last word
guest column

Madras to Chennai

Environmentalist Nandita Krishna on her ealiest memories of the city and how it has changed over the years

My earliest memory of Madras is the sound of silence. I would lie in bed listening—to nothing. Then, slowly, the birds would wake up and nature came alive—not Madras, which was always in a state of semi-somnolence. Foxes, peacocks, civet cats, squirrels and monkeys owned our garden. In the hot afternoons, I'd go to the bridge over the Adyar river to watch nesting birds in the estuary and under the mangroves, including colourful flamingos, or climb trees at home. What a life!

The evenings included the mandatory visit to Marina beach, where the "elders" would discuss politics while we kids would play cricket, fly kites, build castles and bury ourselves in the sand. I mocked my country cousins who were dressed out-of-fashion. Sometimes my grandmother would take me shopping to Sampoorna Shastriar's where, in an old house, over cups of coffee, she would buy saris that were never replicated. The vendors on handcarts were wonderful storytellers, spinning yarns about goods as diverse as Persian carpets sold by a Pathan, toys, vegetables and utensils.

I also met some of the greatest Indians of our times—Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajaji, Indira Gandhi and K. Kamaraj, maharajas and maharanis and writers like Mulk Raj Anand and Louis Fischer, among others. A mixed memory—happy because of the knowledge I imbibed and sad because such greatness no longer exists.

I belong to one of Madras' oldest families, living in a huge historic heritage mansion, yet growing up in Bombay and making the annual holiday to my roots. I thus saw the city as an insider and outsider, which is how I felt when I moved here in 1974. Madras, after Bombay, was an overgrown village. There were no opportunities for the young and no entertainment, apart from the ubiquitous Tamil cinema and occasional concerts, a few restaurants and Hotel Connemara, but the streets were invariably empty after eight o'clock.

This pace continued till the early '90s when the economy opened up. Suddenly, there was a boom: industries and tall buildings sprouted up and life began to change. The lovely old houses of Mylapore, and Poonamallee, Mowbrays and C.P.Ramaswami Aiyar Road were pulled down and multi-storied monstrosities came up in their place. By 1996, when Madras became Chennai, a new city and culture had been born.

Is Chennai all bad and not good? Hardly. It is exciting, offering hope and opportunities to young people. It is cosmopolitan, shaking Madrasis out of their smug shells and exposing them to the world. As one who travels extensively, I see more optimism, new ideas and developments in Chennai than in any other Indian city. A young man I knew as a child, who went away to make his fortune in the US, returned to Chennai and has become a software entrepreneur. My son's engineer classmate has become a fashion designer!

But there is a flip side to development. The city is crowded and dirty, traffic unchecked, water scarcity a constant worry and the noise is driving us deaf. The disappearance of trees and old buildings within the city, and tamarind trees and rice fields on the Chennai-Kanchipuram highway is a tragedy. Cricket is played in stadiums, kites have disappeared and the Marina is over-crowded. Handcarts and *malligaikadais* have been taken over by malls. Chennai is still the best Indian city to live in, but can't development, heritage conservation and cleanliness go together? Sadly, public apathy never changed from Madras to Chennai. ∎

SAURABH SINGH