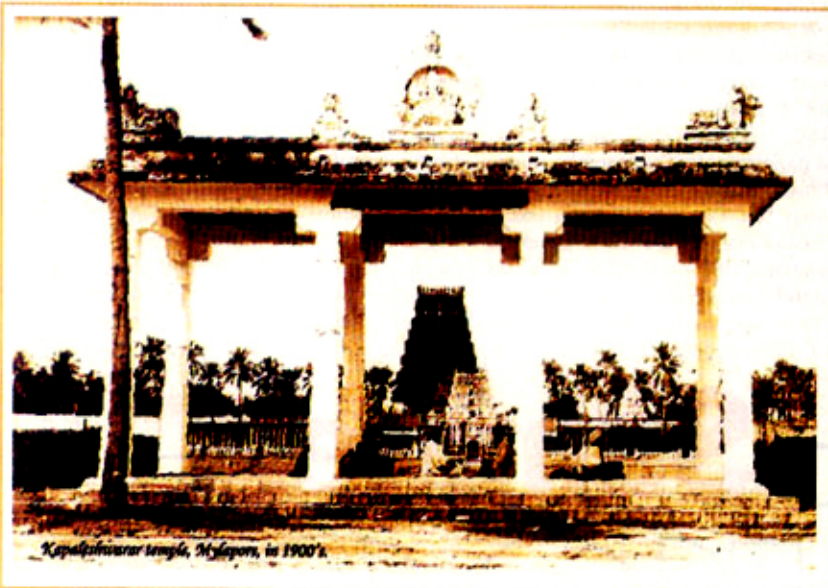


Heritage laws can be used to beautify the city and develop appropriate infrastructure, an easier route to Singara Chennai



Central Railway station, Madras in 1925



Kapaleswarar temple, Mylapore, in 1900's

What's in a **CHENNAI** HERITAGE Name?

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Very little if it is Chennai, named after a gentleman who never came this way. Mystery, if it is Madras, which could recall either the Portuguese Madra family, whose lady attracted the Englishman Francis Day, or the unidentified village of Madrasapattinam. And tragedy, if it is any one of the postal zones of Chennai that was Madras. Each was formerly an independent village, a settlement with a local history.

A tale hangs in each name. The most ancient, Mylapore, means city of peacocks. The sole peacock left is a statue inside Kapaleswarar temple in Mylapore. Another ancient village was Thiru-alli-keni, the tank of white lilies of Shridevi, now modern Triplicane. Today, the tank has neither water nor lilies. Purasawakkam was a grove of Flame-of-the-forest (purasu) trees and Mangadu of mango trees. Buildings have replaced groves. The air of Poonamallee (Poo-virinda-mallee) was once filled with the overpowering scent of jasmine. The smells today are unmentionable, while garbage has replaced the jasmine gardens.

Other parts of the city recall historical events, such as Alwarpet named after Thirumangai Alvar who lived here or Thousand Lights after the old mosque. Thiruvalluvar's temple is buried in a crowded street, an insult to the great writer who once lived and wrote in Mylapore. Names could be a road map for conservation. It may not be possible to restore peacocks in Mylapore, but surely a lily pond in Triplicane is not too tall an order? Or jasmine gardens in Poonamallee?

Chennai needs a heritage plan and laws to protect it. Heritage could be an entire precinct, like Mylapore, or a single building like Central Railway Station, or a temple tank or a single tree like the big banyan at the Theosophical Society. They are our inheritance, and apathy should not be permitted to let them lose their character. Several concerned citizen groups have lobbied unsuccessfully for heritage laws in Chennai. Unlike Chennai, Bombay, Goa, Hyderabad and Bangalore have laws to protect heritage.

Old houses are pulled down for multi-storied buildings, while water bodies are filled with garbage

for construction activities. There are no laws to prevent the Chennaiite from cutting down tall trees or pulling down old buildings. It is shocking that, in spite of the example set by so many cities in India and abroad, Chennai is still clueless about protecting its natural and man-made heritage. Heritage is more than music and dance - it is a way of life that gives any place a distinctive character. Once there were laws to govern construction. For example, all houses surrounding a temple tank had to slope their roofs towards the tank, to harvest rainwater. Today, the houses are replaced with multi-storeyed buildings, and water shortage is a perennial problem.

Even the listing of heritage is undone. INTACH has a list of sorts and the CP Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation has another. Other organisations may have some more. Unfortunately, it is only the educated intelligentsia that is shouting, and the voices are too few and feeble to be heard. State governments should realise that heritage laws - like any other - help the government rather than the individual. Can we ever hope to protect our heritage?