

‘It was more a village than a city’

PRINCE FREDERICK V.



IN AUGUST COMPANY V. Kalyanam (third from right) at Sir C.V. Raman's house.

NOSTALGIA: V. Kalyanam on low air fares, listening to Kirubananda Variyar's humorous discourses and Woodlands' delicious food

KALYANAM: Born in Shimla on August 15, 1922, Kalyanam joined Mahatma Gandhi's ashram (Sevagram) in 1943 and served as amanuensis to the leader. A resident of Madras since 1956, Kalyanam served as a Government official taking care of the interests of socially underprivileged sections and also worked for a few private companies. He also served as a key member of Rajaji's Swatantra Party. President of Deisiya Paathukappu Kazhagam now, Kalyanam also spends much time tending to the plants in his garden. He considers manual labour, noble and mind-cleansing — the reason why he got attracted to Sevagram.

Almost all the jobs I held required me to live out of suitcases. The tags from flights I took during those active working years could have been sufficient material for an exhibition. Despite its

frequency, flying did not wear me down. In the mid-1960s, air travel was devoid of cumbersome preliminaries that are inescapable today. There was no dearth of parking space at the Meenambakkam airport — and it came free. If you thought that was saving, consider this. An air ticket from Madras to Coimbatore cost less than Rs. 100! I always left my Standard Ten close to the airport building before getting on the plane. No matter how many days a car was parked there, it would be secure until the owner returned.

In the midst of busy jet-setting schedules, I embarked on a personal project. Until the early-1960s, Seethammal Colony (named after Sir C.P. Ramaswami's wife as he enjoyed ownership of a substantial portion of the area) cut across by what we now know as K.B. Dasan Road, was an empty expanse. Except for SIET college (now, Justice Basheer Ahmed Sayeed College for Women), it did not boast any significant building. A swirling wind of change began to sweep through this road, when the Madras Housing Unit (under the State Housing Board) directed its attention to it. It allotted plots with type-designed houses in 1964. An allottee, I was unimpressed with the design standards and began to look for a building contractor who would alter the house for a reasonable fee.

My search ended curiously at Sanskrit College, while listening to a discourse by Kirubananda Variyar. With his gift for spontaneous humour, Variyar invariably passed interesting comments about anyone who walked in late. That day, he 'picked on' a contractor, who regularly attended his discourses.

I came across Kirubananda Variyar by accident. Having come to Madras in 1956 as Regional Commissioner for SCs/STs, Southern Region, I took a room on a permanent basis at Woodlands Hotel on Edward Elliot's Road (now, Dr. Radhakrishnan Salai). I had developed a taste for its food, during a visit to Madras in 1949. At that time, founder Krishna Rao ran the hotel from a rented space in Royapettah. On the new and self-owned land, the hotel exceeded its previous popularity. As my work regularly took me on tours around the Madras Presidency, I stayed only five or ten days at the hotel. During these days, I often took sight-seeing bus rides around the city. On one exploratory trip, I chanced upon Variyar discoursing with characteristic humour. After becoming a habitu , I noticed that a Variyar discourse at the Sanskrit College was invariably followed by that of Anantharama Dikshitar.

After my marriage in 1959, I moved into a rented house. It was Sir C.V. Raman's — I also took the scientist's adjacent house for my office. I was a tenant at the twin-house until I acquired my own house. Its construction gave me sleepless nights. The contractor dragged his feet and did not account for the money he had taken from me. In desperation, I approached Rajaji, whose house on Nawroji Road (Chetpet) had been built by the same man. When I spoke bitterly about the contractor, Rajaji gently chided me, "You should not speak like this!" He showed me a wall in his house with a huge crack running across it. In a quietly effective fashion, the great man was teaching me forgiveness and forbearance.

Having gotten myself into a financial mess, I sold my car and took to cycling. Until six years ago, I was cycling around the city. It took an accident to stop me. In 1937, on a short visit to Madras, I was greeted with stretches of empty space on either side of what is today Pondy Bazaar. Walking from T. Nagar and Adyar was like walking through fields. More a village than a city, Madras was friendly to cyclists and pedestrians. Not any more.