

WE CARE FOR MADRAS THAT IS CHENNAI

MADRAS

MUSINGS

Vol. XVIII No. 2

May 1-15, 2008

INSIDE

- Short 'N' Snappy
- The sad face of heritage
- Vel's and MGR
- Drama & music in Old Madras
- Burmese home rafts adrift



"A 'Sound and Light' show without any sound or light... Brilliant, I thought!"

I got that... (I think)

That's the nice thing about living in a culture-hub like Chennai – there's never a dull moment.

A dance here, a reading there, yonder a play, a cinema festival to your left, art shows to your right, and music for all occasions – it never ends.

But sometimes creativity goes all enigmatic on you, with even die-hard enthusiasts stubbing eager toes on the sharp edges of incomprehension.

Now, you're not over-critical; you welcome new, or different, experiences.

But sometimes... you just don't get it.

Like, shadowy figures darting across a darkened stage to plunky music – for two hours. You're obviously missing something very vital – but what? "Life?" one fellow-watcher quavers.

Well, maybe, but that 'response' smacks of taking the easy way out.

You are secretly thankful for the informative brochure, but a little reluctant to admit it. "Your lack of understanding doesn't diminish anything," you get snapped at, "Spoonfed all the time – that's the problem. Make some effort." Point taken.

"Medium"; "message"; "Hot" and "Cold" – remember those terms?

Can a demand for viewer participation get too...er...demanding sometimes?

Not everyone's "multi-sensory simultaneous comprehension" (phew!) operates on the same level – and why should it?

Maybe some creative efforts just stress the "Brrrr" note a bit.

Oh well, you could always take a shawl along.

Ranjitha Ashok

Sad... Sad... Tragic!

In a few weeks this picture will all there be to remind us of a building that contributed significantly to South India's destiny for nearly 200 years.



It was only in the last issue of *Madras Musings* that we had congratulated the Government on taking steps and allocating funds for preserving old buildings in its possession. But now, with the demolition of a landmark heritage building and yet another being threatened, we are not so sure of the Government's intentions.

Last week, the wreckers' hammers began bringing down *Government House*, the home of the Governors of Madras for nearly two centuries, a building where the destiny of South India, nay even of India at times, was determined.

Government House, often erroneously called *Admiralty House*, is located inside Govern-

ment Estate, just behind the Anna statue at Round Tana. The building, though structurally sound, was found to be in the way of a master plan for building a new Assembly for Tamil Nadu, even though there are acres of space elsewhere in the same estate. Related casual-

ties are some century-old trees and also *Gandhi Illam*, a museum dedicated to the Father of the Nation.

As regulars of *Madras Musings* would know, *Government House* was probably one of the oldest buildings surviving in Madras city, discounting the

Fort, some temples and churches. It was in the possession of the Madra family, which probably gave the city its name, before the Government of Madras acquired the building in 1752 as a residence for the Governor. Since then, till 1947, this was the residence of all

Governors of Madras Presidency, Guindy's *Raj Bhavan* (then known as *Guindy Lodge*) being their country retreat. Post-independence it became MLAs' Hostel. When the MLAs shifted to the new premises inside the Fort, they left the building in a derelict condition. In the 1990s, when the

DGP Building on the Marina was being renovated, *Government House* became police headquarters. The police did some restoration while moving in and were so happy with their building that certain police departments continued to function from *Government House* even after the DGP Building was restored.

This writer who visited *Government House* even as it was being knocked down could get a feel of the original spaciousness of the building, all the partitions and false ceilings having been removed. The flooring boasted of some of the highest quality

(Continued on page 2)

• by A Special Correspondent

Also see pages 3, 4 & 5

Senate House under lock and key

The *Man from Madras Musings* could not help shedding a tear at the doors of *Senate House*, the building that government, several industrial houses and alumni of Madras University contributed so liberally to restoring. Now, for reasons known only to itself, the Madras University has locked the building and has done it so securely that not even peering through the windows helps the casual visitor to catch a glimpse of the sumptuous interior.

The other day MMM went along with a group of heritage lovers to the beachfront and some in the group decided to take a peek at *Senate House*. Out came the cameras and the visitors were busy clicking away when an officious security guard arrived to tersely inform everyone that photography was banned on the premises. Now, what exactly is objectionable in taking a photograph of a roughly 150-year-old building is something that foxes MMM. After all, the building cannot be coming under the Official Secrets Act or something like that. And there is after all a Right To Information Act as well now. But MMM and his group put away their cameras obediently. The official then spat profusely on to the parapet of the building and walked off. A member of the group asked him why he was spitting on the building. Pat came the reply that the official and his ilk were responsible for cleaning the place and so they could do as they pleased! And this is what all the restoration and renovation and high profile re-dedication has amounted to! MMM can only shake his head in disbelief, beside shedding the tear already referred to above, though not as profusely.

Similarly, photographing any part of Queen Mary's Col-

lege is strictly forbidden. Permission for doing so must be obtained from the Ministry of Education stating the purpose for which the said photograph is being taken. The application is to be filled in triplicate with one copy to the College, one to the Ministry and a third to be retained by the applicant. In due course, the application will be considered and a decision will be taken based on the merits of the case. Further appeals on refusal will not be heard. That more or less was the answer given to a visitor who tried taking a photo or two. In this era of camera phones, such gobbledeygook is amazing.

A visitor from the United States had this interesting tale to narrate about *Senate House*. Apparently he and his mother

In other words, they came, they walked through, and they left. MMM wondered if it could have been a team of undertakers come to measure the building. If so, they had come to the right place. *Senate House*, once promised as a bustling centre of activity, is now deader than a doornail.

Let 'em eat cake

The *Man from Madras Musings* is tightening his belt every hour. Soaring prices have hit MMM where it hurts the most, namely his stomach. Applying to the Chief will not help, as he will only quote Polonius' speech to Laertes and also talk of rising costs of paper, printers' bills and maintaining circulation. It is in such

Did we help?

Ichabod was *The Man from Madras Musings'* verdict. The building has been knocked down and that is that. So what if it is 250 years old and was owned by the family that probably gave the city its name? So what if it had fine woodwork and some amazing marble flooring? So what if it was Indians who had built it, using a technology that is now lost? All that matters is that we will get a spanking new Assembly building.

In this connection, MMM has a nagging doubt. Could *Madras Musings* have contributed indirectly to the destruction of this wonderful structure? After all, we in this paper

buildings in our midst. Let this be a lesson for MM not to open its mouth on such subjects in future. For what MM thinks today, the Government acts upon tomorrow, except when it comes to passing Heritage Acts.

Height of inaction

"Something must be done," said everyone of them as they shook their heads and drank their cups of coffee. *The Man from Madras Musings* refers to public reaction on coming to know that *Government House* was being pulled down. And then they continued with their coffee and whatever else they were doing.

MMM is of the firm view that the heritage movement is dead in the city of Madras that is Chennai. No more than a lip-service is paid to this activity and, barring a handful, nobody is bothered.

Some of the other reactions amused MMM even more. "You never told me," was the plaintive cry of a matron over the phone. The demolition of *Government House* was discussed threadbare in these columns and we even sent a letter to the Chief Minister and the Governor, said MMM in reply. "Oh, I must have missed it," said the lady. Now what MMM would like to know is what happens to the above matron and others of her kind when action is needed. After all, we in MM also circulated an appeal to readers to sign on a petition to save Bharat Insurance Building. And guess how many signed up? That is apart from the Chief and MMM. But then, Chennai has never been known for public-spiritedness; has it?

MMM

SHORT 'N' SNAPPY

decided to see the building only to find it locked. They tried looking through the shutters, whereupon a swarm of sweepers descended on them and told them to get lost. All of a sudden there was a commotion and a couple of security guards threw open the doors of the Great Hall. A team of officials, all of them busy talking into their mobile phones, then walked through. A friendly sweeper signalled to MMM's friend and his mother that they could do no worse than follow the officials. They did, and managed to get a good look at the inside of the building.

What surprised the visitors was that the team of officials continued on their phones all along, not once bothering to look at the wonderful interiors.

moments of gloom that MMM turns to the business newspapers, for their use of English has often amused MMM. But this time it was even better. One of the city's papers and the first one to go pink in the country had a "feel good" story about how prices are not going up across the board. Prices have fallen in certain areas, said the story. MMM read on and found that prices have either stagnated or fallen for upper class reservations in trains, laptops, digicams, colour TVs, mobile phones and air fares. Wonderful! Oh, if only the common man would use these things and stop bellyaching about food, all will be well. After all, who needs food? To be slim is in.

have all along been asking the Government to vacate the Fort. Now what can the poor Government do but look for alternative accommodation? You can't expect the poor chaps to operate from footpaths and, in any case, there are none. So they look at different locations. In the process, a building or two may come down.

Capper House was one and now it is *Government House*. Anyway, now *Madras Musings* ought to feel relaxed for there is no further danger to any other building because of the proposed Assembly. If only *Madras Musings* had not asked the Government to hand over the Fort to the ASI, the idea for a new Assembly might have never come up and we would have had two more heritage

(Continued from page 1)

marble. The central hall on the first floor had fine plaster work on the ceiling and the hall fronting the verandah had a beautiful false ceiling held with a framework of rosewood that shone as though it had been put up yesterday. The ornamental pillars that rose to the ceiling were made of rosewood and carried monograms of officials and rulers of the past. At least ten doorways were in the finest Dravidian style, each one of them minimum 12 ft in height. The ceilings were of the Madras roof type with Burma teak rafters. The staircases had wooden banisters on some outstanding wrought-iron work. All these were instances of native craftsmanship, none of which survives today. In bringing down this building, the Government has not demolished a symbol of

Sad... Sad... Tragic!

the British Raj, but the work of thousands of Indian masons, woodcarvers and other artisans. The Government has also shown that, despite the few feeble steps it takes to preserve old buildings, it fundamentally does not view built heritage in the city to be worth preserving. That is the reason why a Heritage Act has not been passed and, in a few years' time, given the pace at which things are moving, the city will have nothing but concrete and glass to show.

The plan for the new Assembly was not presented to the public. The building of an Assembly in the midst of arguably the busiest thoroughfare in the city certainly affects public

movement and ought to have been put up for discussion. The silence of the heritage lobby in not taking up this matter is deafening. Probably the movement has run out of steam after successive defeats in the case of the Adyar Estuary and Old Madras Club and at most a pyrrhic victory in the case of the Bharat Insurance Building. The lack of public outcry about this demolition is lamentable. One of the reasons for the lack of spirit among heritage activists is the absence of a Heritage Act in the city, without which any legal representation really has no spine. The judgment in such cases depends more on the sympathy of the judge and not on any law.

It is still not clear as to why the *Government House* could not be integrated with the new plan. It is also interesting that Rajaji Hall has been allowed to remain. That building and *Government House* were part of one integrated whole and one without the other is meaningless. In any other country, these would have been demonstrated as examples of a way of life. Not here, in Chennai, where every square foot is measured and valued for real estate only.

The German firm of architects, who in their own country would not be allowed to demolish any building even half the age of *Government House*, should surely have known better. But, then, a demolition and

a larger construction mean more money for everyone. Even the demolition contractor is sure to make good money by selling off the priceless woodwork being removed. Each door, it is understood, would not be sold for less than Rs. 8 lakh.

What emerges from the demolition of every heritage building is the same:

- There is every need to protect our heritage
- This cannot be done without a Heritage Act passed by the State Assembly
- Without such an Act, no part of our heritage, built or natural, is safe
- To lose our heritage is to cut at our roots.

The sooner every right thinking citizen of Chennai wakes up to this reality, the better.

**OUR
READERS
WRITE**



Sharing knowledge

Madras Musings has tried to bring some cheer to heritage buffs here through its report titled 'Better times ahead for heritage buildings?' (MM, April 16th). It is a matter of cheer that Government has at last awakened to the importance of preservation of recent heritage and is ready to spend money on it. But it is sad that at this juncture there is no expert organisation to utilise this opportunity properly. Quite often, we are given to understand that architects are equipped straightaway for such work. This is not true. Resortation is something more than architecture. It is a question also of methods and study of arresting decay of materials, of strengthening or weakening of structures without spoiling the beauty of their ancient architecture.

It is a matter of anguish that when such work is stated to have been carried out extensively, as in the recent restoration of *Senate House* or *Connemara Public Library*, the expertise acquired was not shared with others through publication. How can heritage thrive in such conditions?

N. Harinarayana
120, Big Street
Triplicane, Chennai 600 005

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Madras Musings* is aware that: (1) the entire restoration of *Senate House* has been documented by those experts who worked on it free of charge and awaits publications if the University of Madras will fund the publishing; (2) INTACH-TN has several times appealed for the formation of a special heritage cell in the PWD and offered to help with the training of the members of such a unit. But there have been no takers.

Flyover to nowhere?

The flyover stretching from North Usman Road to

Mahalingapuram has been opened for traffic and it has led many to wonder whether the people behind the plan have mistaken the purpose of a flyover.

It is common knowledge that flyovers facilitate reaching far-flung areas in a short while or lessen the time taken to go about a circuitous route. The inauguration of this flyover has led to the traffic police diverting traffic through the narrow Kamdar Nagar Road stretch to reach the flyover at the Mahalingapuram end and then reach T'Nagar's North Usman Road by travelling on the flyover, while the original route to North Usman Road from under the flyover is completely clear after the construction.

The people's woes do not end here, people from Mahalingapuram are to use the flyover and reach North Usman Road and take Periyar Road to reach Kodambakkam High Road! Why? Do we have to use the flyover just because it has been built?

* * *

The horrendous hoardings have been removed – good work indeed! But their absence has exposed the absence of road lights in long stretches of major roads! Who is going to do something about that?

Kanchana Ravi
kanchanaravi237@gmail.com

Free – but...?

It has been reported that a retired Army General, who held many key posts before deciding to settle in Chennai, has been battling for the last 14 months to get a ration card for his family. As his efforts to get the card became futile he, through the Army, took up the issue with the Chief Secretary who, it appears, promised to take it up with the Civil Supplies Department.

The fault with the retired General was that he refused to grease the palms of the officials. Had this been done, the General would have received the card at his doorstep.

It is in this context we

should view the announcements made by the Chennai Corporation while presenting the budget. The civic body offered to issue birth and death certificates free of cost. It is also indicated that there will be no cremation charges and that it will provide free of cost a van to transport the dead to the crematorium.

While the services may be free, will the personnel in the Departments concerned allow the public to get away with such free services? I doubt it.

V.S. Jayaraman
31, Motilal Street
Chennai 600 017

Hairsplitting

It was really refreshing to enjoy MMM's sortie (MM, March 16th) after quite some time. His humorous comparison of the nursery rhyme characters with two South Indian delicacies (end of column 2) turned me to an academic point. I have it on authority that Jill is not an English girl's name but another exercise in poetic licence that's made Gill (short for Gillian, an English girl's name) into Jill to match Jack! To my mind, Jill or Gill, rhymes match well with Hill in the second line of the rhyme! But academic hairsplitting is really that!

* * *

It passes my understanding why a Desi Governor, a titular head, needs a beachside bungalow, a need not felt by generations of really ruling English Governors!

However, I differ from reader N.S. Venkataraman on his reference to the simplicity of Gandhiji in travelling in III class rail coach. Sarojini Naidu has gone on record saying that people will be shocked to hear of the expenses incurred in making a normal III class coach suitable for Gandhiji's travel!

N. Dharmeshwaran
11/5, 1st cross Bharati Nagar
Madipakkam
Chennai 600 091

Statue in place

An eight-foot bronze statue sculpted by Vivek Khataur was erected inside the campus of the Symbiosis Group of educational institutions in Pune as early as December 2001. The statue was unveiled by the then President of India, K.R. Narayanan.

'Common Man' is perhaps the only uncommon cartoon figure to be honoured by installation of his statue! As rightly stated by Ranjitha Ashok (MM, February 16th), "He is, and will always be, the quintessential 'you and me'."

T.M. Sundararaman
19, Nallapan Street
Mylapore
Chennai 600 004

Skyrocketing prices

The skyrocketing house-rents and real estate prices in Chennai city should be a matter of grave concern to the Government.

Recently, I came across an advertisement offering for sale a 1200 sq.ft. Housing Board flat, around 35 years old, in Besant Nagar at a price of Rs. 70 lakh.

Apart from the fact that the price is absolutely ridiculous and has no relation to the cost of construction or the original price at which it was sold by the Tamil Nadu Housing Board, this indicates that the fancy prices are being demanded in the name of "market value", for which the upper limit seems to be only the greed of the house-owners and real estate speculators.

Obviously, the real estate prices are being pushed up and the house rents hiked arbitrarily, without any logic or calculation. As there is no resistance from helpless buyers, house-owners and real estate speculators are having a field day. In the process, it has become impossible for the middle and the lower income group to buy any land or building in the city at all. They cannot even afford rental accommodation, in many cases. Many have been found shifting their residences to outside Chennai due to such conditions and are commuting long distance to the workplaces in the city every day, causing wastage of time and sapping their energy.

House rent is now a major portion of expenditure for the salaried class and self-employed persons in the middle and lower income group, who do not own houses/flats. This leaves them virtually with no savings.

Government is shirking its responsibility by ignoring the problem and leaving a large segment of citizens to the mercy of house-owners and real estate speculators. This is not a healthy situation and can lead to restive conditions.

Instead of viewing the matter as if it is mere market-oriented issue, Government should effectively intervene and put some sense and logic in such pricings. If Government thinks that there is real shortage of housing and there is lack of space in the city, it should then promote a large number of multistorey flats, of even 30 stories and above, as in the case of cities like Singapore. Alternatively, it should go for drastic decongestion measures in the city.

Government is not doing much forward planning and long-term thinking, when it encourages more and more software companies and automobile companies to be located in Chennai and suburbs, thus increasing housing needs in Chennai. These could easily be pushed to other areas in the State where there might be more space.

N.S. Venkataraman
M60/1, 4th Cross Street
Besant Nagar, Chennai 600 090

Monstrous smoke

It seems New York's Mayor Michael Bloomberg is donating a few crores of rupees to make Chennai free of tobacco smoke by 2010. The Directorate of Public Health and the Chennai Corporation are also rolling up their sleeves to take punitive action against smokers. Something called Red Ribbon Clubs are also going to be established.

All very good. But should not the mandarins do something about the greater villain? I mean the hundreds of lorries and other vehicles which emit monstrous black smoke from their exhausts, almost killing the persons behind them? It is there for all to see, but no action is being taken.

"From Mount Road to Mall Road" (MM, February 16th) has highlighted the mindlessness and lack of farsightedness that characterises the mad (read 'mall') rush. Already traffic is so clogged and road rage so high on Chennai's roads that even an ambulance on duty may not see you reach your destination on time.

With so many malls being permitted it is State-sponsored traffic chaos we are headed for on once majestic Mount Road.

C.G. Prasad
9, C.S. Mudali Street
Kondithope
Chennai 600 079

READABILITY PLEASE

Dear Readers,

As letters from readers increase, we are receiving more and more **hand written** letters, many of them in a hand so small and illegible or large and scrawled as to be unreadable. Often this leads to our discarding a letter, particularly if some part of it is unreadable.

If you wish us to consider your letter for publication, please type it with enough space between lines or write it using a medium hand, clearly dotting the 'i-s' and crossing the 't-s'.

Many readers also try to fill every square centimetre of a postcard space, making reading or editing impossible.

Please help us to consider your letters more favourably by making them more legible for us.

THE EDITOR

OUR ADDRESSES

For matters regarding subscriptions, donations, non-receipt of receipts etc.: Chennai Heritage, 5, Bhattad Tower, 30, West Cott Road, Royapettah, Chennai 600 014.

Madras Musings now has its own email ID. Letters to the editor can be sent via email to editor@madrasmusings.com. Those who wish to intimate change of address can also do so provided the subscription number is quoted.

For non-receipt of copies, change of address, and all other circulation matters: MADRAS MUSINGS, C/o Lokavani Southern Printers Pvt. Ltd., 62/63, Greames Road, Chennai 600 006.

On editorial matters: The Editor, MADRAS MUSINGS, C/o Lokavani Southern Printers Pvt. Ltd., 62/63, Greames Road, Chennai 600 006.

No personal visits or telephone calls, please. Letters received will be sent from these addresses every couple of days to the persons concerned and you will get an answer from them to your queries reasonably quickly. Strange as it may seem, if you adopt the 'snail mail' approach, we will be able to help you faster and disappoint you less.

THE EDITOR



If only such houses could be restored!

We don't have a heritage act to protect our grand buildings, so asking for one to protect domestic buildings today is like asking for a pie in the sky. Yet, I have always been fascinated – and, therefore, suitably inconsolable – seeing houses pulled down. This story is about one such house which, thankfully, has not been pulled down as yet – and may even get a fresh lease of life!

This house will not go down in the architectural history of

– gooseberry trees, jackfruit, *nagapazham*, *marikhozhundu* and a rare *padiri* mango tree that we delighted climbing.”

The pillared veranda leads to three stately, arched doorways, the tall doors are in the French style, with louvres. The hall, despite its bareness, is a simple but impressive one, not the least for its teak beams. This was the reception area and was always abuzz with relatives coming in / going out and staying on, Noise levels were high and with a resi-



India as a remarkable one, but visiting it while listening to the 'black and white flashbacks' of two women, who spent their happy childhood in the house, brought the empty rooms to life when one overcast morning during a recent trip to Thanjavur.

On a quiet by-lane in Thanjavur stands *Gautama House*. Its walls are thickly coated with moss and the gate rusted but that doesn't deter the view of a short avenue and, then, imposing Doric pillars amidst red brick walls flanked by a stately pair of neem trees. Ramakausalya and most of her cousins were among the forty children born in the house in a space of 58 years. Even before entering the house they can't resist listing the many varieties of trees the more than six-and-a-half acre campus once had. "We had a veritable orchard

dent population of dozens at any-time, it never occurred to anyone to even think of why somebody had come for a visit and how long they were going to stay. What's more, visitors made themselves useful and the *maami* who had just got off the train would have soon bathed and be busy adding a fresh consignment of pickles to the larder.

The hall had on either side of it four rooms for the four senior male members of the family. One of whom was deeply religious and had gold deities that demanded long and complex rituals on a daily basis. The rear rooms were a graceful curved shape and one of them was the room for women to be consigned to during child-birth etc. I was the first child born in the house, said Dr. Ramakausalya with great pride. Between these doors are my favourite parts of the house with



its graceful stucco arches. The one on the right led to an elegant flight of wooden stairs. As the stairs went up, the stained glass panels cast dainty shadows on the wall and on the creepers that

● by **PRADEEP CHAKRAVARTHY**
Photographs courtesy: T. Sakthi Murugan, Thanjavur
www:http://picasabeb.google.com/sakthi.murugam/HeritageTrip

had crept into the house. The verandah upstairs circled the house and a spacious many-windowed room upstairs. The view of the garden must have been fantastic here, but with a part of the land now sold, we had to make do with an ugly view.



Coming down, we pass the hall and a large corridor with grilled windows on both sides. Beyond this were the two kitchens – one for daily use and the other for weddings. Beyond them was the store room, cattleshed and other rooms. Sadly, all these have been demolished and the land sold.

So what made the house special? Every time I visited Dr. Ramakausalya, I was impressed by her relentless enthusiasm and constant good cheer. She constantly reminded me that it was due to a happy childhood – and the house seemed so inextricably linked to this. Secondly, I go to see an old house for its complex craftsmanship; here I did not see complexity, but what I saw was simple, elegant and solid.

I sat on the wooden staircase as my friend clicked away for his

Looking at Heritage

Madras Musings' attempt to save Government House

OUR FIRST LETTER

His Excellency Surjit Singh Barnala 26.10.2007
Governor of Tamil Nadu, Guindy, Chennai

Your Excellency,

Ref: Construction of New Assembly Complex and consequent demolition of *Government House*, now being called 'Old MLAs' Hostel'.

* * * *

The State Government is proceeding apace with plans to build a new Assembly and Secretariat complex in the Omandur Ramaswami Reddiar Estate (formerly Government Estate). We understand from newspaper reports that architects have been shortlisted for the project and that the present occupants of what is being called the 'Old MLAs' Hostel' have been asked to vacate. We have welcomed the construction of the new complex as we, in *Madras Musings*, are of the view that Fort St. George ought to be made available to the public of the State for viewing as a heritage precinct where the foundations of Modern India were laid. In fact, we continue to hope the Government of Tamil Nadu will seek World Heritage status for this historic precinct. But we are at present concerned about the construction of the new building for the Legislature-Secretariat complex at the expense of a historic building.

We are glad that the Government has announced that Rajaji Hall will not be affected by the plans to build the new complex. However, what is a matter of serious concern is the decision taken to demolish the 'Old MLA's Hostel'. It is in this connection that we would like to bring to your attention some of the building's history.

1. The name 'Old MLAs' Hostel' is a recent creation. The building was first a part-time residence and then permanent residence called Government House, of the Governors of Madras presidency from 1752 till the time of independence. It was, therefore, the seat of power. In effect, it was the city residence of your predecessors who occupied the exalted position that you grace today. It was here that many major decisions were taken that helped pioneer several institutions in Modern India. It was a property that belonged to a member

THE RESPONSE WE RECEIVED

S. Audiseshiah, IAS, Public Works Dept., Secretariat
Secretary to Government Chennai 600 009

D.O. Lr. No. 16227/H.1/2007 dated 03.12.2007

Dear Thiru Muthiah,

This has reference to your representation given to His Excellency the Governor of Tamil Nadu which has been forwarded to the Hon'ble Chief Minister for consideration.

As directed by the Hon'ble Chief Minister, I am writing this letter for your kind appreciation of the facts.

The Hon'ble Chief Minister greatly appreciates your concern for retention of the "Government House" (Admiralty House) and probably to use this building as Legislative Library. I wish to inform you that all the aspects which you have brought out in your letter have

architectural photo-portfolio and wondered who influenced whom, the builders of buildings or vice versa. The house was built by a doctor who sold it then to Paneerselvam, a Minister of the Justice Party and his family, who in turn sold it to Polagam Srinivasa Iyer, famous in Tanjore for a dye manufacturing company.

Today, as a shell perhaps awaiting the bulldozer, the house lives on in the memories of those

who spent happy days, each room silently telling a story of how a large and prosperous joint family lived their lives at the turn of the last century. If only these could be recorded at some way for future generations, they will have large, impressive parts of their heritage to be in awe of, but none of the more intimate reminders of all that was best about the close family systems that gave them the successes they achieved.

of the ancient Madeiros family, a name that probably got modified into Madras.

2. The building became the nucleus of the home of the Governors of Madras when the then incumbent Thomas Saunders rented it from the owners in 1752 and bought it in August 1753. Since then many changes and alterations have taken place till the early 19th Century, bringing the house to its present shape.

3. The building became the MLAs' hostel ONLY post-independence and when the new MLAs' hostel was built this building was abandoned to its fate.

4. It was later spruced up for the Headquarters of the Police to move there while the HQ on the Marina was being sympathetically restored. When the Marina offices were made ready, some police offices stayed back and have maintained the building exceedingly well.

5. The building is in the Classical style, an example of early Raj architecture, and, given its historical importance as well, needs to be preserved. It is not in any way structurally weak and, therefore, demolishing it would be an unnecessary and expensive exercise.

6. May we therefore request that, like the DGP Building on the Marina that was saved thanks to the present Chief Minister, and the GPO, which even after a fire was restored to its earlier condition, this building too be preserved? If the new Legislature-Secretariat complex is realigned, **the restored Government House could be developed as a magnificent Legislature Library.**

7. This would send a strong signal out that Tamil Nadu cares for its heritage and its history and will be a lasting tribute to your enlightened leadership.

In this connection, *Madras Musings*, which is a periodical brought out by Chennai Heritage, a not-for-profit organisation supported by the leading corporate houses of the State, has already written an open letter to the Chief Minister. May we expect a favourable response from you as well as your support and intercession in this vital matter of saving a part of the City's heritage?

Thanking you,

Yours truly,
S. Muthiah

Director, Chennai Heritage & Editor, *Madras Musings*

been carefully considered while taking a decision to demolish the "Government House" along with various other structures for construction of a new Legislative Assembly Complex in that area.

As you are aware, the "Government House" is more than 250 years old. The technical view is that the buildings constructed with lime mortar can generally have a life span of 100 years and exceeding that the strength and safety of such buildings should be under periodical review. At various points of time in the past some strengthening measures have gone into in retaining the "Government House". The present assessment is that further strengthening measures may not be that effective as this building being more than 250 years old has served its life. Hence a decision has been taken to construct a new Legislative Assembly Complex in the place of all the old structures incorporating striking heritage architectural features.

As you have rightly mentioned in your letter, the Hon'ble Chief Minister, a known connoisseur of art and architecture, was responsible for restoring the present DGP Office complex to its pristine glory, and was responsible for bringing the Tamil Nadu Heritage Protection Act in 1999. The Hon'ble Chief Minister has not only played a major role in the restoration and preservation of Heritage Buildings but also built commemorative edifices like Kattabomman Fort in Panchalankuruchi, Valluvar Kottam, Thiruvalluvar Statue, Poompuhar etc. These are the testimony to the commitment of the Hon'ble Chief Minister in conserving our heritage and culture.

You will also appreciate that Tamil Nadu requires a new Assembly – Secretariat complex which has been planned on a convenient plot of land owned by Tamil Nadu Government in the Omandur Government Estate. Above all, for the reason of proximity to the general public, this is considered to be an ideal location.

Considering the above facts, I sincerely seek your support to this project and also your valuable inputs for bringing out a new Legislative Assembly Complex of excellence.

Yours sincerely,
S. Audiseshiah

OUR REPLY TO THE SECRETARY

Mr. S. Audiseshiah, IAS, 10.12.2007
Secretary to Government, Public Works Department
Secretariat, Chennai 600 009.

Dear Mr. Audiseshiah

I was delighted to receive your D.O. Letter No. 16227/H.1/2007 of 3.12.07, sounding such a warm, friendly note. Almost all letters from Government sound so official; what a refreshing change yours was, even though I differ with what you have to state in it.

Since you have stated that your letter is "as directed by the Hon'ble Chief Minister", I trust you will bring this response of mine and my reiterated plea to his kind attention.

Let me at the outset state that I am NOT against a new Assembly-Secretariat complex being constructed in Government Estate. My only concern is the siting of that complex in the vast estate. May I also point out that for years I have been suggesting that the Administrative Capital of the State be moved to the Thanjavur-Tiruchchirappalli area exactly for the reason you cite, namely that it will be in "greater proximity to the general public." Since that is unlikely to happen, moving the Assembly-Secretariat complex at least out of the Fort is something I welcome, because I hope that will make it possible for the Government to seek World Heritage Site status for Fort St. George, which it richly deserves for being the place from where Modern India grew. But as I have stated above, Government Estate is a vast area and the new complex could be so located so as not to make necessary the demolition of *Government House*. In fact, when plans were called for by Government for the new complex, if it had been stated that *Government House*, restored, needed to be included in those plans, I am sure architects would have submitted imaginative plans that would have included the historic building.

Regarding the age of *Government House*, except for an unidentifiable core which MIGHT – if it can be identified – be considered 250 years old, the greatest part of the construction is only 100 years old – most of it added by Governors Rumbold and Clive the Second. The Tamil Nadu Archives records will confirm this.

In this connection, may I point out that buildings of the 17th Century, like St. Mary's in the Fort, the core of the Secretariat and other buildings in the Fort, as well as buildings of the late 18th Century – early 19th Century vintage, like the DGP building (which also has a much older core), *Senate House*, the General Post Office, the State Bank of India, the Royapuram Railway Station and many other buildings constructed with brick and lime mortar, besides many others in rural areas constructed of mud and lime, have stood the test of time and have been either restored or are in good condition. Government engineers as well as former Archaeological Survey of India personnel were involved with the magnificent restoration of *Senate House* and can attest to the durability of the building. Further, the Police, the present occupants of Government House, had invited INTACH-Tamil Nadu to give them a report by a qualified restoration expert, who categorically stated that the building could be restored and would last a couple of hundred years more. I am sure INTACH-Tamil Nadu would be willing to provide you with this report.

In this context, I must therefore differ with the contention that "lime mortar (buildings) can generally have a life span of 100 years." Many a standing, well-kept building in this State will attest to the fact that the life spans of such buildings, if tended well, could be well over 300 years.

Finally, I note that there is a Tamil Nadu Heritage Protection Act in place since 1999. Frankly, no one who is a part of INTACH-Tamil Nadu or any of the Government Departments it has worked with on trying to draft a Heritage Act between 1998 and 2002 has ever heard of it. If there is such an Act, I would certainly like to see it. Such Acts the world over are tied up with buildings listed as heritage buildings and make mandatory any action in connection with a listed building being examined by a Heritage Committee and a public hearing. Perhaps if you send me a copy of the Act, I could find out which are Chennai's (and Tamil Nadu's) listed buildings, whether there is a Heritage Committee, and what the procedures are to conserve them or alter them or demolish them.

May I once again reiterate that it is the Chief Minister's commitment to history and art that makes me appeal to him to locate the new complex anywhere else in the Government Estate but away from *Government House* and request him to restore *Government House* for meaningful reuse. Perhaps a discussion with the architects would make such revised planning possible.

With warmest regards

Yours sincerely
S. Muthiah

Director, Chennai Heritage and Editor, *Madras Musings*

Copy to: His Excellency, The Governor of Tamil Nadu, Chennai 32

NO RESPONSE WAS RECEIVED TO THE ABOVE LETTER

Quizzin' with Ram'nan

(Current Affairs questions are from the period April 1st to 15th. Questions 11 to 20 pertain to Chennai and Tamil Nadu.)

1. China recently signed its first trade agreement with a developed nation. Which country?
2. Which prestigious sporting title did South African Trevor Immelman win on April 13th?
3. Which two airlines reached an agreement recently to create the world's biggest carrier with an enterprise value of \$17.7 billion?
4. The train between Kolkata and Dhaka that resumed plying after 43 years on April 14th is called?
5. Name the two new members of NATO.
6. On April 1st, who took over as the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, becoming the first Indian to head the 53-member body?
7. Who did India beat to make it back into the World Group of the Davis Cup recently?
8. The wall (in Ledra Street) in Europe's last divided capital city came down recently. Name the city.
9. Who is the new Union Minister of State for Sports with independent charge?
10. What contentious law as regards education did the Supreme Court uphold on April 10th?

* * *

11. Name the five telecommunication/cellular firms that got licences recently to operate in the Tamil Nadu circle.
12. Which project is the first part of the Rs. 2,300-crore Chennai Circular Corridor initiative?
13. To whom has the State Government handed over the erstwhile Chennai Central Prison's land near Park Station?
14. Which famous company, in collaboration with the Music Academy, has launched a *Panchangam* calendar on 72 *melakartha ragas*?
15. In which district is Uthukuli, known for its butter and 'ghee'?
16. In which place do the rivers Chittar, Manimuthar, Pachaiyar the Tambaraparani originate?
17. Which Jnanpith Award winner has authored the biographical work on the life of Munshi Premchand, titled *Oru Kadhasiriyarin Kadhai*?
18. Which simple dance form of the State could be of the following types: *Poonthatti*, *Deepa*, *Kulavai* or *Mulaipari*?
19. When will the next *Mahamaham* be celebrated in Kumbakonam?
20. How many MLAs make it to the State Legislative Assembly from Chennai?

(Answers on page 8)

Vel's where MGR made his film debut

While K. Subramanyam, Thyagaraja Bhagavathar and company were burning the mid-day sun in Adyar, a few miles away, in Teynampet, another studio had come up and its floor too buzzed with hectic activity, films being made not only in Tamil but also in Telugu. It was called Vel Pictures Studio.

Muthuswami Iyer (Murgadasa), K. Ramnoth and A.K. Sekhar returned from Kolhapur and were anxious, having tasted the elixir of film-making, to continue to make films in Madras. They decided to float a joint stock company and went around hunting for prospective investors. They were able to get M.T. Rajen, a well-to-do electrical contractor interested in films, his friend-brother-in-law C. P. Sarathy – a sadly forgotten pioneer S.

Soundararajan, and Pinapala Venkata Das, a businessman from Andhra and film exhibitor, to join them. Muthuswami met S.S. Vasam, whose *Ananda Vikatan* was by now a bestseller, and who was also making money from crossword puzzles, horse-racing and mail-order business, and asked him to take shares in the company. In what could be called the understatement of the decade, Vasam told Iyer, "Why should I dabble in films? I don't need it!" As Muthuswami recalled decades later, the future Indian movie mogul, the Gemini Studio's boss, hated films!

* * *

Popularly known as Soundararaja Ayyangar, Soundararajan was the first person to use the expression 'Tamil Nadu', long before politicians did, naming his company Tamil Nadu Talkies. He entered cinema during the Silent Film era as a financier and later becoming a producer, director, studio owner and talent scout. He made hit films like *Miss Sundari*, *Rishya-shringar*, and *Bhaktha Naradar*. One of his films which created history was *Raja Drohi* or *Dharmapuri Rahasyam* (1938). It also had a title in English, "Traitor".

A Tamil Nadu Talkies production and the brainchild of its producer-director Soundararajan, *Raja Drohi* was based on the life of the then Dewan of a princely state, whose way of ruling the State made him extremely unpopular. Nat Annaji Rao, a tall slim hero of those days, played the 'Dewan' and his get-up amply revealed whom he was portraying!

The film was released in a 'tent' cinema, at a place called Valliyur, the check-post point for Travancore. The tent was situated safely inside British India, away from the jurisdiction of Travancore, which promptly banned the movie being shown in its territory. Not surprisingly, the ban order catapulted public interest and Travancoreans flocked to Valliyur to see the film which ran for several weeks in that obscure 'tent' cinema!

* * *

Round the City's old studios with RANDOR GUY



MGR making his debut in *Sathi Leelavathi*

Vel Pictures Studio was formed as a limited company with P.V. Das as the Managing Director. The studio was located in a palatial mansion on Eldam's Road owned by Maharaja of Pithapuram. During that period there were hardly any buildings around. A vast stretch of land behind it was much wooded and used for shooting 'outdoor' locations. One such location was used as a tea estate in Ceylon which featured in Ellis R. Dungan's historic 1936 movie, *Sathi Leelavathi*! In this film shot at Vel Pictures Studio, one of many new faces making his debut in a small role as a police inspector was a very fair-skinned, handsome youth. He had been on stage as a "boy" donning male and female roles.

His name was M.G. Ramachandran, immortalised with his initials MGR!

Vel Pictures Studio later moved to a more spacious lot on Mount Road in Guindy, then a green clam suburb of Madras city. Here the fortunes of the studio fluctuated and it changed hands. For a while, V.L. Narasu, a coffee magnate, took it over and produced films in many languages, including Hindi. He burnt his fingers mainly due to disorganised management, faulty planning of production and backing wrong horses, and left the industry. The studio vanished and in its place came up a soft drinks manufacturing unit. A sad end indeed.

Subscriptions and contributions

● Since Volume XIV, No.1 (April 16, 2003), *Madras Musings* has been priced at Rs.5 a copy, ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION: Rs.100/-. Please make out your cheque only to CHENNAI HERITAGE and send it, together with the COUPON, to CHENNAI HERITAGE, 260-A, TTK ROAD, CHENNAI 600 018 or C/O LOKAVANI SOUTHERN PRINTERS PVT. LTD., 62/63, GREAMES ROAD, CHENNAI 600 006.

An ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION of just Rs.100 covers only a part of our costs. Corporate support and YOUR support will continue to be essential for Chennai Heritage and *Madras Musings* to play a greater role in creating awareness about the city, its heritage and its environment. We therefore look forward to your sending us your contributions IN ADDITION TO your subscriptions.

If in the coming year Chennai Heritage receives repeated support from those of you who have already made contributions, and if many more supporters join the bandwagon, we will not only be able to keep *Madras Musings* going, but also be able to continue awareness-building exercises on on-going projects as well as undertake one or two more such exercises.

Therefore, please keep your contributions coming IN ADDITION TO YOUR SUBSCRIPTIONS. If, say, you send in a cheque for Rs.500, we will treat Rs.100 of it towards subscription to *Madras Musings* for 2007-08 and the remaining Rs.400 as contribution towards the causes Chennai Heritage espouses.

We look forward to all readers of *Madras Musings*, and those newcomers who want to receive copies, sending in their subscriptions. We are indeed sorry we can no longer remain a free mailer.

— The Editor

CHENNAI HERITAGE

260-A T.T.K. ROAD, ALWARPET, CHENNAI 600 018.

I am already on your mailing list (Mailing List No.....) / I have just seen *Madras Musings* and would like to receive it hereafter.

● I/We enclose cheque/demand draft/money order for Rs. 100 (Rupees One hundred) payable to CHENNAI HERITAGE, MADRAS, as subscription to *Madras Musings* for the year 2007-08.

● As token of my support for the causes of heritage, environment and a better city that *Madras Musings* espouses, I send Chennai Heritage an additional Rs..... (Rupees)

Please keep / put me on your mailing list.

Name :

Address:

Note: Overseas postage Rs. 550/year extra. Cheques for overseas postage alone payable to M/s. Lokavani Southern Printers Pvt. Ltd. All other cheques to 'Chennai Heritage'.

Theatre & music in Old Madras

In 1890, the Dharwada company came from North India and staged dramas, which people appreciated. They modernised their dramas by making coloured curtains suited to the scenes. Light arrangements also improved. Ornaments used by actors were made of gilt. Dresses were grand. Their dance scenes were attractive and their 'Indra Sabha' was famous. The language was Hindi. Because of them, people improved their art of dancing.

Many Parsi drama troupes came to Madras. These people from Bombay came and staged their dramas for two or three months each year at the place where now the Burmah Shell Company building stands. Their stage arrangements were pretty and attractive, especially the scenes depicting rains, sea, burning of houses etc. Their costumes were good. Their durbar dances were worth seeing. To change a scene, they used to fire a shot and within a minute the scene changed. Their troupe consisted of men and women. After this, women started acting female roles in Madras also.

The Sarasa Vinodini Sabha, Bellary, was founded by Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharyulu. He wrote plays and also acted. Before Dharwad and Parsi dramas, 'prose dramas' were in vogue. In 1884, the Guntur Drama troupe was famous for these kinds of dramas. Examples of these are *Harischandra* and *Keechaka Vadha* of Venkatasubba Rao and Chilakamaithi Lakshminarasimham. In these dramas, Prakasam Pantulu used to act the roles of Chandramathi and Draupadi. He was a degree holder and also a lawyer. So his dramas had shades of English and Sanskrit theatre. He made socially affluent people act in his dramas and did not use professionals. And he arranged songs similar to Dharwad and Parsi dramas. The eminent dancer Raghavachari got the title 'Andra Nataka Pithamaha'.

Prakasam was more prominent as a playwright than as an actor. Telugu drama improved due to his efforts. The troupe often came to Madras and their productions were much admired. I have seen his role as Bahuka in *Chitranelineyam*. Then he was rather old and did not shine well. After his dramas appeared, other old dramas went out of fashion.

Sri Kolachalam Srinivasa Rao, then an advocate in Bellary, wrote many dramas. He wrote a book about drama in

English. The best among his plays is *Vijayanagara Samrajya Pathanam*. Sri Raghavachari's role as Pathan Rustom was famous among Andhras. He had written the play *Lava Kusa*. Rao's drama company was not running as well as that of Achary's. For some time, the two troupes were not on good terms. Sri Rao's company was called 'Sumanorama Samaj'. The party opposed to them called it 'Summaneri Sabha'. In Kannada, it means 'observe silence'. In those days, rivalry between drama companies of the same town was common.

When the performance of the Sarasa Vinodini Sabha was appreciated by people, some people in Madras started the Sugana Vilasa Sabha in 1897. At first there were only seven members. Initially they staged plays at the Victoria Public Hall. Afterwards, the Sabha shifted to its own building on

Mount Road. Both Tamilians and Andhras were members. I was also a member. They staged plays in English, Andhra, Tamil and Sanskrit. After some time, they staged only Tamil and Telugu dramas. They were famous for good dramas as well as good sweets, which attracted the members. They celebrated Dussera festival and for nine days conducted feasts for all the members. An English, Telugu and Tamil library was also started.

After shifting to their own building, they stopped staging dramas and now many people are not even aware as to where this Sabha is. The founder of this Sabha was V. Srinivasa lyengar. Members called him 'Muthanna'. He was a good dramatist and for some time held the post of a High Court Judge in Madras. He tried his best to improve the Sabha. Even in his old age, he used to practise at the High Court and we were reminded of Bhishma when we saw him.

The mainstay of this troupe was Diwan Bahadur Sambanda Mudaliar. He was a Presidency Magistrate. He wrote Tamil dramas and members of the Sabha acted in them. He himself took part in the dramas. Even in his 60th year, he used to play the role of Prahalada and make the audience laugh.

The late Rangavadivelu was associated with this Sabha. He was also a lawyer. And he met with an early death. He had am-

bitions to sing and act in dramas, but he was not able to do so. He learnt dancing for some time. He performed dance without singing. When he acted as queen, Sambanda Mudaliar acted as king. They were good friends. I remember his part as queen with a *thilakam* and a smiling face. In Telugu dramas, sometimes Bellary Raghavachari and Nellore Kandadai Srinivasan (Doraswamy) also took part.

The first Telugu drama I saw was *Varoodhini*. The part of Varoodhini was played by Krishnaswamy Iyer. He had a melodious voice and many Chetty people came to hear him singing.

There were other drama troupes also. Changam Bazaar is in George Town. Tamilians there acted in plays. I saw one *Dambachari Natakam*. Two prostitutes took part; Balamani and her sister acted the male

and female parts. Even though they were prostitutes, they disliked men acting with them. This drama was full of erotic scenes and there used to be a big crowd. Balamani was beautiful and a musician. She used to sing Telugu *Javalis*. She acted in *Tara Sasankam*. In this, Tara expresses her love for Chandra and massages him with oil. In Tamil it was called *enna thekkare* scene. Even photos were taken of this scene and distributed to the people. People gathered in large numbers to see this particular scene.

Govindaswamy Rao was a Brahmin. He was a police constable who later took to drama. He was a hefty fellow with a moustache. His *Ramdas* drama was famous. He acted as Nawab in that. He knew the Urdu language. Small children were trained to act as Rama and Lakshmana. The children sang well.

It was announced that a prize would be given to the best actor in *Harischandra* with two men acting the same role. This was announced in the papers and a huge crowd gathered that day to witness the drama. Police help was sought to control the crowds. The scene started with the heroine decked as a bride with the two men standing by her side wearing costly ornaments and carrying silver sticks in their hands. The judges declared the prize would go to that one who wore more gold jewels.



The Town Hall (Victoria Public Hall) where the Sugana Vilasa Sabha staged its plays.

Music sabhas

Due to contact with Tamilians in Madras, I cultivated my interest in music. I attended many music concerts. In those days there were not many music *samajams*. Music concerts were held for marriages, which I always attended. Women gave more concerts than men in those days. Among them were Bangalore Nagarathamma, Coimbatore Thayi, Dhanakoti, Godavari, Salem Sisters and Rajayi. Veena Dhanam held performances in her own house every Friday. Those who were interested went to her house to hear her sing.

Sarabha Sastri garu, the flautist, was famous in those days. He was born blind, but he learnt the flute and became an expert in it. After him, Nagaraja Rao garu and Palladam Sanjeeva Rao became experts. The set (group) consisting of Sarabha Sastri on flute, Govindaswamy on violin and Alaganambi on *mridangam* was famous in those days. Once I went to their concert in one Chetty's house. Vissa Ramarao was also with me. He was then studying in the Law College. He was fond of music. The *mridangam* player Alaganambi was late for the concert due to late arrival of his train and so another man was called to play in his place. Sarabha Sastri did not like the idea. After some time, Alaganambi arrived and began to play one or two beats on the *mridangam*. Sarabha Sastri on hearing him became happy and said "Anna, vandiya?" ("Have you come, brother?"). It created laughter amongst the audience. Even now, I recount this incident to my friends.

In those days, women attended the music concerts arranged for marriages but they rarely went to sabha concerts.

In sabhas, they used to hear the music by sitting apart from the audience. Interest in music was not developed among women as it is now. Only *Dasis* learnt music in those days.

For marriages in the homes of rich people, concerts were held in *pandal*s. Carpets were spread and sofas and chairs were arranged. The *pandal* was decorated with bulbs and other materials.

I happened to see one dance programme of Shanmukha Vadivu during a marriage in a Chetty's house in Govindappa Naicken Street in George Town. Though she was stout, short and dark, her dance was appreciated by all. Generally, the head of the family used to sit in the front. Chetty belonged to the Vaishnava sect. He was sitting in front with *Namam* on his forehead. The dancer began singing *Siva duksha paru ralamu ra* (a song dedicated to Lord Shiva) and sitting in front of Chetty began to do puja with *bilva* petals. The people in the audience were unable to control their laughter, much to the mortification of the orthodox Vaishnavite. Amidst their laughter, their turbans fell down. Her song *Siva diksha pamaralamu ra* is recorded.

In Govindappa Naicken Street, Tachoor Singaracharyulu was an eminent musician. He was an Andhra who had settled down in Madras. A violinist, he erected a Sri Rama Mandiram in his house and arranged music performances. He was of a charitable nature and taught students free of charge. He wrote the treatise *Sangitha Kalanidhi*. All preliminary exercises of music were contained in this book. He was a close friend of Sri Sri Sri Vizianagaram Ananda Gajapathi Maharaja.

Concluded

The raft homes of Myanmar

In January, a picture appeared in many newspapers of a floating structure that was washed ashore at Vadakuru near Rameswaram. The square 'house' was 15 feet wide and 12 feet high. There were four drums to keep it afloat. While two of its sides were covered by wooden boards, the other two were fitted with bamboo sticks that facilitated free flow of air. It created quite a stir near Rameswaram.

My colleagues in the Research Centre of Central

● by
DR. D.B. JAMES

Marine Fisheries Research Institute, Madras, had reported a similar raft in 1988. On 6-12-1987 a fishing raft with three crew members was brought to Madras by local fishermen. The raft was from Piyapong Chonka, Burma. It appears that the raft had been anchored in the river Irawaddy. Due to sudden floods in the river, the anchor chain shaped and the raft drifted to sea with three fishermen.

The vessel drifted in a south-

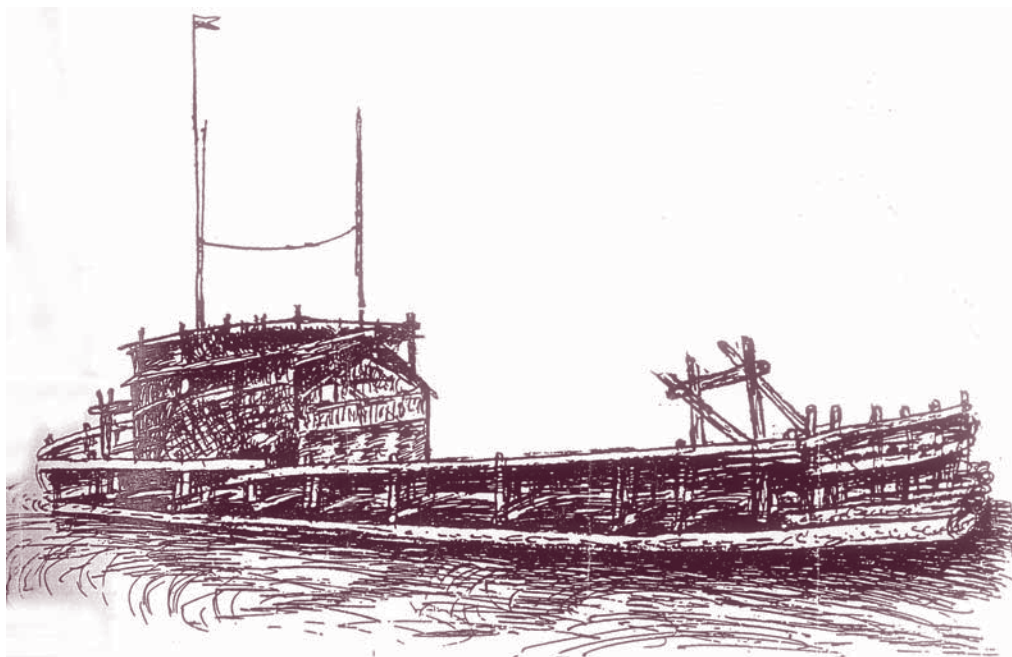
westerly direction for about 16 days and was rescued by Madras fishermen near Pulicat. There were no nets in the raft at the time of rescue. The raft was 12 m in length and 3 m in width and formed with bamboos in two tiers. Twenty bamboo poles were spread in two rows to form the base and they were tied with ropes. Casuarina poles supported the sides of the raft. The raft had a hut which was partitioned, providing a room for cooking and another for living. The approximate value of the structure was ten thousand rupees.

This is not the first time such structures have drifted towards the Tamil Nadu coast. On 10-2-1986 a similar raft landed in Mudiveeranpattinam on the Ramnad District coast. Another, with five fishermen also landed at Devipattinam in Palk Bay on 29-3-1987. The raft was said to have left the Burma coast on 12-2-1987. Yet another raft was rescued near Mandapam on 28-1-1988. It may be noted that all these structures drifted during November to March when the current is in southwesterly direction in the Bay of Bengal.

It is obvious from the four structures that landed on the Tamil Nadu coast that they were the temporary dwellings of Burmese fishermen. They were not used in any fishing operations, as no fishing nets or gear were found on any of them. Per-



The floating house, which drifted to Rameswaram from Myanmar. (From The Hindu, January 23, 1988.)



The fishing raft that was adrift and brought to Madras on December 6, 1987. (Sketch from Marine Fisheries Information Services, No. 85, July 1988.)

Answers to Quiz:

1. New Zealand; 2. The Augusta Masters golf tournament; 3. Delta Air Lines and Northwest Airlines; 4. 'Maitree' (friendship) Express; 5. Albania and Croatia; 6. Kamalash Sharma; 7. Japan; 8. Nicosia; 9. The former CEC, Dr. M.S. Gill; 10. The providing a quota of 27 per cent for candidates belonging to the OBCs in Central higher educational institutions.

* * *

11. Idea Cellular, Swan Telecom, Unitech, Datacom and Loop Telecom; 12. Adyar River Front Project; 13. Chennai Metro Rail Limited for revenue augmentation purpose; 14. Larsen & Toubro; 15. Erode; 16. Courtallam; 17. Jayakanthan; 18. Kummi; 19. 2016; 20. 18.

haps the fishermen lived in these boathouses till a favourable tide in the river enabled them to board regular fishing vessels for fishing operations in Burmese waters. The rafts from Burma reached the Tamil Nadu coast in about 16 days with the help of currents.

Ocean currents and winds are actually nature's conveyor belts, spreading ancient civilisations far from their land of operation. Before the invention of sails and motor boats,

primitive man depended only on ocean currents to cover great distances by raft. After the discovery of sail, he made full use of trade winds which blow with regularity every year. Thor Heyerdhal, the Norwegian Explorer and anthropologist, wrote that South American tribal people sailed from Peru on balsa rafts and, using the ocean currents and winds, reached Polynesia. He undertook a Kon-Tiki (a raft) expedition in 1947 and covered a distance of 4300

miles with the help of currents in 101 days to prove his point. Currents played a major role in the human history changing the course of human history and civilisation. But for the warm Gulf stream current, the whole of British Isles would have frozen. The El Nino cold water current along Chile and Peru has a devastating global effect on weather, fisheries, wildlife and society. It has a profound influence on the Peruvian sardine fishery also.

Madras Musings is supported as a public service by the following organisations:



Amalgamations Group



ASHOK LEYLAND
ENGINEERING YOUR TOMORROWS



Brakes India Limited



Go Placidly



F.L. Smidth Limited

THE HINDU
The Hindu
Group of Publications



MURUGAPPA GROUP

NIPPO
BATTERIES TORCHES

Rane
Rane Group

SAINT-GOBAIN
The future of glass. Since 1665.



SUNDARAM FINANCE
Enduring values. New age thinking.



Sundram Fasteners Limited



TAJ

Hotels, Resorts and Palaces



TATA CONSULTANCY SERVICES



TVS MOTOR COMPANY



UCAL AUTO PRIVATE LIMITED

Since 1856,
patently leaders
— A WELLWISHER