

From the Editor

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OF URBAN POOR AND MULTIPLE ORDERINGS OF DIVERSITY

In the city of Chennai if we were to step out of our verandas – as Bronislaw Malinowski wanted the anthropologists to do- we cannot escape noticing urban poor settlements brutally referred to as *slums*. Dispossessed by the unyielding agriculture and betrayed monsoons thousands migrate to urban poor settlements in search of a dreamland that would offer them hope, employment and better quality of life. Has not the famous Tamil proverb advised them to reach a city even if they were to go low in their lives? Did not the great Tamil epics describe cities of Madurai and Puhar filled with colourful spring festivals?¹ Did not any city offer the hope of escaping the oppressive grid of kin, clan and caste and merge with the holy cosmopolitan *other*?

Belying all the hopes, cities have a way of symbolically ordering power and representations where the urban poor have no participation. Our landscapes, public buildings, houses, streets and public monuments individually and collectively convey a past and are central to order and authority in our society. The ordering of space does not merely reflect social relations and social structure, but is the part of actual constitution of the sociological order. Bourdieu and Thambiah have taught us that the Thai and Berber houses are both statements about and are replicated after cosmological ideas.²

Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), Tamil Nadu chapter has recently identified 39 new heritage sites to be added to the already existing list of 157 in the city of Chennai.³ Apart from the temples, mosques, churches, tombs of leaders and a few natural sites, most of these sites are legacy of the British and now have become seats of political, administrative, legal and commercial power. Only Bharathi Illam, Ramanujan's house, Vivekananda Illam and Valluvar kottam stand as sites of cultural significance that have emerged from this soil and have stood beyond political affiliation. In Chennai, like in any other postcolonial Indian cities the interpenetration of knowledge and power is mediated through English. It is yet another alienating agent for the urban poor.

The grapevine of Annasalai runs like a central spine through symbolic organisation of the city while the perpetually bad smelling rivers Couvam (including Buckingham Canal) and Adayar run almost invisibly like its political unconscious. North- South divide allots commerce to the former and culture to the latter both in popular belief and reality. Northern Chennai is the habitat for city's largest industrial manual labourers with Madras Port Trust topping the list. While the folklore

of these labourers warrants an in depth study the lore of the truck drivers entering this part of Chennai requires another.

Real estate economy classifies boat club road, certain parts of Nungambakkam, Kilpauk Garden, Gopalapuram, Poes Garden, Abiramipuram and Raja Annamalaipuram as *posh areas*; Kottivakkam and east coast road are meant for non-resident Indians' farmhouses. Parrys, Poondamalli high road, Pandy bazaar, Koyambedu, Annasalai, Ranganathan Street and Egmore are commercial centres. As popular belief would have it Kodambakkam and Vadapalani envelope the entire Tamil film industry whereas Thiruvanniyur, Kalakshetra colony, Annanagar, Besantnagar and Adayar are the areas where upper middle class and *officers* live. Triplicane, Mylapore, Thiruvanniyur, Velachery and Alandur are traditional *pockets* (villages) caught up within the city. Ethnicity defines Royapuram, Royapettah, Pudupet and Thousandlights as Muslim areas, Sowcarpet and Georgetown as north Indian ones and Perambur and Ambattur as Anglo-Indian settlements. Taramani is emerging as institutional space for software industry. Rest of the city is meant for large middle class and all areas including the beaches are permeated by urban poor settlements. Cultural memory would credit Marina beach, Island grounds and Chepauk stadium with historic moments that determined the emotions of millions through the political speeches made and cricket matches played. Ordered by class, commerce, power, religion, ethnicity and neutrality Chennai accommodates urban poor settlements as sites of cultural aspirations and economic deprivation.

Sacred geography created and maintained by the city's temple myths does offer an interconnected semantic platform for the urban poor to participate in many expressive behaviour patterns. Mediated by the Bhakthi industry of audio cassettes and middle class households (where the maids and mistresses share the traditions of popular Hinduism) temples invite and enjoy large-scale participation. Pilgrimages and observances dictated by the religious calendars further glue the networks. For instance, since the god of death, *Yama*, meditated at Dandeeswarer temple, Velachery but went for prayers to Marundeeswarer temple, Thiruvanniyur and Kapaleeswarer temple, Mylapore - it is a good idea for the pilgrim to visit all the three temples. Similar pilgrim networks exist for Vishnu and Amman temples in the city. Several tour operators including Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation offer one-day pilgrim tours to the different sets of connections for the local populace. While *Vishnu*, *Shiva* and *Murugan* temples can be said to belong to classical Hinduism, their festivals (*Prathosham*- monthly twice-conducted rite in *Shiva* temples, 63-saivite saints festival, Vaishnavite poet saints' festival- to name a few) have such widespread community participation that they become folk celebrations.

Very few temples like Kalikambal temple in Thambu Chetty Street, Yoganarasimhaswamy temple in Rajalakshmi Nagar and Venkatesaperumal temple of Bairagi Mutt belong to single communities although worshipped by all. Non-brahminical worship patterns dominate in the Amman temples and Melmaruvattur and Thiruvotriyur temples attract huge number of women pilgrims. St. Antony's church in Armenian street and Velankanni church in Besantnagar beach have worship patterns similar to Hindu Amman temples.

The expanding city has engulfed many small folk temples that used to be at the borders of villages and one encounters them rather at inappropriate and unexpected places. Ayyanar temple near Alandur railway gate is one such example. People of urban poor settlements adopt these anachronistic temples as their own and breath new life into them. Either by adoption or creation every settlement *owns* an Amman temple. A typical Amman temple resembles *Ankalaparameswari* temple of South and North Arcot districts of Tamil Nadu where only the head of the goddess is idolised and worshipped. Evelyn Masillamani Meyer's definitive study on Ankalaparameswari in the districts has little to do with these city goddesses.⁴ In most cases the myth is absent and worship patterns are irregular. In the Tamil month of *Adi* (July-August) on Tuesdays and Fridays the people of the settlements offer ritual cooking to the goddesses. On the last Tuesday or Friday a festival is organised in the night. In contrast to the *folk celebrations* of the classical Hindu temples where all the activities happen in the *precincts* these festivals happen by blocking the streets. Preparations for the festivals begin one week in advance. Youths of the settlements collect money from the neighbourhoods and the passing vehicles. The vehicles themselves have a way of signifying whether they would get the money or not. Tata Sumos may belong to the politicians and so it is not a good idea to stop them forcibly. If they stop on the first *request* itself then there is every chance of getting a fat donation. Maruti, Santro, Matiz and Fiat Uno belong to neo-rich and one can stop them to *persuade* to part with money. Ambassadors are official cars and they are best waved off. Maruti vans and Cielos may belong to gangster groups and so it is best not to notice them. All two wheelers can be stopped without hesitation.

Most of the money earned through this *fund raising effort* is spent on putting up a serial bulb figure of the goddess on a scaffolding across the street and lighting up the entire premises with tube lights. If it happens to be a Draupati Amman temple as in the case of Kovalam then *Theru-k-koothu* performance is arranged. *Tiger dance* and shadow puppet theatre performances also used to be regular features of the festival. Nowadays all these performances are replaced by roadside screenings of Tamil *devotional films*. Alternatively live *light music performance* is arranged. These festivals are really the public assertions of urban poor of their existence and solidarity.

Otherwise life in the urban poor settlements is full of hardships. A typical hut in a settlement consists of kitchen and one room. Radios, television sets and cable connections have found their way in selected houses. Mostly women sleep indoors but men and children sleep on the streets or open spaces. Asbestos or thatched roofing indicate slightly better dwelling places but in poor places roofing is plastic sheets or canvas clothes. Plastic pots and ever-silver vessels are the major household items. Water is a scarce and precious commodity. Kerosene (*Krishna* oil as it is called) eats up a major portion of the household income. Provisioning is done through the public distribution system and ration card is a precious document. Chennai Corporation's facilities, railway tracks and vacant plots with heavy shrubs are used as public toilets.

Normally life begins at four in the morning and the lucky settlements wake up to the chanting of *Koran* from the nearby mosques. Most of them hurry to catch up the morning bus service or electric train so that they can transport their goods like vegetables and flowers to the marketplace or to bring them to their neighbourhoods. Maids start their work at several middle class houses around six in the morning. Construction workers, rickshaw pullers, auto drivers, pushcart restaurant owners, hawkers, knife sharpeners, umbrella repairers, cobblers, plastic good vendors and tea shop assistants have different timings. There are no holidays. Men are irresponsible and they do not bring home their earnings. Among men consumption of alcohol is a widespread habit. School going children are blessed, as others become wanderers in the streets. Summer is cruel, as one has to wait for hours to get a pot of water from the corporation tap. Monsoon is crueller, as the rains would flood through the leaky roofs and make the entire settlements unbearably muddy. Government hospitals are the only resorts available for health care. Most of the childbirths occur at the settlements themselves as yet another household activity. Tuberculosis is still a widespread mortal disease.

Vibrant physical culture exists among youths. Beef eating and exercising at the roadside hand bars are considered to be luxuries. The lack of physical culture among the middle class is often ridiculed by referring to them as *curd rice bodies*. The consumers of pushcart restaurants often complain that because *curd rice fellows* have taken to the habit of eating beef secretly, beef price is going up considerably. Street corner *cliques* establish themselves at places such as telephone, milk and internet booths, public parks, barber shops, cycle stands, compound walls, carom playing spots, railway stations and auto stands. The friendship formed in these *cliques* is an important cultural value for the participants and it finds several expressions in the public arena. Several innovations in the spirited Chennai dialect of Tamil occur in these groups, travel to the student population and become standard ways of speaking throughout the city. When a member of the group dies others paste huge printed posters of *tearful homage* all

throughout the city and the passing by buses. The funeral procession is a folklore event in itself. Decorated with mounds of flowers the body is taken in a pushcart surrounded by grieving relatives. All the way through the procession, men dance in front of the pushcarts to the accompaniment of drums. Characterised by retrogressive steps, pelvic thrusts and lewd facial expressions in the context of overwhelming grief, these funeral dances may be seen as rebellious and liminal manifestation of imposed marginalisation.⁵

These dances share generic resemblances to *Gana pattu* performances organised at the events of deaths of leaders of a few violent settlements. Usually these performances start late in the night on the sixteenth day after the death of the leader. Burning a cycle tyre on the fires of which the *Gana* singers tan their drums lights the performance space. *Gana pattu* is sung in a melancholic but high-pitched voice. The melody stays the same and gives the song a meditative quality. The songs reflect over the impermanence of human life through metaphors such as *weaving bottomless baskets with rootless fibers, vessels that cannot hold and bags of air filled with fruitless dreams*. The songs weave the dead leader's heroic deeds that landed him up in jails, brought women and earned sympathy of the local populace. The narrative patterns share their roots with *Manikuravan* story from the southern districts of Tamil Nadu.⁶ For the songs, transsexuals dressed in the garb of women dance while a passive audience consisting of men, women and children watch a few youngsters joining the dancers in an animated silence. Among the fisher folk of Ayodhikuppam and Injambakkam another kind of *Gana pattu* exists without the dance performance. The fisherfolk *Gana* share its tune, tone, theme and philosophical orientation with the other *Gana* but its contents are from the sea faring life. In the mid eighties, *Gana pattu* became very famous with the college students and a few Tamil film directors. Nowadays the tunes of *Gana* are imitated in Tamil film songs and are becoming famous all over the Tamil-speaking world.

The rebellious vitality of *Gana pattu* is on the decline as the urban poor settlements are becoming more and more passive. The complicity between middle class and urban poor through several mediating spaces such as, households, beaches, public transports, temples and movie houses could have been further cemented through the percolation of middle class values of

passivity and contributed towards the decline. In fact inter-caste marriages and elopements among urban poor are also in the decline compared to the mid eighties and majority opt for safe *arranged marriages*.

Pongal in January, English New year and Tamil New year in April have become celebrations for all and the entire Chennai comes out on the streets and on the beaches teeming, bubbling and gushing to form a vast human expression of festivity and joy. English essayist G.K.Chesterton dreamed of a tree that devoured birds nesting on its branches and when spring came put out feathers instead of leaves. Perhaps the city of Chennai is one such tree...

I offer these observations as an apology for an editorial for this issue of *Indian Folklife* that is organised around the theme *City landscapes and folklore*.

References

1. See A.K. Ramanujan's brilliant essay, *Towards an Anthropology of City Images* in *The Collected Essays of A.K.Ramanujan*, edited by Vinay Dharwadker, New Delhi: Oxford, 1999, Pp. 53-73.
2. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Berber House* and Stanley J. Thambiah *Classification of Animals in Thailand* in Mary Douglas (ed) *Rules of Meaning* Pp.98-110, 127-66. For a classical discussion on signification of spatial orders see also Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classifications*, London, 1963.
3. Report in *Madras Musings*, Vol. X, No.04, June 1-15, 2000.
4. Evelyn Masillamani Meyer's study on *Ankalapameswari* is a classic in the field of Indian folk religion.
5. Arnold Van Gennep's *Rites of passage* initiated the idea of liminality and Victor Turner enhanced its creative application to a wide variety of social situations.
6. For a discussion and analysis on *Manikuravan* story, see George Hart's essay on the subject in Stuart H. Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan (eds.) *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India*, Delhi: Oxford, 1986, Pp.233-63. Another book of related interest would be Alf Hiltebeitel's *Criminal gods and demon deities*.



Kalamkari Painting