



Interview with Jayaprakash Radhakrishnan

PG 4

DAY'S DIARY

Eiffel Tower opens

The Eiffel Tower in Paris was inaugurated on this day in 1889. Its construction began on January 28, 1887 and came to an end on March 15, 1889

NAMED AFTER AN ENGINEER

It stands upright on the Champ de Mars in Paris and was named after the engineer Gustave Eiffel, whose company designed and built the tower

ALMOST TORN DOWN

Originally intended as a temporary exhibit, the Eiffel Tower was almost torn down and scrapped in 1909. City officials opted to save it after recognising its value as a radiotelegraph station

INSPIRATION

It has been the inspiration for the creation of many replicas and similar towers, including Blackpool Tower in England and Tokyo Tower in Japan



A HERITAGE RECCE OF ROYAPETTAH'S RESIDENCES

Amid modern chaos and everyday business, all it takes is some effort and plenty of passion to find the beauty that still survives

ROSHNE BALASUBRAMANIAN

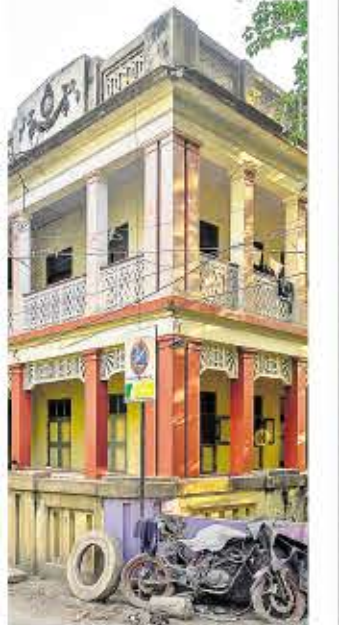
There's no mistaking the aroma of roasted spices, flavourful rice and succulent meat wafting from the myriad briyani shops; and the warm fragrance of melted-butter doused on top of Sathyam Cinemas' popcorn is certainly hard to miss. The roads, bearing the names of civil servants of the British Raj and the court of Nawabs, are never without its chock-a-block traffic. Not to forget, there's the old, powder blue-white clock tower in the middle of a busy junction, reminiscent of the city's history with timekeepers of yore. Beyond its unassuming

façade of being a business district, Royapettah has, for centuries, been a name synonymous with royalty, eclectic architecture and a confluence of cultures. However, today, despite these rich features embedded in the city's fabric, for most residents of the locality, it remains merely a place offering modern entertainment and recreation in different forms. "The area is said to have had a long association with the Nayaks of Vijayanagara and is believed to have derived its name from the Rayas (rulers) of the empire. The neighbourhood is like a multi-layered cake. Take a bite into it and you can understand its beautiful complexities. From Colonial influences, garden houses that belonged to the close-knit Anglo-Indian com-

munity who stayed here, houses with influences from the Nawab of Arcot's time, churches to Agharam-style houses, the area is rich and diverse in history," tells architect and heritage activist Ashmitha Athreya of Madras Inherited. In its ongoing work to rediscover the alleys of the area, present the settlement history in an edible yet riveting manner, the heritage preservation collective conducted a walk in the area, offering knowledge of lesser-known residences that have shaped its urban history and architecture. From Gandhi Peak, The Summer House to Gowri Bagh, we list a few living heritage structures and their architectural influences that maketh 'Raya Petta'.

THANIGAI VILAS

An edifice built in the Art Deco style of architecture, parallels to several of the elements dotting the structure on Westcott Road can be drawn to the Royapettah Clock Tower. With a minimalistic approach, perforated jalis (latticed screen) and sunburst motifs (made popular during the time of King Louis the 14th of France), the corner property is a shining example of the myriad architectural influences that have made their way into local building styles, over centuries.



THE SUMMER HOUSE

The Summer House, a palatial structure, at the junction of the Thalaiyari Street and Bharathi Salai, is a perfect example of Art Deco architecture, a style which can be traced back to France. With an emphasis on the verticality of the building, raised windows, a curvilinear focus, corner staircase with ample headroom and decorative patterns in the crest, the building is truly one of a kind. Another distinguishing feature of the building is its circular columns. This, the architect tells, could be a result of the introduction of circular cement pipes in the late 1940s.



ORCHID HOMES

Nestled among newer constructions, the Orchid Homes on Perumal Mudali Street is a humble building dating back to the 1920s-30s. A testament to the city's rich vernacular approach to construction, the structure was built keeping in mind its extreme climatic conditions. A fascinating aspect of the house is a long, single piece of timber, now etched with the name 'Orchid Homes'. "It's fascinating that the entire piece has stood the test of time for almost a century. When we speak about conservation and strength of heritage materials, we notice how brick, timber and lime mortar become stronger while concrete has only a life of 30 years," she notes.

ARUMIGA VILAS

A few minutes from Orchid Homes is Arumiga Vilas, another house dating back to the 1930s, with a rather spacious veranda than the one we observed earlier. "What is exciting about understanding these buildings is learning how elements are borrowed from multiple styles. For example, here, each sunshade is different while the windows in the centre don't even have one! There is also a different approach to the crest of the building. The columns here belong to the classical style of architecture and the order known as the Ionic Order (of Greek Architecture). There is fluting on the columns and it involutes at the top. It is mind-boggling to think how a house in an area in Madras has an element borrowed from Greece and how it has been adapted to the needs here," she enthuses.



CHANDRA NILAYAM

At Chandra Nilayam, we are made cognisant of yet another style of architecture – the Indo-Deco. As the name suggests, the construction is a mix of Art Deco with incorporations of Indian styles. "The kind of clues we can pick from the art deco style is emphasis on verticality. The plaster, a projection from the base, for instance, rises to the height of the building," explains Ashmitha. To give the construction a coat of Indian sensibilities, a crest in the entrance of the house, carrying the image of Gajalakshmi, the goddess of wealth has been installed. "Indo Art Deco style is



important and of prominence not only because of its distinctive style but because of its roots in nationalism and the freedom movement. Indians wanted to take back what was theirs. In a city that was dotted with foreign styles of architecture, there was need to add vernacular styles. This, in many ways, made a statement that the locals could come up with designs that were rooted," she shares.

GOWRI BAGH

Along the route on Perumal Mudali Street, a small gate leading to a covered parking area, wooden window frames from age-old timbers and stained glass windows lead us to Gowri Bagh – a perfect example of how influences of multiple conquests in the area have led to it being represented in architecture and building construction, tells Ashmitha. Heavily inspired by the neoclassical style of architecture, it is symmetrical and is often

called the 'twin house'. "The house has, over the years, seen multiple layers of decay. There are white patches that could potentially be salt efflorescence, black mould and the primary enemy of heritage buildings – vegetative growth in cracks. If a proper method is not used to remove this growth, then, there are greater chances of the building facing further damage and the cracks widening. While newer additions like rolling shutters (perhaps for a vehicle garage) have been made to the



structure, the older elements, including the timber shutters, arches, pediments and corbels, have remained intact. "This

structure is a perfect example of a confluence of influences – both style and materials from places far and wide. However, with a pathetic state of funding for heritage buildings, where there are no separate funds for heritage homeowners or assurance from government that it will support them, it is not easy to take care of it. It burns a hole in the pockets of the owner and then ultimately, they decide to demolish and build a flat for better revenue. It is a sad compromise one has to make," she says.

GANDHI PEAK

The next time you drive along or walk up Bharathi Salai's (Pycroft's Road) section of road famous for its street-side mattress stores, keep an eye out for this building steeped in history, especially in that of the country's nationalist movement. With lattices, stained glass windows, stone columns and a bust of Mahatma Gandhi at its crown, the three-storey house, which was constructed in 1930 by SP Aiyaswamy, a district



board engineer, has housed Subash Chandra Bose twice, in 1939 and 1941. "Even during a time when the INC was boycotting Bose, Aiyaswamy

went ahead and housed him. The room where Bose stayed is kept locked and it is believed that an autographed photo of the freedom fighter is kept safe in the room," details Ashmitha. Notably, Aiyaswamy was also the architect of several landmark buildings including Curzon and Co. The house, intricately decorated with a traditional Madras terrace roof, is yet another fading landmark that needs to be celebrated.

PHOTOS: MADRAS INHERITED

'Conan Doyle was convinced of a miscarriage of justice'

Author Shrabani Basu's latest book explores the connection between the Sherlock Holmes writer and India, by shining light on the only case he personally investigated

MONIKA MONALISA

Shrabani Basu is back with another book, this time with a tale that shows the story of prejudice against an Indian family that converted to Christianity while they were living in Britain. Set in 1903, *The Mystery of the Parsee Lawyer: Arthur Conan Doyle, George Edalji and the Case of the Foreigner in the English Village* is the story of how writer Arthur Conan Doyle investigates the case of a young Indian lawyer, George Edalji, who was falsely accused and imprisoned for mutilating horses. Previously, the author has penned *Victoria & Abdul: The True Story of the Queen's Closest Confidant*, which was also con-

verted into motion picture. Excerpts follow:

How did you come across this story?
I had always been aware that the only case personally investigated by Arthur Conan Doyle was that of an Indian. Conan Doyle has written about the case himself. But I wanted to tell the full story. In 2015, I read that some letters written by Conan Doyle were coming up for auction in London. These were to do with the George Edalji case and were the letters from Conan Doyle to the police chief of Staffordshire, George Anson. I followed up on the letters and then researched the story through material in different archives, consulting home of-



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files and police records. It took five years!

What do you think made Doyle take up the case?
I think he took it up because it was such an unusual request. Here was a Parsee, a son of an Indian vicar, accused of crimes that seemed unreasonable. Conan Doyle was convinced of a miscarriage of justice and he loved to stand up for the underdog.

What kind of racism did George Edalji go through?
George was 12 when the family started receiving anonymous letters, threatening to kill them and set the vicarage on fire. Racist graffiti was painted on their house and excreta was thrown in through the letter box. It started in 1888 and went on for several years. In 1903, the racist attacks took an even more sinister turn, as anonymous letters started link-

ing George with the mutilation and killing of animals. At the time, he was a 28-year-old practising solicitor and the allegations were damaging.

What about the story is so intriguing?
When George was found guilty, the media said he had committed the crime because of his 'Eastern' roots. Once Conan Doyle rose to George's defence, the media changed their tune. Now, they were fascinated that the George Edalji case was being investigated by 'Sherlock Holmes'. They started writing that he should not be discriminated for the colour of his skin, all of which they were guilty of doing earlier.

What was your reaction when you went to the village and could

find only the tomb stone of Shapurji Edalji?
I knew that George was buried elsewhere. It was sad to see that none of Shapurji's family members was buried next to him. It felt like a lonely grave for a man who had served for over 40 years as the vicar of the parish.

Shapurji Edalji's character is interesting. What do you know about him?
I wanted to examine why he wanted to convert to Christianity as a teenager. I also wanted to find out what drove him to make England his home. What was moving was how he never gave up fighting for his son. Nor did he abandon the village and move elsewhere after receiving threats. He served as the vicar of Great Wyrley for 42 years.

In both your books *Victoria & Abdul* and *The Mystery of the Parsee Lawyer*, both the Indian characters suffer from racism. Since they are set in two different time periods, how different or familiar were the issues?
Abdul Karim had come from India. He was a commoner who went on to become Queen Victoria's favourite and rose through the ranks, getting land and titles. George was born in England. There is nothing Indian about George, apart from his father and religion of his ancestors. Abdul moved in the royal palaces, George lived in a mining village in the Midlands, and worked as a solicitor in Birmingham. Yet, they both become victims of racism. Abdul faced racism from the Queen's household and family, and was eventually thrown out after her death, while George and his family faced racism in the village and from the police force.

