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CONSERVATION

Still beautiful, after 150 years

KEYA ACHARYA

One family in Ooty battles to maintain and renovate its heritage home.

Its current owners, the Sreenivasan family, have spent a fair fortune in maintaining and renovating the house.



An old beauty: Built in typical colonial style. - Photos: Keya Acharya

A PEEK through the gate down the pebbled walkway surrounded by old, gnarled trees and fresh gardens on either side to the main, obviously English bungalow is like taking a journey into history. Amazingly, that history is still being continued in this charming residence.

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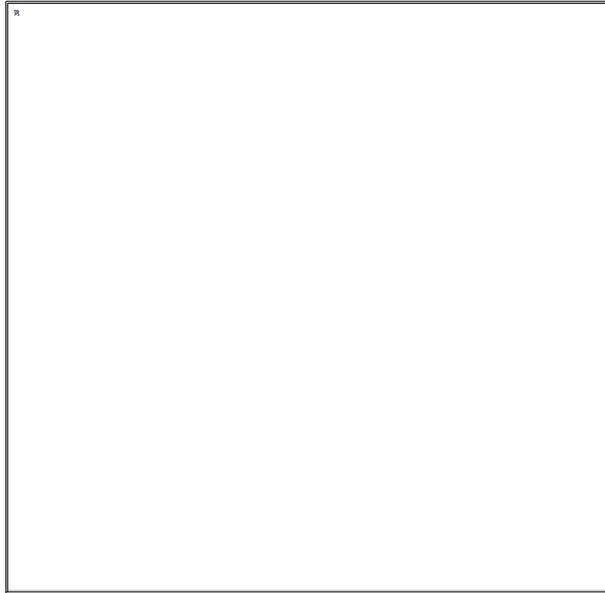
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Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the last Dewan of Travancore, bought "Sunningdale" in Ooty in the early 1900s as 'frontage' for his house a few yards below. Ramaswamy Iyer's house, now running as the CPR Foundation and for which Sunningdale was bought, had his name on its records in 1837. I still have childhood memories of playing by that streamside," says Geetha Srinivasan, Ramaswamy Iyer's granddaughter, who inherited the house from her father, CPR's son C.R.V. Subban.

Used by washermen

That "streamside" is the Kodapaman channel, which 150-odd years ago was used by the washermen of the Raj to keep its officers looking clean and smart. Sunningdale was thus called "Dobie Hall" (for *dhobi* or launderer) around 1905.

Geetha, who is not new to historical buildings as the Convenor of INTACH-Nilgiris Chapter, came to Sunningdale with her husband, former Atomic Energy Commission chairman, M.R. Sreenivasan, when he retired. This beautiful cottage was around back in 1858 when General Cleveland, a man of means with over five properties and commanding the military services there, bought it possibly from a forest officer. By 1905, the place's name had changed to Dobie Hall.

The house is in typical colonial style with a front, glass-covered "morning room", complete with hat-stand and reading-rack, still graceful 150 years later with rows of the beautiful African violets at the windows. There is a pantry adjoining the dining room with its kitchen yards away from the main house, a feature that no doubt caused the cooks of those days much fluster in serving their "masters" hot food.

Before the advent of that convenience, the microwave oven, tea garden *mamsaabs* (or *mamsahibs*) living in similar houses would ensure a live-coal *chula* or iron stove to re-heat food brought from the kitchen before being served at the table. There are plenty of "tea-stories" on how good soup from the kitchen turned to kitchen slop at the dinner table during the rains!

At Ooty, though, *mamsaabs* were few; most were away with their school-going children in England or unable to weather the climate and the frequent transfers of their military husbands.

The military husbands, on the other hand, kept local women as mistresses who did not reside in these houses. It is quite possible that Sunningdale had no mistress of the house in mind when built. For a house with numerous rooms for daily living, it earlier had only two bedrooms.

Its current owners, the Sreenivasan family, have spent a fair fortune in maintaining and renovating the house. Its walls were made basically from lime-mortar, which is a mixture of limestone, cow dung, topped with eggs for binding and stamped by foot to be finally shaped by hand into bricks. "When these houses were first built, the climate was very different with grassy downs as the main ecological feature," says Dr. Sreenivasan. "The moisture from the heavy rains would then be absorbed by this limestone wall."

But monoculture plantation of the water-intensive eucalyptus together with massive deforestation has changed Ooty's microclimate to a dryness that is now cracking these walls. Furthermore, intensive and water-intensive agriculture has lowered groundwater tables, making the house tilt towards the Kodapaman canal as its clayey soils lean towards moisture from the canal. The Sreenivasans have been propping up Sunningdale through trial-and-error. They tried lintel and steel beams to keep the house upright, but new cracks would appear at the edge because of the heavy weight.

They now have reinforced concrete pole buttresses on the exterior of the house to prevent it inclining, spending Rs. 20,00,000 in 14 years towards Sunningdale's maintenance.

The couple have tried, and failed, to get the expenses of house repair as a waiver in their income tax through a clause that allows a certain percentage waiver to normal house-owners. "Surely the government can give heritage house-owners some incentive or tax break to help preserve these houses?" asks Geetha. "There is not even an insurance system from which we could claim this genuine expense," she adds.

Considering that the charm of Ooty for the State's tourism lies in its heritage, there is nothing, not even a legislation requiring permission from the government, to demolish these old beauties. That the conservation of Ooty's heritage needs a policy is not something the government has thought of.

Heritage zone

Geetha appeals to the government to declare the St. Stephen's Church, the oldest in the Nilgiris, and the adjoining Collectorate buildings as a Heritage Zone.

INTACH had previously successfully prevented the District Court, inside the Collectorate compound, from being demolished. But without government legal backing, how much can INTACH do?

Meanwhile Geetha says her daughter, Sharada now at Bangalore, has agreed to live in the house after them. "She says to make sure I leave enough money to be able to prop Sunningdale up for another generation!"

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