

There are spaces between dominant memories that have a texture and character of their own and often point to an intricacy of detail and thought.

SHOBHIT MAHAJAN
discovers many secrets during a drive from Chennai to Pondicherry that get lost in the gush of must-dos. A reverie

THE car radio playing Tamil-techno film songs reminded me of AR Rahman's music.

It was some phone-in show on the radio and as with all private FM radio stations, the RJ was speaking in this irritatingly breathless manner. We were driving from Chennai airport to Pondicherry for a short holiday.

Sooraj, our cab driver, was a taciturn person and I quickly realised that he did not understand English or Hindi and so all communication was in sign language. The drive along the OMR (Old Mahabalipuram Road) was through a verdant landscape of paddy fields interspersed with tree plantations. The trees didn't seem to belong — eucalyptus and some tree which looked like a conifer! A conifer on a tropical coast? Sooraj was not too helpful when

he said that the tree was called *syok*. Even Google had not heard of any tree by that name. It was only later that I figured out that the tree is the She oak, a nitrogen-fixing native of Australia, which looks like a conifer but is actually a flowering plant.

The other thing one noticed was the number of shrimp hatcheries. Aqua-farming was obviously big in this part. But more than the shrimp farms, it was the Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) labs which caught my attention. It turns out that commercially bred shrimps are particularly prone to a viral disease which can be prevented by early detection using PCR kits. The presence of laboratories with such cutting edge technology in remote hamlets was a bit disorienting. The tremendous reach of markets and capital can never be overestimated!

The beach promenade at Pondicherry is a happening place

IMPROMPTU VIGNETTES

TN AT A GLANCE

THE drive to Mahabalipuram is interesting because it seems like a window to this part of Tamil Nadu. As soon as one is out of Chennai, one sees massive hoardings for apartments and villas with evocative names. Obviously the NRIs and the middle classes here, just like their comrades in Gurgaon and Bengaluru, want to live in gated communities with names like Santorini Sands promising Greek style villas. But what is even more striking is the proliferation of advertisements for senior living communities — there seems to be a huge demand for it. Maybe it is due to a growing number of parents left behind by local professionals migrating to the Promised Land of Silicon Valley.

Our entry to Mahabalipuram was dotted with shops and kiosks hawking the usual touristy wares. Soft drink and snacks, handicrafts, Stetson hats and for some reason soapstone sculptures. One particular kiosk selling packaged snacks had a



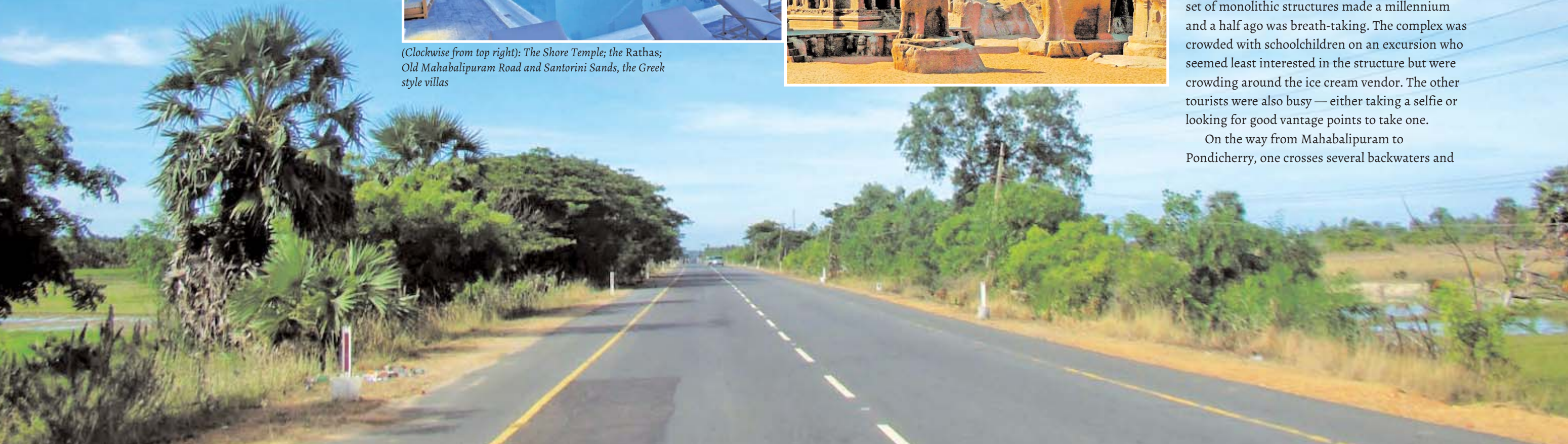
(Clockwise from top right): The Shore Temple; the Rathas; Old Mahabalipuram Road and Santorini Sands, the Greek style villas



board offering mobile phone charging at ₹20. Clearly some enterprising vendor had figured out that there is a market for this service.

The shore temple and the *Pancha Rathas* temple were magnificent. The shore temple had taken a lot of beating from the salt-laden air and the carvings and the sculptures were heavily eroded. Being slightly further from the sea, the *Pancha Rathas* were in a better shape. The workmanship on this set of monolithic structures made a millennium and a half ago was breath-taking. The complex was crowded with schoolchildren on an excursion who seemed least interested in the structure but were crowding around the ice cream vendor. The other tourists were also busy — either taking a selfie or looking for good vantage points to take one.

On the way from Mahabalipuram to Pondicherry, one crosses several backwaters and





(Above) Backwaters between Mahabalipuram and Pondicherry and (below) a street in the French Quarters

small rivers. As one drives into Pondicherry, one can't help notice the absence of multitudes of people. Unlike in the North, where one would find crowds everywhere, from shops to bus stops to roadside vendors, the roadsides are relatively empty. We reached the French quarter or White Town as it is known locally and located our hotel.

The hotel was on Rue Casserne. The streets had French names and the houses appeared to be from the time the French were here. The hotel used to be the residence of Joseph Dupleix, the Governor General of French territories in India. It has been extensively restored and now is a small hotel.

The French quarter, despite many of the houses

now being hotels or guest houses or cafes, still retained some of the old world charm. The atmosphere was laid back and quaint. Right from the street signs painted blue to the architecture, everything seemed to evoke another space-time point. I noticed two colourfully painted open trucks, like the floats used in the Republic Day parade, parked near the hotel. I guessed that they were vehicles used by companies to have live demonstrations of their products at malls and markets. My guess was so wrong. It turned out that those were actually funeral vans which seem to be popular in these parts. Apparently death does not have to be a solemn occasion.



(Above) A statue of Mahatma Gandhi overlooks a plaza and (below) colourfully-painted open trucks



The beachfront or promenade is the happening place. Waves crash into the breakers all along the kilometre or so long stretch. Overlooking the Bay of Bengal are huge French mansions converted into hotels and guest houses or government buildings. A tall statue of Gandhiji overlooks a plaza which has a much smaller statue of Nehru. And that is not all — there is a statue of Dupleix at one end of the promenade and a Memorial to Ambedkar too.

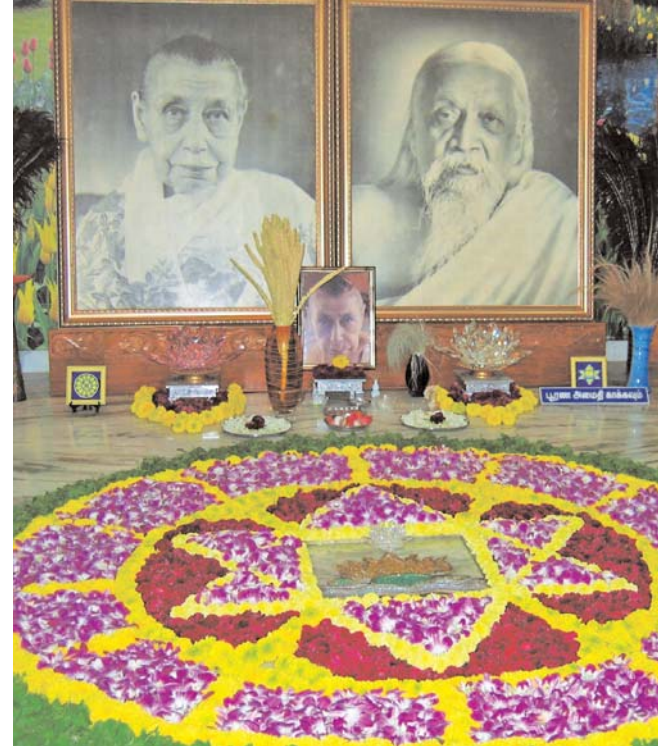
The place was teeming with tourists of all kinds — women wearing the *hijab*, middle class families with young children and aged parents, upwardly mobile young couples wearing designer shorts and shoes and a lot of youngsters. Apparently, loads of young techies from Bengaluru drive down to Pondicherry for the weekend. What was striking was the absence of the two sets of inveterate travellers who are ubiquitous in every other tourist spot in the country — groups of Bengalis and Gujaratis. It was not clear to me why this place is not popular with them.

At such a place, one would expect plenty of vendors selling food and drink. That was not the case here. The vendors had all been given space on a nearby side street. The other thing to notice was the level of cleanliness — there were few empty packets of chips or *gutkha* that one saw lying around. Relative to other tourist attractions around the country that one has been to, the level of cleanliness was noticeable. This is something which is remarkable about the whole city, more so in the White Town than in the “Indian” part or Black town. And all this despite the absence of screaming hoardings asking citizens to be *swachh*.

ESSENCE IN THE DETAILS

WE did the usual touristy things the next day — the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, The Church of Our Lady of Angels and the Cathedral of Immaculate Conception. The Basilica is a neo-Gothic structure with some splendid stained glass windows as well as garishly painted terracotta figures on its walls. Despite being situated opposite the Railway station, it had a serene and quiet atmosphere. In fact, this was something I noticed in all the three churches — the soothing and contemplative silence in the air, the absence of people or of signs telling you what to do and what not to do.

A complete contrast was the Samadhi of Sri Aurobindo at the Ashram. Here, one had to leave one's shoes across the road at a stall and then line up for the *darshan* of the marble-topped platform holding the mortal remains of



(Above) Mother and Sri Aurobindo
(below) Cathedral of Immaculate Conception



Matri Mandir

Aurobindo and his spiritual partner, the Mother. Every few steps, there was an elderly ashramite telling you what not to do — don't speak, don't stop, don't sit down, don't offer flowers and so on. The regimentation and the officiousness were annoying.

The Aurobindo Ashram is, of course, the most well-known location in the city. The Ashram owns many buildings in the French quarter where it runs schools, guest houses, kitchens, printing presses etc. I was told that the Mother, who belonged to a rich family, bought up many of the buildings when the French left in the 40s and 50s.

The relationship between the Ashram and the city is an interesting one as I was told by a friend. Since the Ashram is mostly self-sufficient and run by volunteers, it does not contribute much to the city's economic life. And this is the cause of much heartburn for the locals who feel that the Ashram has taken over their city.

Auroville, the City of Dawn, is a township established by the Mother about 10 km from Pondicherry. Spread over several kilometres, it was intended as a place where people from all countries could live in peace, above religion and politics. It now has about 2,500 residents of many nationalities. These are people who want to explore an alternative style of living — organic, spiritual,

ecologically sensitive and self-sufficient. Thus, the restaurant in the visitor centre complex advertises food with organic ingredients grown on the organic farms at Auroville.

The main attraction in Auroville is the Matri Mandir. Surrounded by manicured lawns, this golden structure is awe-inspiring. Conceived as the soul of the city, a place for contemplation and meditation, it took about four decades to build. To go inside the edifice, one has to register a day earlier and is granted permission in case one is found suitable to visit what is undoubtedly the holiest place in the city. Lesser mortals can, however, walk through a wooded area for a kilometre from the visitor centre to the viewing point. For this too, one has to first register and watch a short video film, then get a pass and only then allowed to go. Once again, it struck me that an institution founded as a reaction against the rigidities and orthodoxies of organised religion, seems to have adopted all the trappings of one. It is surprising that, though the residents and the followers here are mostly well-educated and well-off people (both from India and overseas), they don't seem to be bothered by this apparent contradiction between the philosophy and the reality.

After seeing the Matri Mandir from the viewing



Pondicherry museum

point and eating at the overpriced though good organic restaurant, we headed back to Pondicherry and walked to the museum from our hotel. In the bylanes, on the pavement were several fortune tellers sitting with caged parrots. The fortune-telling parrot was obviously popular with the locals since each seemed to be surrounded by several supplicants waiting for the wise bird to tell them their future.

The museum, though small, was very informative. Spread over two floors of a small building, it had thematic exhibits in each room. There were only about five visitors in the museum while there were 10 people stationed there to keep watch over the visitors. As I walked into the bronzes section, I noticed an old gentleman having tea and talking loudly on his phone. I took out my mobile to check the time and was immediately admonished by the old man to switch it off! Despite its small size, the museum had some interesting exhibits including coins, bronzes, furniture and rocks.

THE GREAT DANES

THE next day we decided to take a trip south of Pondicherry to Tranquebar or Tharangambadi as it is called in Tamil. This is a small coastal town situated near the mouth of one of the distributaries of Cauvery. It is about 120 km from Pondicherry and is the site of the first Danish settlement in India. The drive is once again very scenic and the landscape pretty similar to the one we saw north of Pondicherry.

As one passed small villages and towns on the way, one couldn't help noticing the colourful hoardings and posters everywhere. Most of them were, of course, AIADMK posters with huge pictures of a young as well as mature Amma with smaller pictures of MGR and Annadorai. The number of DMK posters was much smaller and all of them had Stalin rather than Karunanidhi. But apart from these political posters, there were huge hoardings celebrating some wedding, wedding anniversary and even one with a photograph of a

toddler wearing oversized sunglasses — it was his first birthday it seems!

However, what was interesting were the hoardings of Ambedkar. It was soon after his death anniversary and while most of them had large photographs of Ambedkar with the Republican Party leader Ramdas Athawale, there were some with images of Prabhakaran. Obviously he continued to be a hero almost a decade after his death. It was also the 25th anniversary of the demolition of the Babri Masjid and there were other Ambedkar Jayanti hoardings with images of the demolition of the Masjid. I had no idea what the hoardings said but the iconography certainly did communicate something about the political atmosphere in these remote hamlets and villages.

Our first stop on the trip was the temple town of Chidambaram, about 60 km from Pondicherry. The Nataraja temple here is one of the oldest of South India. It is

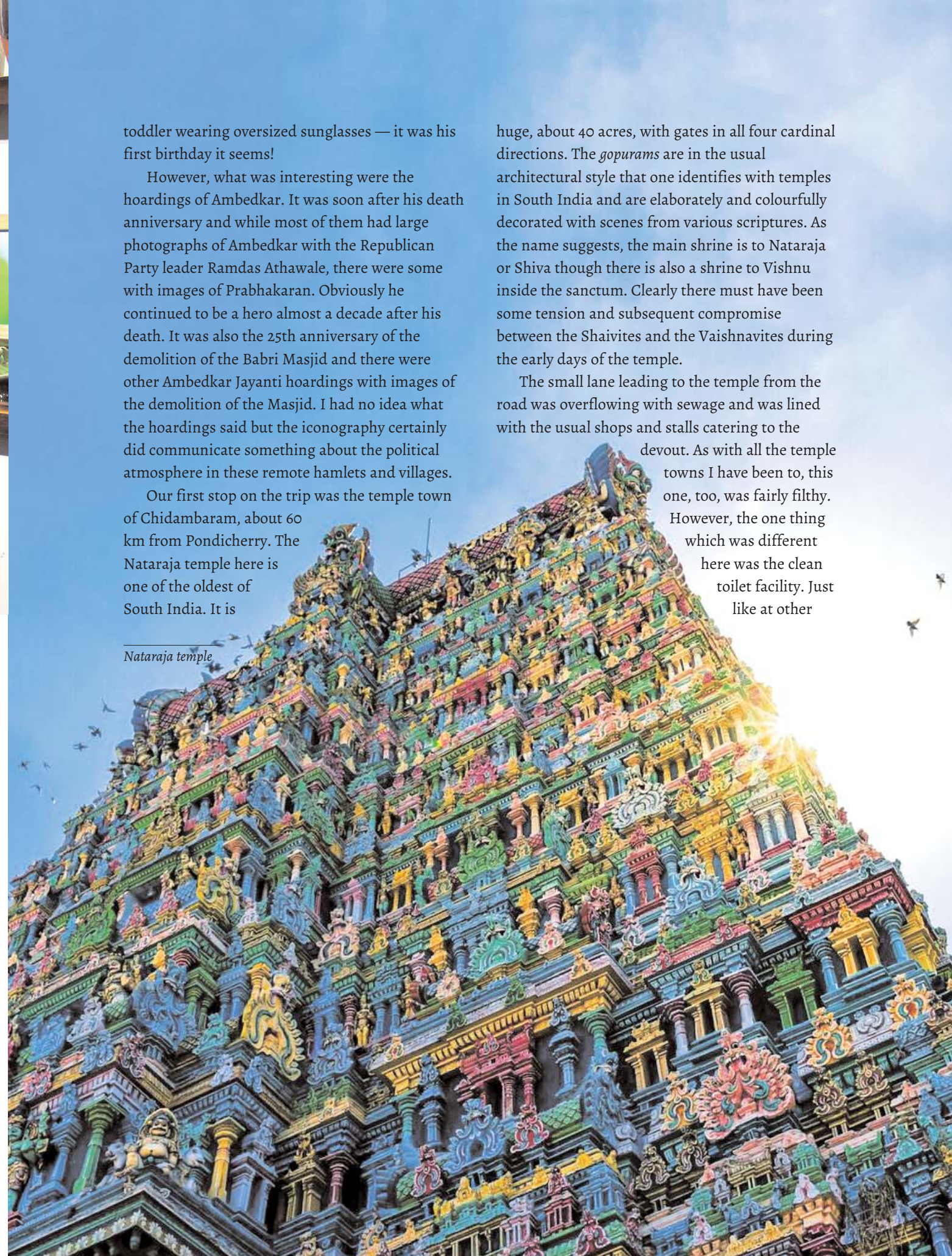
huge, about 40 acres, with gates in all four cardinal directions. The *gopurams* are in the usual architectural style that one identifies with temples in South India and are elaborately and colourfully decorated with scenes from various scriptures. As the name suggests, the main shrine is to Nataraja or Shiva though there is also a shrine to Vishnu inside the sanctum. Clearly there must have been some tension and subsequent compromise between the Shaivites and the Vaishnavites during the early days of the temple.

The small lane leading to the temple from the road was overflowing with sewage and was lined with the usual shops and stalls catering to the

devout. As with all the temple towns I have been to, this one, too, was fairly filthy.

However, the one thing which was different here was the clean toilet facility. Just like at other

Nataraja temple



places on this trip, there are Pay-And-Use toilets where one pays ₹3-5 to relieve oneself. However, what was remarkable about these toilets was that though very basic in nature, they were very clean. I don't remember coming across even one public facility anywhere in the North of the country which has been clean. How these public toilets, used by hundreds of people, continue to be clean and functional is still a mystery to me.

Tranquebar is a two-hour drive from Chidambaram. The village and its adjoining lands were given to the Danes in the 17th century by the Raja of Thanjavur to set up a trading post. The Danes built a fort here which we found closed since it was a Friday. And here I thought that all monuments are closed on Mondays except those where prayers are offered on Fridays!

Even from outside, the fort, though small, looked impressive. Situated right on the seashore, it somehow escaped destruction by the tsunami of 2004 which destroyed the surrounding villages. I was told that about 700 people (mostly fisher folk) lost their lives on that fateful day in Tranquebar.

Across from the fort are the Governor's mansion and the Bungalow on the Beach. The Governor's mansion is now a cultural centre, built with Danish support, which showcases the history



(Clockwise from top left): Pichavaram; Tranquebar Maritime Museum and Tharangambadi

of the Danish presence in this small village. Next to it is the Maritime Museum, a two-room building with some interesting relics from shipwrecks as well as some documents. The Bungalow on the Beach is a large colonial house which belonged to the Governor of the Danish settlement. It is now a heritage hotel run by a well-known chain.

After lunch at the Bungalow, we made our way through the bylanes of this small settlement to find the Ziegenbalg printing museum located in the precincts of a missionary school. Ziegenbalg was a German Lutheran who was one of the first Protestant missionaries in India. He came to Tranquebar in 1705 and set up the



Tranquebar mission soon thereafter. He was obviously very gifted and motivated since he quickly picked up Tamil and set up a Tamil seminary in 1707. More importantly, he translated the Old Testament into Tamil and set up a printing press to print the Tamil Bible. Since all the earlier printing in India had been in Portuguese or Latin, Tamil became the first Indian language to be printed.

The museum does not have the original printing press but has a slightly later version of the press which amazingly is still functional! There are also boxes of wooden and metallic type kept there from that time. Ziegenbalg died at a young age in 1719 and was buried at Tranquebar.

On the way back from Tranquebar,

about 20 km off the highway, is Picharwam. This is one of the largest mangrove forests in the world and is situated between two estuaries. One can take a motor boat trip to the mangroves which are fascinating. Riding on a boat, through a small channel, surrounded by dense marine vegetation brought to mind the iconic scene of Colonel Kurtz, aka Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now* riding on a boat through the dense forests of Cambodia!

We were passing through the Cauvery delta region on the way back and it was clear that the land here was amazingly fecund. There seemed to be paddy growing in every square inch of land, even next to the roadside. No wonder, this region is called the Rice Bowl of Tamil Nadu. The car radio was, as usual, playing some Tamil songs which I didn't understand. The songs were interrupted by a commercial for Basmati rice. I was amused at how this North Indian variety of rice was being sold to people who had been cultivating some of the finest varieties of rice for several millennia. But then, this was just one of the many intriguing things I came across during this wonderful trip.

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