

MEMORIES OF MADRAS

When Bharati's songs filled the air

NOSTALGIA Jaya Arunachalam on a cosmopolitan Triplicane, nationalist fervour and working-class dreams

My father was a bureaucrat serving the British in Madras, and we came from Kancheepuram village to live in Triplicane in the late 1930s.

We lived on Venkatarangam Pillai Street and later Bandla Venugopal Naidu Street, and I remember that both these places had a cosmopolitan atmosphere. There were the Raos from Karnataka, the Shettys from Andhra Pradesh as well as Tamil Brahmins. It was a spiritual place — you could hear the mantras from the Parthasarathy Temple — but it wasn't as orthodox as Mylapore, for example, and was advanced culturally.

The 109-year-old Sri Parthasarathy Swami Sabha has begun in a small house by a philanthropist in Triplicane. I used to hear music concerts organised by the sabha only in the temples, since

it didn't have its own premises. Only large sabhas such as the Tamil Isai Sangam, the Rasika Ranjani Sabha, and the Music Academy could afford premises of their own because wealthy people were associated with them. The Sri Parthasarathy Swami Sabha, which was a sabha of the middle-classes, lacked such patrons.

There was also the Triplicane Cultural Academy, an intellectual hub with all the retired officials of the area as members. People in Triplicane were nationalists, and interested in public issues.

They may not have been very rich monetarily, but they were intellectually rich. I used to study at Samaroo School on Singarachari Street, which is where Bharathiar's memorial is now. It later became the National Girls' High School.

The head of our school was very involved in the freedom movement and popularised Bharathiar's songs; so, we all knew his songs by rote. Subramania Bharati lived in Triplicane, as did other intellectuals of the day such as the novelist, Vai Mu. Kothainayaki Ammal and the Tamil pandit Krishnaveni Ammal.

I lost touch with Triplicane in 1942, when we vacated the city due to the Japanese air raids.

We returned a couple of years later to North Madras, where I studied in St. Anne's Convent opposite Prabhat Talkies and Broadway Talkies on Broadway. We loved watching Tamil and Hindi movies that were played there.

Cinema was the only cultural



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outlet we had, in the absence of music sabhas and such — North Madras was dominated by the working classes, especially places such as Kotwal Chavadi, and their main interest was cinema. Back then, you could watch a movie for 33 paise, sitting on the floor. That was the cheapest ticket, which the workers could buy.

I remember Broadway Café, opposite Prabhat Talkies. It had



SERENE SETTING The Sri Parthasarathy Swami Temple in Triplicane PHOTO: THE HINDU ARCHIVES

the best idlis and gun-powder — you couldn't find anything like it anywhere else!

And then, there was the Robinson Park, which we used to cross as a group of four or five girls on the way to the high school branch of St. Anne's Convent. There were such lovely plants in that park... of course, it's all long gone now.

My other memory of that time is going to Mannady Street. Liv-

ing in a working-class neighbourhood meant that there were several small shops around. But the bigger shops were in Mannady. It had everything from clothes and cosmetics to books and medicines, though there weren't as many pavement shops as there are now. For even larger shops, you went to China Bazaar.

Then, there was also Rattan Bazaar, where you got good

mats, bedding, and pillow covers.

The time I spent in Triplicane inculcated in me a spirit of nationalism.

Living in North Madras, on the other hand, helped me see the workers' conditions and problems, and understand the importance of the workers' movement, particularly in the unorganised sector.

As told to DIVYA KUMAR

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