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MADRAS

MUSINGS

Vol. XXXIV No. 1

April 16-30, 2024

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Good tidings from Gokhale Hall

• by **Sriram V**

The built heritage of Chennai has never had it so good. It was only a few months ago that we in *Madras Musings* had reported on how Bharat Insurance (Kardyl) Buildings is soon to be restored, with the Life Insurance Corporation of India, the owners of the heritage structure, moving ahead at long last with the task. Now, we are happy to report that yet another cause celebre may soon come to a satisfactory conclusion. And that is historic Gokhale Hall on Armenian Street. As per a letter received from IIT Madras, which is published in page 3 of this issue, there has been considerable progress on paper at least, in the process of restoration of the heritage structure.

Both Bharat Insurance Building and Gokhale Hall were catalysts in moving forward the battle to secure the built heritage of the city. In the first decades of the present millennium, it was the practice to dismiss all structures constructed during the colonial era as vestiges of an unwanted past. The Government actively encouraged demolition of such buildings and put up very poorly designed modern high rise in their place. The trend had begun even in the 1980s but it was only from the 1990s onwards that real estate within the city became serious business and every inch was viewed only from the commercial angle. The list of Government-owned heritage buildings that have vanished is long.

It was in 2010 that the tide turned. The High Court had

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Bigger not always better – Can Chennai Airport convert features into strengths?

• by **Varsha V.**

JetArena – a handle on X (formerly Twitter) that covers news and insights from Indian Aviation – recently announced that FlyDubai airline will stop operations between Chennai and Dubai from mid-May, opting instead to ply flights between Kochi and Dubai. The update recalls the media coverage earlier this year which stated that the Chennai

airport is seeing a decline in the number of flights owing to Bengaluru and Hyderabad stealing patronage both domestic and international. In a quote to *The Hindu* earlier in February, aviation expert Gov-

indarajan Bashyam pointed out, “While building a second airport is the key to drastically improving the economy of the State, the interim solution is to optimally utilise the existing space, which can be done by a private operator. There are many incentives that private operators in Bengaluru and Hyderabad are able to provide to draw in airlines. Also, we can take a leaf out of the book of brownfield airports, such as

Delhi and Mumbai, and make that success a reality here as well.” The recommendation to privatise is perhaps a subject for debate, but there’s no contesting the implicit claim that the Chennai airport – reported to handle 18 million passengers a year – is not making efficient use of the current property. While the city awaits its new terminal over the next

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Good tidings from Gokhale Hall

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already dealt with several litigations against demolition of heritage structures and had in most instances cited rightfully that it could do nothing in the absence of an Act to protect historic buildings. In 2010, cases pertaining to both Bharat Insurance Building and Gokhale Hall came up for judgement. The court not only ordered their preservation but also went ahead in presenting the Government with a list of heritage structures in the city and suggested that a Heritage Conservation Committee (HCC) be formed to protect them. It also asked the Government to come up with a Heritage Act. This judgement remains very important in the journey of preserving heritage in the city.

The subsequent history of the HCC and the progress of the Heritage Act have not exactly been edifying. But what is undeniable is that the mere constitution of an HCC meant that there was a review mechanism in place when it came to dealing with heritage. It was possible for instance to ensure that Chennai Metrorail designed stations in keeping

with the skyline in historic areas. This was in sharp contrast to the monstrosities that the MRTS put up. Many of the Government-owned heritage buildings received a fresh lease of life. This of course cannot be attributed to the HCC but the Government itself, post the judgement, had a change of heart on heritage. A conservation cell was created within the Public Works Department with trained engineers, and it has been doing good work.

That all of this is in place even without bringing into force the Heritage Act of 2012 is commendable. However, it is essential that there is progress on the Act itself. Without it, heritage depends on the whims of those in power. And private heritage continues to remain at risk. In fact in the absence of the Act it is privately-owned heritage structures that have suffered the most with most having vanished. In the meanwhile, let us celebrate the news of the proposed restoration of Gokhale Hall and may the edifice soon gain its rightful place as an intellectual and cultural centre as envisioned by Annie Besant, its founder.

HERITAGE WATCH

A Brief timeline of Gokhale Hall

It was in 1914 that Annie Besant founded the Young Men's Indian Association (YMIA). She planned a home for the association which would have hostel facilities for outstation students, a library, a gymnasium, canteen facilities and above all a central hall which would function as an oratory. Constructed by her close associate A Ranganatha Mudaliar, the building was completed in 1915 and its central domed hall was named after Gopalakrishna Gokhale. The building itself came to be referred that way.

Almost from inception it was the oratory that became the best-known feature. Carnatic concerts were held here as were the most fiery political meetings. The building played a key role in the history of the freedom movement. Jawaharlal Nehru has written in its praise.

By the 1970s however, the best days were over. Cultural events had shifted elsewhere. The canteen, sub-contracted, flourished. But the building flowered as a centre for sports for table tennis and body building. In the early 2000s, a misguided move to demolish the structure was stopped by legal intervention. The building will soon get a fresh lease of life. With improved connectivity to George Town by way of Metro services, it may yet again become a venue for public events.

Man-go

The Woman from Madras Musings was receiving a package when she noticed the watchman peering suspiciously at the exchange. He lost no time in shooing away the delivery personnel after the transaction and stomped up to (Wo)MMM's house with a rather stern, determined look on his face. He remarked that the bag seemed to be full of mangoes, which (Wo)MMM readily admitted to, adding that the fruit was a favourite. After a pause, the watchman begged her not to distribute the fruits in the apartment, especially to a certain household living upstairs. (Wo)MMM was lost. It was a so very unexpected request and stranger still, a close look revealed tears shining in the gentleman's eye as he urged restraint.

It transpired that the household in question had already eaten a 'sackful' of mangoes the previous week,

(Wo)MMM was concerned about her neighbours of course and rang them up to see if she could offer any help. They were fine, they said. The TV kept them occupied and they had made ample arrangements for food delivery. (Wo)MMM offered to send them home-cooked meals until they recovered over the next couple of days, but they turned down the offer. They were grateful, but could she perhaps get them a box of mysore pak and a packet of chips? (Wo)MMM sent them some tender coconut water instead, insisting that it was healthier. She wondered if the gesture was not perhaps heavy-handed, and was relieved when word arrived that they had liked it indeed.

Doc Talk

The Woman from Madras Musings wonders if you've noticed the strange fondness among fathers – heads of households, she means – to

edgeways. The patient had hardly opened her mouth to speak when the household 'doc' jumped in with a particularly detailed explanation of how the accident took place, highlighting the portions where he had sprung into action to mitigate the crisis. The patient had landed on the arm, he said, and it was he who insisted that she slowly roll over onto the back to avoid putting further weight on the limb; he had then helped her up to her feet and placed her gently on the bed and brought her a glass of water. He told the nurse that it was his expert belief that it was a fracture and that though the patient claimed the forearm to pain, the problem lay somewhere above the elbow. The nurse listened to the whole thing for a full five minutes.

So, she said, you kept on talking during the incident as you are doing now? The patient affirmed he had,

SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

throwing their digestive health into disarray. The watchman had been charged with taking care of their needs whilst incapacitated and the tasks, he said emotionally, voice quivering, were enough to make a man throw in his hat. Apart from other things, he had found himself obliged to procure them pakodas and paysam to eat alongside dishes like chicken 65 and biriyani. He wouldn't have minded doing these things under normal circumstances, he explained, except that he found their convalescent diet unbearably atrocious. If he was asked to buy one more plate of egg bajji, he declared, he would not be able to rein in his tongue. The announcement done, he prepared to move away and then paused. Could (Wo)MMM spare a mango for him, perhaps? (Wo)MMM said she could spare three. He looked rather pleased as he left, furtively hiding the fruits in his upper cloth.

establish themselves as medical savants. Cough or sniff in their presence and you will be assaulted by a barrage of questions. Is it a persistent cough? Accompanied by a headache or fever? Is the appetite normal? Does the throat ache? What about pink spots – are there pink spots anywhere on the person? The interrogation often veers into acutely uncomfortable areas, and it never seems to cross their minds that some subjects are best left unaired in public. All the while, the interrogator listens keenly with a thoroughly unnerving glint in the eye. One knows what the next step will be – a prescription of antacids and antihistamines which is usually forgotten as soon as the conversation comes to an end.

Sometimes though, this scene plays out at clinics and hospitals, which can be mildly embarrassing as you may imagine. Recently, a nurse had to pay a home visit to consult on a sprain or potential fracture; she barely managed to get a word in

whereupon the nurse broke into a grin, remarking that she supposed it to be as good a distraction from the pain as any. She finished the check-up she had come to do and left, giving the 'doc' an extra firm handshake.

When the results came in, the reactions were mixed. The 'doc' was spot on. Subsequent scans had discovered a hairline crack above the elbow – it was this pain that was 'radiating' through the forearm. There was general relief all around that it was just a hairline fracture, though it came along with a realization that there's no stopping the doc anymore. His expertise had been proven, so to speak; there would be no more escaping spontaneous diagnoses and prescriptions, not to mention the enthusiastic lectures that normally accompany them. Oh, well. (Wo)MMM supposes that a doctor in the family can't hurt, amateur though he may be.

– Wo(MMM)

Can Chennai Airport convert features into strengths?

(Continued from page 1)

two years, there appears to be no reason why improvements cannot be undertaken to boost passenger experience in the current facility by leveraging its inherent strengths - location and size.

The existing Chennai airport is located plumb in the city, a claim that not many metros can make. It has fantastic connectivity to public transport such as the metro and bus lines, and is easier to access from within the city. If autorickshaws - presently not permitted near the terminal and stopped at the gate - can be allowed at pick-up and drop-off points like taxis are, it will serve to ease accessibility for all passengers and visitors. Further, large airports such as those in Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore are sprawling facilities that are not particularly friendly in terms of mobility - flyers and visitors are often forced to walk long distances, an especially arduous task for senior and vulnerable citizens. Being smaller, the Chennai airport has great potential to build on accessibility as a forte - passenger movement within entails comparatively shorter distances, an advantage that

is often overlooked. Ramping up infrastructure in this regard can do wonders to heighten the passenger experience. Take aerobridges, for instance. The Chennai airport currently has only 13, of which a mere four are suitable for international flights. This particular lack is being addressed - the airport will reportedly get nine new aerobridges by 2025 to facilitate the operations of international flights. In fact, the Chennai airport can stand a cut above the rest by offering passengers the benefits of speed and convenience, if only it can tackle congestion and passenger wait times. Happily much is in the offing in this regard.

In terms of operational improvements, the airport has reportedly resumed simultaneous operations of the main and secondary runways after a period of roughly six years. It is said that this will help ease air traffic congestion and cull delays in flight departure, especially during the peak early morning hours between 6 am and 9 am. Digi Yatra, which enables contactless and seamless passenger movement through checkpoints with the aid of facial recognition technology, will soon be available for use. With more and more passen-

gers willing to use biometrics to expedite procedures, this is a good move. The domestic terminal has also recently launched a Self-Baggage Drop facility to help fast-track departure procedures. The new facility removes the need to wait at check-in counters to drop off baggage and stands to save passengers a lot of time. In addition to the already existing theatre and multi-level parking lot, Phase 2 of the new integrated terminal has plans to open a mini hotel for the benefit of international passengers - those who face long transit times would be able to relax before the connecting flight is open for service.

A lot of thought has clearly gone into enriching the passenger experience. As always, one hopes that the authorities do not miss the wood for the trees and accord equal importance to maintaining existing facilities as well. The bathrooms inside the terminal require attention as do other passenger infrastructure such as seating and luggage trolleys. A twin-pronged approach of maintenance and enhancement can provide the Chennai airport advantages that are hard to compete against.

**OUR
READERS
WRITE**



Gokhale Hall

Dear Sriram,

Trust this mail finds you in the best of health and cheer.

I am writing this mail in connection with the article on Heritage Watch in the 16-31 March 2024 edition of *MADRAS MUSINGS* (Vol. XXXIII, No. 23) on the status of the Heritage Act 2012. Non-implementation of the provisions of the Heritage Act of 2012 by the TN Government is a serious omission.

However, with reference to the case example that the article cites (i.e., Gokhale Hall), the information in the article is not factually correct. Young Men's Indian Association (YMIA), established by Dr. Annie Besant in 1914, which owns Gokhale Hall, was signatory to a tripartite MoU with IIT Madras' National Centre for Safety of heritage Structures (NCSHS) and National Council for Science Museums (NCSM), Kolkata under the Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India in September 2022 for a project aimed at adapting the heritage structure into a Museum of the Freedom Struggle, with emphasis on freedom fighters from Tamil Nadu. After a thorough study spanning over 8 months, NCSHS submitted a feasibility report for use of the heritage building for the said purpose, and a detailed project report with the necessary structural restoration interventions and ancillary facilities to cater to such an activity in the building.

The Museum layout has been designed by NCSM. While there are segments of the building with severely dilapidated floors, the central domed hall (from which the building gets its name) and the front facade and spaces adjoining these are in fairly good condition. "Roofless for 14 years now and hanging by a thread" as the article sums up the status of the building is not representative.

We have successfully obtained permission from the Heritage Conservation Committee (HCC) of CMDA last week, after due process of submission of proposed restoration details, discussions and design alterations extending over the period, July 2023 to March 2024. NCSM will now proceed with tendering to rehabilitate the building and put in place the proposed museum, with funds from the Ministry of Culture (GoI). The intent was to start this work in the 75th year celebrations of Indian Independence under the Aazadi ka Amrut Mahotsav scheme.

Thank you for your kind attention and with warm regards.

Arun Menon

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Roja - A soft name but an Iron Will

In search of an amazing woman who has defined odds to do what her mind dictated, I accidentally hit upon one, who worried more about the dead than the living. "Dignity to a dead body", that too an unclaimed or abandoned one, is her calling in life. "No one dies an orphan. Roja is there to bid adieu with respect," is what Roja has promised to herself, to do till she dies. Roja is an exalted soul who deserves to be the first of the many Empowered Women *Adyar Times* will be talking to.

Her story tugs at our hearts - she has performed the last rites for more than 11,000 odd persons within 23 years. Once she cried the whole night after burying an abandoned week-old child with its umbilical cord intact but neck wrung to death. The personal problems that Roja faces with grit, to date, is a humongous lesson to all ladies out there who recoil at the slightest tug of fate.

Roja's work finds her at Kannammapet, Panayur, Thi-

ruvanmiyur, Mylapore or other such burial grounds. Whenever I called her she was at the mortuary doing the shifting of a body into an ambulance or at a burial ground saying a prayer. Not a 9 to 5 job. She is called anytime from dawn to dawn, from hospitals, police stations or even households where no one in the family is willing to do the last rites for a dead relative!

It started when her stomach did a quick churn, at the sight of a dead body being torn apart by dogs. Roja was 14 then; She quickly alerted the police, thinking it was a murder. The constables told her that it was an unclaimed body and it was usual for people to dispose of it in this manner. This drove an axe into her heart and occupied her thoughts the whole day. The image of the human carcass stuck to her mind. She promised herself that she would seek out unfortunate souls and give them a decent burial. Easier said than done. She had no schooling. She

did not know anything about rituals for the dead; she only knew what she had seen in the neighbourhood and in movies. But, her mind was made up. She had to volunteer at the right places and do it on the sly. Only her father knew why she was missing from home at different times of the day. He understood her and even helped her monetarily.

Slowly, it came to light that this girl was devoting her life to this service. Police stations sought her out when there was an unclaimed body in the mortuary beyond the waiting period. They allotted the space for the burial and she performed the last rites in her own manner with a small puja with camphor, milk and garland. The police took care of the necessary expenses.

Roja has a 5-year-old son Rohith, whom she has left in the custody of her father in Chidambaram. Her father is a farmer and has been her moral support for 25 years. Her husband, who fell in love with and

married her, was shocked when he heard what she was doing in the name of service. They lived separately for a few years. But, he came back to her after realising the magnitude of what she was doing. Her neighbours were troublemakers who did not want to live next door to a girl who casually walked in and out of crematoriums. Roja did not pay heed to their lament that she might bring in some evil spirit. They were worried for their family, she understood.

I asked her slowly if she had seen a ghost in any of the burial grounds. "Not even one," she says. I breathe a sigh of relief, and she laughs. "I have never believed in such stories," she remarks. "There are more evil spirits amongst us than in the cemeteries. People who do not

care for their own dead are the worst ghosts, I say. I never cared for people's threats. My only concern is that no one should die without having someone to give them a decent burial. I have a group of friends - Janaki Ramkumar, Kumar, Ganesan, and Anandham Amma - who run a Kaappagam, who always help me with the expenses." A burial costs a minimum of Rs. 4,000. "I have been managing so far. The rest I leave to God, who always sends someone to help me," she finishes.

Roja works at a binding press whenever she gets time. But will that alone help her to sustain her family? Yet, she is unwavering in her noble goal and blind to her own material needs. Roja can be contacted at 75501 43974. - (Courtesy: *Adyar Times*.)

Breaking the Fast during Ramadan

When it is time to quench the thirst and appease the hunger after a long day's fast at dusk, and the Azaan radiates a sparkling and magnificent voice, that is when the Ramadan ambience comes alive. The Big (Wallajah) Mosque stands tall with all its glory and grandeur in Triplicane and is certainly the nerve centre during this pious and sacred month.

The Sindhi followers of the Sufi saint Dada Ratanchand under the Sufi Dar Trust serve food at the Wallajah Mosque for the entire month of Ramadan. Dada Ratanchand moved to Madras during Partition and stayed on here. The trust aims to spread the teachings of the Sufi saint Shahenshah Baba Nebhraj Sahib of Rohri, Sind which state that all gods are one. Dada Ratanchand was his disciple. It is a beautiful and noteworthy gesture of elevating the beauty of diversity in the context of Indian society at large which is primarily known for acceptance, tolerance and inclusivity of different cultures and traditions.

The Wallajah mosque, also known as the Big Mosque, was built in 1795 by Muhammed Ali Wallajah, the then Nawab of Arcot. It has a large prayer hall, a tank and an immense open space fronting it. The entire structure is constructed with granite without the use of iron or wood. One of the most striking features of the mosque is a chronogram composed in Persian by Rajah Makkan Lal, Kirad, who was in the Nawab's employ.

● by Roshan Zahin

Zaheer, who works in Afreen Tea Stall just outside the mosque says that the atmosphere and aura is utterly pleasing and calming because of how simple and sophisticated it is without any dispute or controversy attached to it. He says, "Not only Muslims but also non-Muslims pay a visit to the mosque and our shop. During the time of breaking fast, the Sindhis provide Vadas, at times Biryani, Sweets, etc. to the rozedaar". He asserts that indulging in drinking alcohol near the premises of the mosque is prohibited.

As far as his shop is concerned, it has an ample variety of snacks and savouries available such as mutton roll, chicken cutlet, chicken sticks, halwa puri, rot, haleem and many other delectable items. "The demand is mostly high for our items and the prices are supremely affordable. One halwa puri costs 15 rupees, one box of haleem is 180 rupees, one khuwaja is 30 rupees etc.," adds Zaheer.

"It is great humanity that the Sindhi community is displaying by offering iftari to the people. It just reiterates the ideology of acceptance and inclusion" further adds Zaheer by stressing on the aspect of embracing harmony and brotherhood.

Chand Begum, 74, who lives in Arumbakkam religiously visits the Mosque and says, "Chennai is one city where the differences among different religions is not seen in a negative light. Everyone rather celebrates the differences and does things for different communities with good faith. Unfortunately, communal attacks and riots prevail in many parts of the nation, but I feel blessed that I am in such a city where the level of acceptance and tolerance for different religions is superlative compared to the rest of the country. And undoubtedly, the Sindhi community offering iftar to Muslims is an exemplary instance of that".

Fazal, who works in a Piano Servicing Centre situated on Wallajah road is also a regular visitor to the Masjid. He says, "The Sindhi community makes this contribution from the profit they earn from the textile industry."

"We do this work with sheer love and purely on humanitarian grounds," says Ramdas Devnani, one of the volunteers of Sindhi Community. "There's no specific objective and agenda as such. It's been 25 years since I joined this work. Our Trust comprises different people from different fraternity/ fields. Every day we aim to feed 12,000 people. We provide veg biryani, dates, milk, sweets, etc. Our Guruji taught us that service to mankind is service to God. We don't discriminate against people based on religion, caste, creed and race, and it gives us immense pleasure to serve them. We feel blessed that we are able to do something for others. We simply follow sufism where everybody is loved regardless of any other factor."

The ethnic grace, the inclusivity of cultures, the humanitarian acts, the greatness of the volunteers, the warmth, etc., they all start from within and indeed the Sindhi community is projecting it in the truest sense.



The Sindhi volunteers.



The Big Mosque.



Probably nothing feels as pious as offering prayers.



The women and children sitting to break their fast.



Juice and banana being distributed.



Wazukhana for the worshippers.



The Dargah in the mosque.



The Rozedars.



The appetizing eatables.



Serving nutritious food to the people.



Haleem.



The Khuwaja.

Book Review: The great flap of 1942

– *How the Raj panicked over a Japanese non invasion*

India is a very under-researched country with many gaps in its long history. Its recent history too is not that well recorded. The younger generation may not even be aware that between 1941 and 42, fearing Japanese invasion, there was an exodus from Madras with people fleeing away from the city. *The Great Flap of 1942* by Mukund Padmanabhan – the title is a reference to the British term for the subject looks at the panic that gripped people in that year. It was a period of wild rumours and the rulers misreading the situation. There was complete ineptitude on the British side. It was also a time when the Japanese seemed invincible.

In 1941 with the collapse of Malaya and Singapore, people were leaving other major cities as well. They were convinced they would be the next target. Refugees had started arriv-

ing from Calcutta. Although nothing was spelt out, an atmosphere of panic and dismay was building up. Hoarding and speculation became rampant. There were riots in Madurai as a result of speculation. There was an artificial firewood famine.

It was a period when leaders were caught up in various positions – “the virtue of pacifism, the imperative to fight against fascism, the best course to fashion national unity were among the issues that divided leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and C. Rajagopalachari.”

Padmanabhan starts with the military fiasco the British faced in Malaya. More so than the troop loss, it was the selective and the surreptitious withdrawal of white civilians from Malaya which damaged British prestige. There were anxieties in the Madras Presidency as a large number of the Indians in Penang, as indeed elsewhere in Malaya were Tamil. In an attempt to address this, the Madras government put out a communique in early January explaining that the facilities to evacuate the entire population was inadequate. It attempted to allay apprehensions through a couple of lies. The statement claimed that the Japanese were observing international conventions in the territories they

occupied, which was far from true. It also attempted to rationalise the limited evacuation by stating that many people did not want to abandon their homes and possessions.

The collapse of Singapore had major repercussions. Doubts about the staying power of the British and their commitment to protect the colonies were beginning to be questioned. Fear started spreading in India. Pamanabhan unearths many interesting events which took place and have been more or less forgotten. The chapter on bombings is particularly interesting as several cities were attacked by the Japanese. “The threat of full-fledged invasion by Japanese had more or less blown over by mid-April 1942.

Then there was the politics of war. The British genuinely believed that the Indians would rally behind them. Gandhi had different ideas. There was hardening of attitudes during the war. It was a time to negotiate transfer of power but attitudes hardened even more with Churchill taking over as prime minister. He famously declared that “he had not become the first Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British empire.”

It was becoming apparent that the independent movement was getting stronger by the day. The princely states were not caving into British rule as is popularly believed. Congress party had its own issues. It was

was to create disruption, foster anti-British sentiment, and create an impression that Britain was incapable of defending India. This it did very effectively through sporadic air raids and sustained propaganda.”

Eventually people started leaving cities in large numbers. Madras was the worst affected. Padmanabhan calls it the madness in Madras. “In Madras the exodus happened in phases, triggered by a succession of events. Those who left soon after the Japanese entered the war, the earliest phase, fell mainly into two categories. There were the wealthy who took houses in places like Kancheepuram and Chittoor in the interior but not far from Madras. And there were the business folks from the North (the Marwaris and the others) who left for their native places. As news of reverses in Malaya trickled in a little later the general population started to stream out of Madras (and other coastal towns in the Presidency). By the middle of 1942, Chief Secretary Ramamurthy was reporting that about 20 to 30 percent of the citizens had fled the city.”

Padmanabhan concludes with his epilogue – the slaughter of animals in the Madras Zoo. This single chapter brings out all the horrors of the war.

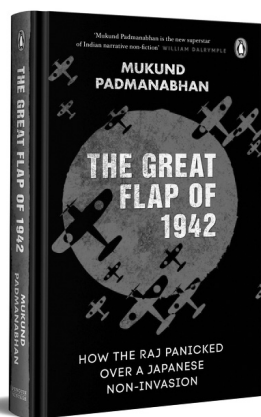
Sushila Ravindranath

But over the next two years they continued to episodically bomb Indian cities. There were strikes intended to disrupt shipping, harass the administration, spread panic and undermine Indian confidence in Britain’s capacity to defend the country.” There were many bombings and many deaths.

not going to compromise on its demand for complete independence.

The war brought about many changes.

Padmanabhan says, “We now know that Japan had no intention of invading India in 1942. So in truth, there was no real threat. All Japan wanted



COLONIAL STORIES – 1

Strange case of an unintended death by poison

In Colonial Madras when the British had just started improving their trade and financial status some strange occurrences took place which are worth recalling. The accidental death of James Wheeler owing to arsenic poisoning is one such. It took place in 1693, barely fifty years after the East India Company set up base here. Wheeler was a Council Member and so very important in the Madras social order of the times.

On August 30, 1693, Wheeler, after having taken a dose of Browne’s medicine for better health had set out for a walk. He did not appear at the council meeting held in the forenoon and this was not normal as he never missed the meetings. A word was brought by messenger that Wheeler was seized with a

serious illness. Within a while another message followed informing of Wheeler’s passing away.

Naturally the council meeting was adjourned and members rushed to his house. While going, the then president of the council Higginson was handed a note by surgeon Samuel Browne, that read “Honourable Sir, I have murdered Mr. Wheeler, by giving him arsenic. Please to execute justice on me the malefactor, as I deserve.” The medicine administered in the morning was inadvertently pounded by a servant in a mortar used for arsenic. Immeasurably distressed and feeling terribly guilty, Dr. Browne, wrote the above.

Incidentally the hospital facility was run by the Anglican Clergy, which maintained St Mary’s Church within the Fort

Heathfield’s death, since the chosen surgeon Edward Bulkley from London could not arrive in Madras in time. The latter

● by **K.R.A. Narasiah**

precinct. The Clergy received a sum of 50 pagodas annually towards maintenance from the Government at Fort St George. John Heathfield, recalled from civil service, was installed as the Head Surgeon in 1687. He died the following year. Samuel Browne, a locally available ship surgeon, was summoned to fill the vacancy created by

eventually arrived and set up practice as well.

Further to his role as a surgeon, Browne was avidly searching for local plants for their medicinal value. He collected plants and made notes on their medical relevance further to other traditional uses. There being two surgeons, the other namely Dr. Bulkley, was asked

to examine and after the autopsy, he reported that though not much could be seen, from appearances, the symptoms before death indicated death by poisoning. Since there were not many methods available and since the doctor himself had admitted, it was determined that the death was due to poisoning and both Dr. Browne and his servant who pounded the medicine were committed to custody.

After the due trial, the Grand Jury acquitted the surgeon by bringing in the “bill of Ignoramus”. (‘ignoramus’ means ‘we do not know’ and this was the formula grand juries wrote on a bill of indictment when they decide that there was not enough evidence for a person for further trial.)

TMS Biography

What if the renowned playback singer TMS needed an introduction? 'The Voice that Moved Millions' as some would have it. 'The Voice every Hero wanted' or closer home, 'A voice that resonated Sivaji's moods, MGR's messages.' So, who would know best? Quite easily his biographer Vamanan who has laid bare the life and times of his muse in the 648-page illustrated TMS, *Oru Pan-paattu Sarithiram*.

T.M. Sounderajan, famously known as TMS, says in the book: "Just as I was born to sing for MGR and Sivaji, Vamanan has been born to write about my life and I am blessed to read this book." The first edition was released in 2002 in TMS' presence and the fourth on the birth centenary of the 'Superstar of Song' in 2023.

TMS was born in 1923 in a poor Saurashtrian family of Madurai. For one who was later held up as an example for his clarity of diction in Tamil, TMS spoke the Saurashtrian dialect at home. He sang his first song in 1950 in the film *Krishna Vijayam* under the music direction of S.M. Subbaiah Naidu. This number bore an uncanny resemblance to a song sung by

TMS' role model M.K. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar. Proving his versatility, TMS sang two light songs for comedian K.A. Thangavelu in *Chellapillai* out of seven that he had sung in the film. The shooting of the AVM film had started in early 1952 but was released only in 1955.

TMS sang his two songs for MGR in the film *Malaiakkalan* (The title song and the evergreen number *Ethanai Kaalam Thaan...*). The massive success of the film released in 1954 underscored the importance of TMS to MGR. TMS sang for MGR till his last film *Maduraiyai Meetta Sundarapandiyai* in 1977. MGR's last song was to have been sung by Yesudas but composer MSV put his foot down and had it sung by TMS.

Considering the iron-clad identification of TMS' voice with MGR, who better than the former to declare resoundingly in song *Naam Aanaittal Adhu Nadanthivittal...* (from *Enga Veetu Pillai*)....

TMS first sang for Sivaji in the films *Koondukili* and *Thookku Thookki* (both released in 1954) and continued till 1991. TMS's singing which suited Sivaji's voice, image and style of acting, helped the latter a

great deal to add the musical dimension to his versatile acting prowess. The ringing voice of TMS features some of the most meaningful songs of Tamil cinema. The unforgettable lyrics of Kannadasan shine in the rendering of TMS.

TMS himself acted in *Pattinathar* (1963) and *Arumagirinathar* (1964). In 1968, TMS co-produced and acted in the film *Kallum Kaniyaagum* which was a success for its songs but flopped as a film and cost him Rs 1.5 lakh. An irreparable personal loss around the same time was the death of his 16-year-old eldest son Balasubramanian. After a personal meeting with Sathya Sai Baba, he was consoled and resumed his recordings. Despite these setbacks this was the time when TMS was conquering the peaks of success.

The silver jubilee of TMS's career as a singer was celebrated in 1972. A souvenir brought out then praised him both as a person and as a singer. Mention



Sivaji offering his felicitations to TMS on the latter's silver jubilee in 1972.

this film as did TMS. Four generations of heroes like MGR, Sivaji and Gemini Ganesan, Jaishankar and Ravichandran, Kamal Haasan and Rajnikanth and Vijaykanth and Sathyaraj had songs sung by TMS picturised on them.

TMS had a strong stage presence and loved to sing live from his stock of about 5,000 songs. He had fans around the globe; the Tamil diaspora adored him. He travelled abroad about 50 times.

by Srinivas Chari

was made of his devotion to Muruga and his bhakti songs which made listeners ecstatic. Studio baron A.V. Meiyappan summed up the accolades: 'It is TMS here, TMS there and TMS everywhere.'

SPB, who in his later years took TMS's place at the top, debuted in the MGR-starrer *Adimai Penn* (1969). Incidentally, Jayalalitha also sang a song in

The late 1970s and the early 80s witnessed the phenomenal rise of Ilaiyaraaja for whom TMS sang 25 songs till 1980 but there were differences between them that were never bridged. More about it in the book.

In 1993, May 1 to be exact, TMS escaped sure and swift death. He had refused to sing from a lorry at an election rally for Sri Lankan leader Prema-

dasa. TMS was very much in Colombo but not part of the rally. A suicide bomber targeted the rally killing Premadasa and 23 others. About 60 were injured. A miracle if ever there was one! TMS lived upto the age of 91. He passed away on May 25, 2013 at his bungalow in Mandavelipakkam where he had lived for more than 60 years.

Apart from his exhaustive biography in Tamil of TMS, Vamanan has brought to bear all his journalistic and creative skills in writing an easy paced dedicated biography in English; the book awaits publication. In keeping with the times, Youtube links of 15 'unmissable tracks' of TMS' songs find a place in the book. Three among them (1). *Paattum Naane Bhaavamum Naane*, I am the song, I am the emotion from the movie *Thiruvilayadal* (2) *Adho Andha Paravai Pola Vazhavendum* from *Ayarathil Oruvan* and (3) *Enge Nimmadhi, Enge Nimmadhi* from *Pudhiya Paravai*....The readers would of course want to make their own list. The author comments on the musicality of the songs with great relish making me want to listen to them again.

For the record, Vamanan has worked in *The Hindu*, *Indian Express* and the Tamil edition of *India Today*. He polished his skills in delving and breathing life into the lives of the cinema heroes and heroines of the past while writing features on them.

Even as a beginner in journalism, his obit on lyricist Kannadasan written in 1981 was well received. His series on 'Tamil Isai Sadhanaialargal' written in *Cinema Express* was expanded and published in five volumes and a sixth omnibus edition. Vamanan's ultimate tribute to TMS is employing his poetic and musical talent to write and sing a song about him. Its link: <https://youtu.be/vBv-OZX3Hgs?si=MgIdGMUT8lJfYme0>

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– THE EDITOR



Chief Minister MGR felicitating TMS.

Indian TT sets sights on conquering the Olympics

'Flag Bearer' seems to be an apt moniker for Sharath Kamal, the Indian table tennis icon who hails from Chennai. It doesn't come as a surprise that he has been picked to be the flag bearer of the Indian contingent at the upcoming Olympic Games to be held in Paris, France. He has been at the forefront of this much-loved sport along with Sathiyam Gnanasekaran – also a TN talent – and has overtaken his own TT idols, Kamlesh Mehta from Delhi and the late Venugopal Chandrashekhara from Chennai. With his leap into the top 40 in world rankings, Sharath is basking in the international limelight. He qualifies to represent the country for a fourth time in the singles event at the forthcoming Paris Olympics. Sharath, who led the Indian team's Men's challenge at the recently concluded World Table Tennis Championships, is elated that for the first time, both the Men's and Women's national Table Tennis teams have qualified for the team competitions at the Paris Olympic Games. In an interview with *Madras Musings*, Sharath shares his thoughts about his career and the Indian TT landscape.

Sharath was introduced to the sport when his father Srinivasa Rao and uncle Muralidha-

ra Rao – famous in Indian TT as the Rao brothers – took him along to their TT Academy. By the time he was eight, he had taken a shine to the sport and began playing in State-level tournaments and Under-10 group competitions. He even achieved the third rank at the time. "I grew up watching Kamlesh and Chandra, and learned a lot from them. Especially Chandra, because he stayed with the sport even after his playing days. He was the coach during my first participation at the Olympic Games. At that time, he was pretty much a key part of my growth in the sport at an international level. From him, and other doyens of his generation such as Kamlesh, I learned to cultivate discipline, determination and commitment. I motivated myself to emulate Chandra's feat when he broke into the top 100 in world rankings. I set that target for myself because people were talking highly of him at that time," says Sharath. Presently TN's no. 1 player and State champion, his career began to flourish when he turned 20. "I was called for a camp with the Indian team. That training camp gave me the right exposure. My growth as a player was very fast from 2003, when I rose to become the national champion in the Singles

category. In 2004, I became the first Indian player to win a gold medal at the Commonwealth Games and also qualified to compete in the Olympic Games, representing India in TT," smiles Sharath. He went on to unleash his prowess at the sport, proving his mettle time and again for the next two years in international TT. He bagged 13 Commonwealth Games medals, 7 of which were gold; two Asian Games medals; and participated in three more Olympic Games. The upcoming Paris Games will mark my fifth Olympic appearance, he said.

● by
V. Venkataramana

Sharath was coached throughout his career by his father Srinivasa Rao and uncle Muralidhara Rao. The latter recalls 2016 as the start of a sudden rapid improvement in the standard of the sport as well as a burst in popularity among TT aficionados – it was the year when four Indian players, including two in the Women's category, had qualified for the Olympic Games held that year at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. "That had never happened before," says Muralidhara Rao, adding,

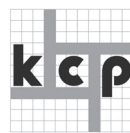


"I would say that 2008 was a watershed year when we won 8 medals at the Commonwealth Games. The reason for such progress can be attributed to the National Federation and the Central and State governments, for they provided players with the right support to establish a definite structure for the further development of talented paddlers. The growth was enhanced by the advent of the Ultimate Table Tennis League, which enabled our players to get the right platform to play alongside the top players on the world stage. Now, many youngsters are doing well across age groups, including boys and girls in the Under 15 and Under 13 categories."

Sharath is cautiously optimistic about the chances of winning a medal at the Paris

Olympics, and agrees that it would be great if this dream of Indian TT fans and members of the National and State Federations were to come true. "The next four months are going to be engaged completely in preparing for the Paris Olympics. The Federation has planned some preparatory camps. We will also be spending a lot of time training in Europe, especially Germany and France, and some time in China and South Korea too. We will also be playing five or six international tournaments. The Paris Games are special for Indian TT as this is the first time both our Men's and Women's squads have qualified for the team championships in the Olympics. This is certainly something very big," he finishes.

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