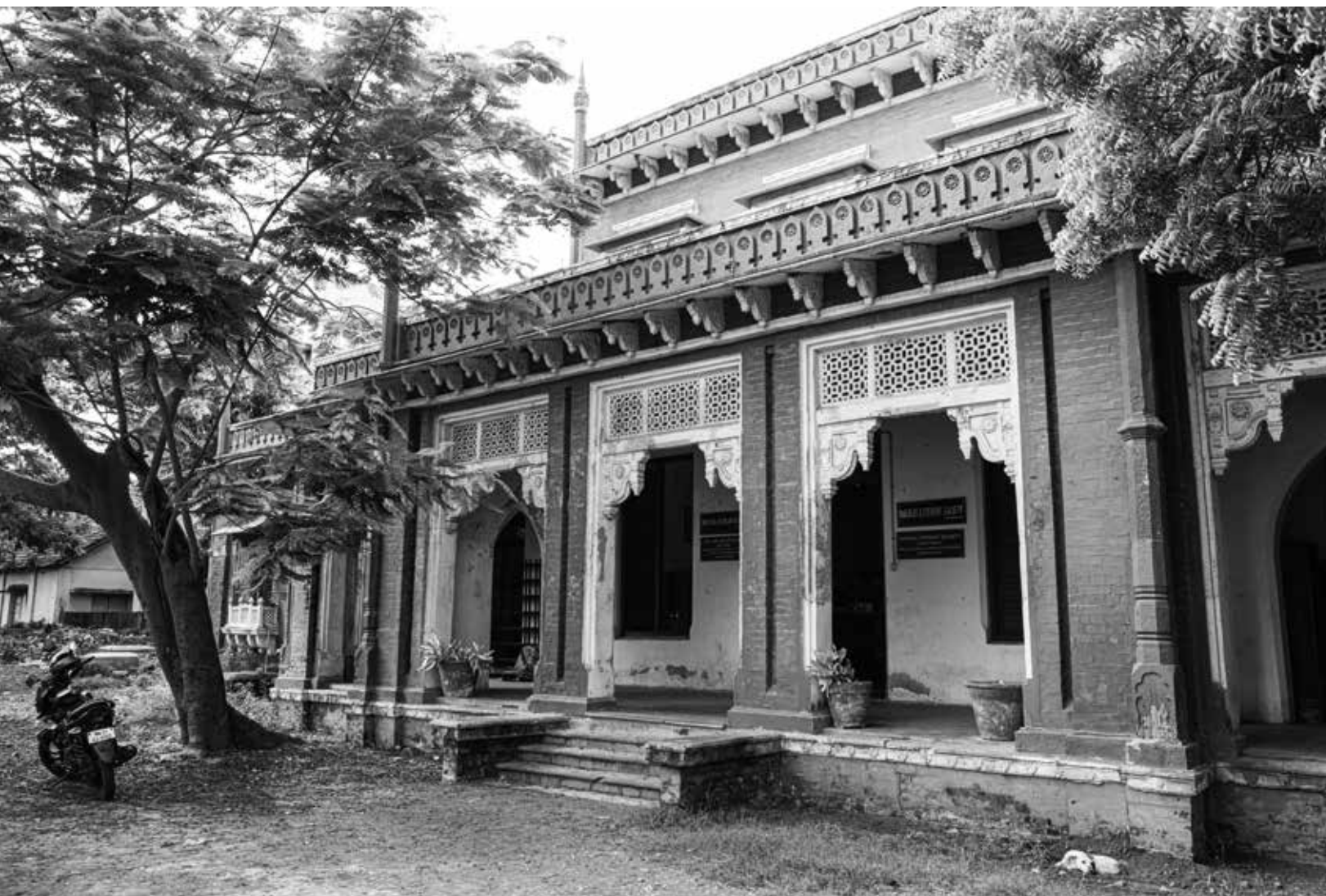




Preserving the heartbeat of Chennai-Madras

THIRUPURASUNDARI SEVEL - ART & CULTURE



Those who have watched the movie, “Mouna Raagam”, would recognize the romantic library scene setting with a high ceiling and the triple-level book shelves stacked with books. This is the Madras Literary Society, (MLS), a red-bricked building in the DPI campus on College Road, in Chennai, which is over 200 years old. This imposing structure with this old library has, as its secretary, a young and cheerful, Thirupurasundari Sevvell!

An architect by profession and an ardent heritage enthusiast and conservationist, she has become the youngest ever Secretary of the MLS in 2017, at the age of just 28 years! Infusing new life into an almost forgotten institution, she has managed to get many students and others to volunteer their time to help catalogue the irreplaceable antique books. She has held events at MLS, and even started the children’s section. But Secretaryship of the MLS is just one

of the many hats donned by Thirupurasundari, also known as T.S. T.S. was interested in building design but when she finished school it was her grandfather who guided her towards architecture. In her 3rd year she was selected for an exchange program at Birmingham City University, where her project involved travelling to old towns where there was heritage awareness, like the Shakespeare village. This was where she first came across

the concept of Heritage Management. On returning to Chennai to complete her 4th year of architecture, she had to work on maps, and decided to study the maps of the Ganges canal. After trying to look up various sources, she was directed to MLS which made her forget all about the maps! She realized hidden treasures and heritage were her calling!

She went on to do her Masters in Urban and Regional Planning in France. Being more interested in policy making, and influencing grassroot level changes, it was here that she learnt about building financial sustainability in even small places, by incorporating what she calls, “creative punches”, like a song or an activity for the participants to take part in, while on a heritage trail. She also realized that heritage is not just about the brick-and-mortar structures, but also

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the people, their lives and experiences. This was an early trigger for what later became her “Nam Veedu, Nam Oor, Nam Kadhai” project.

Upon returning from France to Chennai in 2013, she began practicing under Conservation architect K.Kalpana. It was only then that Thirupurasundari became a member of the MLS where the committee members were very encouraging and gave her a free hand to execute her ideas. Seeing that many procedures were in place to get things done, she realized that it was these that preserve such institutions and help them thrive.

She realized that there is so much that happens to keep the place running and the finances on track.

In 2017 she was offered the post of Secretary of the MLS which she looks upon as a God-sent opportunity to be the change-maker. Her focus here has been to ensure financial stability. Within the MLS, she worked on the accessibility to the building, keeping her own path in mind. She worked with another designer to make a collapsible ramp that could be used in any of the 4 entrances to the building.

Her architectural practice, Studio Conclave, is a small office of a handful of people. But each of them shares her enthusiasm and commitment to heritage.

Another pet project of hers was reviving the artisanal technique of traditional red oxide flooring by doing away with middlemen and connecting the artisans directly with clients. It is T.S that needs to be credited with working to ensure that the artisans are included in the discussion where they are hired.

A conversation with Mallika, a flower-seller in Aminjikarai, led her to realise that public art interventions rarely take the people who reside there into consideration. Walls are painted on, only to then become protected art and therefore unusable as walls by the local residents. She wanted to change the narrative so that residents and communities are the ones telling their local stories. This was the idea behind “Nam Veedu, Nam Oor, Nam Kadhai”.

Now Mallika herself has led 18 heritage walks in Amnjikarai! It was Vincent D’Souza who encouraged T.S to conduct heritage events where she lived, rather than volunteer in unfamiliar parts of the city for Madras Day. Today they have 200 to 250 active volunteers that work with neighbourhood communities to facilitate activities like games, music, colouring for children, heritage trails, etc.

They connect spaces, structures livelihoods, and people.

Each person volunteers in their own locality. They even have autorickshaws as mobile libraries, that communities can access. The core members of Nam Veedu... help with getting permissions, getting information about local topics, cultural appropriateness, taboos, etc. The organisation now writes stories, does translations and has exhibitions too.

T.S keeps the finances of her architectural practice and the Nam Veedu... work separate. Community work is free, but the walks and events that they do for other clients and organisations are charged. Many of the mobile libraries are stocked with donated books and magazines. People like Manohar Devadoss have volunteered their time to tell stories to children. And many well-wishers also donate time and resources. In the last year and a half, many stalwarts of Madras heritage like Manohar Devadoss, Hemachandra Rao, Pavitra Srinivasan, K. Kalpana, Govindraju, etc have passed away. To keep their contributions alive in the public memory, T.S tries to post about them on social media and talk about them on the relevant walks too.

T.S sees the future of Chennai Heritage booming! But just as information and spaces and events multiply, along with the souvenir industry, she sees a lot of misinformation also being touted. ‘We will all need to be responsible curators and conscious consumers,’ she says.

As Chennai in its multiplicity becomes more and more a city for all, she feels that the original stakeholders of this city, the fishing communities, are being marginalized and forgotten, the cause of which appears like a book idea to her, for the distant future. T.S as a writer, has also published a children’s book for Pratham Books, and has a second one



in the pipeline. She also gets sent scripts to check for cultural appropriateness. Writing and story-telling are her biggest passions. She tries to bring in representation and identity to everything that she does. As a natural offshoot to that is memory and nostalgia. She is a certified restorer of books, and objects and she has collected and received many objects of a bygone era, from old telephones to old maps, etc. She often curates touch and feel exhibitions with these items, for children.

With so many interests and such a commitment to heritage and Chennai, she has no interest in expanding her architectural office. She feels that just like success is a choice, “failure” is also a mindset. What she really wants, is to make a difference to others’ lives even if it is only one person at a time and that she has miles to go!

Kaveri Bharath