

ART & CULTURE



WHERE CHENNAI COMES TO LAUGH

Humour Club International
Triplicane Chapter

By Sarayu Sriram



A doctor, a lawyer, an engineer, a teacher and a retired banker walk into a room.

No, this isn't the beginning of a joke.

It is a typical Sunday evening at the Humour Club International, Triplicane Chapter, where professions dissolve, ages blur and strangers leave as friends - united by something as simple, and as powerful, as laughter.

For more than four decades, this Chennai institution has quietly demonstrated that humour is far more than entertainment. It is therapy without prescriptions, community without barriers and service without fanfare.

Founded in 1983 with just 15 members, the club today has a patron base of more than 2,500 across Chennai and beyond. Yet numbers tell only part of the story. The real achievement lies in creating a space where laughter has become a way of life.

Speaking to Champions of Chennai, Secretary R. Sekharan, Vice-President S.P. Venkatesh and Treasurer B. Kannan reflected on a journey that has transformed a modest gathering into one of Chennai's most enduring community movements.

The story, however, began even earlier. Inspired by a humour club started by Y.M.N. Murthy in Bengaluru, a similar initiative was launched in Chennai in 1978 by Govindarajulu at Mannadi. Situated in the bustling commercial hub of Sowcarpet, the concept struggled to flourish. Traders rushing between businesses had little time to pause for an evening of humour.

Recognising that laughter, like music, needs the right audience, the organisers shifted to Mylapore. The move proved decisive. Soon, the Triplicane Chapter was born, eventually growing into the organisation that thousands identify with today.

Much of that growth has happened organically. There are no aggressive membership drives or elaborate publicity campaigns. Newcomers arrive because someone who attended once insists that others experience it too. A neighbour brings a neighbour. Children accompany parents. Friends introduce colleagues. Families return month after month.

That quiet word-of-mouth endorsement has become the club's strongest advertisement.

Rather than relying on sensationalism or controversy, the club celebrates the comedy hidden within ordinary life. Marriage, parenting, workplace blunders, neighbourhood personalities, travel mishaps, misunderstandings between generations and everyday human quirks become material for stories that audiences instantly recognise. Everyone sees a little of themselves in every anecdote.

The laughter, therefore, is never forced. It arrives naturally, followed by nods of agreement and moments of reflection. Beneath every joke lies an observation about relationships, kindness, ageing or family life. The audience laughs not merely because something is funny, but because it is relatable. The organisers call this "qualitative humour." Political satire, vulgarity and humour that humiliates individuals or communities have no place here. Wit, they believe, should uplift rather than wound. Perhaps that philosophy explains why the audience spans generations.

A first-time visitor often notices what is missing. There are no extravagant stage productions, no entertainment gimmicks and no refreshments designed to keep audiences occupied. Instead, melodies from another era float gently through the auditorium as patrons arrive. Many of the attendees are senior citizens.

Long before the programme begins, one senses an atmosphere that resembles a family reunion far more than a formal

public event. People are not treated as attendees; they are treated as family.

Monthly programmes at Mylapore Fine Arts Club regularly attract nearly 800 people. Special events comfortably exceed 1,100, while annual celebrations at St. Bede's Anglo Indian School's Centenary Auditorium have drawn audiences crossing 2,500. People come for the experience, for the camaraderie and because they know they will leave lighter than they arrived.

Discipline, too, has become part of the club's identity. Every programme begins precisely on time and concludes exactly when promised - a consistency patrons have learnt to trust over the years.

Originality is equally valued. Participants are encouraged to present their own material instead of recycling jokes. When an anecdote misses its mark, experienced organisers gently steer the programme forward with effortless humour, ensuring the atmosphere never loses its warmth.

Over the years, the stage has welcomed an extraordinary range of personalities from literature, cinema, theatre, education, law, public administration and business. Celebrated speakers including Bharathi Bhaskar, Suki Sivam and Mohana Sundaram have shared the platform alongside distinguished writers, editors, judges, administrators and artists.

During the course of the interview, it became very clear to the Champions of Chennai team as to why Sekharan remains one of the forum's greatest attractions. His stories unfold with impeccable timing, effortless wit and an uncanny ability to find humour in life's most ordinary moments.

One such story emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic. Confined to his home after contracting the virus, he joked that the illness had one unexpected advantage. For the first time

in years, meals arrived exactly on time and his wife displayed a level of concern that many husbands could only dream about.

But behind the joke lay another truth. His wife, Vijaya Sekharan, has long been one of the quiet pillars of the organisation, handling coordination, planning and countless behind-the-scenes responsibilities that ensure every programme unfolds seamlessly. Though she often becomes the affectionate target of her husband's humour, her contribution is acknowledged with genuine admiration by fellow volunteers and regular patrons alike.

The pandemic also revealed another side of the organisation. When isolation weighed heavily upon senior citizens, Treasurer B. Kannan initiated a thoughtful outreach programme. Committee members regularly telephoned fellow patrons - not to discuss meetings or memberships - but simply to ask how they were coping. Sometimes, a conversation was all someone needed.

Edited recordings of humour programmes were shared online so that laughter could continue reaching homes even when auditoriums stood empty. What began as a temporary response gradually evolved into an impressive digital presence. Today, the organisation's YouTube channel boasts more than 3,20,000 subscribers and millions of views from audiences across the world. Facebook and Instagram have further expanded its reach, while international registration has enabled it to connect with members far beyond Chennai.

Despite this growing digital footprint, its heart remains firmly rooted in service. Every year, deserving students receive educational sponsorships. Financial assistance reaches Army families. Nearly 180 economically disadvantaged households benefit from monthly grocery distributions, while teachers and Corporation workers are recognised for their often-unsung contributions to society.

The organisation also celebrates life's milestones with uncommon warmth. It has organised Sathabhishekam celebrations for 51 couples and Shashtiabhapoorthi ceremonies for 140 couples, honouring marriages that have endured the test of time.

Among its most cherished programmes was the one titled "Manaiviku Mariyadhai," where husbands married for four or five decades publicly expressed gratitude to their wives. In an age where criticism often finds louder voices than appreciation, the programme became a moving celebration of companionship, respect and enduring love.

Its Lifetime Achievement Awards, instituted in memory of Aachi Manorama, K. Balachander and Thenkatchi Go. Swaminathan, continue to recognise individuals whose work has enriched public life and culture.

Yet, despite every success, the leadership remains deeply aware of one pressing concern. Most of those who have nurtured this institution for decades are now in their sixties and seventies. Attendance is strong and enthusiasm remains undiminished, but what they seek now is not applause - it is succession. They hope younger people will move beyond being audience members to become volunteers, organisers and future custodians of a tradition built on generosity, discipline and laughter.

Humour, they believe, is not merely about making people laugh. It is about making people feel less alone.

In a city that races from deadlines to traffic jams, where stress often arrives long before joy, Humour Club International, Triplicane Chapter continues to offer something increasingly rare - a few hours where differences disappear, burdens become lighter and laughter reminds everyone that life, despite its challenges, is still worth celebrating.



For 43 years, this remarkable institution has proved a timeless truth. In a world that often takes itself too seriously, Humour Club International reminds us to pause, smile and laugh. By adding humour to the daily humdrum, it nurtures not just happier moments but happier people.

After all, smiles are contagious, laughter is magnetic, and the people who help us rediscover both are quietly shaping warmer homes, stronger friendships and kinder communities. For giving Chennai that priceless gift, they are, truly, our Champions of Chennai