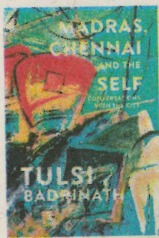


All of old & new



MADRAS, CHENNAI AND THE SELF – CONVERSATIONS WITH THE CITY
Tulsi Badrinath
Pan Macmillan
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₹ 299

“Paris is a woman but London is an independent man puffing his pipe in a pub”— Jack Kerouac (novelist, poet and literary iconoclast). And in line with the analogy above, my city of Chennai is certainly a *veshti*-clad temple priest on a bike, rushing away to a *puja* function at a home or a *kovil* (temple), unsullied by the unbathed impurity inherent in bus travel; besides, of course, being quicker and convenient.

Dancer-writer Tulsi Badrinath introduces us to one such priest (who is also a black belt Karate-expert), right in the first chapter of her new non-fiction narrative, *Madras, Chennai and the Self*, as she profiles a dozen citizens owing allegiance to a 375-year-old Southern Indian metropolis that has quietly and gracefully shot to the top of the best-seller list, so to say. A few months back, publications like *The New York Times* and *Lonely Planet* have endorsed Chennai in their lists of places to visit, even reside.

Badrinath starts off by talking about her own connection to a city that has nurtured her since birth (in a nursing home on a road close to the beach and sea that defines the place). Her introductory chapter sets the tone of this book, all the way to the concluding pages; and there you have it — a poetical overview of Madras in history, from the Sangam literature times of yore, to 17th century visitations by the East India Company, all the way till modern Chennai, the Detroit of India,

as also ‘one of the earliest absorbers of technology’ — to quote Kiruba Shankar, one of the city’s earliest bloggers and also an entrepreneur, a podcaster, a people connector and an organic farmer.

But essentially, the book salutes the city through the voices of a dozen interviewees, besides the 13th voice (the author herself). Starting off with our aforementioned Vaishnavite priest K Sheshadari (the man who broke tradition and learnt a non-*sattvic* sport, yet continued to follow the rules of his calling), we have a list of citizens, some known, some less so, but all with roots in Madras, evolving along with changing Chennai. And so you have a Dalit success story, P Sivakami, IAS officer-turned-writer-cum-nascent-politician, somebody worth listening to for her reasoned talk on caste and the need for farmers to own land.

There is a producer of snuff, inheritor of his father’s debt-laden business, managing still to steer the old company to safe shores. There is a moderately successful cricketer who was unlucky not to reach the top, yet managed to make a mark in the equally noble field of Carnatic music journalism. There is a respected film actor (Vikram) who fought health odds and emerged triumphant.

A veteran from the field of education and politics, Dr Beatrix D’ Souza, is a delight to follow, as is the humane gynecologist Dr Uma Ram. The profiles on Nawab Abdul Ali, the Eighth Prince of Arcot, and Faizur Rahman, a Civil Engineer, are,

“ ESSENTIALLY, THE BOOK SALUTES THE CITY THROUGH THE VOICES OF A DOZEN INTERVIEWEES...”

among other things, a cheering commentary on the truly secular and tolerant nature of this city.

There are voices from the past too, as Badrinath recalls her close interaction with naturalist M Krishnan and his wife Indu — a couple who ‘respected each other’s territory, their different interests and pleasures’. But to me, the *raison d’etre* for reading this book would have to be the chapter on Sarathbabu Elumalai, the impoverished boy who grew up knowing hunger, in Madipakkam, Madras, then soldiered on with maturity and faith, till he had acquired his engineering degree from BITS Pilani, and an IIM (Ahmedabad) degree that would fetch him a cushy job — which he did not take up, preferring to provide employment through his newly started food business, a catering service company called Food King — that ultimately brought him back to home base, Madipakkam. If there is one inspiring story that needs to be read, it’s this one.

But, sadly, alongside these positive voices, there are negative accounts of regressive traditions: the gynaecologist quotes a professor who broke down after a second miscarriage: ‘I am not a mother yet. This is a disgrace...’ How would she return to her village?’

Interwoven with these profiles are the author’s own strands of experiences and memories, the insider-outsider view of a non-Tamil who still manages to feel like a ‘Madras’. Some pertinent observations catch the eye: ‘While the city has adopted the Gregorian calendar, its secret rhythms are attuned to the lunar calendar. The festivals, the *tithi*, the *panchangam* detailing these are a necessity in most homes.’

The overall image is of an eternal city, changing yet rooted. Tulsi Badrinath’s work is a worthy addition to the recent pile up of books on Madras-Chennai. But, I do have a quibble — the cover could have been livelier, more enticing.

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