

August 22, 2014

Chennai and I



The Hindu

As Madras Day celebrations come to an end, four Melange writers examine their chemistry with the city. Photos: S.R. Raghunathan, G. Sribharath, Sam Kumar, V. Ganesan, H. Vibhu

The way we were

It was so quiet you could hear the birdsong...

DEEPA ALEXANDER



Madras has been home since I first arrived as a toddler on a monsoon morning in the 70s, in a rexine-backed white Ambassador from yet another coastal town.

Although I was born here in a family that has lived in Madras since the early 1900s, I wandered away often, for a childhood in the districts, brief stays abroad and in cantonments across India. But then it was in this city, which swamps you with sweat, that I studied, worked and watched the moon hang low over the bay.

Home was an old Chettiar house lined with casuarina trees that reached for the stars and dropped their cones in time to be picked and painted for Christmas. An orchid flowering in the garden was seen as something of a miracle in this water-starved city but the guava tree under which we lovingly laid to rest our many dogs thrived throughout the year. Lights out was at 9 o'clock and only a stray car horn and the rattle of the beat constable's bicycle broke the silence of the night. He'd stop by at our gate to sign the 'beat book'. He still does, only now he arrives on a swanky bike emblazoned with the words 'Beat Officer'.

Growing up a girl in Madras, back then, was a strange contrast of sorts.

At my school run by nuns, we were taught to sit with our knees and ankles together but the biggest cheers on sports day were reserved for the girls who could sail over the hurdles. Bharatanatyam and ballet (taught by an Anglo-Indian from the Russian Cultural Centre) were part of the curriculum but the girls with the Bollywood moves learnt from scratchy videotapes, much before zillion dance schools mushroomed, won the votes for 'Ms. Popular'. Having short hair meant you would never be chosen to play Juliet even if you could deliver the lines better. It also meant you were a swimmer or a rider or pursued a sport — it had nothing to do with convenience or the fact that you admired Lady Di.

Girls of all ages took the early morning bus to the Marina pool and thought nothing of changing into swimsuits behind the hedges that bordered it. The coaches made no distinction between them and the boys when it came to the rigours of training but when classes gave over, only the boys were allowed to frolic in the sea.

Fathers were inordinately proud of daughters who could race a Yamaha 135 cc bike on the beach road, ride horses to equestrian glory, hit the bull's-eye in shooting, rig a sail in open sea, paraglide or dream of joining the uniformed services. But permission to go to the discotheque was always met with stony silence.

Independence Day to Republic Day and all the days between were an excuse for the girls to dress up and they nailed it right on every occasion. No one ever wore casuals to a formal event — and being in your Sunday best meant just that, especially if it was for breakfast at the club or the medal parades at Rajaratnam Stadium. The high tea was always laid out on tables with crisp white linen and no one pulled rank — it was always ladies and children first. Later in the evening one went to "see the lights" that illuminated public buildings.

First encounters with food from other cultures didn't come from restaurants. They came from the mothers of girls who lovingly packed an extra box of *bhel puri* or *vindaloo* and shoved it through the ladies' special bus window into our laps. Chung King on Mount Road, is where one headed for birthdays and special treats. And no one gave or received return gifts.

Sunscreen was rarely used and NCC girl cadets sported their tans as a badge of pride. The sight of the War Memorial evoked relief — it was where the timed three-km cross-country run ended.

The all-girls college where I graduated from dared us to dream the impossible and hailed us to take on the world. But when I headed next to a men's college which had recently turned co-educational, women were gently reminded that only boys could perch on the stiles or linger on past dusk. And what a day of celebration it was when Coca-Cola first hit the campus.

Much of that fun ended one afternoon when dreaded gangster Asai Thambi was shot outside the college gates.

And then when life took over and Madras became Chennai, it lost some of its class. Loudspeakers at street corners blared more than just devotional music or political speeches. Many who left the city only to return later were horrified at the impersonal urban jungle it had become. The fireflies have long gone, so have the sparrows and the moon has turned into a night lamp.

The silliness of nostalgia or call it what you will. In those rare moments a little of the old Madras shines through the curtain of Chennai. And as much as I have stopped loving it without question there are a few memories I still cling to. That unmistakable smell of sea in the air, the salt maps that this city draws on our clothes and the song, *Madras nalla Madras*, which forever sings in my heart.

The outsider insider

SHONALI MUTHALALY



A displaced Malayalee? Not quite. Kerala for me is just a summer holiday: speed boats on the backwaters, boisterous family weddings and *karimeen* lunches at my grandmother's sturdy dining table. I'm not alone. Let's face it. We are a generation of fractured identities, travelling incessantly across the country — indeed the world — with no place to call home. I realise this sounds like a maudlin country song but trust me, I should know, for I could be its poster girl.

For the longest time, every time I was asked that unavoidable Indian question — “Native place?” — I would shrug and say I have no idea. I grew up in Kenya, between Nairobi and Kisumu. It was suitably exotic: flamingos at Lake Nakuru, dusty safaris through Masai Mara and glamping at the swish Mount Kenya Safari Club. Among other advantages this childhood gave me the ability to sing the Kenyan national anthem in perfect Swahili, an enviable party trick. (Even if I do say so myself.)

Returning to India, my parents moved to Munnar’s tea estates and I was packed off to boarding school in Ooty, thanks to which I developed a lifelong fondness for the scent of eucalyptus, Kingstar fudge and bulky black wellingtons. Then came the Calcutta years: my first night club (‘Someplace Else’ set to Peter Andre’s cheesy ‘Mysterious Girl’ soundtrack), horse riding classes at Tollygunge Club and an initiation into a chic, vodka-fuelled, party-hopping jet-set.

So when I landed in Chennai, I defined myself as a ‘Calcutta girl,’ feeling rather smug about the fact. By then my parents had moved to Mumbai, where I caught up with friends during college breaks, over mugs of beer at Café Mondegar, famous for its jukebox and Mario Miranda frescoes. Or wore too much kohl and drank endless cups of masala chai while arguing loudly about art with opinionated friends at Samovar, the suitably bohemian café at Jehangir Art Gallery on days we felt especially intellectual.

Chennai felt gauche in comparison to my potpourri of flamboyant hometowns. It was so quiet. So infuriatingly laid-back. So unabashedly unassuming. However, I was here for three years of college and hence decided I had no choice but to get used to the sleepy ‘small-town’ feel, along with those persistent mosquitoes, mouthy auto drivers and *sambar*. Okay. To be honest, I still don’t like *sambar*. (Insert pause so Chennai loyalists can ‘tut, tut’.)

Cue: Grouchy protagonist falls irrevocably in love with the city (A.R. Rahman plays in the background as she gambols through Mylapore). That’s the expected format, right? It’s not that simple. You have to admit it’s high time we discuss this city without getting schmaltzy about strings of jasmine, steaming filter coffee and Marghazhi. Because, the truth is ‘Madras’ is different cities to different people. Which doesn’t mean it’s perfect. But it does mean you can tailor this city to suit your lifestyle, and indeed life. Each one of us has our own Madras. Or Chennai, depending on what age you are. I’m part of the generation that uses both names with equal ease.

For some, sure, it’s the well-loved and oft-celebrated city of ghee-drenched *dosas*, chilli *bhajjis* on Marina beach and freshly ground coffee (strictly no chicory added). But for others, Chennai is partying till dawn on the glittering East Coast Road once famous for its louche rain dances, chic sushi lunches at authentic Japanese restaurants and cocktail evenings. Or livewire literary soirees, art gallery evenings and niche theatre.

My own Chennai is a riotous blend of them all. Where else can you learn surfing from chatty fishermen at 6 a.m. in the warm, salty sea, watched by curious families picnicking on the beach. Go for a new-age power yoga class, attend a stand-up comedy show and then party hard through the night before staggering into a comfortably crowded Udipi restaurant at 1 a.m. for crisp *masala dosas* and a steel tumbler of overly sweet Horlicks? All in one day.

This is why it's easy to fit in — once you fit in. It sounds like an oxymoron, but anyone who's made it past Chennai's bland, politely formal surface will understand what I mean. Over here commutes are short, waiters are avuncular and bouncers are fatherly. Once you're an insider, you'll never be able to take an early morning flight, shop for vegetables or have a romantic dinner without bumping into half a dozen people you know, who will tell your parents/ friends/ colleagues exactly what you were wearing/ buying/ doing. It can be stifling, but it's also oddly reassuring. Once you get entwined into the city with its warm social networks and disciplined but relatively relaxed approach to life getting 'comfortable' is inevitable. Soon, you'll be so comfortable, you'll sit up one day and suddenly realise this is as close to home as it gets. Especially for those of us with itchy feet, restless minds and patchwork lives.

A cultural homecoming

CHITRA SWAMINATHAN



Close friends were worried, the not-so-near sympathetic, the dance guru anxious and the family concerned. Twenty years ago, my decision to shift base to Madras from the North was seen as a social climb down. “*Conservative hain wahan log, garami bhi bahut padti hai* (people are conservative and it's also very hot there),” warned Wadhi aunty, the affectionate Punjabi neighbour in Hinglish. Neena Sharma, my childhood buddy and confidante, always wondered how Madrasis lived in houses without curtains, furniture and crockery (remember the film *2 States?*) and are constantly preoccupied with pujas. “You will find the city boring,” she said, the annoyance palpable in her voice. “The only good thing is you will get to eat delicious *dosas* and *vadas*. And, of course, the walk on the beaches will be wonderful,” added Neena as an afterthought.

But I've always had a long-distance love affair with Madras. Winters, during the growing-up years, made me cold and bitter not because temperatures dropped abysmally in North India. I would ruminate over those happening months in Madras when dance and music take over peoples' lives. It's a city where December is not the end of the year, but the beginning of a new Season. Though I professed respect and fondness for my kutchery-crazy uncle, it never ever materialised into an invitation to visit him during Margazhi.

So, relocating to Chennai felt like a cultural home-coming. It meant warm winters and soaking in the Margazhi milieu of *kolams*, early morning *bhajans* and ghee-scented *pongol* distributed in

temples. The fuss-free living of the people here was easy on the mind and the pocket. You didn't have to prep-up when you stepped out of your home to buy just vegetables. It was fine if your footwear did not match your sari. But the boisterous laughter of those extremely helpful neighbours, who were part of all celebrations and festivities at home, kept ringing in my ears.

Everything however paled when compared to the city's unique musical sensibilities. It's a very intimate and sacred experience for its residents. If Carnatic ace Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Hindustani veteran Pandit Jasraj routinely sing to a full house, queen of chartbusters Shreya Ghoshal and ghazal exponent Pankaj Udhas perform to noisy ovations too. Rajinikanth is *thalaiva* while the late actor Dev Anand was mobbed and captured in a thousand cameras when he graced a musical show here.

Artistes of all hues prefer premiering their new or innovative works before this discerning audience that may be sticklers for tradition but are not averse to change.

Two decades ago, the December festival had not gained such a frenzied pace. Many of the legends such as Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, M.S. Subbulakshmi, D.K. Pattamal and K.V. Narayanaswamy were around to gently hand-hold you through the nuances of the art.

There are hardly any cultural fests around the world that have as many lecture-demonstrations as performances as well as canteens serving a delicious mix of *keeravani*, *keera vadai* and *kshetrayya padams*.

Margazhi is also the time when some cool breeze sweeps through the city and women pull out their *kanjivarams* to exchange notes on saris at sabhas. This is also the time when you might be snubbed for trying to quieten them or telling the *mama* in front of you to put down the magazine that's blocking your vision.

But this is not the only time when you desperately hope the 'rich culture' reflects in our streets with garbage mounds, roads with haphazard traffic, monuments falling-apart, walls-turned-urinals, stinking Cooum, acerbic autowallas, reckless bus drivers and the jasmine flower seller who heaps expletives on you for stopping to ask how much a *mozham* costs but not buying.

In a city of strangers

ESTHER ELIAS



It has been 56 days since I moved to Chennai. I left Kochi on a rain-drenched dawn and by dusk, drove into a two-hour long traffic jam at Tambaram. As I inched my way into the heart of the city, I had no illusions about where I was. This was Chennai, not Madras. In the 10 months I'd lived here for a journalism degree over two years ago, I'd looked for the cliché-soaked Madras of filter coffees and *sambar vadas*, of streets paved with history, and of closed cliques of the cultural elite, but I found Chennai.

A Chennai I'd entered at Central Station that stank from its gatherings of all things leftover, from day-before's dinner to last night's urine; a Chennai where the prosaic crept all over the poetic, where everyone and everything was coated in fine layers of dust, and where within its embrace of anonymity, I found freedom to find myself. This was no Madras of home comforts. This was Chennai, where the single woman hustled.

My first day back here was framed in rain. As I opened suitcases all over my rented room, the heavens opened above, the street outside flooded and my floor slowly filled with rain. In the days since, I've gotten lost more times than I care to count, followed false leads and jumbled up addresses, criss-crossed the city on wrong buses and fought with too many auto drivers. But most of all, it's been a daily struggle to come to terms with a city of unfamiliar contexts, histories and people.

Unbeknown though, I've gently been let into the rhythms of this city. I know now how morning breaks over our quiet colony. I've watched the sky paint itself in new colours each day, watched eagles soar above our treetops and parrots perch on our coconut palms. I know the washing machine tunes of the lady next door, and the pressure cooker whistles of the family just across.

I've made friends with nameless faces, with the neighbour's child who awakens at six, puts on a blue cape, flexes his muscles on the balcony and tells the crow outside that he's Superman; with the *istheri akka* and her husband at the abandoned house; with the *kaathi* roll boy who knows my chicken *tikka* weakness, and the parlour girl who's no longer appalled at my undone eyebrows; with the grocery *akka* who knows I've forgotten my plastic bags, again, and the street corner auto *annas* who take me wordlessly to work, meter on.

I've found Chennai in the kindness of strangers — in the share-auto driver who drove in torrential rain from Kasimedu to the High Court, holding down his tarpaulin curtain with one hand, and turning every few minutes to ask, "*Neenga okay-a?*"; and in the arms of the unknown elder at church who held me as my family struggled with illness, whispering "It'll be okay, child; it'll be okay."

For a girl accustomed to the calmness of Kochi's backwaters, I've found peace by Chennai's turbulent seashore, in the words its roars and surges gave to the disquiet within. But, most of all, I've found welcome at the homes of people who open their doors to tell you about their lives. One day at a time, one person at a time, this Chennai of strangers is slowly turning into my tapestry of stories.