



Photographs by Nikhith Komath

THE KAPALI CONUNDRUM

From lip-smacking rose milk to the quirky *vadacurry*, a culinary journey through the by-lanes of Mylapore can reveal much about one's decision making abilities, finds out **Saritha Rao Rayachoti**

Halfway through a food walk in Mylapore, heading in the direction of the next eatery, you pause outside Kapaleeswarar Temple. On the one hand, you want to enter this glorious temple and worship Lord Shiva. On the other, it's nearly 5.30 pm and temptation lurks ahead in the form of limited edition, golden fried *bajji*. What would you choose?

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's talk about Mylapore first. There's so much more to Mylapore than the fact that it predates the city of Chennai as an ancient port along the coast of Tamil Nadu, referred in the writings of Greek geographer Ptolemy and visited by the likes of St. Thomas, the apostle. The centuries-old Kapaleeswarar Temple forms the nucleus around which legends, stories and affiliations abound: of Goddess Parvathi as a peahen, of Shukracharya's eye, of Rama's brief sojourn here, and numerous others. And then there are the 63 *nayanmar* who



composed hymns in praise of Lord Shiva, who are honoured at the Arubathimoovar Festival here.

The essence of Mylapore, in my mind, is a composite of its heritage, its people and the retail enterprise that thrives here. From serving the needs of the temple to its informal status as a traditional Indian market, there is a seller here for every kind of requirement. With so many devotees, temple employees, residents, students and casual visitors thronging the locality, there is a plethora of eating options ranging from air-conditioned restaurants with comfortable seating to street-side joints.

But the charm of gastronomic Mylapore resides in its traditional standalone eateries, usually second generation, that serve a limited menu of traditional South Indian snacks for breakfast and evening tiffin. They have been in existence for decades and their regulars include groups of the retired elderly who gather for a daily round of conversation over coffee. The joke goes that they have been regulars for so long that they know the present owner, usually a balding, pot-bellied 50 year-old, from the time he was a lisping toddler drooling from one side of his mouth. You will also come across temple priests, college students, elderly women in nine-yard saris as well as young men living in bachelor accommodation nearby, visiting these outlets for their daily or weekly flavour fix. One Sunday morning, I observed a woman who arrived at an eatery and waited patiently, flipping virtual pages on her e-reader device, while a fresh batch of *vadais* was set to cool before being packed for her. It was as though this was her oasis of calm at the end of a hectic week.

Despite having lived in Chennai for many years, my introduction to the traditional eateries of Mylapore was recent. I attended two Food Walks organised to cover popular joints, as part of the

annual Mylapore Festival that takes place every January in the Tamil month of *Margazhi*. While the walks I attended were on a set course, the following is a route which, if the eatery timings work out (and one has the appetite to down *bonda* after luscious *bonda*), can be done at one stretch. The list includes outlets where the fare is best eaten fresh off the fire or consumed at the store itself, but there are also shops included here, where you can pack dry crispy snacks or sweets to be eaten later. Along the way, do provide business to street vendors and pick up seasonal produce for pickling, like green pepper, sarasaparilla root, mango-ginger and tender mangoes.

A small temple now housing a timber shop stands adjacent to the place where Vaishnavite scholar Peiyalwar is said to have been born. This is just off Kutchery Road on a street now called Arundale Street. Rayar's is in an alley nearby, in an old-style house where the yard with a well has been enclosed and two rooms converted into a sitting space and cooking area. The place can seat about 16 people at any given time, and tiffin items, personally made by the owner, are served on banana leaves. For breakfast, they serve *idli*, *dosai*, *pongal* and *vadais* and a sweet, usually *gulab jamun*. For evening tiffin, they also serve a rather limp *rava dosai* and, if I may describe it thus, a well-seasoned potato *bonda*. The coconut chutney is like a sauce, and it is glorious to let the *bonda* soak up the chutney before eating it. However, at an extra charge, you can ask for *getti* chutney—the thicker version—and *kaara* chutney, a fiery green chilli one. The trick is to mix the two depending on your spice-heat tolerance level. If it gets too much, end with the sweet of the day that is wordlessly placed in front of regulars who probably get their daily sugar fix here. Another must-have is the filter coffee served in a tumbler-*davara* set.

Sundal,
vadaicurry at
Mami's Tiffin



Bajji served with
coconut chutney
at Jannal Kadai



Opposite page:
Patrons line up
at Jannal Kadai



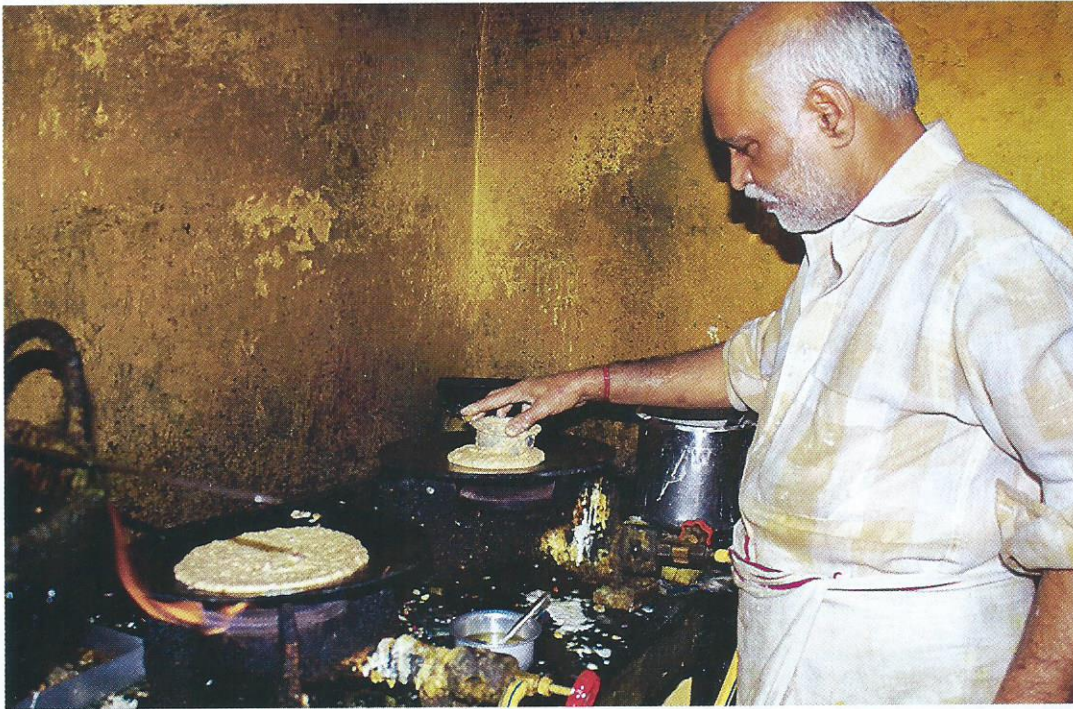
Mathala Narayanan Street links Kutchery Road with North Mada Street and Sri Karpagambal Kapali Sweets (not to be confused with Karpagambal Mess) is on this narrow one-way street. Among its specialties is the mini *samosa*, piled high on a large metal tray, too comfortably rustic to be referred by the elitist name of 'cocktail *samosa*'. The filling is made of toasted onion caramelised to sweet perfection. The other delicacy here is *pakoda* with the mild but unmistakable flavour of mint.

It is 5.30 pm and you are at the crossroads of Ponnambala Vathiyar Street and Nadu Street. The *gopuram* of the Kapaleeswarar Temple looms over you as you ponder your decision. What would you choose? Spiritual surrender to Kapaleeswarar? Or sensory surrender to deep fried decadence? Will you be a yogi or a *bhogi*?

No matter what you choose, the next stop is accessed by walking along Ponnambala Vathiyar Street until you come across a small crowd on your right thronging a window. When the owner of Jannal Kadai (literally Window Shop) passes

out a plate of golden fried raw banana *bajji*, *bonda* and two types of chutney through the grills of his window, one forgets his surly rebukes, and stands on the street with the plate, trying to avoid a bleating moped from one direction and from the other, an oncoming mini-van aspiring to be Yama's mount. You also notice the discipline with which customers dutifully stack their used plates to one side and use only the required amount of water from a *sombu* (vessel) to wash their hands. Maybe we are all becoming more civic-conscious. Then again, maybe we are all afraid of the man at the window.

Mami's Tiffen (yes, spelt exactly like that) on Pichu Street is a white-tile lined functional eatery but fairly spacious for this locality. This is a self-service place where you collect your order, help yourself to accompaniments from steel dispensers and eat standing with your plate resting on a granite ledge. There is an array of food here, from fluffy Mysore *bonda* (without a potato filling), *kozhukattai* (try the jaggery-coconut one), a very sticky *sundal* and one of the best *podu dosai* in the city. They also serve *vadacurry*, an ingenious



Dosai making at Rayar's



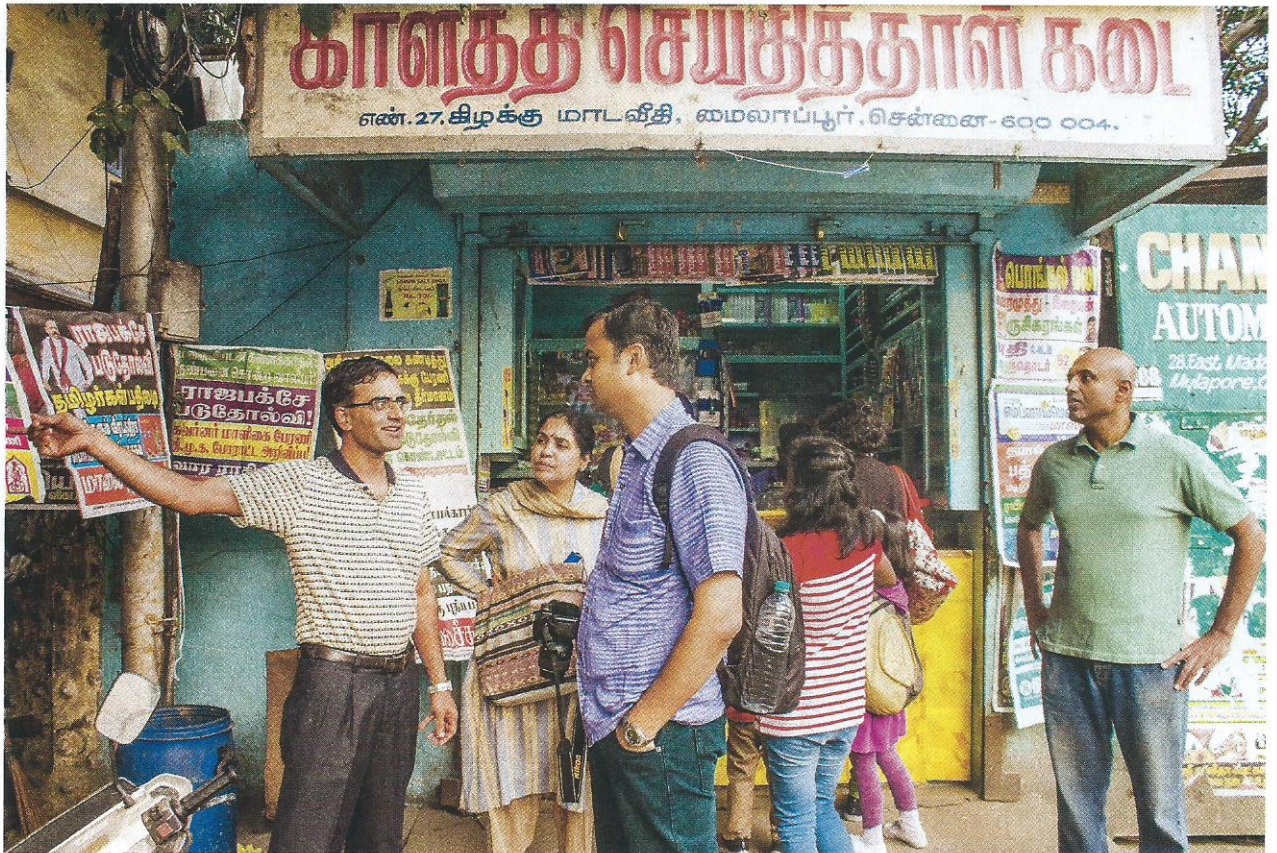
Opposite page: (clockwise from top left) The famous small onion *samosa* and special *chakli* at Sri Karpagambal Kapali Sweets; *gulab jamun* and savoury *bonda* from Rayar's

preparation I've encountered only in Tamil Nadu, where the morning's leftover *masala vadai* (made of *channa dal* as against the *urad dal* that *medhu vadai* are made of) are crumbled and prepared as a side dish. It can be eaten with *dosai* but, because of its korma-esque flavour, is a better accompaniment to *chapati*, *parantha* or *idiappam* (string hoppers). And do look up at the cashier counter for a portrait of the lady who puts the Tamil sobriquet of *Mami* in the name of the establishment.

When my young niece from Bengaluru visited us recently, we decide to hit 'The Tank' (short for Mylapore Tank and its vicinity). After wandering amid shops with flower garlands and dodging a couple of cycle-rickshaws, we reached our destination—Kalathi Newspaper Mart on East Mada Street (not to be confused with Sri Kalathi shop around the corner), renowned not only for the eponymous newspapers but its rose milk and *panneer* soda that have slaked the thirst of generations of students from schools and colleges nearby. The shop also retails rose milk concentrate by the bottle. The rose-mimicking *panneer* soda out of codd-neck bottles is infinitely better than the pet-bottle packaged kind one can get off a supermarket. Do try the dates *mithai*, a sort of fudgy rose-tinged date *burfi*. Now that I think about it, most of the items here taste of roses. A rose by any other name is still a Kalathi product?

One Sunday morning, we wait for our Bangalorean friends who are unforgivably late for breakfast. Gomathi Saiva Unavagam has already run out of *pongal*, and the fear is that they will soon run out of their famed *vadai*. The *pongal* here reminds me of temple *prasadam*—food befitting the gods distributed to devotees in humble environmentally sustainable *dhonnai* cups made of dried leaves stitched into shape. Only, here it is served in plates lined with banana leaf and runs out quickly.

To be fair to our friends, the place is difficult to find. The simplest route is to enter Mandaveli Street from R K Mutt Road, and look for a largish wedding hall on the right, opposite which is a retail complex and, obscured by a little temple, Gomathi's. After a tumbler-*davara* of their filter coffee made with just that wisp of chicory that can drive coffee purists crazy, we succumb to a *vadai* each, slathered with ladies' finger (okra) *sambar* and coconut chutney. The *vadai* in the morning and the *bonda* in the afternoon seem to be made with the same Mangalore *bonda* batter, a mix of flours and seasoned buttermilk. They are slightly crisp to the touch but when you plough your fingers into one, it deflates into a soft mass. When our friends arrive, we try to look like we haven't just tasted heaven. And there's still the *rava khichadi* to be savoured.



Who knows, maybe you will drop by one of the joints and give the retired regulars food for thought by bringing up the predicament of sensory versus spiritual over a tiffin of *keerai vadai*, *jangiri* and coffee

The Kalathi Newspaper Mart is not only known for the newspapers but its rose milk and *panneer* soda

And the 'colour' soda from the shop nearby. And the filter coffee powder to be picked up from the adjacent street. Mylapore has so much to offer that this list is only a springboard to discovering a more exhaustive array of gastronomic experiences, including coffee shops (Leo Coffee's Mocha Cafe), stores selling condiments (Ambika Appalam, Subham Ganesan, Ganapathy's Butter & Ghee), and traditional sweets and savouries (Grand Sweets & Snacks, Surya Sweets).

Who knows, maybe you will visit Mylapore Festival when the residents here sometimes open their *agraharam* homes to visitors for a traditional meal. Maybe you will stop here on your way home one evening for a glass of *ragi* malt and chance upon an outlet serving *moar*

kali the way your grandmother used to make it. Maybe you will drop by one of the joints on a leisurely evening and give the retired regulars food for thought by bringing up the predicament of sensory versus spiritual over a tiffin of *keerai vadai*, *jangiri* and coffee.

If you ask me, in the tradition of complex mathematical problems, it's not about how tough the conundrum is. It's about attempting it. It's about simply choosing one alternative over the other and living with the decision. And it's about how that decision changes you.

Don't take my word for it, just ask the toothless temple priest sitting next to you relishing a ghee-laden coconut *poli*.