

Vignettes of the real 'Vada Chennai'

Consistently depicted in contemporary Tamil cinema as the sordid underbelly of the city, north Chennai has suffered an erasure of its historical multifacetedness.

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North Chennai isn't all rowdies and gangs. It has real people inhabiting it, just like anywhere else. | The Hindu Archives

There is something about the dark personality of north Chennai (a.k.a. 'vada Chennai' in Tamil) that has attracted filmmakers. A string of Tamil movies from the last decade, including the recent Dhanush-starrer, *Vada Chennai*, have largely portrayed north Chennai as a maze of congested narrow streets infested with riotous gangs and violence. As an erstwhile resident of this area for nearly 25 years, I could only partly

reconcile with this depiction. Let me present some perspectives I feel the script-writer left out of the narrative.

History paints a different picture of this part of the city. In 1673, Dr. John Fryer, the surgeon to the East India Company, had spent some time in Madras. He thought of north Madras as a “a spacious suburb of the town proper... strewn with shady gardens of the English merchants who liked to spend their leisure hours in them.” Later, in 1747, *The European Magazine* published from London reports that the “streets are wide and many of them well planted with trees, so that having the sea on one side, and a river on the other, it may be said that few cities stand so pleasantly...”. Three Centuries later, north Chennai has become the grimy and forsaken backyard of a teeming metropolis.

Movies set in north Chennai, over the years, have created a cult out of this urban sprawl by painting the neighbourhood red with violence. It is not clear since when it began to be associated with the sordid. After all, saint Ramalinga Vallalar lived here in the 19th Century, preaching about caste-less society and non-violence as the central creed of humanity. Such lofty ideals notwithstanding, there were always street skirmishes. As a student, I have been witness to dramatic events many a time. Late at night, all of a sudden the street lights and power would be switched off as shops hurriedly pulled their shutters down. Much like in the movies, I would then hear sounds, engulfed in pitch darkness, of bottles whizzing and crashing amid a barrage of expletives. When the lights came back on again, the only evidence of the untoward incident would be broken glass and the occasional puddle of blood. Curiously enough, someone would immediately clean up the mess. Unlike in the movies, firearms were rarely used and gunbattles unheard of.

Historicity competes with chaos and crowdedness for the honour of being north Chennai's most salient feature. Not many are aware that the Royapuram railway station, built in 1856 and found today in the heart of north Chennai, is the oldest surviving station in the subcontinent that is still in use. The museum at Fort St. George

recounts how many of the administrative practices of the Indian government (especially routine paperwork) had its origins within the precincts of this fort. Several times have I walked past the crowded Robinson Park where the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, one of the major political parties of Tamil Nadu, was born in 1949.

The language of this place is another marker. The Tamil spoken in these parts is often considered coarse and irreverent. I used to travel by bus to my school near Parrys Corner. The bus conductor would often say “Front-la move pannunga, sir!”, and few realise that what appears to be a Tamil sentence actually is three-fourths English. This vernacular has evolved by generously borrowing words from other settlers who spoke Telugu, English, Urdu, and Hindi. Clearly, it is more cosmopolitan than we are given to believe. This syncreticism is most noticeable in the *gaana song*, which took birth here and entered popular film music.

Three Centuries ago, north Madras was the capital of a trading company that slowly took over the rest of India. Today, in the movies, it wears the mien of urban degeneration. For the majority of the audiences acquainted with north Chennai only as the film industry depicts it, one might be disappointed to discover it otherwise. In reality, as in many other parts of India, people here are fighting an unresponsive system whilst aspiring for upward mobility and a better life. Many, including myself, have benefited from its free healthcare and book banks for students. This is the main story of the real 'vada Chennai'. Everything else is a sub-plot.