

ONE HUNDRED – NOT OUT

(A Centenary History of the Coimbatore Club)

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TO ALL THOSE

WHO HAVE MADE THIS

HISTORY POSSIBLE

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

1. THE FOUNDING FATHERS
2. THE EARLY YEARS
3. THE FLY IN THE OINTMENT
4. THE AGE OF EXPANSION
5. WE ARE NOT AMUSED
6. THE AGE OF MATURITY
7. THE ENGLISH CLUB

INTRODUCTION

In the year 1903, some of the old records concerned with the formation of the Coimbatore Club were discovered by the merest accident when a godown containing old boxes were being cleaned out. Until then, these records seem to have been of greater interest to white ants than to the members of the club. They had also suffered from damp and the ravages of time, but fortunately, the more important ones were in a sufficiently good state of preservation as to be legible. Mr. Gadsden, the then secretary compiled a brief history of founding of the club from these documents. This was brought up – to – date in 1993 by Mr. Blackstone who, apart from documentary evidence, also added a few lighter touches. Events since 1933 are within the living memory of many of the older members who were approached for any information that they might have in the form of interesting incidents, anecdotes or photographs.

The various office bearers of the club have been extremely punctilious in the matter of keeping records and the minutes of every committee meeting as well as every general body meeting have been carefully preserved for us to this day. But writing the history of the club from the information available in the minutes book is like painting a portrait from an unearthed skeleton. When for example the committee expressed its displeasure at the remarks made by a member in the complaints book as being in bad taste, we are left in the dark as to what those remarks were. While the decisions made over various issues at different times are known, we are often in the dark as to the motivating factors that led to them. But fortunately, some of the complaints books have survived the ravages of times as well as the wrath of successive committees and they have thrown some light on the needs, attitudes and frustrations of members at various times.

All these materials mentioned above have been used in preparing this centenary volume.

In writing such a history, one could record a chronology of events regarding the starting, the progress of the club, the lists of office bearers, the development of facilities, the important events, and so on. Such a history is not likely to be of interest to anyone except perhaps the older members for whom they would bring back nostalgic memories. But a new member is likely to ask, 'After all, what does it matter to us whether the billiard table was purchased in 1890 or in 1910?' The story could perhaps be made more interesting by adding amusing incidents and episodes in the life of the club at various

times. But when such an attempt was made by Mr. Blackstone in 1933, it was criticized by one member of the committee in no uncertain terms. He commented.

“Anecdotes of a frivolous type are out of place in a club history. The ‘Chummary’ seems to have had only one claim to fame – alcoholic intemperance. Genuine humour is not to be expected of wits bemused by drink. The unseemly behaviour of past members cannot possibly be of interest to future members. The authors of practical jokes have no real claim to fame. It is no doubt soothing to our own self esteem that our predecessors behaved no better than we do..... Such things are best forgotten”.

But in spite of such a superior outlook, amusing incidents and anecdotes of the past have continued to circulate, adding spice to a life that otherwise threatened to become a dull routine. The ability to let one’s hair down without causing too much damage and at the same time provide some amusement to others has been a tradition in most clubs and the exploits of the more boisterous or boozy members have always been looked upon with tolerant good humour and have become a part of the traditions of the club. Perhaps, what added spice to an otherwise routine existence was a dash of eccentricity exhibited by members from time to time which raised it above the level of mediocrity in an age when conformity to accepted standards was considered an essential path to success.

Of course, one could write this history as a microcosm of British social life in India in the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. It could be treated as a useful sociological document reflecting the values, attitudes and relationships of the British ruling class in a district headquarters town. This necessarily involves making a deep study of events and their interpretation according to the social norms of the period. Such a study would be of interest to the social historian, as well as for the general reader.

What has been attempted in these pages is a combination of all these three aspects of the club history namely, a history of the club’s growth in terms of membership, facilities and so on, a record or authenticated events and anecdotes of interest or amusement and an attempt to relate these to the social and cultural attitudes of the period. It is inevitable that such an interpretation should necessarily reflect the attitude of the writer.

Perhaps, this combination would be of interest to the largest number of people-both members and non – members.

1. THE FOUNDING FATHERS

The social life of the British in India in the second half of the nineteenth century was distinctly different from the first half. The great rebellion of 1857 and the consequent replacement of the East India Company by British Parliament made a tremendous difference. While once the white sahibs had fraternized with the Rajas and Zamindars and even wealthy Indian merchants, the new imperialism demanded that they should consider themselves as exclusive super brahmins. In the past, it was not considered disrespectful to have local mistresses or even to marry them, but the new morality demanded that such liaisons should not be resorted to. The situation was considerably eased by the opening of the Suez Canal which enabled a large number of young eligible spinsters from England to face the long and hazardous journey to India. The soldiers were advised to 'sweat the sex out of you' and made to play an interminable number of football matches in an attempt to put the precept into practice. The new breed of civil servants – known as 'competition – wallahs' by the old hands who did not have to undergo any such humiliating experience as an examination for entry into the civil service – were imbued with the ideas of Victorian morality and the spirit of new imperialism. Their training as well as the atmosphere in India strengthened the feeling of caste and inspired them with a sense of mission. All this meant social exclusiveness from the local population in every sense of the word and a feeling of lonely splendour in an alien land. While the ordinary soldiers could be made to 'sweat it out' on the football field, the officers, the civil servants and the increasing number of business men had to resort to other means in order to spend their leisure hours according to the requirements of Victorian ethics and imperialistic prestige. A number of activities were organized for their benefit – particularly in the smaller towns where the number of Britishers was less and more closely knit. A club was founded in every district headquarters town.

The first mention of the 'Coimbatore Club' occurs in the orders of the Collector of Coimbatore, Mr. Wedderburn, in June 1873 when the Tahsildar was asked to hand over a plot of land to 'The Honorary Secretary of the Coimbatore Club'. Therefore, we may take it that the club came into existence in that year.

However, the earliest papers found go back to the year 1859 at which time there was a book club in existence. The only places of physical recreation seem to have been the racquet court (the present swimming pool) and the croquet ground (the present tennis courts). The racquet court was built in 1844 and the masonry work is a standing tribute to the solid and painstaking methods of the period. A swimming bath was built about the

same time on the other side of Trichy Road. This however was not as well done and had to be rebuilt in 1861 by Mr. Robert Stanes. After enjoying various degrees of popularity, it was totally abandoned in about 1910. The book club, the racquet court and swimming bath were entirely separate institutions and a member of one was not necessarily a member of the others.

The main objective of the book club was the purchase and circulation of English periodicals and magazines, but there was also a considerable number of books in the house of the hony. Secretary. Among the early records of the book club, the first of any interest is dated 24th February 1859. It is a circular sent by the hony. Secretary Mr. J. Miller asking the members to vote on a proposal made by a member 'that as no books were circulated during the months of October, November and December, no subscription be paid for those months'. Needless to say, even in those good old days, the proposal was carried by a large majority, only one member having the courage to vote against it! But the fiercely democratic traditions of the club even in those early days are obvious!

Whether it was due to these democratic traditions or to some other reason, in the same year, the old book club was dissolved and a new one formed. But one of the members of the old club who was residing in Ooty at that time was indignant because the books of the old book club were all sold. Writing to the hony. Secretary on 30th March 1859, he complains of 'a literary dearth four or five months' and adds, 'when the club is in full swing again with a large stock in hand, I shall be happy to join it'. The hony. Secretary's reply to this letter was more forcible than polite and proved too pungent even for white ants and that member did not join the book club.

(Incidentally, this complaint must be unique, for apart from being the first recorded complaint, it is also the only time that any member has complained of a 'literary dearth')

The subscriptions to the club were apparently collected by means of a subscription book and the hony. Secretary seems to have experienced the usual (?) difficulty in collecting money. In May 1859, he sent round the following circular.

Memo

Coimbatore Book Club

"This is too bad – Sullivan pays and does not sign. Irvine signs but does not pay. Sweet does neither but perhaps he boned (?) the blotting paper, which has been abstracted today for the fourth time within these two months!

May 5th, 1859 J. M."

But the secretary got very little sympathy from the members to whom he appealed. They seemed to consider it a good opportunity for the exercise of their wit and proceeded to compose verses on the back of the circular! Nevertheless, the flourishing (?) condition of the club is revealed by the fact that the subscription was reduced from Rs. 5 to Rs. 3/8/- per month.

The book club continued to flourish on the old lines when it was decided to build a library. On 3rd April, 1873, it was resolved to apply to the collector for the 'piece of ground immediately above the croquet ground to the north and between the two roads leading to the racquet court from the race course, for the purpose of building a reading room.' The land was handed over in June 1873, and a circular was sent out for contributions, 'to erect a building in every way worthy of the Coimbatore Book Club and this station'. A sale got up by the ladies seems to have been fairly successful, for they realized a sum of Rs.273 and a balance of Rs.20 from the cricket club were also utilized for the building fund. What the cricketers thought about it is not recorded!

The following were the original subscribers to the club in response to the appeal:

Messrs. Balmer	Rs. 50	Messrs. Francklyn	Rs. 25
Clogstoun	50	Maltly	25
Ellis	50	Baber	25
Davies	50	Horsburgh	25
Grimes	50	Underwood	75
Hessey	50	Dyer	30
Thompson	50	Galton	25
Scott	50	Campbell	20
Rogers	50	Cook	20
Clocte	50	Winscombe	20
Douglas	50	Garment	20
Stanes	50	Cornish	15
Bean	50	Court	10
Rice	25	Grigg	10
Pope	25	Rose	10
Gibson	25		

The names given above may be taken to form the original list of members of the Coimbatore Club as distinguished from the Coimbatore book club. The amount thus subscribed came to Rs. 1400 and the additional Rs. 600 which was required to meet the

estimate of Rs. 2000 for the new building had already been subscribed the previous year. The first payment to the contractor was made in November 1873, but the final payment receipt is not dated, but it must have been prior to August 1874, as on the 17th of that month, the 'first meeting of the members of the Coimbatore Club was held in the reading room'. The 'reading room' referred to is the present mixed bar which is the oldest part of the club.

The meeting was held for the purpose of passing the rules which had been drawn up in accordance with a resolution passed at a meeting held on the 25th May 1874. The following members were present at this meeting:

Messrs. A. Wedderburn,
C. J. Rogers,
Capt. J. G. Clocte,
J. Garnet,
F. M. Kindersley,
W. G. Underwood,
C.J. Douglas
J.C. Winscombe,
H. R. Grimes.

Mr. Winscombe presided over the meeting and Mr. Grimes was the hony. Secretary. The first copy of the "The Rules of the Coimbatore Club' was passed at this meeting.

The croquet ground, the racquet court and the swimming bath were all amalgamated with the club though the accounts were shown separately for the first year. The subscription to the club was fixed as follows:

Donation	Rs. 25
Monthly subscription	Rs. 7

But by the time the rules were passed, the club was well and truly in business. Looking back on the last hundred years of club history for a moment, it is a somewhat sobering thought that it should have been the book club that gave birth to the Coimbatore Club. Except in the very early years, the library has not played a particularly conspicuous part in its history. In spite of sporadic attempts at classifying and preserving the books, all the old ones have disappeared – the thermal as well as the 'intellectual' climate not being conducive to their preservation. In fact, anything 'intellectual' has generally been looked upon with considerable misgivings by the average member and the centre of gravity of the club has always been the bar. Evidently, a marriage of convenience between croquet, swimming and reading gives rise to somewhat unexpected progeny.

2. THE EARLY YEARS

Racquet and croquet and reading were not adequate to absorb all the surplus energies of members even in those early days and in 1875, it was resolved that the 'east room be appropriated for whist and smoking'. It is perhaps difficult for a later generation of members to understand that in those days, no liquor of any kind was kept at the club and it seems to have been the practice for members to take it by turns to bring their bottle of whisky to the club, the supply of soda water being in the hands of the writer.

In October 1875, the subject of a billiard table was first mooted and an estimate was called for, but it was not until 1886 that it materialized. The battle of the billiard table seems to have been long and arduous with fortunes fluctuating between the radicals wanting to introduce new fangled ideas and the 'no changers' digging in for the status quo. But the final victory was won by the radicals in 1886 when the billiard room was built and the table set up.

In October 1876, a general meeting was called to consider ways and means for a billiard room' and a resolution was passed that the construction of the billiard room be commenced and that £ 50 be remitted for a table. One would naturally suppose that having gone that far, the supporters of the proposal would have carried it through, but in November of the same year, one of the members who had taken up debentures removed his name with the result that the sum subscribed fell short of about Rs. 1000. It was then decided to bring the matter before another general meeting. This was done only in December 1878 when Messrs. Cole and Stewart proposed tersely 'To mortgage the club and buy a billiard table'. This magnificent proposal was carried unanimously, but apparently, nothing was done to implement it. (May be, there was no one who would accept the club property as mortgage in those somewhat prudent days!) But in July 1879, Messrs. Cloete and Russel proposed that 'a billiard room be built and funds raised on the security of the club property'. To this more moderately worded proposal, the following amendment was proposed, 'that neither the club nor club property be made responsible for a loan for the billiard table'. The amendment was carried and the project again had to be dropped.

Nothing seems to have been done till 1886 when there appears a resolution asking Col. Body to prepare plans and estimates for a billiard room and the committee was authorized to raise Rs. 5000 on debentures. The members on this occasion were determined that the proposal should go through, for within three months we find another resolution that the billiard room and billiard table be insured for Rs.5000. This is the present mixed billiard room.

This struggle between the ‘innovators’ and the ‘no-changers’ have gone on ever since. The innovators have generally wanted new activities to be started out of club funds while the ‘no-changers’ have maintained that if any members wanted to start any new activities, they should pay for it and not use the club funds for that purpose.

To go back for a moment to the pre - billiard era, in May 1877, the hony. Secretary. Capt. Clocte issued a memorandum on the present condition and prospects of the club. He brought to the notice of the members that having started in 1874 with a balance of Rs. 466 the club was in debt to the extent of Rs.300 and he ascribed this to the fact that the subscription was too low. The monthly subscription at that time was Rs. 7 but it must be borne in mind that this covered everything-racquet, croquet, swimming bath and library. He suggested that each department of the club should be made self – supporting and that an additional subscription be levied under each head. His suggestions were accepted and the following scales of subscription were introduced.

Library	Rs.	6	per mensem
Racquet	Rs.	2	“
Swimming	Rs.	1/8	“
Whist	Rs.	-/8/-	“

This subscription for the Podanur members was fixed at Rs. 3/8. This arrangement seems to have put the club finances on a more satisfactory basis and no alteration of this scale was made for many years.

In 1882 Col. Clocte gave up the honorary secretaryship and left a note on the position of the club at that time. In this note, the liabilities are shown as Rs. 700 and the assets at Rs. 3500 ‘excluding the value of building and grounds and books’. He however showed a certain need of repentance for this providing for an ungrateful posterity in remarking “our debenture debt should be raised to Rs.2000 or Rs.3000 and the additional money spent on general improvement of the club for the present members. As we are now progressing, we are simply amassing wealth for our successors”. In this, as on several occasions during his long term of office as hony. Secretary, Col. Clocte gave expression to some business-like views with regard to club management.

On the strength of these proposals, in June 1883, the committee decided to raise Rs.2000 in debentures, and the following additions and improvements to the club were carried out :-

1. Three dressing rooms were added to the Swimming bath
2. Whist and store rooms were enlarged
3. A boarded floor was laid down in the library
4. The racquet court walls were lined with cement

The first mention of the stores in the club records was in 1878 when it was resolved to purchase £ 50 worth of stores from the Army and Navy Stores, £ 50 worth from Morris, £ 25 worth of sherry in cask, £ 25 worth after – dinner claret from Europe, and a case of breakfast claret from Pondicherry. The money for these purchases must have been privately subscribed as these items find no place in the club accounts. In February 1879, it was decided to start a co-operative society and a circular was sent round inviting members to take up shares. Each shareholder was required to subscribe £ 50 and the society was worked on the system of remitting money directly to Europe for stores and charging subscribers 10 % and non – subscribers 20 % over and above the actual cost of stores delivered in Coimbatore. Capt. Cloete seems to have been the prime mover in starting this society and 27 shares were taken up immediately. The co-operative society was quite distinct from the club till July 1879 when the committee submitted a full scheme for the amalgamation of the two concerns and this was approved on 1 st August 1879.

On 15th December 1887, it was proposed to close the stores entirely and the subject was brought up again before a general meeting in April 1888. It would appear that large quantities of stores had regularly been imported from England and that the club had suffered considerable losses owing to the quantity that had to be condemned. At the general meeting, an amendment was proposed “to sell only such stores as are in general demand”. This amendment was carried and sub – committee was appointed to select stores. In January 1892 the committee requested Mr. Kidd to arrange with the club writer, Mr. Turnbull to run the club stores. The arrangement introduced was that the stores were to be purchased as hitherto but Mr. Turnbull was to get a percentage on all sales in addition to his salary. This arrangement was in force for nearly two years and was then condemned as unsatisfactory.

Leaving cards was a social obligation for the ladies in those days and calling boxes were prominent features in almost every club. It is therefore difficult to realise that any argument could be advanced against a card rack being put up in the club, but in those dark ages, the committee was not prepared to countenance the casual in social matters by facilitating the paying of calls by leaving cards at the club, and on 20th December 1880 it refused to allow a card rack to be put up in the club library on the grounds that the club could not be looked upon as a dwelling house.

In July 1883 it was decided to open a bar to store and to serve members with liquor, retail. Up to this time no liquor had been retailed by the glass in the club. It was also decided, as an experiment, to serve tea between 5 p.m and 7 p.m daily.

At a general meeting in March 1884 it was proposed to buy a piano for the club, and through the usual die-hard amendment was put up that “piano may not be purchased from club funds”, the original proposal was carried. The committee in those days however had views of its own on its position of dictatorship and a week later it passed the following resolution:

“The committee inform members that the resolution of the general meeting passed on 3-3-84 is not in order as the club fund are under the management and at the disposal of the committee, who will consider the proposal if it is laid before them”.

Unfortunately the rest of this controversy remains ‘wrap’t in mystery’. But the somewhat authoritarian attitude of the committee in these matters is evident.

In May 1885 Messrs. T. Stanes & Co., failed and went into liquidation. The balance to the credit of the club in their hands at the time of their failure was Rs. 1537. The club could ill afford to lose such a large sum and feeling was evidently rather strong on the subject. In October 1886 the liquidators announced a dividend of 1 ½ annas to the rupee – the fact was communicated at a meeting of the committee and the letter was ‘recorded with many explosions of disgust’. However, in January 1895, Mr. Robert Stanes paid to the club the sum of Rs.300 as a first installment towards liquidating the debt. Subsequent payments were made annually by Mr. Stanes until 1898 in which year he paid a sum of Rs. 413-1-0 which cleared off the old debt. The settlement of this account was purely voluntary on the part of Mr. Stanes as the club had no legal claim on him.

In August 1886, sub-committees were appointed to frame bye-laws for each of the following:-

Cards, Billiards, Library, Tennis, Racquet, Swimming Bath and Stores.

Bye-laws were drawn up and passed by the committee. In November 1889 it was decided to build a card room and dressing room to the east of the billiard room. This work was carried out without delay and early in the following years the store room was extended.

In June 1890 Mr. J.G. Fischer Marshall presented the club with a fine collection of trophies. These were originally placed on the billiard room walls and what remains of them is now in the bar lounge. These trophies were presented on the condition that if at any future time they were not wanted, they should be returned to the donor.

At a general meeting in August 1893 it was decided to abolish the old system of club accounts and to adopt the ordinary mercantile system. At this general meeting Mr. Kidd resigned the honorary secretaryship and was succeeded by Mr. Gadsden. Whether it was due to the change in system of the accounts or to some other cause, it is now difficult to say, but the results following the change were eminently satisfactory: the accounts for the year ending 30th June 1893 show a loss of Rs. 232- 13-2 while those for 1894 show a profit of Rs.1462-5-1. In the same year, at a special general meeting the subscription rules were revised and the donation was raised from Rs. 35 to Rs. 50. An absentee subscription was at the same time introduced.

In the early part of 1894 Mr. Hunter submitted to the committee a report on the club library and re-catalogued all the books. With the advent of other activities, the library was getting neglected and according to Mr. Hunter's report, a number of books were either missing or in a sad state of repair – thanks to the climate and the presence of white ants – an unfortunate state of affairs for an organisation that started off as a book club.

In September 1894, it was decided to connect the library and billiard room by a covered way. A good deal of discussion took place as to what form this should take, a minority of the committee being in favour of a narrow passage under which carriages could be driven. The majority, however, decided on a broad raised covered way which could be used as a dining room. A plan and estimate were prepared by Mr. Stoney and were placed before a general meeting held on 7th December 1894. The committee was at the same meeting authorized to raise Rs. 700 in debentures to carry out the work. The covered way was completed in July 1895.

In the year 1886 the billiard room and table were insured for Rs.5000 but this seems to have been allowed to lapse as in 1895 none of the club property was insured. In February of that year a resolution was passed directing that the club property be insured for Rs. 10000 and this insurance has since been kept up.

Early in 1896 it was decided to add a bar and a new card room to the east of the billiard room, and plans and estimates were prepared for the work by Mr. Strange. These were laid before a general meeting on 11th July 1896 and approved. The committee was authorized to raise Rs. 1500 on debentures for the work. This was done and the additions were completed four months later. This is the present rummy room.

On 1st December 1899 the rules regulating reciprocal honorary membership between the Malabar and Coimbatore clubs were revised but there is nothing to show when these rules were first introduced. In July 1900 at a general meeting, the members gave the committee authority to extend the system of reciprocation to other clubs and in September of the same year a circular setting forth the terms of affiliation was addressed to nearly all mofussil clubs. The proposals met with general approval and the list of affiliated clubs continues to be a lengthy one.

In 1900 the club office establishment was entirely reorganized. A new writer was appointed and he was required to furnish cash security of Rs.500 and an assistant writer was also appointed to assist in the work of accounts which had considerably increased in late years. The changes proved advantageous, as new accounts in connection with the stores and bar were opened, by means of which a much better check was maintained on receipts and issues. Since then, the club accounts have been subjected to a thorough annual audit and have generally earned the auditors' approval.

One may conclude that the birth of the new century found the club thriving and prosperous and on the threshold of a new era.

3. THE FLY IN THE OINTMENT

At the annual general meeting of the club held on 29th August, 1889 we find a somewhat unusual name among the members present – that of Mr. C.V. Narasiah. He must have joined late in 1888 or early in 1889 since his name is not found among those present at the meeting in 1888. He must have been an unusual man in many respects. Mr. Narasiah hailed from a high class Brahmin family in Mysore State. He lost his parents early in life and was brought up by his maternal uncles all of whom had been to England and were called to the Bar. It was therefore not surprising that he too followed in their foot steps. He studied comparative religions at Oxford and was called to the Bar from the Inner Temple. During his stay in England, he seems to have been greatly impressed by Christianity and became convert. On his return to India, one of his uncles who had founded a textile mill in Hyderabad wanted to start another in Coimbatore in conjunction with Messrs. Stanes & Co. Mr. Narasiah was sent to negotiate the deal. The scheme did not materialize, but Mr. Narasiah liked Coimbatore and settled permanently in 1887 to practice law.

How an Indian came to be admitted as a member of this exclusive preserve of the British ruling classes remains somewhat of a mystery. According to Miss Narasiah, five barristers came out to India together - four Englishmen and Narasiah. And the Englishmen who were very friendly with their Indian colleague wanted him to be a member of the club provided he would bring his wife also to the club as and when he got married. On that understanding, he became a member and continued to be one till his death in 1942.

One of the factors that tended to create friction between the Indians and the British in social relationships was the fact that most Indian ladies did not mix with men freely – particularly with strangers and foreigners – as the European ladies did. This was resented by Englishmen who felt what westernized Indians wanted to mix with them and dance with their wives, but left their own spouses safely at home. The fact that Mr. Narasiah agreed to bring his wife to the club must have made his election to membership some-what easy, but it could not have been the only factor.

It is interesting to speculate on the reasons that led to his admission. Here was an Indian who had been to the most cherished institutions in England for his education, who had imbibed the best that England could offer in the way of culture, who had the courage to discard the religion of his forefathers and adopt a new faith in the face of opposition from his family and community, and who could hold his own even among the ‘competition – wallahs’ in deciding intricate points of law or in duck shooting. In fact, he typified in every respect, what the benevolent aspect of British imperialism was trying to achieve in India. He was a standing example of its success. It was also a time when the bitter memories of

the great rebellion were forgotten and the nationalist movement had not yet raised its inconvenient head against the British. The idea of treating the Indians as 'equals' was fashionable so long as they did not take it too seriously. It was a time when imperialism could afford to be magnanimous in the case of individuals who had shown ability and loyalty. As yet, Indians did not pose a threat to British superiority either in the professions or in the political field. And Mr. Narasiah was British in everything except colour: under those circumstances, perhaps, colour be ignored.

But the situation was very different thirty years later. A large number of Indians were educated and they were competing successfully in the various professions and services with the British. Political agitation for independence was making the British feel less and less secure in their Olympian heights of power and prestige. Social exclusiveness therefore became an important factor in maintaining a feeling of importance and in being able to 'let their hair down' without the Indians being there to comment. The result was that no other Indian was admitted as a full member for seventy years until the author was invited to be a member in 1959.

The twenties seem to have been a critical period with regard to the admission of Indians as members. The matter must have been discussed informally. Though one does not know the circumstances that led to these discussions, there are a number of references in the minutes to problems of membership. In 1920, the committee resolved that 'no person who is ineligible to be admitted as a member shall be introduced as a guest'. In 1924, there was a discussion on admitting a new type of 'hony. member' but the matter was dropped. But what type of person was considered for such membership has not been recorded. In August 1925, selected non-members were admitted to the golf club. But since the golf course was some distance from the club premises, the question of such members ever using the club was not likely to arise. And in May 1925, application of an Indian was not accepted. In order to set all discussions at rest, in February 1927, eligibility for membership of the club was amended as follows:

"The Coimbatore Club shall consist of an unlimited number of members being European or American gentlemen received in general society"

The resolution was carried by twelve votes out of thirteen. It is not recorded who the brave gentleman was who voted against the prevailing trend.

The matter obviously did not end there. In 1934, there is an entry in the complaints book that the committee should be more circumspect whom they admit as guests. But another remark is even more forceful and to the point. "Is the Taj Mahal affiliated to the club? If not, why was this man admitted?" What the effect of this terse remark was, we are left in ignorance, but the same year, a suggestion was made that there should be a 'visitors room' to which visitors ineligible to be introduced as guests could be taken. The complainant says somewhat wistfully, "We never invite Indians to visit us at the club, but it

is impossible to avoid them altogether because of professional reasons and therefore, a room should be provided for such contingencies”.

In 1935 the annual general meeting of the golf club was held in the Coimbatore Club but two Indian members of the former were not permitted to attend the meeting on the ground that the club was not open to them. This must have created an awkward situation, for we find that at the annual general meeting of the Coimbatore Club in 1936, it was resolved that ‘gentlemen not eligible to become members of the club can be introduced as guests with the prior permission of the committee’. At the next meeting in 1937 Mr. O.E. Windele proposed that Indians be admitted as members. This, however, was not approved.

But as far as Mr. Narasiah was concerned, he seems to have been accepted as part and parcel of the British society and we find friendly references to him. He was evidently an active member of the club and participated fully in all its activities and was on the committee from 1897 till 1901. In view of his long and continuous association with the club stretching over half – a – century, he was elected as an honorary life member in 1940.

Evidently Mr. Narasiah used to entertain lavishly. He had a large garden and his garden parties were very popular and even the governor and his lady used to attend if they happened to be in Coimbatore. They used to have various games and sports at these parties to which all the members of the club were invited, but whether anyone else was invited is not known. They had a riding ring in his compound where the ladies used to ride. The golf course was next door to his bungalow and people used to drop in for breakfast after a round of golf. People used to arrive for these parties in bullock bandies – not the utilitarian carts of modern times, but carts with well upholstered seats and cushions in which the ladies could stretch their legs and relax. They had trotting bullocks with bells round their necks, which could average a phenomenal speed of about six miles per hour! Mrs. Narasiah and later her daughters used to provide teas at the tennis courts. While the ladies of the station took it in turns to provide teas, Mrs. Narasiah’s teas were looked forward to with some eagerness since she always provided some tasty ‘native’ delicacies. They had become an integral part of the English society and had been accepted as such.

Nevertheless, to have been a member of this exclusive club for a period of more than fifty years must have been difficult for him in many ways, and occasionally embarrassing as when new members or visitors came and found an unexpected Indian in their midst. However, he continued to be a member – ‘the only fly in the ointment’ as one member remarked in the more illiberal 1920s- for more than half-a-century of the club’s history.

4. THE AGE OF EXPANSION

The years 1900 to 1930 might be called the age of expansion in the history of the club. The various services in India were being consolidated and strengthened and a larger number of Britishers were coming out to India. The coming of the railway and the establishment of railways workshops in Podanur also contributed its quota of members. The plantations were also expanding and needing new managers. As the nearest town, both to the Anamalais and the Nilgiris, Coimbatore became a centre for visiting planters all of whom became members of the club. Coimbatore was considered an attractive district headquarters town because of its salubrious climate and proximity to Ooty; consequently, it was a coveted posting for the European officers. The coming into existence of the Forest College and the Agricultural College also meant more European residents.

The membership of the club which was 29 in 1884 and 38 in 1895 went upto 175 in 1921 and to a maximum of 333 in 1931. Though a majority of the members were out-station members and the local resident membership never went beyond 50, nevertheless such increase in membership gave the club a status and stability and enabled it to expand its facilities and activities.

The question of building residential accommodation had frequently been raised in the past and in August 1902, it was decided that it should be built. The committee was authorized to raise Rs. 10000 for the work on the usual debenture bonds. The full amount was subscribed in about ten days. But during construction, it was decided to deviate from the original plans and another Rs.5000 had to be raised. The chambers were completed in October 1903.

In December 1905, at the general meeting, the members suggested that the committee should give its earnest consideration to the subject of the club making its own ice and soda water and storing, instead of procuring a daily supply. Cold as the subject was, judging from the numerous entries in the suggestions book, this had been a subject of very hot controversy – the inordinate thirst of the younger members often causing the senior members to do without their ice at dinner! But the idea was definitely abandoned in 1906 as the cost of manufacturing ice was prohibitive. However, in July 1907, the committee decided to raise a loan of Rs.2000 for the purchase of a soda water plant and this was completed in November of the same year.

The question of converting the club into a limited liability company was discussed in 1908 and Mr. Narasiah was asked to furnish the necessary information, but evidently, nothing came of it. The matter was again discussed a few years later, but the club continued to remain a 'private' one. 1908 was also a year when the club finances came

prominently into notice since there was a loss on the working of the club to the extent of Rs. 1900. A sub-committee was appointed to enquire into and report on the working of the stores department, the system of accounts, and charges in connection with chambers and establishment. It was also decided to approve the proposal of the committee for a second billiard table and the committee was authorized to raise the necessary funds and have alterations made to the existing buildings. This last decision was needed partly because of increasing membership and partly because of the new enthusiasm for billiards resulting in an unseemly scramble by members waiting for a game. All these decisions evidently had the desired effect, for in 1909, not only was the second billiard table added, but the working of the chambers showed a profit for the first time.

The Hunt Club was formed in 1909. The original pack consisted of indigenous hounds imported from the foot of the Anamalais (and well practiced in poaching operations in the forest reserve!) They were known as the 'Mosquito Hounds' and had a short but hectic life culminating in the sanguinary slaughter of all Mr. Narasiah's livestock, when it was decided that compensation payable for the misdoings of these hounds was more than the club could afford. So the mosquito hounds were replaced by fox hounds.

The years 1910 to 1912 saw a major expansion in the facilities of the club. New buildings were erected for stores as well as office and debentures to the extent of Rs. 8600 were raised for a new ball room and bridge room. It was also decided to have better lighting and Mr. Lodge and Col. Ellis were appointed to select a suitable system of lighting by petro-gas. Rightly or wrongly, Mr. Lodge had the reputation of being a very loquacious member of the club and it was in connection with his activities regarding gas-lighting that he got the somewhat undeserved little of 'gas-bag'; and the new dance hall, illuminated by this system, was for long known as the Lodge Memorial Hall. This new lighting system in course of time gave way to an electric one - run on the club's own Blaskstone engine - and when this became too old, the club was connected with the town electrification system which had just then been established.

In the year 1911, the stores and the soda water factory were taken over by Messrs. Spencer & Co. This proposal had been under discussion for some time and when Mr. Collyer became the hon. Secretary, the proposal was discussed seriously and a branch of Spencers were opened at the club. This arrangement lasted until Messrs. Spencer & Co., opened a complete branch of their own in Coimbatore. It was also during Mr. Collyer's secretaryship that the once famous Coimbatore Club dinner song 'God Made the Bank for the People' sprang from the combined poetic frenzy of the more spirited members.

It was about this time that riding became very popular and most of the members joined the mounted corps (auxiliary force), but the first visit of a general officer (presumably for inspection) was marred by the fact that a trooper of the escort to conduct him from the railway station to the collector's bungalow had to delay proceedings while a chair was obtained from the waiting room to enable the short legged officer to mount his

charger! Interest in riding naturally led to the formation of the Coimbatore Race Club. The races were held on the Podanur 'Downs'. The description of one such race which appeared in a Madras paper is remarkable both for its quaint English as well as for its delicate sarcasm. It refers to the 'fair rider being seated on the horse as the body is to the soul' and 'striking a new path and riding far beyond the active host'. Evidently her riding 'brought a blush to the cheeks of the police and there was a line drawn between East and West'. And finally 'men came and went and a flutter of thrill was left behind flopping its wings'. But despite such excellent beginning, the Race Club did not have a very long life. The First World War put an early end to its activities and the coming of the motor cars in the post-war period ensured that it was well and truly buried.

There were other innovations too. The bullock bandies were gradually giving place to motor cars and motor cycles with side-cars for ladies. Bicycles were beginning to make their appearance for the lower orders. While the committee was engaged in repairs to the stables in the first decade of the century they were widening the culverts to admit motor cars and converting stables into garages in the second decade. The ladies complained of poor lighting in the ball room, which prevented them from doing war work and which resulted in the installation of 'petro-gas'.

This age of expansion might also be called the age of frivolity. The energies of the younger members of the club were not all fully utilized by their professional exertions and additional outlets had to be found for their exuberant spirits. What was 'sweating in out on foot-ball field' in the 19th century took the form of hard drinking and playing practical jokes on their unsuspecting seniors in the early part of the twentieth century.

In 1907, during the club dance, two lively young bachelors found the writer's single bullock cart, unyoked the bull and brought it into dance room, one riding and the other leading it. The bull evidently became inspired with the spirit of the moment and breaking loose, gavotted round the room with its rope trailing while the female dancers tried to escape by climbing pillars - a somewhat difficult task in the feminine garments of the day. This incident seems to have furnished a precedent and from then on, until 1924, extraneous vehicles and beasts of traction were brought on to the dance floor; but when in that year, a full sized Rolls - Royce was introduced posing a grave threat to the flooring, the committee felt that something had to be done and erected an iron pillar at the top of the porch steps to prevent such ingress in the future - the one spontaneous memorial to the ability of the Rolls-Royce to climb steps. The wits of the club christened the pillar somewhat rudely after the gentleman who owned the Rolls-Royce. The pillar was soon removed!

To go back to 1908, however, the station was extremely fortunate at the time in having several young and hearty bachelors whose social and other activities were very rampant until 1912 when in due course they were scattered to various places and the club settled down to a more or less quiet existence for several years. These bachelors started a

chummery known as the 'Bull and Bush'- later by fate's irony converted into a convent. The denizens of this pied-a-terre did much to enliven Coimbatore society both at the club and elsewhere. They never by any chance dined at home (unless they had guests from outside the station). They invariably took pot-luck with friends and the occasional early risers of Coimbatore might add amusement to exercise by seeing various frenzied chokras carrying suit cases with suitable clothing for the day from house to house in search of their masters. During the years of existence of the 'Bull and Bush', there was nothing of importance that happened in the Coimbatore Club in which the members of the famous coterie did not have a hand.

In 1908, when Wellington Club sent down a cricket team to play the Coimbatore Club, four of the members of the visiting team had the temerity to accept the offer of the 'Bull and Bush' to put them up. The match next day was rather a fiasco as these four members, after enjoying the hospitality that was provided for the night, were quite incapable of appearing on the field. A similar incident occurred in 1912 when the captain of the Calicut XI who had come to Coimbatore to arrange fixtures, intending to stay for one day was entrapped by the 'Bull and Bush' and only succeeded in crawling away on the sixth day. History does not relate whether his superiors accepted his excuse as sufficient, but so well known was this institution by this time that it is probable that they realised that he could not be held responsible except for over-confidence in the strength of his head!

Another incident that is perhaps worthy of record is the disciplinary action meted out to a very unpopular member who was incarcerated for the night in the racquet court with a couple of dhobi's donkeys in the vain hope that they might improve his manners. When the prisoners were released the following morning, the donkeys appeared singularly dejected and sorrowful but there was no apparent good effect on the member who forthwith complained to the committee and the police. The committee very sensibly decided to overlook the incident and the police, just as sensibly, treated the case as 'undetectable'.

There was always something happening in Coimbatore during this period. Because of its comparatively mild climate and possibly because of its proximity to Ooty, a number of semi-official functions were held here. There was the I. C. S. week, the Police week, the Forest Officers' week and so on. Coimbatore was very often the meeting place for such gatherings. While officially, the club had nothing to do with them, often, the social functions connected with these gatherings were held at the club and with the participation of the members. There was always a round of entertainments with dinners and dances and official receptions. Often, the governor was present at these functions and to be introduced to him-even to entertain him-was the aim of every socially ambitious lady.

Strict protocol was observed at all these functions and the question of seniority was very important. The civil list was like a social bible to which one referred in case of doubt. Often there are complaints recorded in the suggestions book that the civil list is not

available in the club or that it is out of date. Was the wife of a collector who was only acting, senior to the wife of the district judge who had been confirmed in his appointment? Who should sit next to the governor at dinner? Such problems must have caused terrible anguish to the ladies and endless worries to the gentlemen. In this struggle of social status and prestige the officers of the I.C.S. and their wives were naturally considered the cream of society. The army and the police and the judiciary came next while the officers of the engineering, agriculture and the forest departments came at the bottom of the social ladder. While senior business men could hob-nob with the elite of the I.C.S. the box-wallahs were only step above untouchables.

The story is told of the wife of a leading business man who claimed that by 'right' their excellencies the governor and his wife should stay in her bungalow and not at the collector's. When asked how she laid claim to such an honour, she exclaimed, "I have modern sanitation and the collector's bungalow hasn't. Surely, you don't expect their excellencies to use a thunder box!"

Paths to social success are very devious indeed!

Dancing seems to have become very popular during this period-particularly after the First World War. In fact there was a vehement protest by the members when the committee decided there should be no dancing during Lent in a particular year and the committee had to yield the point. There was dancing on three nights a week and even then the members were not satisfied, so it was resolved to permit dancing on other nights with the prior permission of the committee. Mr. Molloy was appointed as dance secretary and a local band trained by him was in attendance on all occasions. A monthly dance subscription was levied on all resident members. A gramophone and amplifier were also installed for informal dancing when there was no band. There are frequent complaints in the suggestions book regarding purchase of new records.

The age of expansion may be said to have come to a close with the building of additional chambers in 1933 and the opening of the present swimming pool in 1935. With a large increase in membership, there was constant demand for residential accommodation from outstation members. In fact during the late twenties and early thirties, government officers were requested to loan their tents which were pitched in the compound of the club to provide additional accommodation. More chambers were therefore built in 1933 to cope up with the increasing demand.

The original swimming pool which was on the opposite side of the Trichy Road was abandoned in 1910 and the land had been disposed of in 1925. But the idea of a new swimming pool was revived in 1930. There was however a lot of controversy as to whether the large expenditure involved was worthwhile. It was felt that it may not have a permanent popularity and the water supply was unreliable. But thanks to the indefatigable efforts of Mr. Wootten, the building for the swimming pool was sanctioned and the

construction was completed in March 1935. In the Christmas show in 1934 the following song was included in order to raise money for the construction of the swimming pool:

“We want a pool in Coimbatore,
A swimming pool in Coimbatore,
Where we can daily while away
Our hard earned weekly holiday.
So, if you are saving for new dentures,
Renounce then now and buy DEBENTURES,
And give girls a treat –
They are so sweet in Coimbatore.”

The inauguration of the swimming pool by the president of the club with all pomp and ceremony was fixed for 11 A.M on Sunday the 31st March, but with the usual originally exhibited by certain members two of them dived into the pool at 2 A.M. that morning in their evening clothes. When a complaint was made, it was later explained that they had done so in order to inspect the under-water lighting system - which did not exist.

5. WE ARE NOT AMUSED

From the very beginning the committee members of the club seem to have taken themselves and their job very seriously. They were not mere elected representatives trying to run an organisation, but set themselves up as law makers as well as judges of social standards and behaviour. They made rules and bye laws, interpreted them and enforced them without fear or favour. Somewhat pompous in their attitude, often when there was a complaint, it was dealt with not by an explanation but merely by drawing the concerned member's attention to the appropriate bye-law. Evidently the members were expected to know the bye-laws by heart and they covered almost every situation that was likely to arise in the club. They did not hesitate in censuring members when there was an infraction of the rules and often, a member was told that his remarks were improper or that his suggestion was in bad taste.

Nor were they respectors of important persons. As early as 1875, when the club was hardly 2 years old, the collector Mr. Wedderburn, was told: "The committee cannot allow Mr. Wedderburn's proposal to pass without remarking on the objectionable tone in which it is couched." Unfortunately the nature of Mr. Wedderburn's proposal has not been recorded for posterity.

In fact, there seem to have been considerable differences of opinion between the military officers who dominated the committee at that time and the Civil Service. It should be remembered that in the early days of British rule, the army had an important role to play both in adding territory as well as in maintaining law and order and often the Civil Service was dependent on the strength of the army for its functioning. But in the second half of the 19th century with greater stability and peace and with the coming of the Oxbridge types into the Civil Service, the army had to take a back seat. The former acquired power, prestige and status that became the envy of the army officers. In fact, there is a story about an army officer sitting next to a collector's wife at a dinner and telling her. "Now the Civil Service has usurped the place of the army. In fact there are only two castes now – the civil and military – the military being the lower caste." And the collector's wife replied, "I agree with you there are only two castes, Civil and Uncivil."

The Coimbatore Club was obviously not quite free from this and perhaps the remarks of the committee as well as the subsequent differences are to be viewed in this historical perspective. But with the passage of time and the posting away of the army from Coimbatore, this disappeared and the collector of the district was often elected as the president of the club.

On a later occasion in 1913, the committee decided that "His Excellency the Governor need not be invited to dine at the club to the opposition of several members". It must have taken considerable courage to decide not to invite such an important person and it is not known what circumstances led to this situation. But it is worth noting that it was a somewhat bad year for the club; the bar man and the writer were both dismissed for losses in bar accounts and the committee had to express its regret at the annual general meeting which was endorsed by the members present.

Another member was told by the committee that his remarks in the suggestions book were not in order and he should withdraw them, which the poor member subsequently did. But when a visitor who happened to occupy the chambers for a short period ventured to make some suggestions, he was dealt with even more summarily. The secretary was directed to inform him that he had no right to make any remarks and there were two commercial establishments in the locality intended for European visitors where he would perhaps be more comfortable in the future.

But such an attitude did help to maintain standards which might otherwise have deteriorated.

While the committee took themselves and their bye-laws very seriously, the members have always had a robust sense of fun and frivolity often at the expense of the establishment. The complaints book was made use of not only for airing their grievances or making suggestions for improvement, but also to exhibit their talents in wit and wisdom and for having sly digs at the committee and at the bye-laws which the committee considered inviolable. Some of these remarks in the suggestions book are perhaps worth recording for posterity.

One member suggested for example that ants should be served separately from pop corn so that each member can add them according to taste. But another member added a post script to this complaint: "No ants in my pop corn. Why discriminate?"

When the wall clock that had been recently installed went wrong, one member suggested that the hands of the clock be altered so that they at least agreed with each other. Another member remarked critically that the bye-law regarding children and dogs should be applicable to toads also. On another occasion, a member wrote that it should be suggested to the bar-man that martinis were not usually made with soda water.

When an anonymous complaint was made that since no books were added to the library it might as well be liquidated, the committee dealt with the complaint most expeditiously by remarking that "the committee does not deal with anonymous complaints".

But often the secretary fell in with the spirit of the suggestions and his replies were in the same vein as the suggestions themselves. When a request was made for the purchase

of new gramophone records suitable for sylph-like gyrations 'if the club could run to it', the secretary replied, 'the club does not want to run to it. The members want to dance to it'.

A member with the poetic turn of mind complained about the lack of company in the club in the following lines:

"If there are any souls to be seen,
They are usually in dozens umpteen
Or there is nobody here;
The club is so terribly bare
Shame! Shame! Where is the Bon e spirit been?"

But the secretary was equal to the occasion and he answered.

"Up in the mountains to see the queen"

When a member complained that no cigars were offered as compliments of the club after lunch, the secretary answered as follows:

"It is the same the whole world over,
It is the rich that want the fags;
If they don't, the secretary
Has to put up with their nags!"

One member wrote: "I suggest that a fund for purchasing new pictures for the bar and bridge room be opened. Many members other than myself appear to find the gloomy relics of Victorianism which adorn the walls at present depressing in the extreme. I shall be happy to open a subscription list with Rs.30 provided that a total of not less than Rs. 350 is subscribed". The committee's reply was characteristic. "The committee has considered this suggestion and whilst Dr.Meashan's offer is much appreciated, the opinion is that the Vanity Fair Spy pictures are not viewed with such disfavour generally by the majority of the members and it is not considered that it is necessary or desirable at present to replace them."

Mr. Mortimer came into the club one Sunday evening and found it empty. "I came to the club at 7.45 P.M on Sunday night and found no one in the club. I sent for the honorary secretary but was told that he had gone for his 'rice'. I think it is a bad show. Is the secretary a vegetarian?" To which the secretary replied, "Mr. Mortimer being a new member is perhaps not aware that on Sunday evenings, most of the members are to be found in church and that the honorary secretary also some times 'rices' to the occasion. I

hope you have now been ap – ‘peas’ – ed”. This correspondence went on for some time until a third member wrote. “This correspondence must now cease, Editor”.

An irate member who had spent a princely sum for a bath in the club rooms had the following complaint. “Gentlemen, with humble submission, I beg to bring to your notice that in accordance with the club bye-law regarding dress, I went to the extreme extravagance of paying 4 annas for having a hot water bath in the men’s dressing room and beg to point out that considering the low level in the bath tub, one needed to be an acrobat in order to have a decent rinse. In fact there was barely enough water to humidify my bottom which is not abnormal in proportion to the standard bath tub”. Needless to say, the secretary was left speechless in replying to this complaint.

A member partial to alcohol complained, “I hate ants, particularly the large black variety. I hate them even more when they are bottled with lemonade”. And then he added as an afterthought, “Say it softly; I am not keen on lemonade either”.

The last complaint of any interest relates to 1955. “It is now 1st March 1955 and we have not yet received the photographs taken at the new year’s fancy dress dance. It was the same last year and the year before and no doubt it will be the same next year. In the interest of posterity, it is desirable that the ‘Most Handsome Man’ receives his due place in the annals of the club and this one has no record for 2 years. As it is unlikely that I shall obtain the hat trick, may something be done about this?” ‘The Most Handsome Man’, as many will remember, was none other than Mr. Angus Low.

The sexes have always been segregated at the club. In the early days the ladies used to come and sit on the verandah and perhaps used the library. Later they had the privilege of doing tennis teas in rotation. No doubt they could borrow books from the library and used the other facilities. But the bar was the sanctum sanctorum of the men to which the fair sex was not admitted. As the facilities expanded there was a sitting room for the ladies where they could play cards but the men rarely frequented it.

Women’s lib was rather slow in coming, but it did arrive somewhere around 1910. The common room which was only furnished with a large round table and upright chairs which helped to make the atmosphere more prim and proper than was approved of by the younger members of the fair sex. The ladies complained of unsociability on the part of the men but the men refused to vegetate in these uncongenial surroundings and stuck to the bar. The dead-lock was finally resolved one dark night by the removal of the round table which was rolled down Trichy Road and finally deposited in a deep quarry. The perpetrators of this dark deed were not finally traced but there was little doubt as to what institution housed them.

Evidently, this did not solve problem in its entirety and we find suggestion from the ladies in 1912 asking to be allowed to sit in the billiard room and watch the play on Sunday evenings but what the committee decided on this is not known. There were also frequent

requests from ladies for the curtains in the ladies dressing rooms to be changed or that matting in the ladies bridge room should be provided. But the committee does not seem to have taken these requests very seriously, for we find that a suggestion from 9 ladies for a ping-pong table was ignored and it was again repeated a year later.

The year 1921 seems to have been a crucial year in the battle of the sexes. For in April of that year, women were permitted to use the chambers on the same terms as men provided they were accompanied by their husbands. However, only 3 months later in July 1921 the committee decided to have two cots in married quarters instead of one and to provide chicks. The hot weather in 1921 must have been very cozy and private in the married quarters with a single cot and no chicks! In November 1921 Mr. Molloy was designated by the committee as the ladies' representative. What qualifications Mr. Molloy possessed for such an unique honour is not known.

Evidently, during this year the ladies had established a ladies' committee and started making official representations to the club. But we find that in October 1921, the committee smugly passed a resolution of being unaware of the ladies' committee and hence took no cognizance. But within the period of 3 months, in January 1922 we find that the honorary secretary was directed to consult representatives of the ladies in so far as it concerned ladies room, etc. Evidently this was taken as defacto recognition of the ladies' committee and in order to clear any misunderstandings on the subject, the committee passed the following resolution in August 1922.

“This committee will always give serious consideration to any recommendation made by the elected representatives of the ladies and welcome the formation of their committee as a body to whom they can turn for advice, but cannot guarantee to submit to them every matter concerning the ladies use of the club.”

In spite of the pompous tone in which the resolution was couched, this seems to have been a signal victory for the ladies. There has always been a ladies committee since those days. The final surrender took place in January 1925 when ladies card boxes were permitted in the club.

6. THE AGE OF MATURITY

Amateur dramatics have always been popular among the British in India. But traditionally they were also considered to be one of the two temptations as well as pit-falls of semi-detached wives (the other being military men on leave). But in spite of these hazards, they flourished in the Coimbatore Club and there are frequent references to plays being produced on various occasions. In 1937, the Coimbatore Amateur Dramatic Society was formed from among the club members. During the late thirties and early forties, a number of plays were produced very successfully each year. Popular successes were generally chosen and considerable efforts were put in designing the stage scenery and costumes. While the lucky ones who went home on leave could see them on the London stage, those who were left behind could console themselves by watching these productions. The Dramatic Society was also responsible for producing the show during the Christmas and New Year Celebrations.

The increase in membership as well as in activities imposed a great strain on the hon. Secretary and the committee and a number of sub-committees had to be appointed for each of the activity such as billiards, tennis, library and so on. A steward had been appointed in 1928 but he resigned in 1935 and a fulltime secretary was appointed for some time. This does not seem to have been particularly successful and a manager was appointed in 1938. Finally, he was replaced by a hostess in 1940 to look after catering and chambers while the hon. Secretary and the hon. Treasurer between them managed all the club affairs.

There were also a number of other changes during this period. The billiard table which had been moved upstairs above the ball room was brought down and put in the mixed billiard room so that it could be used by the ladies. The coming of prohibition in 1936 caused a certain amount of anxiety and one of the bar boys was sacked, but since all members of the club being British subjects were given permits more or less automatically, the problem was not very serious. The pattern of entertainments during Christmas week viz., children's party, Christmas dinner, the stage show and the New Year dance took shape during this period.

At the request of the committee Mr. H.C. Budd, the hon. Treasurer, made a review of the financial position of the club for the years 1933 to 1938. While he found that the financial position was generally satisfactory, there was a noticeable drop in profits in 1937 and 1938. He also found that the club had not built up any reserves. A major portion of the income came from resident members. These members were grouped under the following heads:

I.C.S.,
P.W.D.,
Forest Department,
Police,
Banking and Commerce.

Of these, except commerce, almost all others were government servants. Mr. Budd remarks, "It does not require much imagination to realise that in a few years' time the appointments held by most of the Europeans in the government services at least will be handed over to the Indians. I am looking at the long view, but it will affect the interests of the club." The first note of anxiety with regard to the future had been sounded.

In spite of this anxiety however, a number of improvements were brought about during this period. Extensive repairs in the form of relaying the floors were undertaken in the older parts of the building and modern sanitation was installed in all the bath rooms in 1938. New furniture was purchased and a new radiogram and amplifier system were installed in the ball room. With some profits from the dramatic society, the stage was constructed in its present form and a permanent curtain fixed. In the year 1940, the cantilever shelter at the swimming pool was constructed. In order to persuade out – station members to use the swimming pool during week ends, specially reduced charges were offered for chambers. But it does not seem to have attracted many visitors.

The outbreak of hostilities in Europe did not at first affect the club very much. Things went on much the same as before. The Christmas festivities in 1939 for example were on the same lavish scale as in previous years, and the shortage of alcohol was not yet particularly serious. Except for a contribution of Rs.3000 to the 'Madras Mail War-Plane Fund' there is no reference to the war in Europe during the first months of war.

But as time went on, many of the younger members were being called up to one or other of the defence services. The pressure of war was imposing itself on the work of civilian members also. Shortage, and later, rationing of petrol meant that travelling was cut down to a minimum and outstation members were not paying as frequent visits as they used to do at one time. Because of the difficulty of obtaining liquor stocks and anticipated shortage, a form of rationing was introduced whereby the number of bottles a member could buy per month was limited. The opening hours of the bar were also curtailed in order to conserve stocks. Consequently, the bar profits were reduced and the occupation of chambers also came down considerably. On the other hand, expenses could not be cut down but were mounting because of the increase in costs all round. The committee was faced with the problem of making both ends meet in 1941.

This year was also the time when the golf club had to be closed down. The UPASI bungalow which provided access to the golf course had been sold and the new owner did

not permit the use of his grounds. Consequently, the course was very much reduced in size and finally the land was taken over for building a temporary camp for military purposes. The golf club was finally closed down in 1942.

But from 1942 onwards things took a turn for the better as far as the club was concerned. A British regiment was stationed at Madukkarai and later a fleet air – arm unit of the royal navy was stationed at Red Fields. There was also a military hospital where there were a number of British nursing sisters. In order to enable the officers of all these units to use the club, the rules were altered. A new class of membership known as ‘Temporary Service Members’ was introduced. Commissioned officers of His Majesty’s forces or of the forces of the allied nations were admitted under this classification. This meant the Indian officers were also entitled to use the club.

Certainly, the European officers availed themselves of this opportunity and from then on, the club became very lively. Facilities such as the swimming pool and the tennis courts were in constant demand. The dance nights were overcrowded. There had to be two sittings for supper because of the shortage of crockery and cutlery, etc. In spite of the shortage of liquor and introduction of informal rationing, the bar profits increased. As a result of a large number of military officers coming and going, the chambers were also almost always full and permanent members complained that it was impossible to get rooms when they wanted. In view of the number of officers using the club and the many problems that arose as a result, it was resolved to co-opt the commanders in the area for the army and navy, on to the committee.

In order to obviate the problems of sending bills to temporary serving officers who might be stationed in the locality for very short periods, a system of coupons was introduced. This seems to have worked very successfully, but in 1945 a fraud in the sale of coupons was discovered and the committee had to set apart Rs. 6000 for loss in accounting for coupons. Action was also taken against the suspected members of the staff.

The southern Peninsula Mounted Rifles (SPMR) had been formed some years ago. The SPMR consisted mainly of planters and Coimbatore being a convenient centre for all planting districts it became the headquarters for their annual training camp as well as other social activities. All functions in connection with the SPMR were held in the club. Most of the members of this corps joined the forces in 1940 and it was finally disbanded in 1947. The menu on the occasion of their farewell dinner held at the club is somewhat unique.

S.P.M.R.

SEMPER PARATUS

Stand – down dinner, 2nd September 1947 Turning signal – 20 – 25 Hrs – Apertif –
Start Engines

- Soup - 303
- Fish - Slidex
- Meat - A la Black Panther, potatoes a la Bren Small shot, Pull through sausages.
- Pudding - Beret
- Cheese - Grouping, Biscuits – Application
- Coffee - C.T.A. Charley – Tara Able
- Nuts - Hexagon
- Liquor - Very light – Red and Green Liquid fuel – Flash point - 150°. Brake Fluid to keep control.

The crest of the SPMR is still adorning the wall of the bar, along with other crests of regiments stationed at Coimbatore from time to time.

At the end of the war, the British army was leaving India and there was a serious drop in attendance at club functions. Band dances were replaced by dancing to recorded music in an attempt to reduce expenses. In 1947 the financial position was considered serious and the committee undertook the job of retrenching the extra staff that had to recruited during the war. The coming of independence in August 1947 found the club still flourishing but somewhat uncertain the future.

7. THE ENGLISH CLUB

At an extraordinary general meeting of the members held in December 1947 the name of the Coimbatore Club was changed to 'The English Club'. The explanation offered for this change was, now that India was independent, perhaps one of the 'Indian' clubs should be known as the Coimbatore Club. But there was no Indian club clamouring to be known by that name and even after 20 years the name remained unclaimed. Thus, a name and a tradition established over a period of 75 years were changed.

But almost immediately, in January 1948, at another extraordinary general meeting it was resolved that gentlemen living in Coimbatore area could be admitted as guests 'provided they are invited by the committee or if the invitation is approved by a member of the committee'. It was also resolved to open the club to Indian members of affiliated clubs. Officials of the district such as the collector, deputy inspector general of police and the district judge were also invited to become honorary members of the club.

From now on it was a matter of keeping the club going. The British civil servants were leaving India with a few exceptions and even in commerce, young Indians were gradually recruited to executive positions in British companies. Few young Britishers were coming out to India and the average age of the club members was increasing year by year. The membership was thus getting reduced affecting the revenues. Those who remained however were resolved to keep the flag flying. Going to the club and supporting the activities became not only a matter of social enjoyment but a matter of social obligation to one's fellow members and even a patriotic duty. On club nights, members were not supposed to have other engagements and were expected to come to the club if at all possible.

In spite of reduced numbers, the younger members showed their determination to liven up club nights by singing and dancing. They were not deterred by the tight economics enforced by the committee and finally persuaded them to install a new record player and buy new records. The popular old records were also played over and over again so much so, that one long – suffering member was provoked into breaking one of them. The few old diehards were seen only when entering and leaving the bridge room and frowned upon such frivolity and scathingly referred to the lively members as 'Butlins'!

In these attempts to keep the club going pantomimes, theatricals and concerts were a regular feature. Dress rehearsals were often chaotic and organisers would swear that the final night would be a disaster with members forgetting their lines. On the final night however, all would go smoothly. The forgetful members would have their lines nailed to the floor, pasted on bottles, hats etc. With the exodus of the old-timers when theatricals

became somewhat difficult, they were replaced by fancy dress dances, childrens' parties, treasure hunts and swimming galas. Thus, strenuous attempts were made to maintain a warm and friendly atmosphere for which the club has become well known.

In spite of all these activities, the finances of the club were not too good and a number of measures were adopted to improve it. In May 1948, Mr. Grenyer was appointed secretary and he made a number of suggestions for improving the finances. One of them was running sweepstakes on the Derby and other races among the members. This suggestion was accepted and they were organized for a few years. Another suggestion was that a fruit machine should be installed. Though Mr. Eric Stanes considered that 'a fruit machine would lower the prestige of the club', it was nevertheless installed and proved to be quite popular amongst some of the members. But there were numerous complaints that it was not working properly and counter-complaints that five paise coins were being used instead of twenty – five paise tokens. After some years the machine was removed.

Attempts were also made to sell some of the land belonging to the club – particularly the triangular piece abutting the Race Course, but after some tentative negotiations, the sale did not materialize.

The corner plot of the land on Trichy Road had been given during the war for a temporary cinema intended for British troops. In 1946 the owner of the cinema requested permission to put up a temporary building and the committee sanctioned the construction on payment of a nominal rent. But when the construction was finished it was found to be not so temporary (the Rainbow Cinema) and there was lot of criticism at the annual general meeting that the committee should not have authorized the construction without the permission of the members. Attempts were also made to curb the powers of the committee so that such a situation may not arise again. The original lease was for a period of 2 years but it was periodically extended until a new long lease was entered into with the new owner of the cinema in 1958. This enabled the club to redeem all debentures that were outstanding as on that date.

During all this period of uncertainty regarding club finances, it was supported by some local members such as Mr. Eric Stanes who managed the affairs of the club with prudence. In spite of such efforts, there was a substantial loss in the year 1953 and strict measures of economy were imposed. The secretary accepted a voluntary cut in the salary. The price of suppers and snacks was increased. The ladies' committee was very active during this period in suggesting economies as well as undertaking considerable supervisory work on a voluntary basis.

One interesting item of news caused a stir in the club society during this period. A member on the point of retirement suddenly decided to change his religion to Islam and marry a young girl of about 17. The change in religion was perhaps necessitated by the fact

that he already had a wife waiting to receive him in U.K. This is the last piece of eccentricity indulged in by any of the members before conforming to a monotonous routine.

Mr. Grenyer retired in 1955 and the club was again left without a full time official. A manager was appointed, but he does not seem to have been particularly successful. It also had to face other problems with regard to excise, sales tax, industrial disputes and so on. These had to be tackled on a purely voluntary basis through the services of its members.

This was also a period when many of the British firms were purchased and run by Indian companies. The Stanes family which had been closely linked through commerce and industry with Coimbatore for over a century gave up their interests in M/s. Stanes & Co. In 1961, the club reluctantly bid farewell to Mr. & Mrs. Wootten. He had been a most active member of the club for over 35 years. In 1964 Mr. & Mrs. Eric Stanes also retired. Mr. Stanes had been a member of the club since 1920 and had been a keen supporter for 44 years. They left behind many happy memories of their association with the club. With the departure of these veterans, the old era may be said to have come to an end. The Tea Estates of India moved their headquarters from Coimbatore to Coonoor. Such factors also resulted in an exodus of European residents and the membership of the club dwindled still further. Farewell parties were all too frequent with the departures of long-standing members retiring and returning to their home countries. On one memorable farewell, the parting couple was entertained to a 'Toda Chorus' of members dressed as Todas and a farewell felicitation on a scroll was presented. The last straw was the devaluation of the rupee in 1966.

Christmas dinner in the club on the 25th December was always a somewhat formal affair. It was usual to listen to the Queen's broadcast at 8-30 P.M (I.S.T.) and then sit down to roast turkey and Christmas pudding. A person was always on hand to say grace and lend dignity to the occasion. The last time such a dinner was held, the religious gentleman was so carried away not only by the spirit of the occasion but also by the generous liquid hospitality of the members that instead of merely saying grace, he delivered a sermon. When finally he was persuaded to take his seat, he promptly went to sleep and had to be propelled home by means other than his legs. Needless to say, such formal dinners have since been given up.

With the gradual reduction in the number of Europeans in the locality and increase in costs of maintenance, there were only two alternatives before the members – either to close down the club (as had happened in some places) or to admit Indian members and make it a going concern, and an asset to the social life of the area. In 1960 it was resolved to admit Indians as full members of the club. Since that decision was taken, a large number of Indians have been admitted and today most of the resident members are Indians. The change-over from being a completely European club to an almost wholly Indian club has been achieved smoothly and successfully. Mr. Macrae and Mr. Batra who had been the

president and secretary respectively during this period have been largely responsible for this smooth change-over.

At the annual general meeting of the club held in 1970, the members resolved that the name of the club be changed back to the original name of the 'Coimbatore Club'. One may take it that this change in name is somewhat symbolic. But what it represents is perhaps a little difficult to say. Is it re-birth? Regeneration? Or is it a second childhood?