

Letter from Chennai

MODERN APPLICATIONS OF ANCIENT TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE

Mr Nair's tea shop stands on the pavement opposite to my bedroom window. I have written of him in these columns earlier, but now that I have retired I spend more time at home and have more occasion to observe him. I should state that his continued presence there is quite illegal. Some years ago, the Madras High Court made it clear that such roadside eateries could not be permitted. However, food vendors and other roadside peddlers could mount their wares on carts and move from place to place, plying their trade. Mr Nair has studied ancient Hindu temple architecture. I have seen temples in Konark and Khajuraho, and I am sure many other places which I do not remember now, constructed in the form of chariots with wheels, some with stone horses sculpted ready to draw them. They were representations of the sculptor's art. They cannot move, and were never intended to move. Mr Nair's tea shop is similarly mounted on a cart with wheels, but those wheels have not moved an inch in the past 20 or more years. Apparently they satisfy the staff of the corporation and the police that theoretically they could move along Chennai's roads and carry Mr Nair and his tea shop along, thereby keeping him on the right side of the high court judgment.

I do not mean to get entangled in legal matters. During previous years I could only observe Mr Nair and his clientele in the early mornings, as he had usually closed for the night by the time I came back to my bedroom. However, retirement means that I can look out of that window more frequently nowadays, and at different times of the day. I had assumed that the people who used Mr Nair's services would largely be labourers working in the neighbourhood, or maybe delivery boys coming to the area, and I often wondered how he managed to keep his business going. The first lesson I have learnt is that his clientele is much more eclectic. Many of them ride up on fancy motorcycles, some in cars. I have even seen some high-end cars that make me envy their owners. Most of the customers are young, smartly dressed men. Perhaps just 10% of the customers are women, and they are mostly of the working class.

Most of these young men stand on the road in front of the tea shop, some on the pavement beside it. This is a side road leading to a few residential streets, and the traffic is not heavy. Almost everyone has a glass of tea in one hand, and a lighted cigarette in the other, and alternates between sips and puffs. I thought the smoking habit was on the wane, but perhaps I was mistaken. PubMed provides many studies of smoking in India. A casual perusal indicates that around 40% of Indian men smoke, despite all the negative publicity, and the restrictions on advertising. Mr Nair's subset has even higher figures. Higher taxes on tobacco are called for. The government should take all available measures to reduce this pernicious habit.

OF DOGS AND MEN

By and large, the human species has had a symbiotic relationship with the canine. I lived many years in Mumbai, and I felt it was a sin to make dogs live in a flat where they could not run around, and had to stay confined in a limited space. In a city like Chennai, there are still many houses with gardens, and dogs can roam free

and play with the children who own them, or whom they own. Most people who have dogs have them for companionship. A few dogs are used for specific purposes. Seeing Eye dogs help many blind people move around. Some people believe dogs provide security, warn their owners about intruders, and perhaps deter unwanted people from encroaching. There are many species of dogs that have been bred to be friendly and playful, and they should satisfy all human needs in a city.

Pit bulls and Rottweilers are powerful and naturally aggressive breeds. I can understand someone needing protection if he has some great treasure in his house that has to be carefully guarded from thieves, and maybe such dogs would serve the purpose. The ordinary Chennai resident does not need a Rottweiler unless he is a dog enthusiast who wants to popularize the breed. One couple in the city were breeding dogs for sale, including Rottweilers. Two of their Rottweilers got loose in a public park and mauled a 5-year-old, and her mother who tried to rescue her. Apparently, even the owners of the dogs could not control them. The dogs were not licensed and had not been vaccinated against rabies. The police are taking action and have charged the owners with endangering public safety.

The Greater Chennai Corporation announced recently that there are 1565 licensed pet dogs in the city, but they estimate there are 27 000 or more domestic dogs actually present. As usual, after an incident that arouses public anger, they have announced strict new rules. All dogs must be licensed. The licence will be valid for only 1 year, and dogs must be vaccinated against rabies before the licence will be issued. Any individual can take only one dog at a time in a public place. The dog must be muzzled and on a leash. Most of us believe that, like so many other 'strict' regulations, these are fairy tales.

One of my previous letters dealing with the stray dog menace was written a few days before the Supreme Court took up some petitions dealing with stray dogs and what should be done about them. I followed up on that judgment. The Court said that the then newly promulgated Animal Birth Control Rules, 2023, provided the solution and high courts could deal with any cases related to those rules. I looked up these rules. Amid a lot of verbiage, the essential points are that owners are responsible for deworming, immunization and sterilization of pet dogs, and the local authority for the same actions in street dogs. The Corporation Commissioner said there were an estimated 57 366 street dogs in the city. That degree of accuracy makes me doubt the figure. A special camp was to be set up in June 2024 and 150 dogs were to be vaccinated against rabies. My calculator tells me 383 such camps will be needed to vaccinate all the estimated street dogs. A study of vaccination in research beagles kept in a rabies-free environment¹ suggested that immunity to rabies in these dogs declined after 5 years, so we would need to repeat the vaccination once in 5 years. Do you believe that we will be able to achieve this goal on nearly 60 000 street dogs in Chennai? The only sensible approach would be the humane slaughter of all street dogs.

BONDS FOR MEDICAL EDUCATION

Non-service candidates for postgraduate (PG) medical education in Tamil Nadu have to execute a bond that will be levied if they

fail to serve the government for 2 years after obtaining the degree. The sum was ₹40 lakh (4 million) for degree courses and ₹20 lakh (2 million) for diploma courses. A group of doctors who had served the government during the Covid-19 pandemic approached the high court requesting that this period of Covid duty should be accepted in lieu of the period to be served after completion of the PG studies, and they should not be made to serve a further 2-year period. The learned judge agreed with them that the period of Covid-19 service should be set off against the bond requirement, and directed the government to act accordingly. The government has gone further and has reduced the required service period to 1 year, and the bond amount to ₹20 lakh (2 million) for PG degrees and ₹10 lakh (1 million) for PG diplomas. They have also announced that the period and the amount of the bond would be reviewed from time to time depending on the requirements for specialist doctors in government service.

Meanwhile, our neighbouring state of Karnataka had enacted a law in 2012 that required all entrants to government quota seats in medical colleges to sign a bond that they would serve in a rural hospital for a year after graduation. A group of doctors

who entered the colleges in 2015 and graduated in 2021 went to court saying this was illegal since it was not a requirement specified by the National Medical Commission. The judge did not rule on that point, but said they need not perform rural service anyway since the government published the rules in the gazette only on 22 July 2022. In the absence of this publication, the bond, declared the judge, was inchoate, and therefore could not be enforced. I did not know what that word meant, and had to look it up in the dictionary, which informed me that the definition was: 'only partly in existence; imperfectly formed'. The judge criticized the government for going to sleep. All the bonds signed before 22 July 2022 are invalid and cannot be enforced.

REFERENCE

- 1 Dodds WJ, Larson LJ, Christine KL, Schultz RD. Duration of immunity after rabies vaccination in dogs: The Rabies Challenge Fund research study. *Can J Vet Res* 2020;**84**:153–8.

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[To cite: Mani MK. Letter from Chennai. *Natl Med J India* 2024;**37**: 223–4. DOI: 10.25259/NMJI_727_2024]

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