

Letter from the Heritage Centre

IIT Madras
7 August 2017

Album 208



Opening of Vana Vani, 1963

Some months back, we added to the photographic collections of the Heritage Centre a good number of pictures taken by Mr. C. Gourisankar, who photo-documented events and infrastructural developments at IIT Madras over a long time, starting from the earliest days.

I was browsing through the newly digitised Gourisankar collection when I started flipping through an album titled 'Opening of School, 8-7-1963'. This was Album 208.

I wondered at the many stories it tells. Album 208 tells you of course that Vanavani School was declared open on a Monday 54 years ago by Dr. A. Lakshmanaswami Mudaliar, first Chairman, Board of Governors, IIT Madras. The album also tells you that Father Murphy, from Loyola College, played an important role in the newly formed school. It tells you that Prof. Sengupto, first Director of IIT Madras, Mrs. Shanti Sengupto, Mr. R. Natarajan, first Registrar of IIT Madras, and a number of German professors and technicians participated in the opening

ceremony. It tells you that the first students, little children, were treated to cool drinks on the first day of school and that they used gaily striped paper straws.



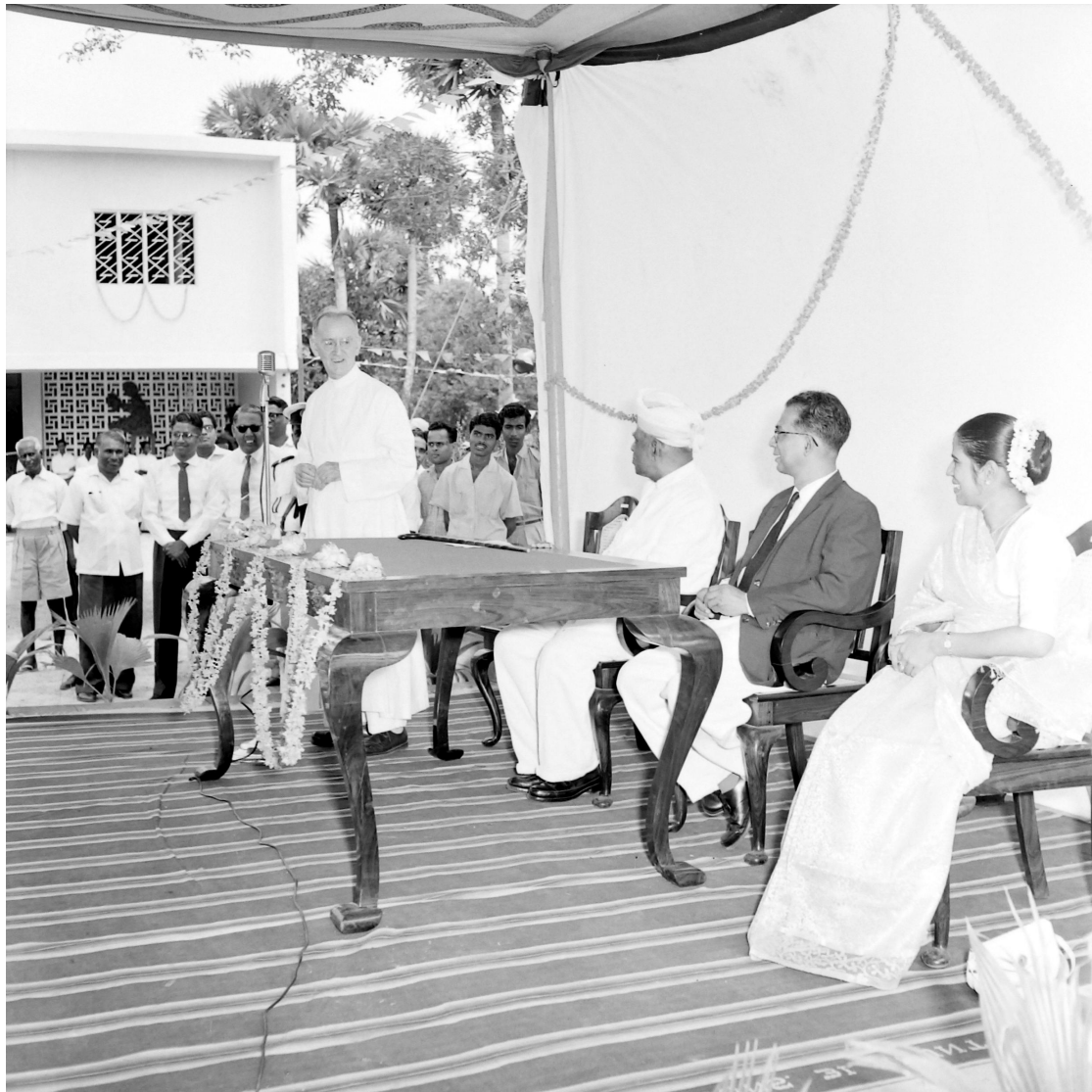
Striking the gong

I came to picture IMG_0206, which showed the Chief Security Officer, Mr. Venkatraman, holding up a gong and Dr. Mudaliar striking it with a mallet, no doubt to start classes. Dr. Mudaliar was lifting the mallet with his left hand. This was interesting, I thought, remembering that only 10 per cent of the world is left handed. By what must have been a great coincidence, the security officer was left handed too! He was using his left hand to hold up the gong! I scrutinised his elaborate uniform and saw that on his lapel were the metal letters 'T.I.I.'. I wondered what the full name of this agency was.



The cutting of the ribbon

The picture bearing number IMG_0207 shows Dr. Mudaliar cutting a ribbon to open the new school building. Standing near him is Mr. Y.S. Ramaswamy, the Superintending Engineer of IIT Madras, apart from Father Murphy, Director Sengupto and Registrar Natarajan. There is a coir mat bearing a geometric pattern at the entrance. A 'WELCOME' created out of strings of flowers—it is not clear whether these are real or paper—hangs from above. Something about the picture struck me as being odd—shouldn't the WELCOME have faced outwards? It *should* have appeared inverted, but it was not. Strange, how this mistake had taken place, I thought.



A breeze blowing as Father Murphy addresses the gathering

IMG_0208 shows a stage, with Father Murphy speaking. Seated on the stage are Director Sengupto, Dr. Mudaliar and a lady, presumably the headmistress of the new school. There is a carved wooden table on the stage, adorned with more floral strings. These appear to be blown about by the breeze, suggesting that they are made of paper and that it is a windy day.



Rearranged seating order?

IMG_0210 shows another view of the stage. The flowers are being blown about even more in this picture. Dr. Mudaliar is speaking and Father Murphy is seated now. Prof. Sengupto and the 'headmistress' are seated as before.

But wait, something has happened, go back to the previous photograph please. Yes, the seating order on the stage is inverted! Did the speakers and dignitaries change places during the function? Surely, that could not be!

Then the penny dropped—what we had received were Mr. Gourisankar's *negatives*, and during the course of digitisation, some of them had been scanned the 'wrong-side-up'!



A mirror-image nursery class

IMG_0211, showing a classroom, confirms that this has happened, if indeed confirmation is required. There are freshly painted desks and chairs in the room, and the blackboard is marked with—what else—flowers, these being of chalk. But the blackboard also has 'NURSERY CLASS' written on it—in *mirror image style*!

Mystery solved. There was no extraordinary prevalence of left-handedness among the dignitaries on that day in 1963, no mistake in the floral decorations, no 'T.I.I.' on the uniform of the Security Officer—only 'I.I.T'!

Kumaran Sathasivam

The Heritage Centre is located in the ground floor of the Administration Building, IIT Madras. It is open on weekdays from 9.00 am to 5.30 pm.

heritage.iitm.ac.in