Woman from Madras Musings is struck, once again, by the fatheadiness of some to insist that life chug along with their terms even in the midst of a natural calamity. Even as the city was struggling to breathe itself from the floods and inundations, stories emerged from the ground about public requests that ranged from the silly to the plain bizarre. There was the piece from a relief volunteer who entreated people to request for dire essentials, not treaties like ice cream; there was the news story of a mendi artist who had to catch a boat to reach his customer in a town upriver outside of the city; and there was (Wo)MMM’s own personal experience with someone who wanted to know how they could get a bottle or two of whiskey delivered home until their street was drained.

(Contd from previous page)

quote to Donald Herald that Ennore Creek is home to about 100 species of fish. If the breeding ground is affected, he warns, the livelihoods of the fishing community will be destroyed.

Meanwhile, media reports are emerging about the ensuing health issues affecting the people of Ennur, Adi Dravidar, and other fishing villages. Many complain of burning sensations in their eyes, itching in their hands and legs and spells of giddiness. The health department has deployed a team of doctors to provide medical care, and the State Government has sent twenty boats with men and resources to the Ennore Creek area to help with relief works.

The State Oil Spill Crisis Management Group came together on December 11 to review the extent of the crisis. The group – headed by the member secretary of TNPCB and consisting of experts from the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB), the Coastal Guard, the Madras High Court, and other agencies – was to determine the extent of the current oil spill and the potential long-term environmental impacts. The group also noted that the refinery was committed and North Chennai was sealed off. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) and the Coast Guard – conducted field visits and concluded that the spillage had indeed originated from the CPCL refinery in Manali. Presently water levels have receded. There was no pipeline leak from the refinery. We are investigating the matter,” they said. The response from the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB) has been disappointing, too. Activists and residents of Ennur claim that the Board attempted to downplay the crisis in the beginning, maintaining that the water only contained traces of oil. However, following direction from the Government, the Board issued directions to CPCL to identify and clean oil stagnations in Buckingham Canal, Ennore Creek and adjoining areas; it was also tasked with ensuring that all pipelines and tanks are safe from leakage. The TNPCB order also noted that CPCL’s operations would be suspended if the refinery was found to have discharged oil against the norms under the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974.

The fact is that such incidents are not new to the Ennore-North Manali region in North Chennai. This isn’t the first time that the community has faced issues with pollution from the CPCL refinery, either – in August last year, a suspected sulphur dioxide leak caused many residents to complain of breathlessness and eye irritation. The year before saw the Ennore Creek flailing under severe fly ash contamination. From the CPCL refinery, which is at least the third CPCL crisis in as many years. Questions have been raised in the past, too, of why a seemingly toothless TNPCB limits itself to inspection and damage control. Considering that CPCL in particular

(Continued on page 1)

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(Continued on page 3)

Waterfolds carry oil spill into water bodies

(Continued from page 1)

in a storm is certainly not a personal agenda to frustrate. One just had to wait for the situation to pass. Some things just don’t change.

Kafka, Again

The Woman from Madras Musings has had a terrible time coordinating with service professionals in the aftermath of the cyclone. For one, connectivity took a week longer to be restored at home, thanks to an irresponsible wi-fi provider. The experience was positively Kafkaesque. The first complaint generated a ticket that promised resolution in three days; but (Wo)MMM was left without wi-fi access even a week later. Despite regular complaints to phone support, the service operator dashed off a message every morning pushing the time of resolution to later that very night; when this happened for four days straight, (Wo)MMM gave up all hope. There was nowhere else to go, either – the situation wasn’t better at the Betterman’s or the Eternal’s. Sadly, finally, the Better Half, fed up with having then the connection was patchy. (Wo)MMM is certain that the entire street knew all her business, what with her needing to repeat her words about a million times in a loud voice.

Thankfully, the Better Half – bliss her patience – pressed on and managed to get the original service provider to pay a home visit. Turns out that the problem had nothing to do with Cyclone Michaung, after all – the EB technician had inadvertently cut the cable powering the wi-fi at home. The cable was replaced the next day and the blessed green lights graced the modem once again. It was whilst (Wo)MMM was admiring the prettiness of an active modem that the Better Half received a call informing her that the new provider would install its connection the next day. The Better Half informed them that it was no longer necessary and applied for a refund.

While all this was happening, (Wo)MMM was
Many schoolgirls dream of appearing on the silver screen in film-obsessed India. Fortunately for film-goers, this was never my aspiration. Yet I did have my moment on the big screen in the most unexpected of circumstances.

Circa the late-1980s, a bunch of schoolgirls including me, after appearing for our annual exams, secured permission from our parents to watch a film by ourselves and treat ourselves to ‘tiffin’ at Woodlands Drive In – a restaurant that operated from what is now ‘Sommooi Poongai’ on Cathedral Road. 

That day, we were so excited that the thought she would never recover from the stench of nicottine assailed our nostrils as we entered the mostly empty theatre. We decided to start watching Ivanhoe at 1:30 pm. This would give us time to visit Drive In and return home by the 6:30 pm curfew.

We were so excited that the deserted theatre lobby escaped our notice. The stench of nicotine assailed our nostrils as we entered the mostly empty theatre. As our eyes acclimatised to the dark interiors, we realised that there were barely thirty people in the 300-seat theatre. The usual viewers of period English films – families, college-goers and senior citizens – were conspicuous by their absence. The viewers comprised lungi-clad men and heavily made up women draped in vividly coloured sarees, most of whom were smoking and drinking. The audience torched, loudly announcing our names.

We shuffled out of the theatre to be met by Dilli, disapproving wrt large on his face. He had just driven my father from Ranipet to Chennai and was hoping to take the rest of the day off. Unfortunately, my father asked him to fetch us.

‘You ought to inform your parents of your whereabouts,’ observed Dilli.

‘I secured amma’s permission,’ Pat came the reply, ‘What does she know of movies and theatres? Next time, ask appu.’

Dilli then informed us that he would drop everyone off at their homes. None of us mustered courage to tell him that we preferred going to Drive-In.

Two of my friends were unprepared to announce that they refused to talk to me for months.

I was even more excited than usual to board the now discontinued Sholay Passenger to Kumbakonam the next day. After all, the risk of being pulled out of a theatre amid a film screening was practically non-existent there.

K.R. Surendran
surendran0871@gmail.com

I wish I could meet her. I would love to know more about my dad and his school. Victor Phear is my dad and he passed when I was 4. The school looks amazing.

Kimberley
kimsmith676@gmail.com

The article brought back fond memories of school. Our so-called English diction is all thanks to Mrs. Enos teaching us in prep school.

Mathai cyriac
matha251@gmail.com

What a grand teacher, a blessing we were tutored by her.

Nataraja Moorthi M
raju_nutty@yahoo.com

Jayendra Panchapakesan
(Vol. XXXIII No. 12, Oct 1-15, 2023)

Humanity prevails, as always.

Shreelatha
shreelath60@gmail.com

Some Things Just Don’t Change

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struggling to get the Betternail’s car towed from their garage. It was one of the vehicles affected by the floods, for water had inundated the seats. Towing vehicles, she discovered from the service company, were in short supply; it took five and a half sessions before one was finally arranged to take the vehicle to the workshop. Of course, all work had to be halted to attend to the imminent possibility of the vehicle being towed at any given day; and with a patchy network to boot. (Wo)MM thought she would never recover from the exquisite torture of the past few weeks. But one morning, the maid appeared in front of her demanding a chat. She wanted to know why (Wo)MMM was moping about for a few days; nothing could be that bad, she said, to warrant an practical sulk. Thinking that apples and pomegranates would help, she had bought a bag of fruits on her way.

She was right, of course. They did.

What’s in a name?

The Woman from Madras Musings rather enjoyed the last Short ‘N Snappy penned by MMM. She had no idea that the city had such a surplus of random urban legends concerning area names. Though, she was reminded of a tweet about a Kathipara landmark on Google Maps. The user had stumbled on a place calling itself ‘Vanthu Vettucom,’ prompting him (or her) to ask, in some alarm, whether it was a barber shop as he (or she) hoped. Turns out the guess was bang on the money. Now isn’t that a nice name for a hairdressing establishment?

– (Wo)MMM
An interactive exhibition with a difference – R.V. Ramani’s Art

As we climbed up the stairs to enter the exhibition, we were welcomed with such warmth by Mr. R.V. Ramani, who bade us welcome the works of diverse artists. His exhibit displayed the works of A.L. Apparajithan, Muralikumar, Krishna Mohan, Asma Menon, S.S. Kalairani, K.M. Adimoolam, Subha De, Lykim Lent, Karun, C. Douglas, Indrapramit Roy, Ulrike Arndt, Mana Parekh, Bhupen Shinde, Ashwin Bhat, Todikani Kanu, Shipra Bajaj and M. Nahesh. There were pieces from the host too, which sparked much conversation. Ramani patiently answered the numerous questions that arose on the subjects of his art, work, and experience. On the second day, the exhibit included a movie screening of his hand-drawn animation films as well as an interaction with artist and film-maker Biswajit Das from Guwahati.

In all, this was an interactive exhibition with a difference, a gathering that celebrated art as well as the audience.

The host R.V. Ramani interacting with visitors.

A movie poster, which finds prominent display in the exhibit.

A piece of work by Kalairani based on R.V. Ramani’s films, interviews and reviews in the press.

Biswa Das, an artist and filmmaker from Guwahati, presenting his hand-drawn animation films.

Sculpted pieces on display.
During the late seventies and early eighties, when I was with the port of Visakhapatnam, Ambrose was the additional Secretary in the Ministry of Shipping, in charge of Ports. Being the departmental head in the port, officially I had regular meetings with him; he was even then known as the friendliest senior officer in the ministry. In fact, he allotted time for anyone from the port sector to meet without any hassle. Earlier, when the post I was holding in the port was recommended to be elevated and the papers were pending owing to bureaucratic delays, he got them all resolved. The then Chairman of the port used to tell me that but for Ambrose my post could not have been elevated.

Eventually after retirement I settled in Chennai and so did Ambrose. It was a great surprise to me when some years back, he called me and asked if he could visit me to discuss some matter. I told him that if he had told me, I would have gladly gone and met him. He replied that he wanted a favour from me and so it would be appropriate for him to come and meet me. When he came (and it was the first of many delightful visits) it was for asking me to write for Adyar Times a neighborhood journal that he owned.

So, it started and I wrote weekly articles for about seven years without break on the locality, in a column titled Amazing Adyar.

During this time, he often used to take me to people and places that were to be written about and that is how I came to know a lot about Adyar. This continued for three to four years and he always appreciated my writing.

Recently when he wrote his small book of memoirs, he asked me to provide a foreword for the book. I was overwhelmed by this gesture.

Born to Jayarani Pushpam and Abel Arulanandham at Cuddalore on April 11, 1928, an ambrose often recalled an incident of his childhood days, and of an Alsatian pup he could not say no. It grew big in no time and unfortunately died in a road accident, and he had to get her another pup.

As a youngster he studied in Bain School run by a Scott-Miss Bain, that moulded his character.

Later in his life he had good schoolmates, one of them was Sundarji, a quite but dashing character, who joined the Army and rose to the rank of General. After passing the Intermediate examination in first class in 1943 Ambrose continued his studies in the Madras President College. He wanted to write the All India Services Competitive Examination conducted by the Central Government but was under aged and therefore sat for the competitive examination for the Madras Civil Service (Executive Branch) conducted by the State Govt. and having passed the same was first appointed as Probationary Deputy Collector in June 1949, at Chithoor district (now part of Andhra Pradesh) and having passed the same was first appointed as Probationary Deputy Collector in June 1949, at Chithoor district (now part of Andhra Pradesh) and having passed the same was first appointed as Probationary Deputy Collector in June 1949, at Chithoor district (now part of Andhra Pradesh), and rose to the rank of General.

Character, who joined the Army and after completing successfully sat for the competitive examination for the Madras Civil Service (Executive Branch) conducted by the State Govt. and having passed the same was first appointed as Probationary Deputy Collector in June 1949, at Chithoor district (now part of Andhra Pradesh), and functions and when I visited such places I saw the respect he knew what the poet Josiah Gilbert Holland meant when he wrote:

God give us men! A time like this demands,
Strong minds, great hearts, true faith and ready hands,
Men whom the list of office does not kill,
Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy,
Men who possess opinions and a will,
Men who have honour; men who will not lie,
Men who can stand before a demagogue,
And damn his treacherous flatteries without winking!

Tall men, sun crowned, who live above the fog,

In public duty, and in private thinking,

For while the rabble, with their thumb-worn creeds,
Their large professions and their little deeds,

Mingle in selfish strife, lo! Freedom weeps

Wrong rules when the justice sleeps.

I shall miss him. Last month when I called on him, he was bedridden. It was tragic to see a person who was a hockey player in his college days and ennobled an athletic figure, so enfeebled but his spirit was undimmed.

I pray for his soul to rest in peace.

— by K.R.A. Narasiah

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Ambrose as District Collector.

Kavali in Nellore district, now a part of Andhra Pradesh.

When reorganisation of states on a linguistic basis was accepted, Andhra Pradesh was formed on 1st October, 1953 with Kurnool as the temporary capital, Ambrose was allotted to Tamil Nadu and posted as Additional Asst. Settlement Officer in Pattukottai, Thanjavur District, under K.Varanathan, I.A.S., Later after having held senior positions such as the Chairman, Madras Port Trust and Chairman, TN Electricity Board, he was posted as the additional secretary in the Union Ministry of Shipping. It was then, in order to relieve the Mumbai Port of congestion, that a new Container Port was planned to be constructed at Nava Sheva. In addition to his duties and responsibilities as Addl. Secretary, he was appointed as the Chairman of Nava Sheva Port.

Joining the international body, ICRISAT, he was appointed as the Asst. Director General (Administration and Finance), of the organisation and after completing four years in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, he was transferred to Hyderabad.

After completing successfully all such assignments he moved to Chennai to lead a retired life, when he was induced by Ramakrishnan another former civil servant, to start the tabloid Adyar Times. Initially he says he had a lot of financial problems, when he had to borrow for running the tabloid but later he overcame these and the enterprise was paying back well.

He was quietly supporting many social service organisations and when I visited such places I saw the respect he commanded. We became quite close during those days and then I knew what the poet Josiah Gilbert Holland meant when he wrote:

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I pray for his soul to rest in peace.
S. Venkitaramanan – The Turnaround Man

Venkitaramanan, an IAS officer who passed away recently, was a legendary figure who held many top positions in government. He was Finance secretary at the centre (also at his home state in Tamil Nadu) and the governor of the Reserve Bank of India among other things. In Chennai he will always be remembered as the man who turned around the fertiliser giant Spic (Southern Petro Chemicals Industries Corporation).

Established in 1969, Spic was the first large fertiliser factory to be set up in Tamil Nadu. The trial chairman Tamil Nadu Industries Development Corporation (TIDCO), he was very keen on trying to get Spic from the beginning, starting with unanticipated cost overruns.

Once commissioned, there were a lot of teething troubles. Spic was cleared for fuel oil which subsequent to the oil price hike had become uneconomic. The management tried to get naphtha instead whose price had also shot up. Around this time the government’s fertiliser price policy also worked against newer plants like Spic. By 1977, Spic was teetering on all fronts – financial institutions and banks had become crucial to make profits in fertiliser industry. One of the steps taken was to put up a special facility to import ammonia and phosphoric acid at the Tuticorin port. Under Venkitaramanan’s guidance many transportation and distribution problems were solved.

He brought in consultants from many fields. Another one of his major contributions was in human resource management. He managed to evolve an industrial culture in a joint sector organisation consisting of both public sector and private sector employees.

Venkitaramanan left Spic in 1983 because of his appointment as secretary to the department of power and subsequently finance at a crucial moment in the centre. He was a man of many achievements but the turnaround of Spic would always be one of the high points of his career.

SPIC aerial view.

by Sushila Ravindranath

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He left behind a organisation which had become dynamic, quick to grasp opportunities and able to withstand crises. The subsequent history of the company had nothing to do with him and does not merit inclusion here.

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

THE EDITOR

Venkitaramanan addressing a Spic AGM with M.A. Chidambaram and A.C. Muthiah seated to his left.
Velavan and Rajeev among National Squash title winners

November was the month for the senior national squash championship, hosted at the Indian Squash and Triathlon Academy in Chennai. Among the winners in various categories, two names had added interest because they were from the city. Velavan Senthikumar emerged victorious in the men's category while veteran Rajeev Reddy was the pick in the Over-70 yrs category.

What had made the 25-year old Velavan’s win something special was because it was his maiden national crown in the seniors and a reaffirmation that this talented young man was ready for bigger challenges. One of those early pupils at the Squash Academy in early 2000, Velavan had quite soon caught the eyes of his coaches the Malaysian Maj S. Maniam and the then national coach Cyrus Poncha (currently the Secretary General of the Squash Rackets Federation of India). They had seen in him the next big name in Indian squash and another prizet product from the Academy. A tennis player who turned to squash, Velavan was quick to pick up the nuances of the sport and being a left hander lent an additional dimension to his court play. It did not take long for him to showcase his rich talent with title-wins in the national championship, British Junior Open (U-19) and the Asian junior championship one after the other for what seemed a start to a golden career. But the demands of academics took precedence and before anyone knew, this spiritedly lad had flown away to the US for studies. That break from squash at the national level kept him away from avid squash lovers for a while even as he tried to keep in touch with the sport with his activities in the professional circuit. The Tamil Nadu lad did make an attempt to regain attention with an enterprise return to form in the national championship last year but Abhay Singh, his stable mate took away the triumph, won the Over 70 yrs title. Velavan was back at his best and there is so much more to do he realises.

Consistency is an aspect he has been gaining attention at the veteran’s level is Rajeev. A world referee in squash which enables him go around the globe and watch and officiate top rung competition, Rajeev’s last big assignment was the Hangzhou Asian Games. A member of the MCC, squash has given him tremendous shine in the Olympics (squash is being introduced as a sport in the 2028 edition) are his goals. With time on his hand and ambition high, here in an Indian player who would increasingly demand attention as the days go by.

As for now, the man who has given his first reward and from them this veteran never looked back. Over 55 yrs, Over 60 and Over 65 yrs followed by which time he had a healthy collection of around 10 titles! What came as a turning point, as he said was his officiating in a World Masters competition once where he took charge of the Over-80 yrs competition. Stuck by the way the two senior competitors went about on the court, Rajeev realised age can be just a number and that has inspired him to go on in pursuit of more success. The 72-year old has by his latest triumph, won the Over 70 yrs category twice and yes, there is hopefully more to come. With hockey and tennis his additional pastimes, Rajeev in every sense breathes sports!