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But history will remain...

The building that houses the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi Centre is a historical landmark of Chennai, where significant events in politics, cinema and music have taken shape... However, the proposed demolition would be yet another impending erasure of history and heritage, says GOWRI RAMNARAYAN.



"DO YOU know the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's centre in Kilpauk is going to demolish its old quarters"? The news announced yet another impending erasure of history and heritage in this city.

Built in 1857, those quarters, originally Sladen Gardens, had been home to a British resident, who left his fine taste for greenery in the vast compound. Later, under Justice Tyabji's residency, the building staked its first claim to fame, playing host to Mohandas Gandhi.

A snapshot of Sladen Gardens on the cover of a Tamil magazine on April 16, 1942 shows a tree-fringed, verandahed, colonnaded mansion, with the flag of the Indian National Congress flying on its terrace. A playful note declared: 'Since railway stations are a prime target for air raids, we don't want to facilitate the identification of the Egmore Railway station by the *Kalki* Office landmark. Therefore, to confuse the enemy, we have shifted our office to another location.' Enraptured by tales of the Mahatma's walks outdoors and councils indoors, T.Sadasivam had bought Sladen Gardens from Mammen Mappillai, through the agency of 'Aryabhavan' Sharma, to house the *Kalki* magazine. The first floor became his home.

Neither editor 'Kalki' Krishnamurthi, nor managing director Sadasivam could have imagined then that 20, Guruswami Mudaliar Road, Kilpauk, would indeed become a Madras landmark. Renamed Kalki Gardens, this workbase of the two freedom fighters was to witness stirring action in the socio-political, literary and cultural fields.

Sadasivam had the job of supporting three geniuses — 'Kalki' who had left *Ananda Vikatan* to start the eponymous weekly; Carnatic vocalist wife M.S. Subbulakshmi who had played a film role ("Savitri") to raise funds for the journalistic venture; and statesman C. Rajagopalachari, whose political fortunes fluctuated from governor generalship of India, to the dissolution of his own political party.

By 1941, 'Kalki' had already made a name for himself as a pioneer in Tamil journalism, a writer of forceful fiction and non-fiction. But Kilpauk saw a change over in his writing style, which gave a stamp of its own to the weekly. It was here that he ran his campaigns for Rajaji, most ardent when the leader's disturbing foresight made him unpopular, or ousted him from power.

Kalki's panoramic historical novels - "Parthiban Kanavu", "Sivakamiyin Sapatham", "Ponniyin Selvan", "Alai Osai" — were serialised from the press here, with assistant editors competing to read the instalments in drafts, and foreman Rajapathar visibly enjoying every line that he set for the letterpress. August 15, 1947 saw the Indian flag raised on the premises by the jubilant staff, with Rajapathar's "Thayin Manikkodi Paarir" preceding M.S Subbulakshmi's national songs!

What a galaxy of writers haunted the building through the decades! With an editorial team including Tumilan, Nadodi, Vasanthan, Somas, Saavi, Bhagirathan, Jayamani Subramaniam (admired for his stint with Netaji!), Mi Pa Somu, P.S.Mani, Na Parthasarathy, Ra Ganapathy, and contributors like Akhilan, Jayakanthan et al, *Kalki* magazine serialised memorable works of fiction, "Pavai Vilakku", "Kurinji Malar", "Mullum Malarum", "Kallukkul Iram" among them. If Rajaji's Ramayana and Mahabharata brought the epics to the masses, T.K.Chidambaranatha Mudaliar shared his joy in classic Tamil. Translations from Indian languages were prioritised. It was a familiar sight to see editor 'Kalki' seated on a neem shaded wooden bench, listening to linguist Ra Vizhinathan read from Premchand and Bhagavatcharan Varma in Hindi, and making suggestions. The magazine discovered new talent all the time, once in its own press, from where compositor Govindan was transformed into author Vindan.

When Rajaji left the Congress in 1959 to start his own Swatantra party against Nehruvian socialism, Kalki Gardens became his headquarters. To visiting statesman Chester Bowles he was to quip that his little cottage on the premises was his "10, Downing Street".



Soon, an outhouse quartered Khasa Subba Rau to edit the party journal "Swarajya" (later edited from the same spot by Pothan Joseph, Philip Spratt, K.Santhanam and R.Venkatraman, now ex-President of India). The main hall on the first floor rang with orations by Minoo Masani, Pilo Modi and Acharya Kripalani. It was here that the Swatantra-DMK alliance was forged, and a grand luncheon celebrated the historic victory of C.N.Annadurai's party. One suspects that firebrand Sadasivam got a new lease of life from such anti-establishmentarianism. The building welcomed controversial figures like Sheikh Abdullah immediately after his release from imprisonment in Kodaikanal. It was on its terrace that a grandson found Sadasivam pacing through the night, all packed for imprisonment during the Emergency. He must have been disappointed to have been left free!

National and regional politicians were not new to Kalki Gardens. From Govind Vallabh Pant and Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan to Morarji Desai and Indira Gandhi, Ramaswami Naicker to M.G.Ramachandran, as also unlikely visitors Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan (whose height and nose were wonders for the workers!) and Master Tara Singh, they were all treated to its trademark hospitality. The old time guests were a humble lot. P.C.Ghosh, then Chief Minister of Bengal, was found by a Kalki staff member sitting on his holdall at the Central Station platform. Nehru's visit sparked a charming incident. Introducing his staff from the different sections, Sadasivam declared that he himself was in charge of the garden. Thereafter, the two rose lovers indulged in green talk, ending in the Prime Minister being garlanded by chief gardener Ekambaram.

The garden was Sadasivam's pride and visitors' delight. Trees of height and girth there were, including a mahogany. A big lawn in front with a lily pond had terraced borders, with *kanakambaram* red, yellow and blue, topped by lady's lace and red salvias, dahlias

and asters. Elsewhere grew lush patches of phlox, petunias, zinnias, asters, cosmos. A rose-patch splashed velvets of many colours. Daily jasmine yields brought *malli*, *mullai*, *ramabanam*, *iruvatchi* and *jati* to be strung for the gods, and the women of the house. Subbulakshmi's crescent-shaped flower strand became as famous as her music!

On the circular lawn near the house you could stumble upon just about anyone — film director Ellis R.Dungan consuming *bajjis* with the hot pickles he loved, Lord and Lady Harewood sipping tea, music collector James Rubin joking with children, Maharani Gayatri Devi and Jayaprakash Narayan at discussion, or Rajaji holding court. Old timers recall that industrialist Anantaramakrishnan (Amalgamations) was a regular who always sat on the floor at the leader's feet. Men of every profession whether industry, medicine, law or history, were all part of the Kalki circuit.

A *tulasi madam* was the lucky recipient of daily prayers from the golden voiced lady of the house. If the garden resounded with birdsong, the house echoed celestial swaras. Subbulakshmi's presence had the artiste community flocking to Kalki Gardens from all over the world. Family friends like Annaswami Bhagavatar, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Musiri Subramania Iyer, Ramnad Krishnan, Turaiyur Rajagopala Sharma, K.S.Narayanaswami, K.V. Narayanaswami, Rajamanikam Pillai, Papa Venkatrama Iyer, Alathur brothers came to stay, or to sing, teach, and exchange songs - and jokes - over lunch and tiffin.

It was here that MS practised songs for the film "Meera" (1944), sometimes with full orchestra rehearsals for recordings at Newton Studio. It was here that Sucheta Kripalani called to ask MS for Gandhi's favourite verse from Meera, and added that "Bapu prefers to hear you speak the words rather than hear someone else sing it."

This signalled action in the `piano' room. The eccentric prodigy Vaidyanathan (brother of film actor Ranjan) set the bhajan to tune. MS learnt and recorded it in record time for the spool tape to catch the night flight. A few months later, she was to swoon right here, on hearing the radio announcement of the Mahatma's assassination, followed by her voice intoning "Hari tum haro jan ki pir".

Through the years, the piano room had resonated to an incredible range — from Dilip Kumar Roy's Surdas lyric (Deendayal gopal) to T.Brinda's ripe padam "Kovalayakshiro", utsava sampradaya kirtanams by S.Ramanathan, Siddheshwari Devi's thumris — all feeding the MS repertoire. The lady was an eternal student, as ready to learn Rabindrasangeet as Vishnusahasranamam. The latter's recording by MS was preceded by vedic scholars chanting it for 40 days in the house, with Agnihotram Thathachariar's expositions. Siddheswari Devi was resident teacher for months, and a daily sight was to see the two grand ladies singing their scales in perfect unison.

No other spot in Madras could have had auditory experiences as varied as Kalki Gardens. Listeners still feel the magic of Rajaratnam Pillai's nagaswaram on the open terrace. Select audiences have heard exquisite post-prandial chamber recitals — not only by the Carnatic greats but by Hindustani wizards like Ravi Shankar, Girija Devi and the Dagar Brothers. It was here that after listening to Subbulakshmi the wonderstruck maestro Bade Ghulamali Khan exclaimed, "You are not just Subbulakshmi, you are Suswaralakshmi!" T.T.Krishnamachari (the finance minister drove his own Fiat car) could be seen at Subbulakshmi's home recitals, eyes moist, his lips intoning the lyric with her. Few know that a villupattu performance here by students of the Sattur School inspired actor N.S.Krishnan to take up the art form!

Even royals from Jaipur, Kashmir, Mysore or Europe, were amazed by the princely feasts at Kalki gardens, with their rosy paalpayasam and golden poli. Western musicians like Yehudi Menuhin got a sensational taste of India here. The same sumptuous feast was offered to every worker during Diwali, with the ghee served always by Subbulakshmi's generous ladle.

Kalki gardens played its part in the renaissance of Bharatanatyam. Pandanallur Jayalakshmi enchanted viewers in the hall; which later reverberated to the cymbals of Guru Ramaiyya Pillai, as Anandhi and Radha, the daughters of the family, learnt the then 'forbidden' art, with Subbulakshmi to sing for them. It was here that Subrahmanya Bharati's songs were first choreographed for dancing. The dance connection continued with visits by Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi.

From the Kanchi Paramacharya to Ma Anandamayi (housed with 60 disciples!), gurus found a congenial halt in Guruswami Mudaliar Road. Indira Didi rendered the bhajan "Ghungru bandh" in an unconscious trance, swamis Chakatapram, Andavan or Ranganathananda lectured, Sengalipuram Anantharama Dikshitar narrated the Ramayana to a packed garden...

With the closing down of the publications in 1977, the garden changed hands. The Mahesh Yogi Institute fostered education, though sacrificing the garden for new construction. When the main building is razed, another heritage site will be gone with the winds of change from the Chennai landscape.

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