

Tribute to what was Madras

SPOTLIGHT

Madras, Chennai and the Self — Conversations with the City
By TULSI BADRINATH
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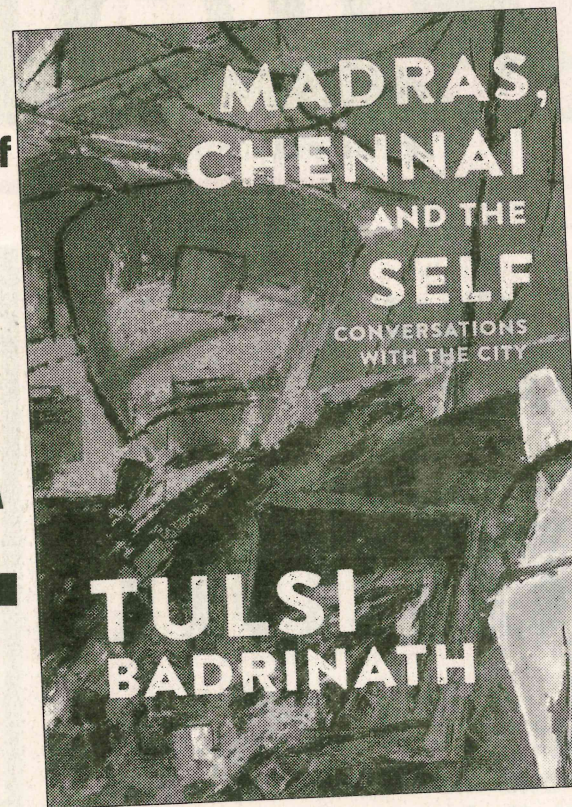
THERE is a plethora of books on Madras that is Chennai. All aspects of the city's history, heritage, art, culture, cuisine, music, even bird life in the city have been written about exhaustively. What could young Tulsi Badrinath of north Indian origin but born and brought up in the city because her father, an IAS officer who consciously opted for the Tamil Nadu cadre, could add to the knowledge of this 400-year-old First City of the Empire where modern India began was the first impression of this reviewer on receiving a copy of *Madras, Chennai and the Self — Conversations with the City*. This book is not a conventional book about Chennai. It is exploration of the city through the experience of 12 individuals drawn from different walks of life. While there is some familiarity when one reads the book, the author springs many surprises. She says that through the book she wanted to write about the people in the city: how they see Chennai and through the neighbourhoods, "how we can get the flavour of the place." The flavour of the place there is plenty and the book has turned out to be a literary work which none interested in the city and its people could ignore.

Tulsi begins her narrative with a temple priest, K Seshadri, who wanted to learn karate without compromising his religious practices. Through him we are told while the ancient temples at

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Triplicane and Mylapore existed for centuries before Madras did, the Chenna Kesavaperumal Temple, or Great Pagoda, was the first after the birth of Madras. Coins minted by the East India Company not only bore the image of a temple tower, but were also called pagodas. When the Company decided to demolish much of the original Black Town, including the Great Pagoda, two temples, Chenna Kesavaperumal and Chenna Mallikeswara temples, one dedicated to Vishnu and the other to Shiva were built. Chatrapati Shivaji visited the area in 1667. The author notes the gods need daily reminders of one's existential dilemmas.

Growing up in Madras, Tulsi finds caste mattered more in this city than in the other three major metros, Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi, and the caste dynamics came into subtle play in day-to-day interactions. Though not an outsider in the



sense she was born in the city, she had to negotiate these boundaries with care. The group dynamics of caste, she says, are deeply rooted in clothing, language, food, attitudes and traditions which are not easily apparent to a tourist or temporary visitor to the city. "They are but a culmination of centuries of rigid demarcations between Brahmins and non-Brahmins, 'upper' and lower castes." EV Ramasamy Naicker, aka Periyar, fought to dismantle the social structures that allowed the idea of caste-linked practices and prejudice over the course of his long life of 94

years, but caste tensions have only increased in the state, going by the "furious, often violent, opposition to inter-caste marriages."

Spending a day with P Sivakami, a Dalit woman IAS officer, the author learns how the civil service functions in this caste-ridden society. "If there is no political will, a file will not be cleared. The way it works is on the basis of caste. There were four or five Brahmin officers whose files were always cleared. If I sent one, they would have a thousand queries," Sivakami told Tulsi. When Sivakami was posted to the Adi Dravidar Welfare Department, she saw the true face and spirit of the government towards poor people. She felt that if the state was not helping them financially, the least it could do was to allow the Union government to help. The moment the government understood that she knew about the working, she was transferred to 'punishment' posting where she could idle and draw a salary.

Instead of idling, she used the time to write books. Tulsi's father Badrinath too was given punishment posting because the Chief Secretary of his day found him an "intellectual" unfit for civil service. Badrinath too took to writing books when he was in service with the Tamil Nadu government almost four decades ago. Sivakami left the IAS and joined Bahujan Samaj Party. She contested the Kanyakumari Lok Sabha seat and lost her security deposit. Politics after all is a mug's game.

The Nawabs of the Carnatic who had contributed to the British consolidating their power from Fort St George are central to the expanding city of Madras. A chapter titled "Inheriting History" brings out little known nuggets about the lives and times of the Nawabs. It was Nawab Wallajah's gift of land in Mylapore to the ancient Kapaleeshwarar temple that

resulted in the vast palm-lined tank in front of it. Even after Indian royalty lost their privy purses and privileges in 1971, the Carnatic Nawabs were given the privilege of being addressed by their title. His Highness the Prince of Arcot, Al-Haji Nawab Ghulam Mohammad Abdul Ali Khan Bahadur, the present title holder, is history personified. Amir Mahal, the Arcot palace, is situated in the bursting Triplicane locality, guarded by an array of sleek black cannons on wheels. His car is allowed to have a revolving red light fixed on it. Emperor Aurangzeb bestowed the title Nawab of the Carnatic on Zulfikar Ali who won the Fort of Gingee deep in the southern peninsula in 1698. The vast area spreading across Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu was part of the Mughal empire. It was Zulfikar Ali who gave the British the villages of Egmore, Purusawalkam and Tondiarpet which formed the city of Madras. Triplicane was already under the control of the British. Prince of Arcot holds the place of First Nobleman of the Muslim community in south India.

San Thome is one of the oldest bastions of Catholicism in Madras, with more than 2,000 years of Christianity. The Portuguese had long settled in San Thome but came under the possession of the Sultan of Golconda in 1662 and passed on to Aurangzeb and the Carnatic except for two years when the French controlled it. The British took control of it in 1749. At the Gymkhana Club, Madras, the last bastion of colonial traditions including the dress code for men, Tulsi was surprised to find "Chinese *tbali*" on its menu. The earliest friends Tulsi's father, Badrinath, made when he came to Madras as a bachelor were M Krishnan, India's most eminent naturalist, and his wife Indumathi. Their home became a second home to Tulsi in Madras where she had no relatives. Badrinath came from Mainpuri in Uttar Pradesh. *Madras, Chennai and the Self: Conversations with the City* is Tulsi's fourth book which is a tribute to Madras that is Chennai she loves and made it her abode.

The reviewer is a veteran journalist and former Director, The Statesman Print Journalism School