

THE BOMBAY OF MY AWAKENING:

A Personal Journey Through the Soul of a Changing City

(By Kalashri Dr Lata Surendra)

There is a distinct, rhythmic click-clack that echoes through the deepest chambers of my memory. For the current generation, it is merely the mechanical sound of a local train cutting through the humid air of the Western or Central lines. But for me, if I close my eyes and breathe in the salt-heavy air of the post-independence Bombay that raised me—a city throbbing, raw, and electric with the spirit of an emerging India—that sound transforms. It slows down. It becomes the sharp, mathematical heartbeat of an Edakka drum echoing in the quiet, focused backstage of theatres; it becomes the fierce, cadence-driven voice of V. K. Krishna Menon rising over the packed public grounds of North Bombay. Most of all, it becomes the steady, comforting hum of the coffee grinding machinery and the sensory richness of tea leaves at my father's retail outlets.

That was my father's kingdom—not a collection of tea parlors or making cups of tea, but an enterprise built on taste. Receiving massive consignments directly from the Churakulam Tea Estate, he dealt with premium varieties of tea powder and freshly grounded coffee. He was an absolute master of the craft, meticulously blending specific proportions of Broken Orange Pekoe and Gold Dust to cater precisely to the era's taste for a perfect cup—one that possessed an exquisite body, deep color, and robust liquor for whoever brewed it. At the same time, his heavy machinery grounded coffee beans to order, customized flawlessly to match the exact texture needed for the perfect, traditional filter coffee.

With three iconic retail outlets strategically situated across Shivaji Park, Princess Street, and Kalbadevi, my father's commercial footprint was inseparable from the daily lives of the city's inhabitants. Yet, our home was defined by a profound sense of refinement and an overarching love for literature. My father was a brilliant linguist and a dedicated scholar, and it was his intellect and deep appreciation for the written word that awakened my own path. He immersed me early on in the beautiful world of books, inspiring my lifelong commitment to writing and analytical scholarship.

Around our dinner table, the air was permanently thick with the rich aroma of roasted coffee, the subtle fragrance of blended tea leaves, the sharp scent of wet paint drying on Kathakali ornaments, and the fiery, smoke-filled intellectual debates of traveling artists, writers, and community stalwarts. Our house became a sanctuary, a living consulate, the ultimate converging point where the members and artists of the Bombay Keraleeya Samaj came to rest. It was through these very eyes—watching quietly from the corners of crowded rooms, listening to the clinking of

teacups, and peering through the heavy velvet wings of grand stages—that I first became aware of the monumental world being forged around me. I did not merely witness history; I evolved within its very skin, shaping the fragile architecture of my own personal identity through these intimate interactions, and slowly awakening to the immense, beautiful miles I myself was destined to travel. The early Pravasi Malayalis who stepped onto the soot-stained platforms of Victoria Terminus and Dadar did not come here merely to find an obscure corner to survive. They arrived with an audacious desire to stand out, choosing to kiss the concrete jungle of Bombay, hold it close, and re-engineer its fierce heart using the gentle, swaying aesthetics of Kerala's fine arts.

To truly feel the Bombay I knew, one must understand how a community wrapped its arms around its own. When a young migrant left a quiet village in Palakkad, Alappuzha, or Travancore in the 1950s and 60s, they boarded a train into a terrifying, vast unknown. They arrived with nothing but cardboard suitcases, high literacy rates, and empty pockets. In a city driven by the relentless, crushing machinery of textile mills and corporate banking, they could have easily been swallowed whole. But the pioneers who came before them had already built an invisible, unbreakable net of human dignity.

The journey almost always began in the bustling belly of Dadar West. The moment you stepped off the train, the world immediately smelled of home—of pure coconut oil, roasted spices, and fresh banana leaves radiating from Jayanti Stores, the ultimate retail pilgrimage site near the station tracks. Jayanti Stores was far more than a simple grocery shop near the station tracks; it was a sacred commercial and cultural pilgrimage site, an emotional lifeline for thousands of homesick families. It was the only place in the vast metropolis where one could reliably source genuine Matta red rice, deep green Kodampuli for traditional curries, fresh tapioca, and authentic, crisp banana chips fried right before your eyes. It functioned as an informal neighborhood community board where people from different suburbs would cross paths, exchange news from their home villages, and share leads on housing or employment. Right around the corner from this retail haven stood the majestic Nayar Samaj Co-operative Hostel, an institution established explicitly as a monument to collective survival and diaspora welfare. Shri V G Nair was its President. The hostel refused to let young, educated men fall into the squalor of unregulated tenements. It provided clean, highly disciplined, and deeply affordable boarding, community meals that tasted of the home fires, and a built-in professional network where senior clerks and managers would actively mentor newly arrived youths, polishing their interview skills and placing them into secure positions within the city's banking, shipping, and administrative sectors. If a migrant fell ill or collapsed from the grueling metropolitan pace, they were never left to suffer alone. They walked straight into the clinic of Dr. S. Gopalan in Bandra West. Dr. Gopalan was a legendary, benevolent physician who treated struggling students, mill hands, and low-income

clerks completely free of charge, often slipping money into their pockets to buy the very medicines he prescribed. For specialized traditional healing, families headed to the first-floor Vaidya Shala run directly by the Samaj, where authentic Ayurvedic practitioners maintained the holistic health of the community.

In the central suburbs, if a family faced an administrative crisis, a legal hurdle, or a sudden housing eviction, they sought out Shri Puduwal from Khar. Shri Puduwal was an institutional anchor, a tireless civic volunteer who spent decades troubleshooting the personal and systemic crises of the diaspora, negotiating with landlords, navigating municipal offices, and ensuring that every Malayali family felt legally and socially secure in their neighborhood. This entire social landscape of who was who during this vibrant, capsuled period was perfectly preserved in the historic Malayalee Directory published back then—a literal address blueprint of absolute empowerment for the diaspora. This wasn't mere survival; it was a profound declaration: No Malayali who steps into this city today will ever be left to feel like an orphan.

The true spirit of the Malayalis lay in their absolute, fierce refusal to separate economic survival from intellectual advancement. They understood with profound clarity that a community that abandons its literary roots is a community that quickly loses its structural spine. Long before they could afford to construct grand concrete auditoriums or high-rise school blocks, they established the traditional Vayanasalas — grassroot reading rooms and makeshift libraries—right inside the crowded chawls of Parel, Matunga, Lalbaug, and the dense tenements of the Worli Samajam. These tiny, humid spaces were the true political and philosophical incubators of the diaspora. They were organized, funded, and kept continuously alive through the legendary efforts of 'Mathrubhumi' N. R. Nair. Before the advent of digital media or satellite transmissions, getting regional print media across the vast distance from Kerala to Bombay was a logistical nightmare. N. R. Nair spearheaded the Bombay operations for the historic Mathrubhumi newspaper with an iron will, managing complex daily railway schedules and distribution networks so that copies of the daily paper reached the chawl reading rooms as swiftly as humanly possible. His office operated effectively as an informal cultural consulate; whenever a local sub-organization needed media coverage or public mobilization, N. R. Nair was the primary strategist ensuring their milestones were broadcasted both locally and back home in Kerala. The reading rooms truly were cradles of Kerala consciousness. Inside these reading rooms, after grueling ten-hour shifts in factories or corporate offices, young men and women would gather under the dim light of single electric bulbs to devour the news, debate international politics, and maintain their fluency in their native tongue. These spaces stacked not just Mathrubhumi, but also Malayala Rajyam and Kerala Kaumudi, bringing the progressive, anti-caste social reform philosophies of Sree Narayana Guru directly into the consciousness of the Bombay working class. It was here that the diaspora

engaged deeply with the contemporary literary renaissance of Kerala, passing around worn copies of anthologies by celebrated female writers like Sarala Rama Varma. Sarala Rama Varma was a powerful, highly articulate voice of realism whose short stories and cultural essays plumbed the profound psychological depths of modern women navigating urban transition. Her writing deeply resonated with first-generation migrant women who were trying to balance traditional familial expectations with the harsh, liberating realities of metropolitan survival. Alongside these literary figures stood administrative giants like Shri Keshava Pillai. Shri Keshava Pillai was a senior bureaucrat, a brilliant structural organizer who worked tirelessly behind the scenes for multiple regional sabhas. He was the man who drafted the legal constitutions, structured the financial audit systems, and navigated the complex cooperative laws of Maharashtra, ensuring that our cultural societies possessed the institutional permanence and legal bulletproofing required to transition from tiny, rented rooms into multi-story, self-owned properties across the city.

Designing the sanctuaries of the future were the educationists. As the community stabilized through the 1960s, its collective focus shifted toward the ultimate tool for permanent social mobility: modern, high-grade institutional education. The pioneers of this movement knew that if their children were to dominate the future, they needed an education that combined international academic rigor with a deep, uncompromised awareness of their cultural lineage.

During this critical post-independence transition, a monumental administrative and pedagogical partnership emerged under the guidance of visionary educationists. Working within the highly disciplined, prestigious framework of this historic institution, these pioneering educationists opened its elite doors to minority and South Indian scholars, instituting advanced methods of training, science instruction, and literary analysis. They mentored a generation of young minds to think with absolute global perspective while maintaining a fierce sense of community responsibility, setting a benchmark for academic excellence that influenced educational trusts across the entire city.

The formalized network of the Nair Service Society (NSS) was expanding rapidly across the Bombay suburbs, a movement that was permanently energized by the historic 1963 visit of the legendary social reformer and NSS founder, Mannathu Padmanabhan. Arriving in the commercial capital as a revered national figure, Mannam's structural tour in 1963 unified the scattered, independent suburban clusters under a single, highly synchronized institutional banner. He traveled extensively through the rising migrant hubs of Chembur and Ghatkopar, addressing massive, roaring rallies of working-class South Indians. His speeches were electric, challenging, and entirely devoid of comfortable nostalgia. He fiercely told the local committees to stop relying on temporary rented municipal spaces or charitable halls for their cultural survival. He delivered

his signature mandate: 'The ultimate tool for diaspora advancement is modern, permanent education, not just cultural sentimentality. Build schools, purchase land, erect concrete laboratories, and ensure your children are masters of the modern world.' Inspired by his fierce vision, the suburban Karayogams immediately launched aggressive fundraising campaigns, laying the physical and financial groundwork for permanent educational landmarks across the city. This educational vanguard was beautifully balanced by the women-led initiatives of the Keraleeya Mahila Samaj based at Shivaji Park. Founded and steered by trailblazing pioneers like Mrs. Curien and Mrs. Sarah Philip, the Mahila Samaj recognized that working mothers in the metropolis needed safe, progressive early-childhood care. They built the historic Balodyan Nursery School right near Shivaji Park—an institution that became a beloved, secular sanctuary providing pioneering preschool education and child development programs. For decades, the Balodyan Nursery stood as an irreplaceable landmark of community care, ensuring that while parents worked to build the city, their children were nurtured in an environment of absolute safety and high educational standards, before its recent municipal relocation to Matkar Marg.

The Onam spirit then was a decentralized carnival of radical hospitality. In the very heart of this thriving, high-velocity metropolis, it was the raw, unadulterated energy of the Onam festival that systematically bound the diaspora together, forcing the concrete jungle of Bombay to pause and acknowledge the cultural majesty of Kerala. Onam in the Bombay of my awakening was never treated as a simple, private holiday or a quiet, isolated family meal consumed behind closed doors. It was an explosive, decentralized, and deeply political socio-cultural carnival that spilled out of private living rooms and completely took over the public geography of the city. Weeks before the actual festival day, the reading rooms, the suburban Samajams, and the NSS Karayogams would morph into hyper-active coordination hubs. The central railway tracks would throb with human movement as thousands of families from the distant suburbs made their mandatory pilgrimage to Dadar West, packing the market lanes to secure authentic Kasavu mundus, specialized clay Urulis, and fresh banana leaves shipped directly from the south. When the day of the Sadya arrived, it became a monumental exercise in radical, uncompromised hospitality. In the cramped, humid chawls of Worli, Parel, and Dharavi, doors were literally unlatched and thrown wide open to the public street.

The feast was not a closed ethnic ritual; it was an open cultural bridge. Marathi textile workers, Gujarati traders, and North Indian corporate clerks were invited to sit cross-legged on long rows of mats laid out across communal corridors and public grounds. They broke bread together, their fingers mixing the rich rice and pradhanman on emerald-green banana leaves, experiencing firsthand the warmth, the culinary sophistication, and the profound egalitarian philosophy of a festival that celebrates a kingdom of absolute equality. Through the Onam spirit, the traditional

Kasavu fabric met the harsh Bombay stone, proving to the city that the Malayali did not live as an isolated, insulated minority enclave, but as an expansive, generous, and welcoming heartbeat that was deeply invested in the collective social harmony of Maharashtra. It transformed the urban space, turning cold, industrial neighborhoods into warm, shared spaces of celebration, and ensuring that our native heritage became a source of pride and joy for all linguistic communities across Bombay.

The cultural pathways had titans of light giving direction to movement and rhythm. The classical arts of Kerala achieved magnificent, uncompromised structural permanence in Mumbai through a brilliant, tireless lineage of performers, teachers, and choreographers who refused to let metropolitan lifestyles dilute their traditional heritage. When the early post-independence masters like Guru Krishnan Kutty, Guru Krishna Panicker, Guru Raghavan Nair, and the visionary GuruGopinath arrived in Bombay, they faced an urban arts scene where 'classical dance' was almost exclusively defined by Kathak or Bharatanatyam. Kathakali and Mohiniyattam were viewed as exotic, distant regional forms. Through sheer willpower and unmatched pedagogical discipline, these gurus completely altered the city's cultural fabric. Guru Krishnan Kutty, alongside Smt. Ammu Kutty, established the celebrated Nrityashree academy, breaking down the complex gestural vocabulary of Kathakali and the gentle, swaying grace of Mohiniyattam for cosmopolitan students who did not speak a single word of Malayalam. Guru Krishna Panicker, operating his influential Nritya Prabha institute alongside Gowri Panicker, focused on the absolute, uncompromising preservation of the strict Kalluvazhi Chitti standard, demanding the exact same geometric precision and emotional depth from his Bombay disciples that was expected in the ancient temples of Kerala. Guru Raghavan Nair democratized these arts completely, traveling relentlessly along the suburban train lines, converting rented municipal classrooms, local school blocks, and the premises of the Bombay Keraleeya Samaj into affordable evening dance studios so that the children of ordinary working-class clerks, factory hands, and railway workers could master their classical heritage. How can one forget Chajyar Rajan ,a corporate consultant who moved to Mumbai and kept his roots alive or Thullal Balan who became the beloved face of Ottamthullal at festive city gatherings.

This aesthetic foundation was matched by the creative genius of Guru Gopinath, who recognized that the long-form, overnight performances of traditional Kathakali were difficult for a fast-paced, multi-ethnic Bombay audience to absorb. He pioneered Kerala Natanam that was a majestic, beautifully modified classical style that extracted the profound expressions and physical conditioning of Kathakali and presented them in elegant, shorter, themed dance-dramas that absolute beginners could instantly follow and appreciate. To ensure the physical infrastructure of these high arts remained intact, K. P. Nair (the brilliant brother of the legendary corporate

administrator and national arts patron M. K. K. Nair) worked tirelessly to establish the Western India Kathakali Centre in Mumbai. Modeled after the iconic FACT Kathakali school in Kerala, this center became the premier apex body in Western India for coordinating authentic costume makers, sourcing specialized facial paints, scheduling elite touring troupes, and funding massive cultural pageants.

How can one forget the Man with the golden pen - Shri Perecad Narayanan Nanappan (P. N. Nanappan) who was a vital pillar of Mumbai's Pravasi theater movement, famously known for bringing the raw, relatable pulse of middle-class diaspora life to the stage. Associated closely with the Experimental Playhouse and various Kerala Samajams across the city, he had a unique gift for writing and directing plays—such as his celebrated work *Kshetram*—that acted as a mirror to the immigrant experience. His narratives deftly captured the socio-cultural struggles, nostalgia, and daily hustles of Malayalis navigating a fast-paced metropolis like Mumbai. Every script he delivered was packed with a distinct comedic and dramatic punch, ensuring that his audience walked away not only deeply entertained but also profoundly reflective of their own evolving social realities. I was a part of many of his plays and his theatre - productions such as *Purandaradasa*. I was always inspired by his sensitive scripting, language that awakened me to words as bridging metaphors.

The absolute pinnacle of our community's cultural validation took shape under the elite lights of Dr. V. K. Narayana Menon, the first Executive Director of the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA), an institution that serves as the definitive gatekeeper of artistic excellence in India. The great visionary in Indian Culture whose name always cropped up in conversations was Dr. V. K. Narayana Menon, a brilliant Kerala-born scholar, musicologist, and administrator who served as a monumental pillar in India's post-independence cultural landscape. After an illustrious career that included working with iconic literary figures at the BBC in London and serving as the Director General of All India Radio, his distinct vision truly came to life when he co-founded the NCPA alongside Dr. Jamshed Bhabha in 1969. Menon's greatest visionary contribution was establishing the NCPA's historic archival project. Recognizing that the genius of India's classical master musicians and folk traditions was oral and transient, he pioneered recording thousands of hours of rare, live performances in a custom-designed acoustic studio. This massive audio treasure trove—preserving legends like Pandit Jasraj, Bismillah Khan, and Kumar Gandharva—ensured that India's performing arts heritage was not lost to time but preserved forever for future generations.

The NCPA also had as its Program Director Shri K. Subash Chandran—who had previously served with immense distinction as the Private Secretary to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru—was the

creative, administrative mastermind behind this golden era. Working alongside the iconic Dr. V. K. Narayana Menon, K. Subash Chandran wielded his immense administrative acumen and deep love for the arts to ensure that Kerala's classical forms received prime, uncompromised representation. He was a towering, elegant presence who organized massive multi-city festivals, invited international critics, and personally presided over our performances. He was the one who mentored us, who challenged us to treat the stage not as a space for hobbyists, but as an altar of absolute professional perfection. To perform under his watchful, encouraging guidance was to understand exactly how many miles we needed to travel to achieve true artistic liberation. On those historic NCPA stages, every dance step was driven by an extraordinary, world-class framework of live traditional orchestration. We did not use recorded music; we relied on the living, breathing genius of vocalists.

Parallel to the cultural pathways ran the profound spiritual roadways that seamlessly anchored our ancient traditions to the cosmopolitan soil of Maharashtra, transforming urban neighborhoods into sacred spaces of collective devotion. A crowning, timeless jewel of this spiritual geography was the legendary Asthika Samaj located in the South Indian hub of Matunga. Established over a century ago, this institution became the absolute spiritual and emotional sanctuary for the expanding Pravasi diaspora. When the sacred, beautiful idol of Lord Guruvayurappan was formally consecrated within its historic stone walls, the temple transformed in the consciousness of the community. It came to be known affectionately, universally, and reverently across the entire length of the city as 'Kochi Guruvayur.' For generations of Mumbai Malayalis, walking through its serene, oil-lamp-lit courtyard was not just an act of weekly worship; it was the exact physical and emotional equivalent of stepping onto the sacred, ancient soil of home. It was a space where the language, the traditional temple music, and the collective prayers offered a timeless sanctuary from the exhausting, relentless pace of the surrounding metropolis, reminding every devotee of their deep, uncompromised spiritual anchor.

This deep internal devotion found its explosive, public manifestation on the streets through the pioneering work of Vasu Menon Ashan of Ambarnath. In the 1960s and 70s, as central Mumbai became intensely crowded, thousands of working-class Malayali technicians and manufacturing laborers shifted to the outer industrial belts of Ambarnath and Kalyan. Vasu Menon became their primary spiritual and cultural anchor, spearheading local committees to establish seasonal Ayyappa shrines so that migrants living at the literal edge of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region could experience the rigorous 41-day Mandala Vratham austerity period. His true stroke of creative genius was integrating traditional Kerala performing arts directly into the street processions of the Ayyappan Vilakku. He trained massive, highly disciplined folk ensembles in the

mesmerizing art of Thiri Uzhiyal—sacred flame dancing—and coordinated complex, rhythmic step-formations right in front of the moving deity's chariot. Vasu Menon did not keep this vibrant spectacle isolated in the far suburbs; he collaborated directly with the central bodies to bring his trained dance troupes straight onto the historic, grand public grounds of Shivaji Park in Dadar West. To witness hundreds of synchronized Malayali devotees, their hands holding open flames, leaping and turning in perfect, roaring harmony to the thunderous rhythm of the traditional drums on the very grounds of Shivaji Park was a breathtaking milestone. It was a cultural synthesis that did not disrupt the multi-ethnic city; it expanded its imagination, permanently embedding our ritual heritage into the shared public memory of Mumbai.

As I evolved as an artist, navigating this throbbing, majestic city, the ultimate validation of my lifelong journey arrived when I was called upon to personally give choreographic shape to the very heritage that had raised and nurtured my soul. I will never forget the immense, quiet tears of profound pride that filled my father's eyes when the venerable, male-led leadership of the Bombay Keraleeya Samaj formally approached me with a monumental, historic task. They requested me to conceptualize, direct, and choreograph the signature cultural production depicting the history, spirit, and artistic soul of Kerala for their grand Golden Jubilee Celebrations, held at the cavernous, legendary Shanmukhananda Hall in Sion. To stand on that historic stage—a venue where the greatest musical and dance maestros of India had made history—and to direct a sweeping, vibrant visual tapestry of our homeland's classical and folk arts was a moment of profound, shattering awakening. My father, who had spent his entire life connecting scattered Malayalis, sat in that massive audience and watched his own daughter connect the entire city through the universal language of dance. It was a moment where the miles I had traveled suddenly crystallized into absolute purpose.

Years later, that deep creative responsibility came full circle when the ladies of the Bombay Keraleeya Samaj approached me to anchor their own historic milestone. For their grand Platinum Jubilee Celebrations, I conceptualized, wrote, and choreographed the intensive production titled Ritu Gatim—The Rhythm of the Seasons—staged at the prestigious Veer Savarkar Hall in Shivaji Park. This production was a deeply emotional, highly complex choreographic exploration that mapped the cyclical nature of time, the emotional landscapes of migration, and the unyielding resilience of cultural memory. We wove traditional mudras with contemporary arrangements, creating a production that mirrored the exact journey of the Pravasi who transitions through the seasons of metropolitan isolation to achieve collective triumph. As the final notes of the live orchestra faded into a roaring, thunderous standing ovation from a packed auditorium, I looked out into the crowd and realized with a quiet clarity how far we had truly traveled as a people. We were no longer just a group of transient migrants trying to fit into the corners of Bombay; we had

successfully woven our very DNA, our aesthetics, and our history into the permanent stone architecture of the city.

The dawn that was lit by those pioneering Pravasi Malayalis from the post-independence era through the late 1970s is the direct, uncompromised foundation that gives us our magnificent present today. The modern generation of Mumbaikar Malayalis must realize that the sprawling network of community centers, grand temples, and elite colleges they see around them did not appear overnight by corporate accident or political favor. They were bankrolled, brick-by-brick, through the immense success of self-made Malayali industrial titans and corporate leaders who achieved legendary status in Bombay's fierce business world. Shri G. P. Nair, who served with great distinction as a Justice of the Peace (J.P.) for Bombay, built the massive Bombay Drug House (BDH) Industries into a pharmaceutical empire, generating a vast national fortune through his blockbuster restorative formulation, Hillberry Tonic. He chose to channel his deep capital directly into his own construction wing, M/s. Hill Rocks Construction, explicitly to physically erect the multi-story Sree Narayana Guru High School and College complex on P.L. Lokhande Marg in Chembur. He transformed what was once a swampy, neglected suburb into Sree Narayana Nagar—a thriving institutional capital of education and social advancement anchored by the Sree Narayana Mandira Samiti.

Shri G. P. Nair was joined in this philanthropic mission by infrastructure patron Shri A. M. G. Balaram, an independent manufacturing industrialist who heavily financed land acquisitions for suburban educational trusts. In the high-stakes world of engineering and cooling infrastructure, award-winning tech entrepreneurs like T. S. Srinivasan and Mukundan C. P. Menon (who rose to the rank of President and COO of Blue Star Limited, and later served as the Managing Director of Voltas Limited) steered the city's commercial boardrooms while serving on elite educational boards, ensuring that the children of working-class families received heavily subsidized, world-class schooling. This standard of professional excellence was matched within Mumbai's premier Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) landscape by the 'Colgate' Warriors—senior executive leaders like Anil Warriar and Nalini Warriar at Colgate-Palmolive India—who established the corporate benchmark for strategy, consumer insights, and administrative governance in the commercial capital.

Equally one remembers the legendary Nair House on 14th Road in Khar West. For decades, this iconic landmark family and location stood as an irreplaceable pillar of community contribution. It provided shelter, structural guidance, job leads, and an invaluable sense of immediate belonging to the earliest generations of corporate and working-class Keralites navigating the suburbs.

Because of this industrial and corporate vanguard, the modern diaspora is now a magnificent,

sprawling constellation stretching along every single railway artery of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region. Travel out to Navi Mumbai, and you stand before the sprawling Amrita Centre and the powerhouse Navarasa Academy in Nerul. Look all along the far edges of the Central line to Dombivli, Thane, Ambarnath, and Kalyan, or up the Western line to the bustling clusters of Vasai-Virar—and you will find grand Lord Ayyappa Temples and active socio-cultural Samajams and sabhas today anchoring every single neighborhood, fitting the city perfectly all along the tracks.

We need to remember with profound reverence the open doors of Mayor M. Madhavan's bungalow, standing adjacent to the Bombay Keraleeya Mahila Samajam. His home was a sanctuary that never demanded credentials, only offering comfort, warmth, and orientation to the weary Pravasi facing an intimidating metropolis. As the First Citizen and Mayor of Bombay from 1965 to 1966, he wielded his authority to safeguard the vulnerable and champion the working class. We honor his enduring legacy today in every whistle of the Jayanti Janata Express—the historical direct pipeline he fought to secure alongside the Bombay Keraleeya Samaj—and the Netravati Express, which he helped divert via the scenic Konkan Railway route, permanently stitching our two homelands together.

'We must shatter the myth of this closed world of 'I, me myself' today. Nothing that 'is' today would ever be minus the shaping hands of luminaries gone before! We need to understand that we do not need a walk between the world we live in and the heritage we carry; we need to integrate them into a singular, breathtaking dance of existence.'

This article is a sensitive and urgent awakening call for the current generation of Mumbaikar Malayalis who have inherited this magnificent present. The schools you study in, the corporate desks you occupy, the auditoriums you perform in, and the temples you pray at were not built on comfortable sentimentality. They were forged through the sweat, the high discipline, and the absolute brilliance of an extraordinary generation of Pravasis too from various states who looked at a strange, chaotic concrete jungle and chose to conquer it through sheer excellence and an uncompromising devotion to their roots. They did not just survive the concrete jungle; they kissed it and taught it how to dance. I have traveled my miles, driven by the memories of Subash Chandran's guidance, Shri Nanappan's commentaries, every Guru's mentoring advice, every artist's reaching visual prayers and my father's unyielding pride. Now, the stage belongs entirely to you. It is your sacred, historic responsibility to look back at the dawn that brought us here, to honor the pioneers, and to step onto the floor with absolute dignity to ensure that the music never stops.

“Manushyar ellarum onnupole...”

As we gather to celebrate Onam in Mumbai, the vibrant floral pookalams and the shared warmth of the sadya remind us that we are breathing in the very dignity, resilience, and unity shaped by the visionary hands that went before us. The great Malayali pioneers of this metropolis did not live merely as an isolated diaspora. Instead, they breathed the timeless ethos of Mahabali directly into the soul of Maharashtra, offering their very spirit of oneness to the city that adopted them. From the legendary civic leadership of Mayor M. Madhavan to the inclusive socio-political vision of V. K. Krishna Menon, they broke down boundaries of caste, creed, and geography to build a sanctuary of mutual aid and secular solidarity. Today, every flash of traditional gold border on a crowded Mumbai local train, and every resonant beat of the chendamelam echoing through these historic streets, is a living testament to their legacy. We do not just inherit their culture; we inherit their hard-won respect, awakening once more to the profound truth that under the modern skies of Mumbai, just as in the golden reign of Maveli, all human beings walk as one.

*"Wishing you all a blessed and
unified Onam ""*

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