

The Many Lives of Madras

21–22 August 2026 at MIDS, Chennai

Madras Day has evolved into an annual celebration of the city's history, culture, institutions, and people. More than a commemoration of the founding of a colonial settlement, it has become an occasion to reflect on Chennai—its layered past, dynamic present, and aspirations for the future. The city has continually reinvented itself through migration, commerce, scholarship, art, industry, and civic engagement, making it one of India's most enduring urban centres.

Celebrating the Many Lives of Madras

Madras is simultaneously a historical city and a living metropolis. It is remembered through archives, literature, architecture, music, cinema, neighbourhoods, industries, and everyday lives. Its identity has been shaped by multiple communities, languages, occupations, and cultures that continue to redefine the city. The Madras Day celebrations at Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS) seek to explore the many lives of Madras by examining the intersections of history, development, culture, environment, and citizenship. This set of events, a series of exhibitions and public lectures, celebrate not only the city's heritage but also its resilience, diversity, and capacity for renewal.

Madras Day 2026 at the MIDS will celebrate the city as a living archive—one shaped by memory, scholarship, creativity, and everyday experience. By bringing together diverse voices and disciplines, the event seeks to honour Madras not merely as a place with a remarkable past, but as a city continually reinventing itself through its people, institutions, and ideas.

A Library Exhibition

The Library of Madras Institute of Development Studies commemorates Madras Day with a library exhibition which will spotlight rare literature on Chennai and the old Madras available in its prestigious collection. The exhibition will feature around 170 books and documents recounting Madras' socio-cultural and political history. The display will include government gazettes, census reports, socio-cultural documents, archival records and documents of Madras' urban settings. Also on display will be some of the rare books by popular historians of Madras such as J T Wheeler, H H Dodwell and Henry Davidson Love. Records and letters to and from Fort St George from the early 18th century will adorn the shelves.

Landmarks of Madras: Through the Lens of Philo Irudayanath—A Photographic Exhibition

What is a Madras Day celebration without seeing the Madras of yore? Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS) and Nilgiri Documentation Centre (NDC) come together to showcase, through a photo exhibition, the antiquity of the city through the lens of the late Philo Irudhayanath, the man who sedulously captured the transition from Madras to Chennai. Philo was a primary school teacher in Chennai and a self-taught photographer, anthropologist and writer. He was one of the earliest travel writers who documented and brought to light the potential tourist spots, ancient temples and the lives of several tribes and indigenous peoples of south India. He had published over five thousand articles in English and Tamil in more than sixty magazines. He passed away in 1992. The photo exhibition is curated by NDC. Both the exhibitions are open to the general public on 21st and 22nd August 2026.

Programme

Day 1 | 21 August 2026, Friday

10:30 AM | Reading Room, MIDS Library

Inauguration of Exhibitions

Welcome Address	R Murugan Librarian, MIDS
Chief Guest's Address	V P Jeyaseelan, IAS Director of Tourism, Government of Tamil Nadu
Inauguration of Exhibitions by the Chief Guest	☞ The Madras Day Library Exhibition ☞ Landmarks of Madras: Through the Lens of Philo Irudayanath
Release of Souvenir	<i>Bicentenary Memorial of Sir Thomas Munro</i>

11:00 AM | Adiseshiah Auditorium, MIDS

Prize Distribution Ceremony

Prize Distribution for Madras Day 2026 Essay Competition jointly organized by MIDS and Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation (TTDC)

Opening Remarks	M Suresh Babu Director, MIDS
Prize Distribution by the Chief Guest	
Vote of Thanks	R Murugan Librarian, MIDS

3:30 PM | Adiseshiah Auditorium, MIDS

Public Lecture: Madras or Chennai: The Continuing Debate

Speaker	V Sriram Historian
Chair	A R Venkatachalapathy Professor, MIDS

Abstract

Since the inception of the city of Chennai in 1639, the name of the city has attracted considerable attention. The names Madras, Chennai, Chennapatnam, Srirangaraya Patnam, were all given for one city. Place changing their names is not new in history. Even centuries

later, the nomenclature remains a compelling lens through which historians, urban sociologists, and residents negotiate the city's complex identity. This talk explores the historical origins, cultural politics, and deep-seated sentimentality surrounding the names Madras and Chennai. From a fishing village to a metropolis, the city its name carries a history in itself, the debate is worth looking back at, this Madras Day.

Day 2 | 22 August 2026, Saturday

11:00 AM Adiseshiah Auditorium, MIDS
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Public Talk: **Tales of the City—Madras in the Vernacular: Chennapuri & Vilasam**

Speaker	A Monish Shanmukh Kasyap Research Scholar, MIDS
Chair	TBA

Abstract

The city of Chennai has largely been seen through the accounts of the British. How did the city look in the middle of the nineteenth century? Chennai at its inception had a multi-cultural root and grew as a cosmopolitan city. It attracted traders, weavers, travellers and soldiers and is known to giving a second chance to many. This talk will be a traveller's account of the city in 1863. The *Chennapuri Vilasam*, a medieval style *Prabandha* by M Narasimha Sastry from the Krishna delta, provides a native account of the city at the mouth of Cooum River. It recounts and reimagines the city as it was in mid-nineteenth century. Join this Madras Day for the Vilasam of Chennapuri at MIDS.