The Making of a South Indian Metropolis:

Chennai / Madras, 1919 –1973

CALL FOR ESSAY PROPOSALS — ITERATION 2

About the Project

This call for essay proposals is issued by a collective of scholars and researchers interested in the history of Chennai/Madras, based in institutions within and around Chennai. Building on the first iteration of the Chennai History Project, we invite scholars working on the social, economic, political, cultural, and spatial histories of the city to contribute to Iteration 2 of this ongoing metropolitan history initiative.

The Chennai History Project is conceived as a sustained, multi-year scholarly effort to deepen academic engagement with the history of Chennai/Madras. While the city has benefited from the work of public historians and heritage enthusiasts over several decades, academic research on Chennai remains comparatively sparse. This project seeks to address that gap through original, analytically grounded historical research.

The project is organized by Empowering Communities Through Education (ECTE), a Texas, U.S. based nonprofit organization, with Alliance for Community Empowerment (ACE) as the implementing partner in India.

ECTE was established to work on social and economic justice efforts in Chennai, India, and the United States of America (USA). Born out of a deep sense of compassion and a commitment to address social and economic justice issues, ECTE is dedicated to empowering people and communities by providing them with tools to ascertain their rights in society. At the heart of ECTE is a belief in the transformative power of education, which serves as a catalyst for personal growth and a cornerstone for community development. The ECTE vision, however, goes beyond education alone, embracing a holistic approach to empowerment that fosters a culture of lifelong learning and civic engagement.

Scope and Periodization

Iteration 2 continues to focus on Chennai/Madras and its surrounding regions (including areas of the erstwhile Chingleput/Chengalpattu district of the Madras Presidency) during the period 1919–1973.

This period encompasses profound political, social, and economic transformations, including the transition from colonial governance to democratic rule, the consolidation of Dravidian politics, rapid urban expansion, and the restructuring of labour, education, infrastructure, and everyday life in the city.

Research Approach and Intellectual Orientation

By encouraging historical research centred around Chennai/Madras, this project seeks to enrich existing histories of the city in two important ways.

First, it promotes a relational approach to the study of people and places, focusing less on individual actors and more on social classes, occupational groups, spatial formations, and the land itself. Such an approach enables a move away from histories dominated by elite figures and institutions, and towards a broader social and ecological history of the city, attentive to labour, migration, environment, and everyday life.

Second, the project calls for a more analytical engagement with the history of Chennai/Madras, placing emphasis on explaining historical processes and transformations – rather than merely describing events – so as to better understand how the city emerged as a South Indian metropolis in the twentieth century.

Research Focus for Iteration 2

While proposals across a wide range of themes are welcome, Iteration 2 will place particular emphasis on areas that were underrepresented or incomplete in the first iteration, including but not limited to:

- Working-class history and labour struggles, including industrial, informal, and service-sector labour

- Linguistic and cultural histories, with special attention to Telugu and Urdu sources, communities, and print cultures in Chennai

- Infrastructure and mobility, including railways, electricity, housing, and urban services

- Education and professionalization, including schools, colleges, medicine, engineering, and home science

- Feminist and social movements, including anti-Hindi agitations and gendered political mobilization

- Capitalist and financial transformations, including the emergence of organized finance and capital markets (such as the establishment of the Madras Stock Exchange), and their implications for labour, land, industry, and urban governance

- Neighbourhood and spatial histories, including demographic change and migration

- Post-Independence land reform and urban governance

We especially encourage proposals that foreground non-elite actors, marginalized occupational and caste communities, and those that situate Chennai within wider regional, national, and transnational processes.

Approach and Expectations

The project encourages:

- Analytically rigorous historical writing

- Engagement with primary sources, including archives, print materials, oral testimonies, and vernacular-language sources

- Relational approaches that move beyond individual biography to examine social classes, institutions, environments, and urban processes

- Clear analytical engagement with the geography of Chennai, ensuring that the city's specific neighbourhoods, spatial formations, infrastructures, or ecological contexts are integral to the argument rather than serving merely as background

- Final essays that employ appropriate academic research methods while being written in clear, accessible language that allows the work to speak beyond specialist audiences

Selected contributors will be expected to produce original, unpublished research and to participate in structured check-ins and editorial feedback processes over the duration of the project.

Language and Accessibility

Essay proposals and final essays may be submitted in English or Tamil. Proposals engaging with Telugu and Urdu sources are strongly encouraged. Project events and discussions will be bilingual in character, and translation support will be provided where necessary.

While maintaining analytical depth, contributors are encouraged to write in clear, accessible prose, so that the essays can speak both to academic audiences and to a broader readership interested in the history of the city.

Submission Guidelines

Interested scholars should submit a single consolidated PDF containing the following:

1. Research proposal / abstract (800–1,000 words) outlining the research question, argument, and significance

2. Methodological note describing sources and approaches

3. Brief project timeline

4. Latest CV of the applicant(s)

Timeline and Support

- Call for Abstracts released: January 26, 2026

- Deadline for submission: March 31st, 2026 (11:59 pm IST)

- Notification of selected proposals: May 1st, 2026

The project aims to support approximately 15 essays. Selected contributors will receive:

- Editorial and peer feedback

- Opportunities to present work at a workshop/conference

- A total research stipend of ₹65,000 upon successful completion of project milestones

Final essays will be collected for mainstream publication and presented at the Iteration 2 Chennai History Workshop/Conference in August 2027.

How to Apply

Iteration 2 of the Chennai History Project is organized by ECTE Foundation, with Alliance for Community Empowerment (ACE) serving as the implementation partner in Chennai.

Please email your consolidated PDF to:

chennaihistory@ectefoundation.org

For queries or requests for clarification, you may write to the same address.

Closing Note

Through Iteration 2, the Chennai History Project seeks to deepen scholarly engagement with the city's past while expanding the range of voices, sources, and questions that shape its history. We invite historians, researchers, and independent scholars to join us in this collective effort to re-examine Chennai/Madras as a dynamic South Indian metropolis.

Prospective contributors are strongly encouraged to engage with existing scholarship on the history of the city while developing their proposals. To support this, the project provides a partial bibliography of key academic works on Chennai/Madras, as well as the Call for Papers from Iteration 1, both of which outline the intellectual foundations and analytical orientation of the project. Applicants are encouraged to use these materials to situate their proposed research within, and in conversation with, existing historiography.