

Chatting with Chennai

A personality sketch of the city, it attempts a creative path in profiling the metropolis.

V. SRIRAM

The last couple of years have seen a number of books coming out on Madras that is Chennai. The city is not uniformly lucky in all this output. While some publications have been excellent, many would qualify as egregious. Happily Tulsi Badrinath's *Madras, Chennai and the Self: Conversations with the City* is in the former category, for it attempts a creative and entirely new path in profiling the metropolis.

How do you go about writing on a city? Badrinath's book does not purport to be documentation of the city's history. It is more of a personality sketch of the city, as evinced in conversations with various people who live in it. Of these, 11 are people whom the author has interviewed; the 12th is a couple that is no more and they are profiled from her memory.

As we read, we see the city's many facets spilling forth. That it is a conservative town that takes its time to move forward though never eschewing modernity is evident from the tale of Seshadri who, despite being an orthodox, tufted and *namam*-bearing temple priest, trains in karate. That it is at heart a secular city (when was the last time we had an inter-religious riot?) comes through from Faizur Rahman's interview and also that of Nawab Mohammad Abdul

Ali, the eighth Prince of Arcot. From the latter's story we also see the history of Madras/Chennai. Its all-inclusive character manifests itself from the interview with P. Sivakami, the Dalit woman who became an IAS officer and later took to politics. From Beatrix D'Souza we get to see a facet now more or less forgotten: the Anglo Indian community.

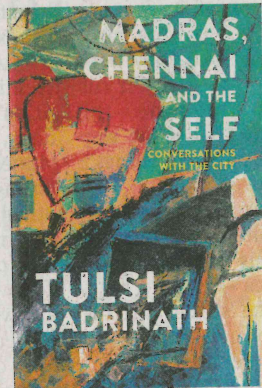
That Chennai is the place where people come with hopes and some of the deserving do make it to the top is the story of Sarathbabu Elumalai a man who made his fortune in *idlis*. Reading it reminded me of another success story, now dimming in public memory: S.S. Vasan, whose mother sustained herself and her son in the early years selling *idlis*. And what is Chennai without Kollywood and cricket? These come forth in interviews with actor Vikram and cricketer-turned-writer V. Ramnarayan respectively.

By far my favourite chapter is the author's recollections of Perunkulam House, a vast garden property that stood on Radhakrishnan Road. We read of its inhabitants — the writer/photographer and naturalist M. Krishnan and his wife Indumathi. The tale of the house, now gone, and of its occupants speaks of a city that was

unhurried, valued open space and had time to stand and stare. The conundrums that modernisation brings is brought out in the story of Saravana Sakthivale, who is trying to keep his family's century-old snuff factory going. The heydays are long past, for inhaling snuff is now a dying habit to be replaced by other vices such as smoking. What does one do with a business like that? You can draw plenty of parallels from this, including the losing battle to preserve heritage structures!

A moving chapter is the interview with Dr. Uma Ram, one of the city's leading gynaecologists. For all its modernity, Chennai still tries to time births so that the proverbial evil hours of *rahukalam* and *yamagandam* are avoided. And it has its own issues of women — their safety, well-being, care and progress; despite the city being in the forefront of women's education. An interesting aside is that this chapter is fashioned as a conversation with the doctor not at her clinic but at home while she is setting up the Navaratri Kolu. Tradition is but a step away in our metropolis.

And, what of the future? There is always Information Technology of which Chennai just cannot seem to have enough. Talking about that is Kiruba Shankar, whose chart for the future will have to coexist with *kolus*, *rahukalams*, a secular way of life, *idlis*, Kollywood, cricket, (may be) snuff, temples, the battle to preserve heritage and provide opportunities for all — men and women, of all castes and backgrounds. That is Chennai for you.



Madras, Chennai and the Self: Conversations with the City; Tulsi Badrinath, Pan Macmillan India, Rs.299.