The Guindy National Park:
Its History and Physiogeography

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The Guindy National Park is situated within the city of Madras at lat. 81° and long. 13°, at sea-level. The park is in the environs of "Raj Bhavan", the residence of the Tamil Nadu Governor. The history of this park is the story of "Guindy Lodge", as it was called formerly.

The earliest information on this tract of forest is that sometime between 1671 and 1678, Mr. William Langhorne, a rather successful Governor of Madras, carved out a house and garden from the forest that was Guindy. The "Guindy Lodge" changed hands many times before it was acquired by the Government in 1821 for Rs. 35,000 or 10,000 pagodas, the currency of those years. Sir Thomas Munro was the Governor responsible for its purchase and made it the country residence and weekend resorts of the Governors of Madras.

At the time of purchase, the lodge comprised of 3 single storied buildings and the surrounding forest. The adjoining Joseph Nazer Showmier property was bought along with the Guindy Lodge for an extra Rs. 8,750/-. The Raj Bhavan estate came into existence with another land purchase in 1823 which linked the two properties. Between 1837 and 1842, the scholarly Lord Elphinstone, Governor of Madras, added to and altered the buildings to its present shape. He also built the approach road to the lodge. The land and forest around these buildings was called "Raj Bhavan Forest" and managed by a team of Forest Officers under the Military Secretary to the Governor.

In March 1956, Mr. A. J. John, a Governor of Madras, handed over the bulk of the Raj Bhavan Forest to the Forest Department and thereafter it was controlled by the Department Range office, Tambaram. The Guindy Park Forest, as it was renamed, got its first superintendent on 20-10-1959 and became a separate unit. A year later it came under the control of the State Wildlife Officer. The area of the Park was then 504.80 hectares.

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In 1961, 154.80 hectares were dereserved and handed over to the Indian Institute of Technology. In 1970, 8.00 hectares were given over to the building of the Guru Nanak College. The Cancer Institute claimed 2.28 hectares in 1977. Still further inroads into the forest was made when a Governor orally handed over 7.32 hectares for the 3 memorials erected to Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Kamaraj and Sri C. Rajagopalachari. Earlier, on 19-11-1970, a small slice of forest land (0.4 hectares) was leased to Mr. Romulus Whitaker to set up the Madras Snake Park. The Guindy Park was elevated to the status of a "National Park" on 4-9-1978. This includes the Children's Park (8.8 hectares) but not Raj Bhavan Estate (62.12 hectares). A riding club and school that had operated within the Park has since stopped its activities. The area of the National Park today is 270.57

The K.K. Tank—the major source of water to the inhabitants of the Park

—Pic.: V. SANTHARAM

Blackbuck
The Guindy National Park

Bhavan main gate is a pond called "Duck Pond". The entire area of the park can be divided into 4 areas based on the canopy and the dominant trees present.

**Area I**
This area is thickly forested with good canopy. The dominant tree is the umbrella shaped *Acacia planifrons*. The undergrowth is dense with the shrubs *Glycosmis pentaphylla* and *Clausena willdenovii*.

**Area II**
In the semi-open areas *A. planifrons* is almost absent and the canopy sparse. Although no species is clearly dominant, the palmry *Borassus flabellifer* is conspicuous as also the shrub *Dodonaea* sp., and *Randia* sp. This area forms the major part of the park.

**Area III**
This represents the area which has been primarily cleared and in some cases have also been planted with saplings of trees. The polo field, measuring about 180 x 135 meters, is an open *maiden*, carpeted with herbs and grasses of about 16 species.

**Area IV**
The extreme west of the park is perhaps the remnant of the

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*Pic.: V. SANTHARAM*
A magnificent Cheetal Stag

Pic.: PRESTON AHIMAZ

The vegetation is thick, though not as in area I. *Acacia sundra* is characteristic here, along with exotic *Castus cereus.*

Some species of the trees of the park are listed below:

- Acacia planifrons
- *A. sundra*
- *A. leucophloea*

The Guindy National Park is separated from the I.I.T. Campus by a barbed-wire fence reinforced by a chain link fence, with a total length of 2.6 km and a height of 6 ft. This campus now measures 200 hectares, additional land having been added to the original 154.80 hectares. This forested area was originally contiguous with the National Park, though now about 41.6 hectares have been built up. The rest is fortunately available to 515 cheetal (*Axis axis*) and 235 Blackbuck (*Antilope cervicapra*). (Census on 22-6-1982, R. K. Menon).

The National Park has a population of 756 cheetal and 391 Blackbuck. (Census on 22-6-82, R. K. Menon). The lesser fauna of the I.I.T. campus and the National Park are similar. Some of the other mammals that inhabit here include Bonnet monkey (*Macaca radiata*), Jackal (*Canis aureus,* Jungle cat (*Felis chaus*), Civet cat (*Viverra indica*) and Mongoose (*Herpestes edwardsii*). About 130 species of birds have also been recorded here (see article elsewhere in this issue—Ed.).

No forestry activity is being carried out in the National Park, though many small cement water troughs have been built in the yea-
1983 to alleviate the prevailing drought conditions. One ton of Buffalo or Para grass (*Brachiaria matica*) is trucked in daily to seven selected spots in the park for the ungulates. This feeding is done every year during the summer months when the forest turns dry and parched. Between October and February, after the North-East Monsoon, the forest is all green and verdant.

The polo-field, once the haunt of the Blackbuck, is today overrun by *Acacia planifrons*, and *Cida cordifolia*, choking out the grass. Blackbucks no longer congregate in large numbers. Instead, they are now found in other parts of the park, especially the dry bed of the K. K. Tank and other open spaces in the Raj Bhavan Estate. At the I.T.T., the favoured spots are the sports stadium, which is unused for a large part of the year, and the National Cadet Corps training field. At both these places, the animals are so habituated to man that they move away from the field during the sports events and return as soon as the men leave. At the N.C.C. training grounds, even rifle fire does not drive the animal far or for long. It is of special interest that a large concentration of Blackbuck can co-exist with intense human activity (Mungall, 1983, personal communication).

There are no large predators at the National Park or at I.T.T., the balance being maintained by a few Jackals, stray dogs, and by immigration. The stray dog menace is being controlled by the Forest Department by shooting.

A new wall is already up around the park and it meets up with the peripheral wall of the Indian Institute of Technology, encompassing a total area of about 550 hectares of forested land. The present population (I.T.T. and G.N.P.) of some 1,271 cheetal and 626 Blackbuck are now walled in, in these few hectares. Population pressures can no more be alleviated by immigration into the surrounding area nor can the cheetal migrate during the post-monsoon period (*Observation on Cheetal at Guindy National Park*: R. K. Meenon, 1983. *Cheetal*, Vol. 24, No. 1). Further study and management of Guindy National Park would be the obvious answer.

This park, so advantageously located within the city of Madras remains an ideal site for naturalists and ecologists to conduct profitable studies.

Much of the above information has been drawn from the Tamil Nadu Forest Department Management Plans for Guindy National Park. (Somasundaram, 1980).