

Reminiscences of a Chess International Master

- By **Mr. Manuel Aaron**, *Former Chief Manager of Indian Bank*

When I joined Indian Bank in 1960 there was no BSRB (Banking Services Recruitment Board). I was taken in as a Probationary Officer purely on a reference by Dr B.Gopala Reddy, the then Union Minister for Information & Broadcasting. He was also the President of the All India Chess Federation. I won my first National Chess title in Delhi in December 1959. At the prize distribution ceremony, Dr Reddy congratulated me on my victory and asked me what I was doing in Madras. I told him that I was looking for a job. He asked me to go and meet Rajah Sir Muthiah Chettiar, the Chairman of Indian Bank, in Madras.



Mr. Manuel Aaron
in 1962

Rajah Sir gave me a job as an Unpaid Probationary Officer in Indian Bank, which is normally for a period of 6 months. When I was still serving my apprenticeship in T.Nagar branch the West Asian Chess Zonal was announced in Madras.

As National Chess Champion, I was to play a 4-game match with Suren Momo of Mongolia. When I approached the Accountant of T.Nagar branch for casual leave to play the match, he told me, “We are short-staffed. Why not somebody else play instead of you!” At the directions of Head Office, I was given leave to play the match.

I won that match 3-1 and qualified for the Asian Zonal Final, also in Madras. The second match in 1961 was against the Australian, CGS Purdy who was World Correspondence Chess Champion. I won it easily 3-0 and thanks to that victory, became an International Master – India's first. The Hindu brought out an editorial on my historic achievement.

Other chess successes followed, but life was not easy. My immediate bosses in the bank branches worked me to the bone and often I left for home at 9 pm, tired.

During the 1960s the Sports Journalists Association in Madras once announced that I was elected Sportsman of the Year. Before they could hold the official ceremony, Mr M.Gopalakrishnan organised a felicitation function for me at the Harbour Branch and invited Mr T.Govindarajan of The Hindu, a former President of the Sports Journalists Association of India. “TG” as he was known attended the function and in good humour told our bank, “You have stolen our thunder!”

Meanwhile, I had married the same year I joined the bank, 1960, and children were born. I was an officer in the bank, but for many years I was practically a clerk, sitting up late, balancing ledgers. Then I was posted to MBD (Madras Banking Department). MBD was supposed to be a 'Punishment Branch' meant to punish officers who had transgressed somewhere! But on the contrary, MBD became a kind of paradise for me. Under the Branch Manager Mr Karupppiah Chettiar, I was the officer in charge of BP (Bills Purchased) and I soon became an expert in BP. Then when Mr M.Gopalakrishnan became the Manager of MBD, he did not want me to do a desk job and said he wanted to use my public image as a well known chess player to go out and meet new customers and attract them to our Bank. I went to places like the Port Trust and the High Court law chambers and got acquainted with celebrated lawyers like Mr Govind Swaminathan who reminisced on chess play during the time he was a junior lawyer in England.

From MBD, I went to the Audit Department to 'query' all the returns that the branches sent periodically. The Audit Department was in the H.O., the same as the International Division where Mr D.V.Sundar, a young sports lover, was working. Mr Sundar's ability and enthusiasm for all Sports automatically made him the Indian Bank's Sports Secretary.



Mr Viswanathan Anand being awarded in 1983 for winning the 4th edition of All India Chess Tournament organised by Indian Bank

By then the Sports Department of our bank had become very strong and popular with Mr D.V.Sundar as Sports Secretary producing results beyond our wildest dreams. I was the Treasurer. Our bank's name regularly

appeared in the headlines of Sports columns of leading newspapers. Basically a hockey player he learned the technical nuances of organising different games with brilliant success. The CMDs of our time, Mr M.V.Subba Rao, Mr M.G.K.Nair and Mr M.Gopalakrishnan had the broad vision to support our sports' initiative to the maximum and enabled us to recruit a few promising sportspersons according to Government guidelines under the sports quota. Invariably they turned out to be outstanding young men and women.

The Sports arm of Indian Bank was very productive, regularly hitting the headlines in newspapers and the media .Our bank really did not have to advertise itself, as the bank's sportspersons in football, hockey, volleyball, basketball, table tennis, chess, carom, athletics, etc., were bringing in free ads through the sports channels all over the country.

During 1980-1992, Indian Bank also organised eleven All India Chess Tournaments in which the best players from India like Vishy Anand, Pravin Thipsay, Ravi Sekhar, Arun Vaidya, et al, participated and won honours. Anand won the 4th edition in 1983, four years before he became India's first grandmaster. The Indian Bank Open was one of the All India Open Tournaments that prepared Anand's fantastic rise in International Chess.

In 1993, the bank organised, in collaboration with Videocon, a 14-player International Chess Tournament through which P.Mithrakanth of Neyveli Lignite Corporation became an International Master. So, our Bank had contributed in many ways to the development and spread of chess in India.

Without any exaggeration the 1980s and 1990s could be termed the Golden era for Indian Bank Sports.

(Mr. Manuel Aaron was the first Indian chess master in the second half of the 20th century. He dominated chess in India in the 1960s to the 1980s, was the national champion of India nine times between 1959 and 1981. He is a former Chief Manager of Indian Bank)

