

Another milestone in Tamil Nadu's legislative history – the new seat of power

Courtesy: The Hindu

The inauguration of the Assembly-Secretariat complex on the Omandurar Government Estate in the heart of the State capital of Chennai marks another milestone in the history of the elected legislature of Tamil Nadu.

The origins of the legislature can be traced back to the Indian Councils Act, 1861. The law restored the legislative power taken away by the Charter Act of 1833. The legislature of the Madras Presidency, which then comprised the present area of Tamil Nadu and parts of what are now the States of Orissa, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, was given the power to make laws for the “peace and good government.”

The Provincial Legislative Council was constituted. It consisted of the Advocate General and four to eight ad hoc members nominated by the Governor to the Executive Council. At least half the members were to be non-officials, nominated for two years. The Legislative Council could not interfere with the laws passed by the Central Legislature. All Bills passed by Provincial Councils required the assent of the Governor-General. Even after that, they could be disallowed by the Queen, to whom they had to be referred. Though the Council was a mere advisory committee for the government in its legislative work, one positive feature was that the public came to know of what went on in the Council, which was till then not possible.

As a result of the Minto-Morley Reforms, a package of constitutional concessions was formulated through the Indian Councils Act, 1909. This raised the strength of the Council from 20 to 50. Elections, though not direct, were introduced.

With nationalist sentiment gaining strength, the British enacted the Government of India Act of 1919, also known as the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms. The membership of the Madras Legislative Council went up to 127 — it was the country’s biggest body of its kind at that time. The number of elected members was 98; the remaining members belonged to the Executive Council or were nominated non-official members. The life of each House of the Council was three years.

On January 8, 1921, the inaugural meeting of the Council took place at Fort St. George. Four days later, the Council was formally inaugurated by the Duke of Connaught, an uncle of George V, Emperor of England. At the inaugural meeting, the Council adopted a resolution to grant women the right to vote.

The next important stage in the evolution of the legislature was the enactment of the Government of India Act, 1935. The Act established a bi-cameral Legislature in the Province of Madras, as it was then called, with the Legislative Assembly consisting of 215 members and the Legislative Council 56 members. The Legislative Council was to be a permanent body with one-third of its members retiring every three years. In the Assembly, there were 116 members from the general seats and 30 from those set aside for the Scheduled Castes. Representation was

given to different groups such as Muslims, Christians and landholders. There were eight women members, too.

The first House of the Assembly was constituted in July 1937 after the general elections. C. Rajagopalachari became the Premier of the Presidency and headed the Congress Ministry. His Ministry resigned in 1939 following differences between the Congress party and the British government over the Second World War. The legislature ceased to function.

In March 1946, general elections were held all over the country. T. Prakasam, famously called Andhra Kesari, became the Chief Minister. Between March 1947 and April 1952, Omandur P. Ramaswamy Reddiar and P.S. Kumaraswamy Raja held the post.

Two years after the Constitution of India came into force in January 1950, elections to the first legislature of Madras State were held. The then Composite Madras Assembly consisted of 375 seats. These were filled by means of elections in 309 constituencies — 243 single-member constituencies, 62 double-member constituencies (one seat in each reserved for Scheduled Castes) and four double-member constituencies (one seat in each reserved for Scheduled Tribes). As the three seats were uncontested, elections were held only in the remaining 372 seats. One member was nominated by the Governor to represent Anglo-Indians.

In April 1952, Rajaji, who had by then held the posts of Governor-general and West Bengal Governor, succeeded Kumaraswamy Raja who lost in the general elections. Two years later, K. Kamaraj became the Chief Minister and he held the post till 1963.

The strength of the Assembly went down to 231 with the formation of the Andhra State in October 1953 and the merger of Kannada-speaking area of Bellary district with the then Mysore State. After the States Re-organisation Act came into force in November 1956, the number of members was further reduced to 190. After Kanyakumari district and Shencottah taluk were added to the State, the strength was raised to 205. Three years later, one more constituency was added to Tamil Nadu, taking the strength to 206.

In 1961, all 38 double-member constituencies were abolished and an equal number of constituencies was reserved for SC and STs. Through the Delimitation of Parliamentary and Assembly constituencies Order of 1965, the number of territorial constituencies was increased to 234. Of these, 42 seats were reserved for the Scheduled Castes and two for the Scheduled Tribes, besides one member to be nominated from the Anglo-Indian community. Since then, there has been no change in the strength of the Assembly. (Under the latest delimitation order of 2007, the number of seats earmarked for the SCs and the STs has not been disturbed.)

M. Bakthavatsalam succeeded Kamaraj in October 1963; since then there has not been a Congress Chief Minister in the State. In the historic Assembly elections of 1967, the 18-year-old Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam under the leadership of C.N. Annadurai was swept to power. The name “Madras Legislative Assembly” was changed to the “Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly” on January 14, 1969.

M. Karunanidhi, who became Chief Minister in February 1969, remained in power till January 1976 when the Union government dismissed his government and dissolved the Assembly. After

a brief period of President's Rule, M.G. Ramachandran, the founder of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, became the Chief Minister after his party secured a majority in the 1977 elections. In February 1980, his government was dismissed and the State had another stint of President's Rule. Ramachandran came back to power in June that year after the AIADMK emerged successful in the general elections. After his demise in December 1987, his widow Janaki Ramachandran held the post of Chief Minister for 24 days. One more spell of President's Rule followed.

The Legislative Council, which was part of the State legislature since 1937, was abolished with effect from November 1986. In May that year, the Assembly adopted a resolution seeking to abolish the Upper House. Subsequently, Parliament adopted the Tamil Nadu Legislative Council (Abolition) Bill, which got presidential assent in August 1986. In 1989 and 1996, the Assembly adopted resolutions to revive the Upper House but these efforts did not fructify.

In the 1989 Assembly elections, the DMK staged a historic comeback and Mr. Karunanidhi became Chief Minister after a gap of 13 years. Two years later, his government was dismissed again.

In the 1991 Assembly polls, the AIADMK was returned to power and Jayalalithaa became the Chief Minister. Five years later, Mr. Karunanidhi was sworn in Chief Minister for the fourth time. In 2001, it was the turn of the AIADMK to stage a comeback. Ms. Jayalalithaa was Chief Minister for most of the term. O. Panneerselvam, who held the post for about five months, did not face the Assembly.

The 2006 elections saw the DMK coming back to power. Mr Karunanidhi became the Chief Minister for the fifth time.

Where the TN State legislature met

- Council Chamber, Fort St. George (1921-1937)
- Senate House, Chepauk campus, Madras University (July 14, 1937 - December 21, 1937)
- Banqueting Hall (Rajaji Hall), Government Estate (January 27, 1938 - October 26, 1939)
- Legislative Council, Fort St. George (May 24, 1946 - March 27, 1952)
- Children's Theatre (Kalaivanar Arangam), Government Estate (May 3, 1952 - December 27, 1956)
- Assembly Hall, Fort St. George (April 29, 1957 - March 30, 1959)
- Aranmore Palace, Udthagamandalam (April 20-30, 1959 - Legislative Assembly; May 4-9, 1959 - Legislative Council)
- Fort. St. George (August 31, 1959 - January 11, 2010)

Monumental achievements

M. Karunanidhi's different tenures as Chief Minister have been characterised by the erection of different memorials or landmark structures

The present tenure is, of course, marked by the construction of the state-of-the-art Secretariat complex. Two memorials, the Valluvar Kottam in Chennai and the Thiruvalluvar statue at land's end in Kanyakumari, both dedicated to the saint-poet, stand testimony to his initiatives.

The Valluvar Kottam in Nungambakkam was conceived and built during Mr. Karunanidhi's first tenure that lasted from 1969 to 1976. In September 1974, sculptor S.K. Achar, who had already designed the Vivekananda Rock Memorial in Kanyakumari, launched the work on the Valluvar Kottam. In January 1976, the structure was ready, at a cost of Rs. 99 lakh. Mr. Karunanidhi was no longer in power when it was declared open by President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed in April 1976. In a recent statement, he noted that he was not even invited to the event.

In January 1989, Mr. Karunanidhi assumed charge as Chief Minister again at a ceremony held at the Kottam.

The idea of installing a statue for Thiruvalluvar in Kanyakumari was floated towards the fag end of Mr. Karunanidhi's first tenure. On December 31, 1975, the State Cabinet, at a meeting chaired by him, approved the proposal. A month later, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam government was dismissed and the State was brought under President's Rule. In April 1979, Prime Minister Morarji Desai laid the foundation stone for the statue project.

It was left to Mr. Karunanidhi to revive the project during his next tenure from 1989 to 1991. While presenting the Budget in March 1990, he announced that a 133-foot-tall statue for Thiruvalluvar would be installed in Kanyakumari. Six months later, he inaugurated the work. After he came back to power in May 1996, the statue project got a new lease of life. On New Year's day 2000, he unveiled the statue.

It is not just memorials that mark Mr. Karunanidhi's tenures in power. The construction of the TIDEL Park building, housing several information technology companies over a built-up area of 1.3 million square feet, was another high-point of his previous tenure. In July 2000, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee declared open the building. It cost Rs. 340 crore.

Where the future and the past meet

The architecture of the new Assembly building is a mix of modernity and tradition.

The inauguration of the Tamil Nadu Assembly building is probably Chennai's most exciting architectural event since 1959, all of 50 years after the Life Insurance Corporation building was opened. If the 'LIC Building' is remembered as India's tallest building when it was built, the new Assembly building will be remembered for the architectural choices it embodies.

When the decision to build a new Assembly building in the Omandurar Government Estate was taken in 2007, a new complex wrapped in old style was anticipated. A functional and grander

version of the Valluvar Kottam in the city, a memorial for the Tamil poet Tiruvalluvar in the Dravidian style, was expected to be the preferred architectural language of the State government.

Much to the surprise of many, the chosen design from the short-listed three entries with its perforated plain facade without any ornamentation was contemporary in its aesthetic appeal. The only iconic element was the dome at the top. This architecture was a radical departure from the state monuments that were built before.

The intention, as Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi explained in 2008, was this: “From the outside it will have a futuristic look, to signify that the State is staying abreast of the times. At the same time, there will be a courtyard, an extensive use of traditional Tamil kolam art and elements from the Valluvar Kottam, such as the dome.”

Hubert Nienhoff, architect and partner in gmp (von Gerkan, Marg und Partner) Architects, Berlin, the firm which designed the building, echoed a similar note.

Speaking to *The Hindu* after the foundation stone was laid in June 2008, he said: “From the beginning we have tried to root the building climatically and culturally to the place. We have studied the traditional architecture of the region, but a simple arching back to the past is no more possible. We want to know what works and does not at this point of time.”

This seemingly difficult architectural desire — to have one face looking at the past and the other at the future — has been resolved relatively easily. The sharp-lined, elongated, granite-glass-metal clad “modern box” without ornamentation makes for the “modern.” And the dome on top, the iconic element that evokes the temple car at Valluvar Kottam, stands for the tradition. In addition, kolam, or the geometric patterns unique to this region, inscribed on the pillars, attempts to evoke the traditional aesthetic.

The long façade facing Anna Salai, the arterial road, has been scooped out at regular intervals and the façade behind is curved. The black granite in the outer layer and the yellow metal screen walls in the inner facade may not be a popular colour choice, but gives a chrome and gleaming look — the signature feature of contemporary buildings.

Changes to the design were made to bring the traditional elements into greater focus. The dome was reshaped to resemble the Valluvar Kottam and the 20-storey department building located to the east of the public entrance was reduced by half in size so that the dome stood out as the single most important feature.

This large building spread over 9,31,000 sq feet is organised in a simple fashion around courtyards — a common feature in traditional buildings. Four “functional cylinders” of diminishing size (the original design had five cylinders) help organise the multitude of rooms and various departments into four distinct zones. At the entrance is the Civic Forum or the entry plaza, followed by the Assembly hall, library and conference spaces. The present building has seven floors and rises to 198 feet. About 16, 43, 200 human days have been so far spent in constructing the building.

Vantage view from right across the road

The corridors of power just a hop, skip and subway jump away, they waved tantalisingly in our faces. With the usual scepticism of the journalistic tribe, we thought: “Ha! We'll believe them when it happens!”

And so we went on with our lives, watching with mild curiosity the goings-on across the road from Kasturi Buildings (which has been *The Hindu's* home since 1939). When they started cutting down the trees, some of us paused to reconsider, “Hey, maybe!” But the Doubting Thomases amongst us still shook our heads in unison, a superior smirk on our faces, as we sipped tea from tiny paper cups *al fresco* and spoke pointedly of other things.

Until the chaps across the road woke us up with the resounding thuds of what could only come from laying a pile foundation. The tea then began to shake in ripples in their tiny paper cups and the doubters' union broke up; we shuffled away, shaking our heads confusedly.

By the time it had sunk in for us, however, the edifice had already emerged from the foundations. “Whoa!” the prime doubter said, “They are here all right!” And with that epiphanic moment, doubt gave way to faith; dark clouds parted as the streaming sunshine poured through. We were indeed going to be across from the corridors of power. Oh, wait, was it the power circles, instead?

Fresh with hope and with our vantage position we could see the circles emerge, and not to miss out on our advantage, we took mostly distant, hazy pictures from our mobile phones to upload on Facebook. But, with this, the realisation of how easy it was going to be for us journalists sunk in. Everyone else was enviously talking about how easy it would be for *The Hindu* when everything was just across the road while they would have to continue to battle traffic to get any work done. Colleagues from other media outlets who would have to cover the Assembly and the Secretariat were already inviting themselves to *The Hindu's* canteen; somehow word of our Re.1 lunch had got around. We promised magnanimously to buy lunches all around; but we warned them that we may not be able to help if they wanted to park their cars or bikes. That would have to be across the road. Or somewhere else.

And then amongst ourselves it seemed a good idea to bet every night on just how high the building would be when we got back to work the next day. As we saw ourselves losing bets, (our estimates were not even coming close to the rate of growth of the building), we began betting more unrealistically, only stopping when we found we were still losing.

The building was soon towering over us and we had a perfect window view out to it.

Still we kept arm's length, completely overawed by the frenetic pace of activity, and out of a sense of respect for the army of workers plodding on relentlessly. Soon, when the building was big and grey enough, with its yellow panels glinting in the premature summer brightness, we decided it was time to take a look.

A grand guided tour was what we got, a courtesy one neighbour extends to another. As we walked through the circles we wowed the meticulous planning that had gone into laying out the entire building.

The final circle (or the first, depending on the way you look at it) the people's plaza was a complete breath-stopper — opening out fantastically to the world, almost like a Roman amphitheatre with a Spanish Steps frontage. Overawed as we were by that spectacle, we recovered sufficiently to spot one of the exits of the ramp that opened out into a view of *The Hindu*, and take pictures.

On Saturday evening, our neighbours are having a party and since only some of us can go, the rest of us are just going to troop up to the terrace, pull up some chairs and watch. Even if we crawl back, we will still be down in time to meet the deadline. Now, beat that!

A challenge met, and well on time

“Break-neck speed.” Ever thought this phrase could be applied with reference to a piece of work undertaken by a government in India?

It can be after March 13, 2010, the day that re-defines the pace at which a government can deliver a project. The new, mammoth Tamil Nadu Assembly complex stands testimony to this.

Time and cost overruns are nothing new to government projects. From power stations to ordinary buildings to roads and bridges, the government just does not deliver anything ever in time — that used to be the perception.

So how did this happen? No, there was no miracle or miracle-maker. Just an octogenarian Chief Minister, who would not take ‘no’ for an answer, and a set of people who left family and rest behind and worked as if their lives depended on the completion of the complex.

With a task-master in the form of Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, and a team of officials headed by Chief Secretary K.S. Sripathi and Public Works Department Secretary S. Ramasundaram, close to 5,000 persons worked on the project to complete a built up area of 87,058 square metres in record time.

It was exactly one year after the present DMK government came to power in 2006 that the decision to construct a new complex for the Assembly was taken. The very next month Mr. Karunanidhi laid the foundation stone, and the then PWD Minister, Durai Murugan, declared that he would have the place ready for the Finance Minister to present the State Budget for 2010-2011.

That declaration was in June 2008. Then came the court cases. First, over the relocation of a school on the Omandurar Government Estate campus, the site for the new building, and then, over the relocation of a temple. A few months were lost in the process. Finally, the land was formally handed over to the contractors, ECCI, five months later.

Work commenced in November 2008. There were problems at each stage, which had to be addressed. The remarkable speed with which 87,058 square metres of built-up area rising to seven floors is heading for completion is impressive.

Says Mr. Ramasundaram: “The challenge of coordinating and making sure that a labour force of more than 4,000 people worked diligently and adhered to schedules was huge. Adopting innovative technologies, careful project management, persistent reviews to sort out issues and the Chief Minister’s personal involvement has delivered the results.”

Starting from the work on the foundation, advanced techniques have been used. Piling was done using the rotary piling method where four piles are done in a day against one that is possible through conventional methods. There were problems here too. Piling had to be done deeper since the initial estimates of requirement seemed a little off the mark. That meant more delays for the beginning of the work on the super-structure.

Because of the size of the building, large beams with enormous reinforcement were required, but by using post-tensioned slabs, the beam sizes and quantity of steel required were reduced. Because of this, the time required between casting two slabs was also reduced to 10 days from 21 days. Many such acceptable shortcuts were used.

The façade — a combination of structural glazing (of about 20,000 sq m) plus sapphire blue granite cladding (spread over 10,000 sq m) — had to also be held in a structurally stable manner. Reinforced concrete walls were built all around the structure. These concrete walls came up in double-quick time because it used a plastic formwork system which can be easily assembled.

Part of the Secretariat is located at the site on the estate where an oil expeller had been kept alongside an old building. The oil expeller was kept there as a symbol of the suffering of the people during the freedom struggle. V.O. Chidambaram Pillai (1872-1936), one of the luminaries of the national movement during the pre-Gandhi era, was made to operate it when he was imprisoned at the Coimbatore Central Jail. Thirty six years ago, the oil expeller was found buried in Coimbatore and brought to Chennai for display on the estate. In the late 1990s, the oil expeller was removed to the Gandhi Mantapam complex.

Prime Minister’s speech

Following is the text of Prime Minister’s Prime Minister’s Remarks at the Opening of New Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly & Secretariat Complex:

“I am truly delighted to be here once again with the people of Tamil Nadu. Let me begin by congratulating the Chief Minister and the Government of the State for the magnificent new Legislative Assembly and Secretariat Complex, the first phase of which is being opened today.

On this happy occasion I pay tribute to the great men and women who have brought distinction and honour to the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly and Secretariat. Over nearly a century, the hallowed erstwhile premises of the State Assembly have been home to many great sons and daughters of India.

I salute, in particular, the memory of Thiru Rajagopalachari, Thiru Kamaraj and Thiru Anna Durai, who were all great leaders of our national movement, of free India and of the Tamil people.

Inspired by their leadership and example we have seen such great political leaders as Thiru C Subramaniam, Dr. R Venkatraman and Thiru M G Ramachandran serve our nation with great distinction. Each one of them has contributed to national development and the progress of Tamil Nadu. Thiru C Subramaniam played a historic role in India's liberation from hunger and dependence on imported food by providing leadership to the Green Revolution. Dr Venkataraman was the architect of Tamil Nadu's industrial development. MGR set an example for all of us with his mid-day meals scheme, which our government has improved upon.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, it gives me immense pleasure to be here in the presence of Kalaingar, Dr. Karunanidhi. It is only appropriate that the decision to construct this new complex was taken by this giant of Tamil Nadu politics, who is serving his eleventh term as Member of the Legislative Assembly and his fifth term as Chief Minister. The government of the United Progressive Alliance has greatly benefited from the wisdom and leadership of Kalaingar Karunanidhi. I have turned to him often for advice. Karunanidhi has been in our public life for over half a century. We are truly fortunate that we can draw on his experience and wisdom in managing the affairs of our nation.

Under Karunanidhi's leadership, Tamil Nadu has marched forward as a model of development in our country. It has attained new heights in rural development and agrarian transformation. Tamil Nadu is the hub of India's dynamic automobile industry. It has some of the most modern textile mills and a vibrant services economy.

The State is also the cynosure of our nation's eyes because of the high quality of its educational system and its urban development programs. It has a proud tradition of a very responsive and efficient district and municipal administration. On many fronts today, Tamil Nadu is a role model for the rest of our country.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I say this today because we are here to witness the opening of a new Legislative Assembly and Secretariat building. The Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly is one of the oldest legislative forums in the country, having come into existence in 1937 under the Government of India Act, 1935. It has produced parliamentarians of great eminence. It has been home to great leaders who have strengthened and enriched our democracy and our country.

It is the legislators and the administrators of Tamil Nadu that have laid the foundation for Tamil Nadu's development. If Tamil Nadu is one of our foremost states, one of the most agriculturally, industrially and educationally developed States, it is because of the high quality of its political leadership and administrative machinery.

I compliment the members of the panchayat raj institutions, of the municipalities, of the State assembly and of all the administrative services for the good work they have done to take Tamil Nadu forward.

Ladies and gentlemen,

But we cannot and should not rest on our laurels.

India is on the cusp of change. The time has come for a qualitative change and a quantitative leap forward. As a nation, we must strive to do things differently.

I hope the young people of Tamil Nadu will show the way forward in doing things differently. We need a more educated people, a more efficient economy, a more equitable society. We also need a creative people, an innovative people, a people who don't just try to cross hurdles but know how to avoid them. Finding new ways to go forward. New ways to do old things. The age of innovation is upon us. If we do not innovate, we will be left behind by history.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You are the proud inheritors of the rich legacy of the Dravidian Movement and its quest for social justice and equity. No society can move forward without these ideals being put into practice. I hope that these ideals will continue to guide the work of the Tamil Nadu Assembly and the Tamil Nadu Government.

Legislatures are sacred places. They are places for working for the cause of our sisters and brothers who have bestowed upon us the privilege to represent them. They are places for upholding the ideals of our Constitution and indeed for bringing them into action.

Legislators appraise contemporary legislation and enact new laws. To discharge their responsibility effectively they should not only be alert and well informed but should also be alive to the basic concerns of Indian polity. All power has to be regarded as societal trust and to be used for public good. Only then would our legislators be able to work effectively towards providing our people a life of dignity and self respect. Legislators are also watchdogs of public finances and they must ensure that there is no wasteful use of public money, and that the resource mobilization processes do not adversely affect the incentives for savings, risk bearing and the quest for entrepreneurship and pursuit of innovation. Collectively they need to deal sternly with corruption and inefficiency in our governance processes. All this is a tall order but I am sure that in these new premises we will witness new heights of legislative competence and legislative propriety, with discussions being guided by the spirit of tolerance, accommodation and deep and abiding concern for the well being of the common people.

I am also sure that in these new premises, where the voice of the Tamil people will be articulated by their representatives, we will hear the echo of your glorious past. I hope the members of the Tamil Nadu legislature and its civil servants will think big, think out-of-the-box and show the way forward to the rest of India.

I hope in these premises we will see a new India speaking, a new Tamil Nadu speaking, a new India being guided, a new India being inspired by the shining example of the Tamil people. With these words I wish you the best in years to come. May your path be blessed."

The story of the search

For over 25 years, the Tamil Nadu State government and policy makers were in search of a suitable location for the Secretariat.

It all started with the decision of the M.G. Ramachandran regime in May 1983 to build a Secretariat building opposite Fort. St. George. At the height of water scarcity in Chennai, MGR had even floated the idea of shifting the administrative capital of the State to somewhere near Tiruchi. But, this dream did not receive popular approval.

Nearly 20 years later, in May 2002, Jayalalithaa, then the Chief Minister, announced in the Assembly that the government was considering a 2,000-acre administrative city near Mamallapuram.

Later it was stated that the proposed city would come up in Thiruvudanthai and Thaiyur villages, about 40 km south of Chennai. In January 2003, the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) signed an agreement with the Construction Industry Development Board of Malaysia for a feasibility study of the administrative city project.

Subsequently, Ms. Jayalalithaa informed the Assembly that as the proposed administrative city would take 15 to 25 years to build, the Secretariat would be shifted to a vacant space opposite the Marina Beach in two years. The new building would be more majestic than Bangalore's Vidhana Soudha, she asserted.

Originally, the Lady Willingdon College campus was chosen. But, since the area (about 15 acres) of the campus was found inadequate, the then Chief Minister, in April 2003, announced the 30-acre Queen Mary's College campus. However, this plan was abandoned because of a variety of reasons — political and legal.

Five months later, the government decided to establish the Secretariat over an extent of 43 acres in Kotturpuram.

The land belonged to Anna University, the Madras University and the State Government Data Centre. The Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority was entrusted with the work of selecting the architect and the construction agency apart from being authorised to mobilise funds.

Five months later, the government decided to establish the Secretariat over an extent of 43 acres in Kotturpuram. In October that year, Ms. Jayalalithaa laid the foundation stone for the project. Seven months later, there was rethinking on the project.

In May 2007, when the Assembly organised celebrations to mark the completion of 50 years of association of Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi with the legislature, the idea of constructing the Assembly-Secretariat complex was mooted. Mr. Karunanidhi laid the foundation stone in June 2008 and the site was formally handed over to the contractors five months later.

The Assembly-Secretariat complex will have two blocks — Block 'A' and Block 'B.' The seven-storey Block 'A' houses the Legislative Assembly Hall and the Assembly Secretariat, besides the offices of the Governor, the Chief Minister, Ministers, the Chief Secretary and certain core departments such as Finance and Home.

The cost of construction of this block has been revised at Rs. 450 crore. In December 2009, work on the construction of the seven-storey Block 'B' started. With a cost estimate of Rs. 280 crore, the work was expected to be completed in 18 months. This block will house a host of departments.

The plinth area figures of Block 'A' and Block 'B' are 9,30,297 sq ft and 7,43,900 sq ft respectively.

Uttaramerur model of democracy

Explaining the concepts behind the grand new Secretariat complex in Chennai, Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi referred to the great inspiration Tamil Nadu can draw from the Uttaramerur inscription. It testifies to the historical fact that nearly 1,100 years ago, a village had an elaborate and highly refined electoral system and even a written constitution prescribing the mode of elections. The details of this system of elective village democracy are inscribed on the walls of the village assembly (grama sabha mandapa), a rectangular structure made of granite slabs.

“This inscription, dated around 920 A.D. in the reign of Parantaka Chola [907-955 A.D.],” explains Dr. R. Nagaswamy, former Director of the Tamil Nadu Department of Archaeology, “is an outstanding document in the history of India. It is a veritable written constitution of the village assembly that functioned 1,000 years ago,” Dr. Nagaswamy is the author of a book, Uttaramerur, the Historic Village in Tamil Nadu, which has been published in both English and Tamil.” The inscription, he adds, “gives astonishing details about the constitution of wards, the qualification of candidates standing for elections, the disqualification norms, the mode of election, the constitution of committees with elected members, the functions of those committees, the power to remove the wrongdoer, etc...”

But that is not all. “On the walls of the mandapa,” he points out, “are inscribed a variety of secular transactions of the village, dealing with administrative, judicial, commercial, agricultural, transportation and irrigation regulations, as administered by the then village assembly, giving a vivid picture of the efficient administration of the village society in the bygone ages.”

The villagers even had the right to recall the elected representatives if they failed in their duty.

Uttaramerur, which has a 1,250-year history, is situated in Kancheepuram district, about 90 km from Chennai. The Pallava king Nandivarman II established it around 750 A.D. The Pallavas, the Cholas, the Pandyas, the Sambuvarayars, the Vijayanagara Rayas, and the Nayaks successively ruled it. The village has three important temples, the Sundara Varadaraja Perumal temple, the Subramanya temple, and the Kailasanatha temple.

The three temples have a large number of inscriptions, notably those from the reigns of Raja Raja Chola (985-1014 A.D.), his son Rajendra Chola, and the Vijayanagar emperor Krishnadeva Raya. Rajendra Chola as well as Krishnadeva Raya visited Uttaramerur.

Uttaramerur, built on the canons of the agama texts, has the village assembly mandapa at the centre. All the temples are oriented with reference to the mandapa.

Scholars are of the view that while village assemblies might have existed before the period of Parantaka Chola, it was during his reign that the village administration was honed into a perfect system through elections. In fact, inscriptions on temple walls in several parts of Tamil Nadu refer to village assemblies. "But it is at Uttaramerur on the walls of the village assembly (mandapa) itself that we have the earliest inscriptions with complete information about how the elected village assembly functioned," notes R. Sivanandam, epigraphist at the Tamil Nadu Department of Archaeology.

The practice

R. Vasanthakalyani, retired chief epigraphist-cum-instructor at the department, adds that the entire village, including infants, had to be present at the village assembly mandapa at Uttaramerur when elections were held. Only the sick and those who had gone on a pilgrimage were exempt.

There were committees for the maintenance of irrigation tanks, roads, to provide relief during drought, to test gold, and so forth.

There was another astonishing feature of the elective system in the village. "The village assembly of Uttaramerur," Dr. Nagaswamy marvels, "drafted the constitution for the elections. The salient features were as follows: the village was divided into 30 wards, one representative elected for each. Specific qualifications were prescribed for those who wanted to contest.

The essential criteria were age limit, possession of immovable property, and minimum educational qualification. Those who wanted to be elected should be above 35 years of age and below 70."

Only those who owned land that attracted tax could contest elections. Another stipulation, Dr. Nagaswamy points out, was that such owners should possess a house built on a legally owned site (not on public poromboke). A person serving in any of the committees could not contest again for the next three terms, each term lasting a year.

Elected members who accepted bribes, misappropriated others' property, committed incest, or acted against the public interest suffered disqualification.

Tamil Nadu's Legislature gets a grand, green home

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh hails State as being in the forefront of India's development and the quest for social justice.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on 13.03.2010 declared open the world's first green legislature building, the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly-Secretariat Complex, on the Omanthoorar Government Estate here, heralding the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Tamil Nadu's legislature.

Witnessed by Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, Congress president Sonia Gandhi, Assembly Speaker R. Avudaiappan, Madras High Court Chief Justice H.L. Gokhale and a host of other dignitaries, Dr. Singh pressed the button to unveil the plaque marking the inauguration of the complex to the strains of traditional Nagaswaram music.

The Prime Minister, in his 15-minute address, hailed the leadership of Mr. Karunanidhi and said Tamil Nadu had marched forward as a model of development in the country. "It has attained new heights in rural development and agrarian transformation. Tamil Nadu is the hub of India's dynamic automobile industry."

The people of the State, Dr. Singh said, were the "proud inheritors of the rich legacy of the Dravidian movement and its quest for social justice and equity. No society can move forward without these ideals being put into practice."

Praising legislators and the administrators of the State for having laid the foundation for the State's development, Dr. Singh said: "If Tamil Nadu is one of our foremost States, one of the most agriculturally, industrially and educationally developed States, it is because of the high quality of its political leadership and administrative machinery."

Expressing the hope that the State's youth would show the way forward in doing things differently, he said, "We need more educated people, more efficient economy, more equitable society. We also need creative people, innovative people, people who don't just try to cross hurdles but know how to avoid them."

Emphasising that all power should be regarded as societal trust and is to be used for public good, the Prime Minister said legislators were also watchdogs of public finances and they should ensure that there was no wasteful use of public money. Collectively, they needed to deal sternly with corruption and inefficiency in governance processes.

"On these new premises, we will witness new heights of legislative competence and legislative propriety, with discussions being guided by the spirit of tolerance, accommodation and deep and abiding concern for the well-being of the common people."

He called upon members of the Tamil Nadu legislature and civil servants to "think big and think out of the box."

Ms. Gandhi, who released a souvenir, said the State had been a model of "inclusive growth and development" in many respects. Right from the 1950s, the State had pioneered and shown the way in different ways — education, health, nutrition, family welfare, social security and rural development. "Through the decades, its political leadership has combined a profound commitment to social justice and empowerment of the weaker sections of society with a continuing emphasis on industrialisation, development and growth."

Describing the complex as a “magnificent and resplendent” building, Ms. Gandhi said though many experts and others worked tirelessly for the completion of the complex, “the spirit behind is that of Mr. M. Karunanidhi.”

Commending the Chief Minister for his dedication, she referred to his visit to the project site on numerous occasions during the construction.

The Chief Minister said that apart from striving hard to uplift the downtrodden of the State through appropriate schemes and programmes, “We have never forgotten our lofty objective of elevating our mother tongue Tamil to the top position and celebrate its glory.”

He recalled that the government headed by the Justice Party, a precursor of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, was the first to be installed in the Madras Legislative Council and this was inaugurated by the Duke of Connaught in January 1921.

He handed over to Dr. Singh a copy of the book “Four Score & More: The History of Music Academy, Madras” authored by V. Sriram and Malathi Rangaswami.

Historic moments, historic personalities

As it moves into its new home, here is a potted history marking some moments in the life of the Tamil Nadu Legislature:

In early 1927, Muthulakshmy Reddy, the well-known medical practitioner and social activist, became the first woman legislator in the country when she was nominated by Viscount Goschen, Madras Governor, to the Madras Legislative Council. She went on to become the Deputy President of the Council.

An adjournment motion moved by Congress leader S. Satyamurti against the confiscation of books containing Subramania Bharati's songs was adopted by the Legislative Council in October 1928.

Rukmini Lakshmi pathy was the first woman elected to the Legislative Assembly. She held the post of Deputy Speaker of the Assembly during the period July 1937 to October 1945. She also had the distinction of being the first woman Minister in the State when she became Health Minister in 1946 in the Prakasam Ministry.

U. Rama Rao and U. Krishna Rao formed the only father-son duo to become the presiding officers of the two Houses in the State. Rama Rao was the Chairman of the Council during 1937-45, while his son became the Speaker of the Assembly in April 1957. Krishna Rao held the post till August 3, 1961, when he died.

C. Rajagopalachari, popularly known as Rajaji, became the first elected Chief Minister (then called Premier) of the State in 1937. Fifteen years later, when he became the Chief Minister again, he became the first non-elected Chief Minister as he was a nominated member of the Legislative Council.

Exactly a month after Independence, the Legislative Assembly adopted a resolution, greeting Mahatma Gandhi and recording its appreciation of the services of those who had suffered and sacrificed for the cause of freedom. On September 16, the Legislative Council adopted a similar resolution.

It was Omandur P. Ramaswamy Reddi who was Chief Minister of the State at the time of Independence. The Government Estate is named after him.

K. Kamaraj, who was Chief Minister during 1954-1963, had the distinction of facing the general Assembly elections and retaining power twice — in 1957 and in 1962.

C.N. Annadurai, who was Chief Minister of the State barely for two years (1967 to 1969), passed away while in office. So did M.G. Ramachandran, who was Chief Minister for 10 years (1977-1987) with a four-month break in 1980.

Both Houses of the Legislature organised a function at the Assembly Hall on the midnight of August 14, 1972 to mark the silver jubilee of Independence. K.K. Shah, the then Governor of the State, addressed the members.

At the stroke of midnight, the members stood in silence for two minutes in memory of those who sacrificed their lives during the freedom struggle.

In July 1997, a function was organised at the Madras University Centenary Auditorium to celebrate the platinum jubilee of the State Legislature and the diamond jubilee of the Assembly. R. Venkataraman, former President, and C. Subramaniam, who was State Finance Minister during 1952-1962 and later became Union Agriculture and Finance Minister, attended it. M. Karunanidhi, the only person to have been sworn in Chief Minister of the State five times, had the distinction of being at the helm of affairs during the silver jubilee and golden jubilee celebrations of Independence.

When Jayalalithaa became Chief Minister in June 1991, she became the youngest person to hold the post: she was 43. When Mr. Karunanidhi was sworn in Chief Minister for the first time in February 1969, he was 44.

Deputy Chief Minister M.K. Stalin is the only person to have held the post of Member of Legislative Assembly and Chennai Mayor concurrently (during 1996-2002).

Structure for the people

The new Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly reaches out to all

Valluvar in his Tirukkural lists a number of qualities a good king should possess, and in the sixth kural of Iraimaatchi says: *Kaatchik Keliyan Kadunchollan Allanel/Meekkoorum Mannan Nilam.* (Where [the] king is easy of access, where no harsh word repels, That land's high praises every subject swells.)

— G.U. Pope, and others

In a representative democracy, where the government is of the people and for the people, it is essential that the seats of executive and legislative power be accessible to the people. By shifting the Assembly complex to its new location abutting an arterial road of Chennai, the government will be better able to feel the pulse of its people.

Madras, for the British, was an important post on the Cholamandala coast, and it was no wonder that the seat of authority in the early years overlooked the Bay of Bengal. After having been the seat of the Presidency during British rule, post-Independence Madras, while it was still forging for itself a new identity as the capital of a new-born State, naturally looked to the 300-year-old Fort St. George complex to house its representatives.

In the current century, however, when the city's heart is moving inward and beats in sync with the latest in technology, when it has expanded so deep into the hinterland that the Marina Beach has become, even for some of its citizens, a tourist spot visited only so often, the old Assembly complex, for all its historical value, is too distant from its people.

A more central location would have been ideal logically, but would have involved a Tughlaqian effort, and hence would have defeated its purpose.

At a time when analysts and laymen alike are bemoaning the political apathy in civil society, all will agree that the institutions of political discourse, if not its terms and forms, need to be constantly in the public eye to remind the people that politics is not the practice of a professional class, but the essence of civil life; that representative democracy is not the writing away of the rights to decide the course of society. Anyone who has visited the labyrinth that was the Assembly complex at Fort St. George will appreciate the need for a modern touch to the institutions that represent the people.

The new Assembly complex is, then, also a symbol of the new approach to governance, and evokes the freedom and the space that has to enter political discourse.

And for those who would have imposing and grand structures rooted in the architecture of the past, the new Assembly complex, apart from the symbols embedded in its design, is built for the present and the future and it is in its function that it will achieve its greatest value. They will do well to remember that Raja Raja I is known now for his innovations — not for his imitations.
