



# Madras

Sree Kumar

# Madras

*Photographs taken in 2005 and 2009.*

*For Mallika, the avid traveller.*

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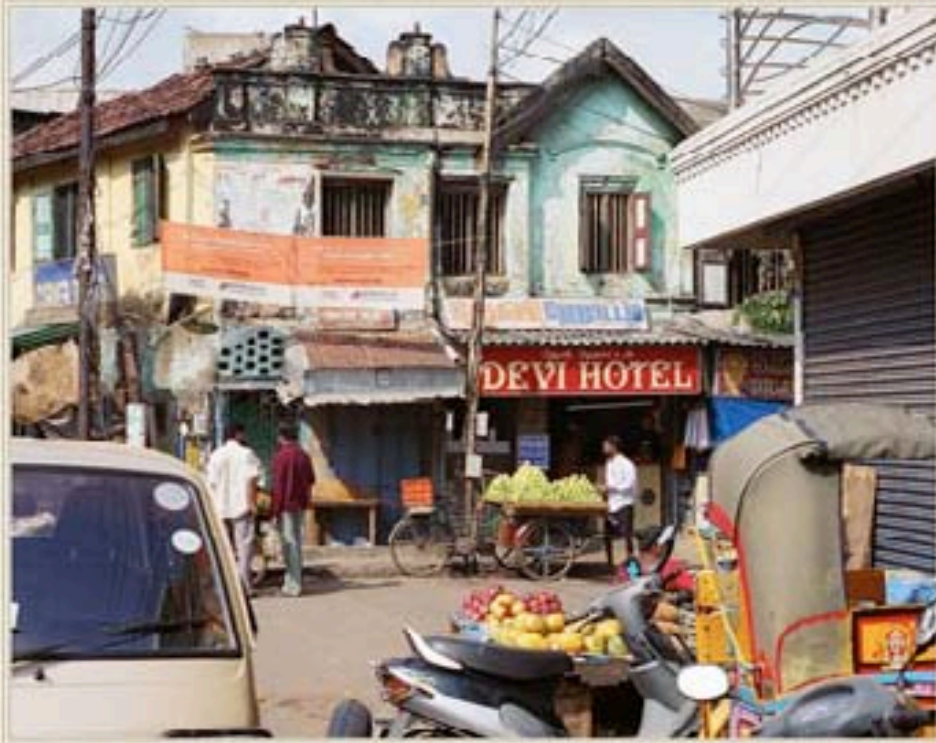
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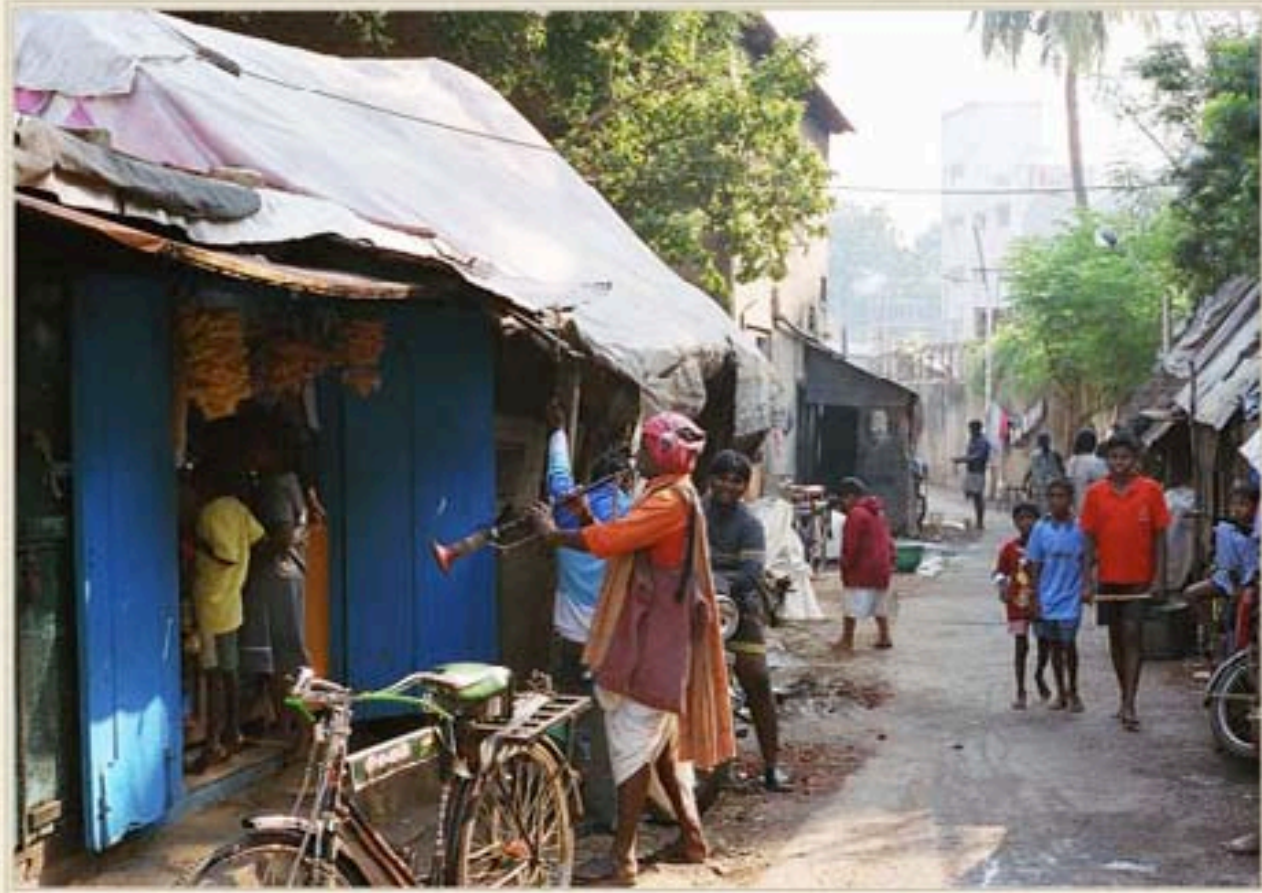












Royapettah







Parktown









Morning Market









Marina Beach









Marina Beach









Marina Beach

















Triplicane





Saint Thome Church













Luz Church





Alwarpet













Mylapore

















Kapaleswarar Temple, Mylapore









Mylapore

























Royapettah

















Madras Central Station









Mahabalipuram









Mahabalipuram































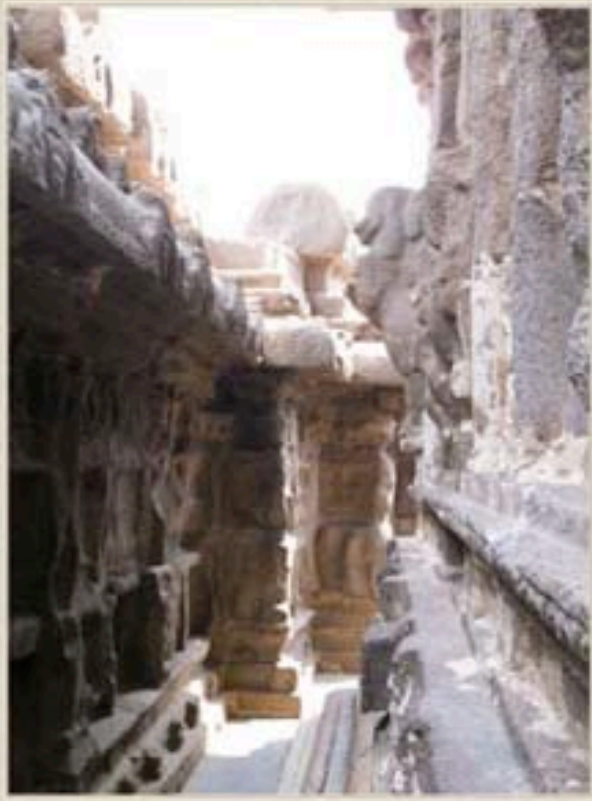


Shore Temple, Mahabalipuram

















Film Shoot, Mahabalipuram













Film Extras, Mahabalipuram







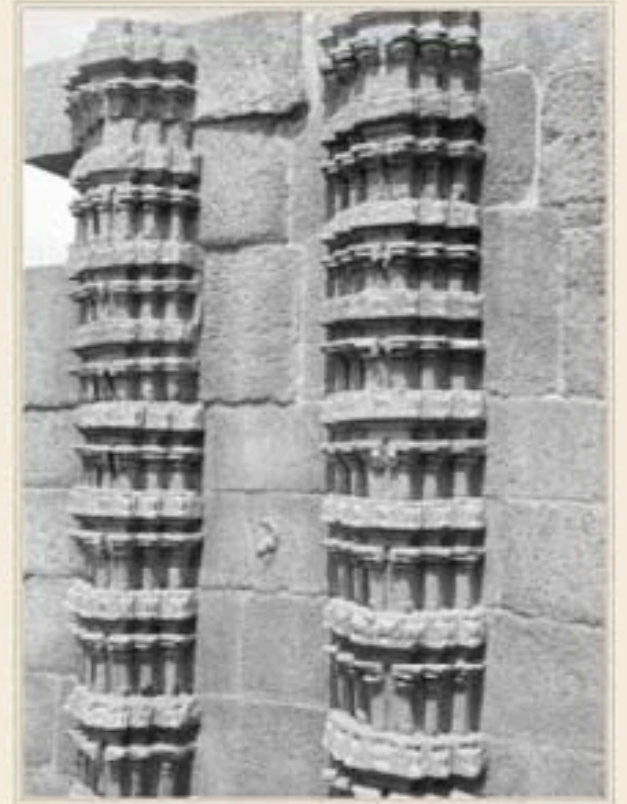
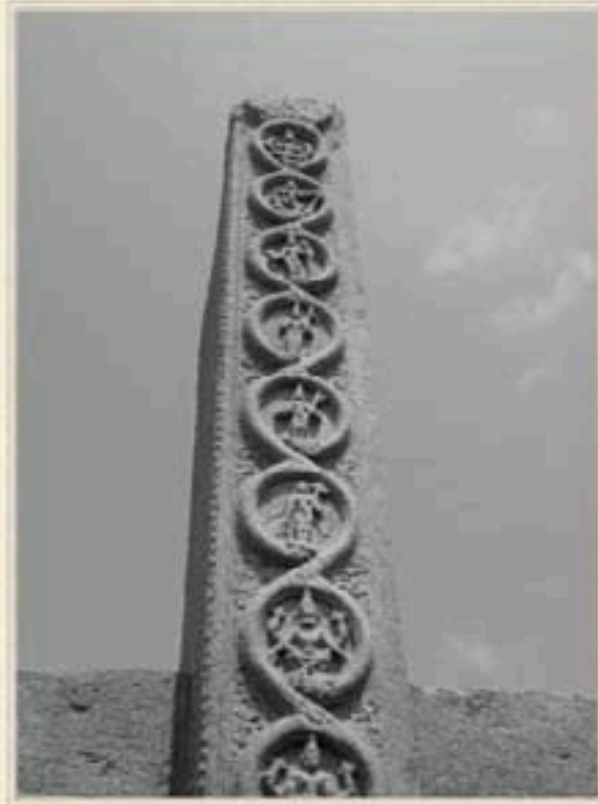






















Rock Temple, Mahabalipuram













Guindy









Guindy







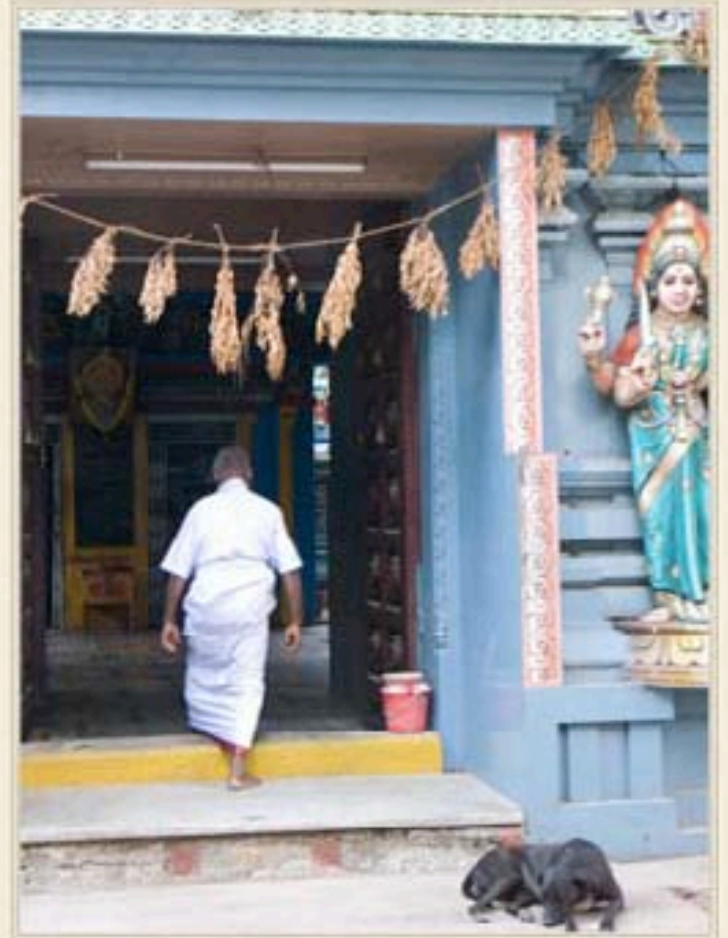






Guindy









Sree Rama Temple



SHRI BALAJEE BHAVAN  
PURE VEGETARIAN

ஸ்ரீ பாலாஜி பவன் SHRI BALAJEE BHAVAN

ஸ்ரீ பாலாஜி பவன்  
SHRI BALAJEE BHAVAN

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HANDLOOM  
DISCOUNT SALE

பாண்டியன் கஃபி  
PANDIEN COFFEE  
RAW - ROASTY - POW

DEETS & SAVOURIES  
CHETINAD ITEMS  
VEG RESTAURANT

DRINKING HALL  
TANGY MEALS & TIPS  
COOL DRINKS & ICE CREAMS

IAEN

PANCAJANI











Panagal Park







Panagal Park







Panagal Park







## Madras: An Uncertain City

For as long as I can remember, it was known as Madras. It is now known as Chennai after Indian chauvinism has reared its ugly head. But no matter. A rose by another name will smell just as sweet. So it is with Madras.

My first encounter with Madras was in 1956 when I was just three. I do not remember much except for a fleeting view of a part of the road from the car window. It seemed to have etched itself in my mind. Many years later, fifty to be exact, I saw the same scene when I was leaving Madras for a drive to Chidambaram. The shops and the scene along the road leading out to the Pondicherry highway suddenly threw me back to the time when I was three and in Madras. I can only conjecture that my parents were taking us out to some place at that time when I saw the scene then.

Madras is a city for intellectual romanticism. It may not appear that way. But underneath this veneer of a busy metropolis there is a strong network of social and intellectual knitting. A quick glance at the day's events in the newspapers will show music, dance and drama performances; lectures and discourses; art and photo exhibitions; book launches and a variety of other creative endeavours. While it would seem that other cities of the world also have similar events, in Madras such events draw extremely large crowds. There is, without doubt, a vast pool of intellectually and artistically inclined individuals in the city.

In 1970, as a teenager, I stayed at the, now demolished, Claridges Hotel. It was in its time a famous watering hole. Tamil Nadu used to be dry (no liquor) and the Claridges was one of the few to have a liquor licence. It was occupied by well to do Indians with a taste for alcohol and film stars who were on shoots in the city.

There were also several Anglo-Indians and British guests, Indo-philes who could not fit in any other society after independence. The waiters wore resplendent white jackets and trousers, and a red turban. There was the sweet smell of a slow decline in the hotel even at that time.

Some months later, my father and I stayed at a Brahmin guest house in Mylapore while attending the Annual Music Festival. It was fairly spartan but clean and we could walk to the Music Academy. We spent most of our days attending various carnatic concerts and had our meals in different vegetarian restaurants. My father kept late nights with his musician friends while I crawled back to the guest house after the last concert of the evening. The highlight, for me, of those ten days was to attend an MS Subbulakshmi concert at the Music Academy. A few days earlier we sat on the stage, as there were no more tickets, to listen to Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer. Those few days with my father taught me much about carnatic music. He was both a musician and a knowledgeable musicologist. I learnt how to identify ragas and talams. He had with him a small notebook in which he made notes of new ragas he heard and which he then tracked down through discussions with his friends.

The stay in Madras with my father defined, in many ways, my future interactions with the city. I came often to attend the Music Festival in December. Now, however, I chose to stay in hotels near the main concert venues in Mylapore and the Music Academy. I split my time between attending the serious concerts and seeing different parts of the city, on foot. When it took my fancy I would take an auto rickshaw to attend concerts at the Krishna Gana Sabha or Vani Mahal, both in T Nagar.



With the music festival in full swing, there is never a dull moment. There are concerts and music lectures from the morning hours right through to the final concert in the late evening. There is a certain ethereal quality to being in Madras at this time.

Where it was once the norm to find Brahmins from the rest of India returning to enjoy Madras in winter it now resounds to the vast majority of visiting Tamil Brahmins from the United States. It is as if everyone in Mylapore has a son or daughter living in the US. In the queues for tickets at the concerts, the talk amongst those in the line is usually about when they came back from the US for the holidays or what their children were doing in the US. Mylapore has now become an extension of the US Tamil Brahmin world. Indeed the music festival now has a section just for musicians from the US.

The streets of Mylapore are lined with shops selling vegetables, flowers, fruits, stainless steel pots and pans, and vegetarian restaurants, standing next to old wrought iron balconied Brahmin houses. In amongst them are the, random, newer flats no higher than three or four stories. Most of these are painted in a rose pink colour. Right in the centre of the little township stands the Kapaleeswarar temple and its ghat. On a Sunday the temple is busy with devotees and weddings. Some distance away towards Alwarpet stands one of the oldest churches in South India - Luz Catholic Church - built by the Portuguese in the 1500s. Perhaps it is the tolerance of a Brahminical Hinduism that keeps alive a deeply religious symbol such as the Roman Catholic Church in its midst, or perhaps it is because there is a greater divinity in the sum of religions within this small area of Madras.

Meanwhile on the beach at Marina, there is a different tempo. Here, along the stretch from Saint Thome church to Triplicane, there are huts and small houses standing at the edge of the beach. Women sell fish along the road while children play cricket on the sands. On the Santhome High Road people mill around, waiting for buses or drinking coffee at the small stalls that dot the road. On a Sunday, the Church is being spruced up for morning mass. Further down from the Church, standing on the sands, is a small Devi temple. It is the final refuge for those living in the huts and who make a living from the sea. Up closer to Presidency College, the beach is filled with walkers and people playing cricket in the hot sun. There are drinks and snack stalls competing for space on the roadside.

On the other side of the city there is Parktown. Here, shops, houses and temples jostle for space along narrow lanes. There are rows of shops selling cloth, carpets, hardware, paints, kitchenware, jewellery and spices while roadside stalls display trinkets of all kinds. It is a veritable shopper's heaven. People stand on the narrow lanes praying to deities in the several small Hindu temples. Next to a larger temple there is a dormitory where men in singlets lounge on the balcony. There is frenetic activity as motorcycles and bicycles try to squeeze past pedestrians. Parktown is special. It has its own symphony of human activity in a neat area within which streets and lanes criss-cross. There are the rare glimpses of how life used to be in colonial times.

The road to Mahabalipuram is a well constructed highway but the traffic, as every where else in India, is heavy and chaotic. There are trucks, buses, cars and motorcycles trying to squeeze each other off the road. The secret of driving on the roads in India is to understand that drivers drive recklessly only to miss the inevitable accident.

It takes some getting used to. Once one understands this basic rule, it becomes easier to relax with the driver.

Mahabalipuram is well-known as the place of the famous shore temple. But it is more than just this. Away from the sea there is an enormous temple complex, built on rocks, where the architecture and carvings are just astounding. More so than this historical attraction, the little town of Mahabalipuram is really a pleasant fishing village some distance from Madras.

When we arrived in the late morning the market was still going on. On the main street there were women selling vegetables and fruits. There were beans, brinjal, carrots, tomatoes, tapioca, cucumber, snake gourd, limes, onions, potatoes, chillies, ginger and coconuts all laid on sheets on the ground. Off along a side road, stood a small row of open stalls selling poultry and meat. The segregation between vegetarians and the meat-eaters was clearly marked.

On the shore, away from the restored temple, a film crew was busy managing the extras and the film stars to shoot a scene. In the hot noon day sun, there were bright electric reflective lights being shone on the actors for the close-up scenes. Several overweight minders stood around, one holding an umbrella over a star who looked like a fool in policeman's clothes. It appeared to be a film with crime and punishment as its central theme. Away from the shoot, a group of local extras had taken refuge under a couple of wooden fishing boats to escape from the glaring hot sun.

Madras has an alluring feel about it. There is a sense of a city with a thread of intellectual and fine art weaving through its myriad activities. There is commerce and there is art. If a city can marry the two, then Madras comes close.

The music festival is where money and art find their common ground if the sponsorships are to be believed. But there is also religion, politics and knowledge, all linked in some way in this slowly decaying city. Madras is testimony to the view that it is the human spirit that makes a city what it is and not its physical infrastructure. Perhaps this is why even when the place names have been changed to reflect the new chauvinism, the people still remember it by its old colonial descriptions.

It struck me how much even the man in the street knew Madras only by its old names when I asked a young auto-rickshaw driver to take me to Anna Salai. He did not know where it was until I told him, "Mount Road". He was in his twenties, and he replied, "Sir, if you had told me this from the beginning I would have known it straight away. For us, we only know it as Mount Road!" If even the young can only identify the city with its old street names, I cannot see why I must now refer to Madras as Chennai. For me it still is Madras!

*Sree Kumar*  
*31st December 2009*



### **About the photographer**

Sree Kumar is an amateur photographer and essayist. He studied in Oxford, London and Singapore, where he now lives.

*See some of his other photos at [photo.net/photos/sree](http://photo.net/photos/sree)  
and his essays at [travelessayist.blogspot.com](http://travelessayist.blogspot.com)*



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