

YAANAI MALAI

Sometimes, landscapes can speak to us. But they only talk if we are willing to listen to them. Manohar Devadoss loves his hometown Madurai. A scientist by profession, the writer has produced some exquisite pen sketches of Madurai and its surroundings. One of his sketches of Yaanai Malai has been reproduced here for you. But what makes him extraordinary is not his versatility. It is his indomitable spirit.

For more than thirty years, Manohar Devadoss has had **Retinitis Pigmentosa**, an eye disorder that slowly but surely reduces vision. His wife Mahema, an immensely courageous person in her own right, was paralyzed below the shoulders following a road accident 36 years ago. The love that they could bring to each other in the face of great tragedy has been a source of inspiration to all who have known them.

The city of Madurai has been in existence for at least 2400 years. Throughout its history the city has nurtured Tamil literature. Over the centuries, Madurai has become famous for its temple complex. Rich in tradition, this ancient temple town has acquired its very own mythologies, evolving its own customs and festivals.

Adominant landmark of the **northeastern outskirts** of Madurai is Yaanai Malai, a solid rocky hill. When seen or approached from Madurai, this hill has a rather striking resemblance to a seated elephant hence the name Yaanai Malai (Elephant Hill). Dotted with starkly beautiful Palmyra trees, this part of rural Madurai has had a character all its own.

The paddy fields here were nourished by monsoon rains, supplemented by water from large wells called Yettrams, which have all but vanished from the rural scene today. Yettrams were extensively used during my boyhood to draw water from these large, square, irrigation wells. Ayettram well had long casuarina poles tied together with a rope, a large bucket made of leather at one end and a counterpoise at the other, enabling a man to single handedly draw large volumes of water.

On a cool moon in October, in the early 1950s, a school friend and I, on an impulse, decided to take a cross country trek to Yaanai Malai, climb up the hill and stand on its head to look at Madurai and the surrounding country. At one stage the hill seemed close enough but as we walked on it seemed to move further away. Suddenly an idyllic rural scene presented itself. We saw watery fields being ploughed. There was a large, square yettram well from which a wiry old man was drawing water. Yaanai Malai was an imposing and Silent backdrop.

Monsoon clouds began to gather, darkening the upper sky and softening the light falling on the austere scene. The landscape was placid but the sky was in turmoil. And yet, there was perfect harmony between land and sky. The sky became darker and light played games on the hill. A large drop of water hit my head. Almost immediately, a heavy downpour tore open the sky and the hill instantly disappeared behind curtains of water. As we walked back to Madurai thoroughly drenched, my friend complained with chattering teeth that the rain had ruined our plan.

During my adolescence, Yaanai Malai inspired in me a sense of mystique. Though I gave a premium to rationalism then, I had difficulty thinking of Yaanai Malai as a nonliving, huge chunk of stone. To me the hill seemed like a silent witness to all that was happening in Madurai, through its history. To this day, I dream of this hill in ways that relate to visual pleasure. In 2001, at a time when my vision due to an incurable visual syndrome, Retinitis pigments had declined to a level when I was hardly able to see any details of a distant landscape, I dreamt that my wife, Mahema — who became paralysed below her shoulders, following a road accident in 1972 — was in her wheelchair and that I stood by her side on top of Yaanai Malai. In this vivid dream, I showed her some of the important landmarks of Madurai, the tower of the large **Vandiyoor temple tank**, the cupolas of the historic palace called the mahal, the great gateway towers of the temple and many hills far and near. I told Mahema in my dream that had **Thirumalai Nayak** the ruler who had built the mahal three and a half centuries earlier, climbed up the hill then, he would have had a view not vastly different from the one we were looking at.

The monolith, Yaanai Malai **looks like an elephant** only when it is **viewed from the southwest**. Happily, Madurai sits to the south west of Yaanai Malai. What appears from Madurai to have a pyramidal shape is in actuality a very

elongated hill. The Melur road from Madurai runs many miles parallel to the southeastern slope of the hill. When viewed from here, the hill has a different yet dominant appeal, as one can see from this drawing of the hill that I completed in June 2002 and have pleasure in presenting below. The broad band of paddy fields ends not far from the hill and then the monolith rises abruptly and steeply like a mighty fortress. The pale brown hue of the hill is enriched by discrete downward streaks of rust-red stains

During the cool winter months, before the emerald of the paddy fields slowly turns into a wealth of gold, small flocks of lily white egrets alight here to feast upon the tiny, silvery fish that stray into the shallow waters of the fields.

The egrets slow, flapping takeoff and the gentle swoop of soft landing as they hop from Pad of the field to another - are as graceful as the movements of ballerinas.

The borders of the paddy fields are often lined with rows of **Palmyra trees**. Small bushes grow wild at the foot of the trees. During the winter season, these plants burst into thousands of yellow flames of flower

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