



Maamas and Maamis of Mylapore

Mylapore is a world in itself – with temples, music, dance, and food – this quaint neighbourhood in Chennai, will transport you to a bygone era of spirituality, devotion, art and culture; where even the local people make you feel nostalgic.

Rathina Sankari

The *mantras* (hymns) reverberated through the temple premises as women clad in nine yard sari with strings of jasmine flower adorning their hair and men in *veshti* (*lungi* or sarong) walked around. They are affectionately called *maami* and *maama* respectively.

I was in the Kapaleeswarar Temple in Mylapore, Chennai in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Despite living my formative years in Pune, my disposition towards Tamil Nadu is fervent and I was enjoying every moment of my stay. It probably has something to do with the state's rich history, milieu and culture.

Based on a well-known theory, the

metropolis Madras (now known as Chennai) on the Coromandel Coast is said to have emerged as the commercial capital of Tamil Nadu after the British acquired a three mile (approximately 4.83 kilometre) strip in Madrasapattinam fishing village. Today within its precincts is a neighbourhood called Mylapore that is two thousand years older than Madras. It is believed that it was a trading port during the Pallava regime and received footfalls from Rome wherein along with spices and cotton, ideas were exchanged as well. In his writings the Greek-Roman geographer Ptolemy referred to this place as Maillarpha.

Mylapore has been glorified in numerous ancient Tamil hymns. The *Nayanmars* (saints

who were devotees of Lord Shiva) have sung songs in praise of the town between the 6th and 8th century. There is a very interesting story regarding the origin of the town. It is told that Shiva was preaching with profound interest to his wife Parvati, but her attention was distracted by a peacock prancing around. Shiva got furious and cursed her that she would take birth as a peacock on earth. It is told that for a long time a peacock worshipped a *lingam* (symbol of Shiva) by offering flowers with its beak at the very same location. Later Lord Shiva appeared and the couple were reunited. The locality acquired the name Mylapore meaning abode of peacocks in Tamil. The present day Kapaleeswarar Temple in Mylapore, whose

presiding deity is Lord Shiva, is said to be just 300-years-old. Historians claim the original temple was constructed close to the sea and could have been either destroyed in a deluge or demolished after the Portuguese arrived. Today the temple in itself is the cultural nucleus of the locality.

A walk around its vicinity takes you to houses with *kolam* (another name for *rangoli*, which are patterns made on the floor with rice flour) drawn at the entrance. Lakshmi, my guide, leads me into the house of the head priest of the temple – a traditional house with a *mitham* (courtyard) in the centre, which serves as a temperature regulator, surrounded by numerous rooms. The members of the family were busy as they had erected a *dhwaja stambha* (flag staff) in their house. Young boys were seen mounting statues of deities on a carriage to take them on a procession around the locality. The worship room was crammed and every inch of the walls was put to use with numerous pictures of Hindu deities. Lakshmi justified the number of pictures by pointing out that Hinduism is a polytheistic religion. I stepped out of the house and faced the temple pond, which has numerous legends associated to it according to Lakshmi. When the temple was being built there was no space to dig a pond. The land adjoining the temple belonged to the *Nawab* (ruler) of Arcot. Despite being a Muslim he readily handed it to the temple authorities on one condition that Muslims should be allowed to use the tank on the 10th day of *Muharram* (first month of the Islamic calendar). The temple has been standing for centuries but I understand from Lakshmi, the temple pond has never seen any Muslim till date.

We walked ahead and passed by old men with ash smeared on their body seated on sidewalks scanning *panchangams* (Hindu calendar used for astrological purposes) as clients sought their advice for deciding auspicious dates and times. Be it weddings, house warming ceremony, medical procedures or any religious ceremony, the dates are finalised only after referring to the *panchangam*. Every year in the Tamil month of *Margazhi* (December-January), *kutcheris* (musical concerts) and *Bharatnatyam* (classical Indian dance) shows are held in halls all over Mylapore. Stalwarts play the violin, *mridangam* (percussion instrument) and *tanpura* (string instrument) as the entire Mylapore community gathers to watch the music and dance festival. This event in a way reinforces the neighbourhood's connection



(Top) Idols of deities mounted on to a carriage for a procession; (Bottom) Old men scanning *panchangams* as clients place their request

with Carnatic music. Mylapore is brimming with life as the sound of *bhajans* and *kirtans* (devotional songs) fill the air. No wonder Mylapore is the pulse and soul of Chennai.

We amble ahead and stumble across numerous eateries peppered around the temple serving lip-smacking traditional Tamilian delicacies at throwaway prices. Rayar's Mess, a place that has seen footfalls from Tollywood (Telugu film industry), serves the best soft and spongy *idlis* (steamed savoury rice cakes) with *getti* (coconut) chutney at Arundale Street. I walked into *maami's* mess that has been serving its patrons for close to half a century. The *mami* is no more but her son continues the legacy serving its hot selling cotton like steamed dumplings called *kozhukattai* and rice and lentil fritters called *thavala vadais*. The Jannal Kadai, another eatery, is literally a hole in a wall. The *maama* runs the eatery through a window clad in a vest and *lungi*. There are no fixed timings, once the food is sold out (which sell like hotcakes) he shuts down the joint. The various fried items are

sought after by clients who enjoy their food standing on the road. There is nothing to talk about when it comes to the ambience of these outlets but it's the food that draws the crowds from all strata of life.

That evening I walked back into Kapaleeswarar Temple for a mesmerising *Bharatnatyam* performance. Behind me were two *maamis* discussing their family affairs through the beats of the *mridangam*. I heard a marriage being fixed in the cultural nucleus of Chennai. Times change but in Mylapore I was happy to be stuck in a time warp. ■

How to reach

Chennai is well connected to various Indian cities by air, rail and road.

Where to stay

Hotel Savera at Radhakrishnan Street in Mylapore is your best bet to put your feet up. Enjoy a meal at their in-house Malgudi restaurant to the strains of live flute performance as the staff serves you their specialities.

Best time to go

December to March