

THE WORD

LAB JOURNAL OF THE ASIAN COLLEGE OF JOURNALISM



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Fraud in GRE surfaces

As the test went online, several circumvented its monitoring

VIDHATRI RAO

When K first heard from a friend that the Graduate Record Examination, a requirement for securing Master's admissions abroad, was being written by ghostwriters, he did not take it seriously. It was September 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic had struck the world and many exams shifted online. While some were trying to adapt, some others saw an opportunity. They saw ways to circumvent the monitoring practices of entrance exams like the GRE. They started becoming "ghostwriters"—essentially writing exams for students desperate to move abroad. K is one such ghostwriter.

A college dropout whose investment business was hit by the pandemic, K decided to take a "chance". His story was made possible by his location in Hyderabad, known for its tech companies, and a once-in-a-lifetime event like the pandemic. He needed the money and by then, the practice had spread around him—in the states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

As K jumped in, he assembled some of his friends. They were all "proficient in a particular subject covered in the GRE". He first became a mediator—someone

TOP 10 NATIONS TO TAKE THE GRE

COUNTRY	TEST TAKERS	MEAN SCORE
U.S.A	42, 76, 519	302.9
INDIA	8, 19, 880	301.1
CHINA	6, 88, 884	313.5
CANADA	68, 518	309.9
SOUTH KOREA	63, 244	311.6
IRAN	54, 376	301.9
TAIWAN	46, 185	310.7
NIGERIA	38, 018	291.2
JAPAN	36, 920	305.9
U.K	32, 001	311.7

SOURCE: ETS

candidates wanting to take this route could reach out to. He eventually became a ghostwriter himself.

After writing some exams, he quit in December 2021. "It was illegal, but everyone was involved. At the moment, I did not think it was particularly wrong."

K explains how the process works. He says that it started with the consultancies themselves. Some educational consultancies get cuts from certain global universities for placing students with them. They make as much as Rs 1-2 lakh for every admission and so, it is in their interest to push as many admissions

as possible.

When a student comes to the consultancy, they are offered a package depending on the score that the candidate wants, K said. The rates vary from Rs 30,000 to Rs 90,000. This was confirmed by The Hindu in its own investigation of the racket.

The consultancies were also creating databases with students' data and calling. They would then consult people like K, who would assemble a team either in their makeshift office—which could pass off for a house—or they could do it in the candidate's house.

K said that ETS—the agency that conducts the GRE—typically requires online test takers to pan their camera around the room to ensure the sanctity of the tests. Ghostwriters like K typically stand behind the camera as it is being panned across the room. After that, it is a simple matter of the test taker pretending that there is nobody else in the room.



To read the full story and to listen to a podcast, scan the QR code.

The writing on the wall



HIDING DISSENT: Political graffiti in Kashmir is often seen written over to make the message unreadable. The government's endeavour indicates an attempt to obliterate the real sentiments of a people long occupied | PHOTO: RWIT

You're not in your Fleabag era ...you're just dissociating

ROHINI ROY

Enter the 'Fleabag Era' woman—she smokes cigarettes for breakfast, squanders around in last night's makeup, she performs pain like it's art.

She is a self-effacing red flag who would rather die than indulge in honest communication.

She listlessly medicates with sex and alcohol, causes pain to others and has become the guiding light for a new strain of feminism. Yes, she is real. Or, is she?

In 2019, Emmeline Clein wrote about "dissociation feminism", where she essentialised the oversharing yet distanced women who often found expression in *Euphoria*'s Rue or the self-destructive Irish beauties in Sally Rooney novels.

An aftermath of the "curdling of the hyperoptimistic, #girlboss," Clein's disassociated feminist is dispassionate and wry.

A more accurate description of this are women on TikTok who, inspired by fictional characters, spew an intrinsic nihilist attitude towards feminist progress or life in general.

These videos are often the epitome of "feminine messiness" that advocate "seeking vengeance for fun" or sleeping in "drugstore mascara".

A range of 'eras' have taken hold of TikTok, but in the spotlight is always the disoriented, detached white woman.

This poignantly worded glorification of heterosexual female despair is evident too in novels by Ottessa Moshfegh and Sally Rooney.

While the nameless character in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* embarks on a drug-addled quest to sleep off an entire year, Frances in *Conversations with Friends* takes it upon herself to act perpetually detached while having an affair that torments everyone involved.

It's as if their aching heroines are always looking for an excuse to submit to pain.

When Fleabag looks directly at the camera during riveting moments, it is nothing but an extension of the mind-body separation that dissociation often leads to.

The terrifying part? Young women today are increasingly viewing it as a poetic coping mechanism.

The inertia and nihilism, which have unflinchingly become the undertones of the "Fleabag Era," are subverting the entire feminist movement.

Fleabag is not enraged with patriarchy but herself. She repeatedly cracks jokes while addressing the viewer during an uncomfortable family dinner in the second season. She wipes blood off her face and says, "This is a love story". Her laughter during woeful situations misdirects the viewers to think that the pain she experiences is her fault and laughter is the only befitting remedy.

This tactic puts the burden of dealing with her pain entirely on the woman and forgives (however unconsciously) the systemic inequalities that cause it.

This passivity, however, is the playground of the privileged.

Dissociative feminism is the prerogative of women around whom the world already revolves—cis, pretty, white and wealthy.

They're tormented, perhaps not very likeable, yet interesting. They can choose to dissociate from oppression and have no desire to fight for women who might not have the said choice.

To then premise a show on Roxane Gay's (who is a person of colour) "Bad Feminist" makes Fleabag bad at bad feminism.

Ironically, Fleabag answers all the questions it raises. "I love you," she tells the priest in the end. "No, let's just leave that out there for a second on its own," she says while he tries to interrupt.

Though she is addressing Andrew Scott, it is also an appeal to the viewer: Sit with my story, allow me my pain. As we must, while being aware of the conditions that have made it possible for her to say so.

White board buses unreliable

NIRMALA MURALI

The 'white board buses' of Tamil Nadu, which allow free travel for women, are "unreliable," "fewer in number" and "cover only a few routes," frequent commuters complained.

The white board buses, announced by the government on May 8, 2021, are known for their minimal fares; one can take the bus for just Rs. 5.

Jaya Durga, a daily wage worker who takes the bus from J.J. Nagar to Kilpauk for work, said, "Though my expenses have gone down, my commuting time has gone up," she said.

Deepali Mishra, a student of D.G. Vaishnav College, said, "My home is near the Ambattur Estate bus stand, I have to take two buses to reach my college at Arumbakkam from my home. It is not just with 'white board' buses but time is an uncertain factor when it comes to any government bus." She said that considering the women population of Chennai, where most of them commute to work and study, it is important to increase the frequency and cover more routes.

Vendors vs Chennai Police

Shoe sellers face constant squabble with police

SHARNYA RAJESH

A group of street vendors selling second-hand shoes on the kerb at the main entrance of the Chennai Central Railway Station complain about their constant conflict with the city's police department.

The local traffic police at this junction are opposed to this business, calling it a "major nuisance".

They say that the vendors are occupying a no hawkers zone and causing hindrance to the smooth movement of traffic by inviting an unhealthy rush at the junction.

As she's polishing and repolishing the back of an old leather chappal, Kasturi Seshadri, a woman vendor in her late sixties, says, "The local police here try to loot and work against us. If one day a senior officer manages to seize our goods, two days down the line, a junior will offer to sell back our own goods to us for an unaffordable price. They do this fully knowing we have nowhere else to go. Why make money out of the poor?"

A police constable at the main junction near the Central Railway



Station said, "Had this been an appointed vending zone, we wouldn't disturb or obstruct them.

The constant pestering is only an attempt to vacate the area and stop them from influencing other vendors to come set-up stalls". The source of these second-hand shoes is unclear.

While one seller Meenakshi Ramaseshan, who has been in the business for over two decades, says there are multiple ways to procure these shoes.

The lost and found departments,

bins, cobblers, and "on some days when things are looking very grim, even from outside temples. But we don't do that very often", she says.

The second-hand shoe sellers say that, because they are not registered street vendors, it is much harder to do business in a vending zone too.

Since their goods cannot be really registered, they are unable to get a license.

Therefore, the sustenance of this job is unreliable and they're constantly on the hunt for an additional source of income.

Under cover: A cunning felon or a devoted family man?

PIHU YADAV

A recent issue of *Vanitha*—a magazine that prides itself as a women's magazine—had Malayalam actor Dileep and his family on the cover.

The cover story that featured the actor and talked about him being a dedicated family man came in the midst of an infamous controversy. In 2017, a popular Malayalam actress was abducted and assaulted

in a moving car.

Dileep is the first among the accused which include four other men. He was also in judicial custody for several weeks.

Vanitha's issue came out only days after the actress had urged the Chief Minister ensure justice for her, and was immensely trolled in the media for this bold move.

After the allegation was made against Dileep, most media houses took the matter into their own

hands and assassinated the actor's character across platforms.

In what looks like an attempt to fix his image in the public eye, Vanitha unveiled its latest issue which portrays Dileep as a loving husband and a nurturing father.

This is a reminder of the United State of America v. Richard M. Scrushy case.

Richard Scrushy was the co-founder and CEO of the HealthSouth Corporation, a global

healthcare company.

He was convicted of committing fraud with the company's finances and after the charges were filed he suddenly turned to God and started his own religious TV talk show with his wife.

The judiciary of any country is also made from the people of that country.

They believe what they see and what they hear. They lean towards a narrative that is more believable.

Media has a history of influencing the judiciary—whether it is deliberate or not is a whole other debate. Richard Scrushy was acquitted of all 36 charges against him.

As was K.M. Nanavati (played by Akshay Kumar in the movie *Rustom*, released in 2016) in the K.M. Nanavati v. State of Maharashtra case. Nanavati, a celebrated Navy officer, who shot his wife's lover in cold blood was

portrayed in the media as the nation's protector and a husband who was trying to save his marriage. It was the trial in India where a jury served.

The bestselling women's magazine in India that claims to "enhance respect for womanhood" featuring a story about a renowned public figure treating the women in his home like queens when he is allegedly thrashing his female co-workers just doesn't sit right.



Narikuravas' fight for their denied rights

How a community's voice has been neglected, pushing them to compete with dominant powers

PALANIVEL RAJAN C

Soundarya, a 20-year-old Narikuravar woman, goes through her dust-layered documents to make sure her birth certificates and other identity proofs are still intact.

She was going to apply for an Aadhaar, a unique identification that would enable any Indian to get government benefits. But, there was a confusion whether she ought to be listed as a Most Backward Caste (MBC) or Scheduled Tribes (ST).

The Narikuravars are an indigenous, semi-nomadic tribal community living in Tamil Nadu. The tribe was one of the many that were notified criminal during colonial times. They were decriminalised under the Denotified Tribes Act, of 1952.

The big problem for Soundarya and others of her ilk is whether their tribe should be classified under Most Backward Castes (MBC) or Scheduled Tribes. Either of the two designations would make the tribe eligible for vastly different benefits under the state and central governments' schemes for historically disadvantaged people.

In Tamil Nadu, the tribe is classified as MBC. But sub-castes within the Narikuravar are categorized ST. And that is the problem.

The Lok Sabha in May 2016 passed a bill listing Narikuravas as ST's. But the bill is yet to become law until the President of India signs it. More than four years after the bill was passed, that hasn't happened yet.

"Most of our people are undocumented citizens of this

country, as we were only travelling all our life, but the diminishing culture forces us to remain in a stable place," said Soundarya. "For that, it's mandatory for us to get documented and avail of all the benefits of being a citizen."

"Ever since we heard we are going to be listed under the ST category, we are waiting for that to happen," said Thangaraj, 28. "We thought we are going to get educated like the others and work in a decent place, but things are even worse these days."

"We have been trying to get our birth certificates and community certificates since the approval of the bill, but the officials do not care to take steps," said Sekar, one of the Narikurava leaders.

Members of the community at Periyar Nagar in Thiruvannamur are unaware of the procedures to procure an identification certificate or a birth certificate, as a result of which many children of this generation do not possess a birth certificate.

Malligai, 45, said she has been married for more than 15 years now, but due to the lack of proper documentation of her marriage, her 10-year-old son does not have a birth certificate.

"Since many of our people do not have awareness about all these documentation things, we struggle in every stage of life to get necessities like ration from PDS shops," said Malligai. "This has become a huge problem for our children's future too." PDS refers to the Public Distribution System that provides rations to people under the Below Poverty Line.

The struggle to enlist Narikuravas in the list of Scheduled



Sekar, a Narikurava leader, with his granddaughter | PHOTO: PALANIVEL RAJAN C

Tribes began in 1965 on the recommendation of the Lokur Committee. The then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, M.G.Ramachandran, in the 1980s proposed to the Union Government to bring Natikuravars under the ST list. After several protests, the UPA government in 2013 issued a bill to include the community in the ST list.

The Lokur Committee report says a tribe must live in a distinct area, have a distinctive culture, exhibit primitive traits. In addition, they must display a shyness of contact with the community at large and socio-economic and educational backwardness.

The Narikuravars do not satisfy many of these pre-conditions. Their

nomadic culture, which allows them to travel stands against the report's spatial organisation. And their habit of selling beads and other ornaments to the public prevents them from displaying shyness.

Captain Durai, convener of a tribal welfare association in Tamil Nadu, said that the name 'Narikuravars' itself should be subject to scrutiny. "The misrepresentation of this community as 'Narikuravars' prevents them from getting included in the ST list," he added. "Their actual name is 'Kuruvikarargal' or 'Narikarargal' – bird-hunters or fox-hunters – migrated from the Northern parts of the country."

He explained the various names under which they are recognised in different states. "They are called 'Nakkal' in Pondicherry and Karnataka, 'Junglewala' in Maharashtra, Vagrivala in other parts of the country," said Durai.

He emphasised the confusion in the naming of the community which prevents them from being on the ST list. However, the same community in other states are given ST status. In the name Narikuravars, the word 'Kuravas' has been taken from a Tamil word which denotes a particular community in Tamil Nadu, he said. "In the Tamil Nadu gazette, their community has been registered as 'Narikuravas', whereas in the Tamil Nadu revenue department

the same has been mentioned as 'Kurukarars'," he added.

Owing to this confusion they are being denied any type of identification of their community. Baskar said that his association has met the secretary of the National Commission of Scheduled Tribes to rectify this problem to help people avail themselves of all benefits.

The tribals who were expecting a better education and employment opportunities are baffled. Vikram, 21, expressed his despair over how the lack of basic education landed him as a sanitation worker in the Greater Chennai Corporation. "I could not proceed further to higher education due to the denial of ST status to us," he added. "Also, the social stigma attached to our community still allows people to discriminate against us."

In 2015, Minister of State Pon. Radhakrishnan, on writing a letter to the Tribal Affairs Minister, noted that the Narikuravar Community is 'nomadic, extremely poor and one of the most vulnerable communities in Tamil Nadu, and a meagre 0.02% are graduates.

"Children of this community go to school, but still, there are many hindrances they come across to complete their education," said T. Saraswathi from Asha for Education, an NGO working with the community. She says that if community members are able to enter college through reservation, others might be keen to follow.

According to an article in Business Line, at present, there are about 30,000 people belonging to the community in the state which is less than 0.1 per cent of the State's population. Since they are

classified under the Most Backwards Caste, they have been competing with the other 41 communities, which are comparatively higher in socio-economic status and political representation.

According to a Government of India Planning Commission document on poverty estimates for the year 2009-2010, the percentage of STs below the poverty line in rural India was 47.4 per cent, but that of rural Other Backward Castes was 31.9 per cent. Similarly in urban India, the STs poverty line was 30.4 per cent against the OBS's 24.3 per cent. This shows that classifying Narikuravars as OBCs leads to the assumption that the Narikuravars as OBCs are above the poverty line when compared to the communities under STs.

"Since they are under the MBC list, they have to compete with other castes like Vanniyars - a prevalent caste in northern Tamil Nadu, who are now socially and economically more privileged than them," said Dr Sumathi (goes by her first name), HOD, Department of Anthropology, Madras University. "The complications in providing them with the status are being reviewed, and we expect that to get rectified."

"Even though we are culturally a nomadic community, children of this generation are willing to educate themselves, which can be possible only when we stay in a place," said Soundarya.

"We are ready for the changes and also to educate our children, but all these implications we face makes our life much harder," she added.

How democracy gets the go-by in elections

Money, liquor and biryani as tools for elections

AJAY TOMAR

Saravanan, 30, drives his auto-rickshaw around Chennai extolling the virtues of the candidate for ward 179 in the just concluded urban local body elections in Tamil Nadu.

The candidate he is singing praises of is Kayalvizhi, of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, or DMK.

Saravanan gets Rs 1,000 a day for six to seven hours campaigning around Chennai. In that time, he drives his vehicle across six kilometres of roads in the ward with a pre-recorded message playing out on loudspeakers.

Saravanan's story might be an indicator of just how much a political party is willing to spend to get its candidate elected.

Political parties spent as much as Rs 55,000 crore to get the candidates elected, according to a Centre for Media Studies report on 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

Auto rickshaws crisscrossed Chennai as candidates vied with one another to win over voters. There were processions extolling their virtues, election rallies. Flyers were distributed in street corners. Hoardings were painted. Messages painted on walls.

Rs 3,870 crore were spent in conducting the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, more than double of what was spent in 2009 - Rs 1,114 crore.

While no party revealed details on how much they spent to get their candidates elected, a comment made by current DMK Rajya Sabha MP TKS Elangovan might be instructive.

"There is a cap of 09kRs 25 lakhs for an MLA, Rs 40 lakhs for an MP. After this the candidates fund their campaign themselves."

"Even a non-party cadre who owns an auto can come and make 1000 bucks in a day," said Saravanan. He added that meals, biryani and liquor are what these volunteers are lured with, especially during the elections.

The report mentioned that election expenditure has multiplied six times to Rs 55,000 crore in the last 20 years alone. "It is interesting to see how the ruling party gears up to spend much more than others. This practice is not



Saravanan (yellow shirt) as he rides his auto-rickshaw around Tiruvannamur | PHOTO: AJAY TOMAR

new but the extent with which it happened in 2019 was significant and has become part of the overall strategy of most of the parties," the report claimed.

According to Shelly Mahajan, senior program associate at Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), "Money can

be a tool to unduly influence the political process.

- Shelly Mahajan, ADR

Money can become a tool to unduly influence the political process. Unequal access to funding can hurt the level-playing field. Un-regulated political funding can result in illicit finance flows, co-optation of politics by business interests and widespread vote buying."

The CMS report also estimated that around Rs 15,000 crore was distributed illegally among the voters in 2019 general elections. It said, "10 to 12 percent of voters acknowledged receiving cash 'directly' whereas two-thirds

said that voters around them also received cash for their vote."

In a 2018 article published by Hindustan Times, Simon Chauchard, a lecturer at School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, said that other than gifts, there are basic logistical costs like short-term wages.

The candidates pay these to the party cadres and the horde these workers gather for political rallies. Such payments are usually overlooked as an expenditure and are not made official.

"No restriction on the amount that corporate entities may contribute to political parties, no requirement for corporations to report political contributions in profit and loss accounts and the fact that parties need not reveal names of individuals/organisations who donated via anonymous electoral bonds need a thorough reassessment," Mahajan said.

The way to do it would be to completely abolish cash donations to political parties, she said.

But for any of it to be effective, the Election Commission of India, tasked with conducting free and fair elections, should be able to stop political parties flouting these laws from contesting, she said.

Part-time teachers want permanent jobs

No safety nets for part-time teachers in private and govt schools

GODHASHRI SRINIVASAN

R. Saravanan, who taught drawing at a government school found that the Rs. 7,500 he was making was not enough. So he decided to take up a job as a part-time drawing teacher at a private school.

Saravanan's story of inadequate income is common to government part-time teachers across the State. Previous protests raised their salaries to Rs. 10,000 from Rs. 5,000. Now, their demand is for a permanent position in line with full-time teachers. From February 24, the Tamil Nadu Part-Time Teachers Association has been protesting outside the Directorate of Public Instruction in Nungambakkam demanding their jobs be made permanent.

Currently, the teachers are employed for three days a week. They don't have social security schemes or retirement benefits, unlike full-time teachers. "You can even call it daily wage labour," Anandaraj J., the leader of Coimbatore District All Part-Time Teachers Association said. Anandaraj teaches computer studies.

However, part-time teachers require the same minimum qualification that full-time teachers have. For instance, to teach in a computer department, an undergraduate degree is a must.

The woes of inadequate payment and lack of social security follow part-time teachers into private education, too. Sarasija Prabu, a



Part-time teachers protest outside the Directorate of Public Instructions | PHOTO: SR RAGHUNATHAN

teacher at Jaya Public School, works like a full-time teacher, but receives a part-time salary of Rs. 10,000.

She was employed as a yoga teacher, but was asked to take up elementary Hindi and Tamil later because the school did not want to employ more teachers.

Employing full-time teachers would cost more for the school, so part-time teachers like Sarasija are given additional subjects without being properly compensated for it.

"I do the job of three people, but get paid for one," she said. Like Saravanan, Sarasija too occasionally works as a sari

salesperson to support her two college-going daughters. She is the only earning member.

On the other hand, the school has stopped recruiting new part-time teachers for vocational courses like music.

According to The Hindu, over 16,000 government part-time teaching positions were occupied in 2011. This has come down to over 12,000. Some government schools —like Jaigopal Garodia Girls' Higher Secondary School in Kodambakkam — don't offer these courses at all.

The NEP (National Education Policy) 2020 mandates 50% of all

"learners going through the school and higher education" system to have exposure to vocational courses. It says that every child should learn at least one vocational course and "be exposed to several more."

The NEP envisions this kind of school education infused with vocational learning by 2030. In this situation, the importance given to existing vocational subjects remains uncertain.

Even though the government has associated the part-time teachers' association of a salary at the ministry, Anandaraj does not know when it will happen.

Sewage water agitates Amma Canteen customers

HARINI MADESWARAN

The overflowing sewage water and house flies in and around the premises of Besant Nagar's Amma Canteen agitates customers, who frequent it for the subsidised food.

Amma Canteen, a community canteen scheme launched in 2013 by Tamil Nadu's then Chief Minister J. Jayalalitha provides every day meals at a low cost.

The kitchen's waste water flows from the canteen's broken sewage pipe at the Besant Nagar's Amma Canteen. The canteen's premises, kitchen's trash pails and area around the overflowing sewage water are infested with a swarm of



Besant Nagar Amma canteen in dire straits | PHOTO: HARINI MADESWARAN

houseflies. Muthupandi, a resident from Shastri Nagar, said, "I depend on this canteen for my daily meals since the first wave of Covid-19

pandemic. House flies swarm over the food and the smell of sewage water causes nausea sensation while I eat. The issue has been there since December."

One of the canteen's cooks blamed the Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC) and the Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board for not repairing the leaks in the sewage and waste water lines.

"It has been three months since we complained to the officials to repair the broken pipe and clean the overflowing sewage water," she said.

According to another canteen worker, officers don't pay attention

even after visiting the place.

"Even the officers who come for inspections do not do anything. They simply tell us to note down our problems, and we never hear from them again," she said.

Customers also complained of neglect by the authorities. "We need this inexpensive food because we can't afford anything else. So we just have to ignore other issues and eat whatever we get here," said Eswaran, a watchman.

"Even if we wish to eat more, we cannot because of these flies and the dirty smell. We just satisfy our hunger and leave this place as soon as possible," said Baasha, a fruit vendor.

Manual scavenging: An unending plight in India

SAI CHARAN N

It was the first in the day for S.Rajesh who got a call to rectify the sewage block in a residential apartment near Tambaram. Rajesh, a manual scavenger, just had breakfast with his co-worker M.Ezhumalai and together set off to do their work.

Rajesh usually gets a call from T.Jai, his friend, every morning to have a conversation about the day's work. That day when Rajesh got a call, both of them didn't have a clue that it will be their last conversation.

According to Jai, that day, Rajesh and Ezhumalai, both removed a load of sewage from the septic tank and went back again the next day to finish the work. The suction tube got blocked inside the septic tank and Ezhumalai went inside to clear it with a rod.

Ezhumalai fainted inside the tank because of suffocation. Since there was no response from the tank for a long time, Rajesh went inside to check and he also fainted by inhaling the poisonous gases emitted from the septic tank. Later, the fire and rescue department entered the septic tank and attempted to rescue them, but the two were declared brought dead at the Royapettah Government General Hospital.

Jai, who also used to get inside the manholes to clean blockages,



Hazardous working conditions | PHOTO: PALANI KUMAR

was shocked because of this incident. "I never knew poisonous gases will come out of the drainage system, now I lost my dear friend," said Jai. "What if I too had died? Who will take care of my family?" mumbled Jai, fighting back tears.

"Deaths happen because of the emission of methane. Anaerobic fermentation is the chemical breakdown of waste materials by bacteria and other microorganisms in the absence of air. The byproduct of this reaction is the poisonous methane gas which settles down due to its higher density than air," said Dr S Ramakrishnan, a Biochemistry Professor at Annamalai University.

As per the National Rural Sanitation survey 2017, the twin pit system which has septic tanks with soak pits doesn't require manual

cleaning. In the single pit system, human handling of faecal matter becomes inevitable and the availability of suctions pumps through mechanical extraction is also less.

The Prohibition of the Manual Scavenging Act bans hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks. However, it defines hazardous as manual cleaning by such an employee without the employer fulfilling his obligation to provide protective gear and other cleaning devices and ensure observance of safety precautions.

"This is a loophole in the act and this paves the way for government and the general public to employ manual scavengers," said Jakkaiyan. "Plastics and other sludge get stuck in the small pipes that connect the households with

the underground drainage. In order to get rid of that block, manual scavengers are forced to enter into the manholes."

Last year, during the winter session of the Parliament, Union Minister State for Social Justice and Empowerment Ramdas Athawale said, "No deaths have been reported due to people engaging in manual scavenging. However, 321 people have died due to accidents while undertaking hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks in the last five years."

Commenting on this, Bezwada Wilson, National Convener of Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA), a movement that aims to eradicate manual scavenging in India, said "The government never collects data properly. Even in the NCRB, there is no data. SKA is documenting all the data and we know the ground reality."

"Parliament is happy to discuss issues which are fancy and reducing this issue to something which is impure. Since manual scavengers are not politically significant the government is not focusing on them even for electoral politics," said Wilson.

Safai Karmachari Andolan recorded the data of the number of people who died because of manual scavenging across the country. As many as 920 such cases were recorded in India between 1993 and 2020, out of which 206 deaths were reported in Tamil Nadu, which is the highest in the nation. There is also a caste conundrum that is intrinsically intertwined with the practice of manual scavenging.

The government data shows that 74% of the people engaged in manual scavenging are from the Scheduled Castes.

Arunthathiyars, Kaatunayakars in Tamil Nadu, Valmiki in Uttar Pradesh, Madigas in Andhra Pradesh, Banke in Odisha and Gujarat, Rellis in Karnataka are some of the Scheduled Castes engaged in manual scavenging across India.

The data released by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment shows that 58,098 people are involved in manual scavenging in India.



HARINI MADESWARAN

Ramanan grows only one crop of rice on three acres of farmland near Otiyyapakam village in Kanchipuram district.

For the remaining eight months a year, the land lies fallow. Ramanan is aware of the health benefits of eating millets. And the fact that it takes less water to grow, something that is of acute importance to a man who only grows when it rains.

But millets are hard to consume in their natural form and Ramanan is unaware of the factories that make millet fit to consume.

"It isn't easy to harvest millet like paddy. We require labourers post-harvesting," Ramanan said while walking on the path on his land, flanked by standing paddy crops.

Tapas Chandra Roy who advises the Odisha state government on millets said the problem stemmed from the fact that post-harvest technologies for millets were barely a decade old whereas, for rice, it has been around for a long time. "The small-scale farmers are not much aware of these and there have to be programmes that specifically train farmers to use the machinery".

Perfura Technologies is a company engaged in the manufacture and sale of millet processing units. Manikandan, the South Zone supervisor for the company, says that the machines are largely purchased by the people in the hilly regions like Kollimalai.

The efficiency of millet machinery is said to be comparatively lower than that of paddy's and the size of the cereals plays a significant role in determining it.

Ramanan is also swayed by the high demand for cereals like wheat and rice.

There is a probability of rising millet production if there is an increase in the Public Distribution System of millets

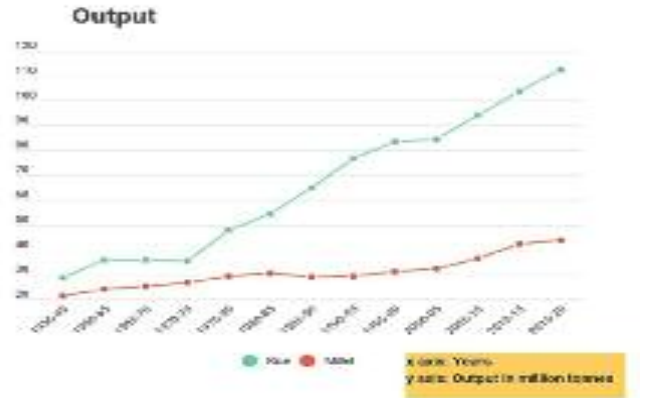
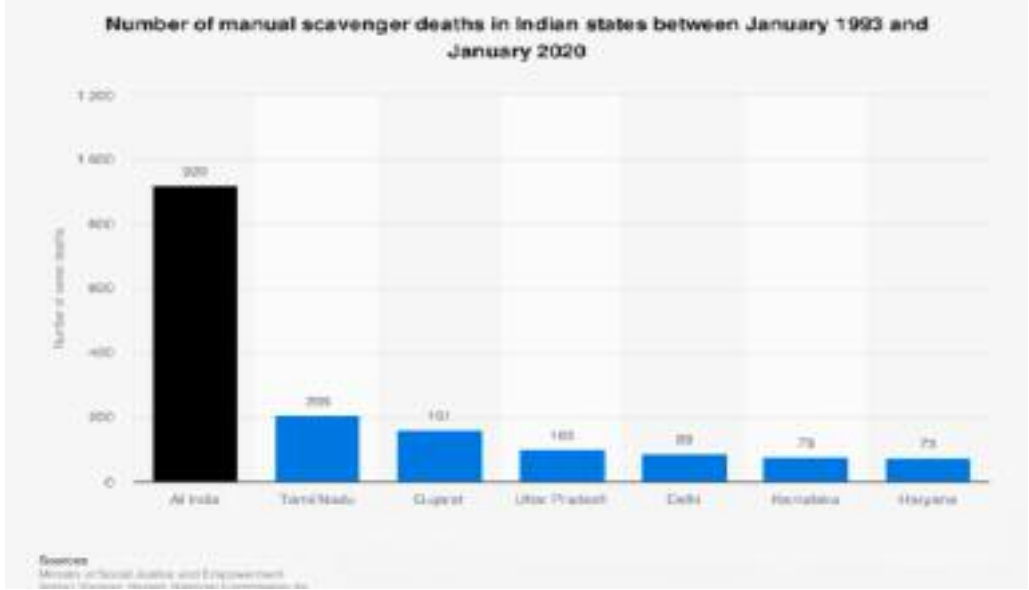
In 1951, as much as 43 million hectares of land was under millet cultivation, paddy was grown on 31 million hectares. By 2019, millet cultivation has nearly halved to 21 million hectares. Rice on the other hand had increased to 44 million hectares.

Manilal Palliwaal, a farmer from the Devathiri district of Rajasthan uses machinery for harvesting millets. However, he prefers growing paddy and wheat over millets. "Despite MSP being

allotted for millet and wheat in Rajasthan, the demand for wheat is high in the state. There are plenty of options available for the consumption of wheat like flour, bread, etc," he says.

According to Parasuraman, Principal Scientist in M.S Swaminathan Research Institute, "There is a high probability of rising millet production if there is an increase in the Public Distribution System of millets throughout the nation. While rice and wheat are being distributed in every state under the system, adding millets in the scheme would create a surge in the production of millets, thereby increasing the consumption."

The interest in consuming millets which are free from gluten has been evolving through the years. "While there are numerous post value products of millets available in the market, including millet ice-creams, there would be a huge demand for processed millet foods in the coming years," Parasuraman said.



ANCHOR

In a league of her own: India's women entrepreneurs' uphill battle

RISHIKA SINGH

During the first wave of the COVID pandemic in 2020, a home-bound Shruti Singh was looking to do something creative in a time of extreme restrictions. In her apartment complex in Pune, Maharashtra, it had been collectively decided that food deliveries and movement will not be allowed inside the gates of their society.

For her and many of her neighbours, this situation presented itself as an unlikely opportunity. In a time of uncertainty, women in her colony came up with a solution to address both the boredom of being quarantined and the demand for home deliveries from restaurants. They started home restaurants and began cooking for each other.

As of February 2022, Maharashtra has had 78 lakh cases of coronavirus cumulatively – the most cases out of all states in India. The state saw some of the strictest lockdowns on the smallest movements, with acts like grocery shopping getting curtailed and public transport being shut down.

Women constitute only about 13% of the country's entrepreneurs, according to the Sixth Economic Census of 2013-14 conducted by the Ministry of Programme Implementation and Statistics. For most women, this statistic tells a story about the society they live in and how freely certain avenues might be accessible for them.

It all started with a one-day online class Singh took to learn baking cookies. Then, in July 2020, she started a home bakery business, called Sweet Sprinkles. When she began, most of her orders were from her network but over time,

she began receiving larger orders.

"This happened through word-of-mouth, and because of people who suggested using Facebook and Instagram for marketing. I was still a little late to it, and only now when I have entered into it, I realise that it is an entirely different world," she said. Singh learned social media marketing by observing other home bakers and cooks and started her own page.

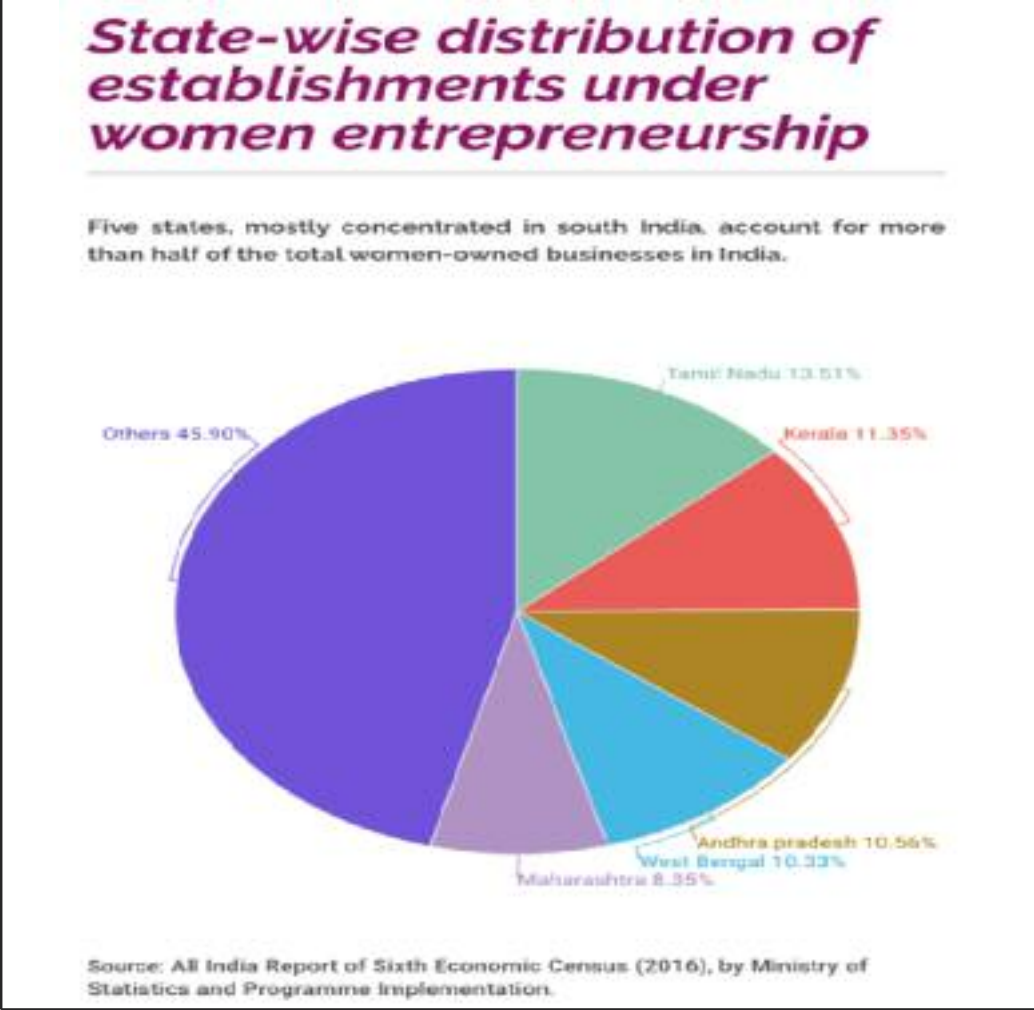
Enterprises started by women usually involve little investment. As per the Sixth Economic Census, 79% of all women entrepreneurs in the country self-financed their businesses; 83% of all enterprises had no hired workers.

However, even when some amount of scaling-up of a business happens, problems specific to women crop up. Geetha Swaminathan, the owner of a cloud kitchen called Adrasam in Noida (Uttar Pradesh), thought of starting her venture during the pandemic as well.

A cloud kitchen does not have a dining area set up, only cooking and delivering food based on orders via apps like Swiggy and Zomato. It made perfect sense at the time, and after initial success, Swaminathan rented kitchen space, hired cooks, and began investing more in her self-financed business.

"It was a mixed response, so while some people were very understanding others could not understand the concept of women running a cloud kitchen," she says. "Workers would not take me seriously, and only after constant requesting would they budge."

In India, only 25% of women engage formally in the labour market as per the World Economic Forum's Gender gap Index of 2020.



Only a few women entrepreneurs then occupy spaces typically expected of men, making it unusual for the larger society to see them in a position of leadership.

That does not mean that women entrepreneurs are all out on their own, at least on paper. The government recognises the need for a greater focus on women entrepreneurs. A slew of schemes

such as Start Up India, Stand Up India has been rolled out to address various stages of starting a business.

Most women-led businesses come under the MSMEs categories of Medium, Small, Micro Enterprises.

While the upper limit for this categorisation has medium-level enterprises with an annual turnover

of up to Rs. 250 crores, the smallest enterprises form the micro category with an investment less than Rs. 1 crore and a turnover of fewer than 5 crores annually.

"The main problem is that awareness of these schemes is not much. There is mainly propaganda by both state and central governments which focuses on the benefits of such schemes," says

Gadde Ravi, Joint Director and Head of Office, MSME Development Institute, Chennai.

"Industry is a state subject, so we are only there at a guiding level," says Ravi. Many schemes, such as the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP), require the implementation to be done by state governments.

Tamil Nadu has the largest number of women entrepreneurs in India with 13% of the total women entrepreneurs of India. Its neighbouring states also have a significant share each, while states like Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan lag much behind at about 6% and 3% respectively.

"But most of the products come under the micro sector and involve items related to cooking, clothing, and similar products." Women are still working in non-engineering sectors even though a lot of potential remains in manufacturing, said Ravi.

There is no simple answer for why women are not visible in such fields, or why the contributions they do make are not on a larger scale. Studies have indicated that women-led businesses repay loans on time, and are not in any way financially less viable than businesses started by men. Age-old barriers of perception about women are only just one part of the equation.

"When I was applying for a loan at an MSME office, they looked at our company's statements and asked why we were drawing salaries. The official said we should invest that money in the company, expecting us to have husbands and fathers to keep us afloat," says Sudarshana Ghosh, an entrepreneur based in Kolkata.

Having started her Kolkata-based marketing and content writing venture named Melange Solutions with a friend in 2016, Ghosh shocked those around her for leaving a stable job as an HR professional. "But that's the thing, there is a kick to being an entrepreneur. You win some and you lose some, but at the end of the day, it is my company and my baby. I work for myself," she says.

Ghosh also mentions that in a field dominated by men, women are not always looking to be supportive. The need for survival is strong, and the inherent competitiveness of being in a business setup means that women do not come together to address their common issues.

Still, in the last few years, organisations and associations have come up to address issues of women entrepreneurs. In a way, their existence itself points to the strides that have been made in increasing the visibility of this class of women.

One such organisation is the Women's Entrepreneurship Development Organisation (WEDO). Based in Chennai, its operations moved online during the pandemic. This helped them reach more women than ever, to whom guidance, mentoring and community could be provided for starting their own businesses.

Kadambari Umapathy, Founder and CEO of WEDO, identifies some major issues that affect women entrepreneurs. "First and foremost, is mindset. Women are concerned if they will have permission to start something. Then there is family pressure on them, and families often don't let them get into business," she says.



Thousands of people gather to celebrate the Panguni Peruvizha festival at the Mylapore Kapaleeswarar temple | PHOTOS: TANYA SAVKOOR

A (cha)riot of colours

TANYA SAVKOOR

The Mylapore Kapaleeswarar temple celebrated the annual Panguni Peruvizha festival from March 9 to March 18. Devotees thronged the streets of Mylapore, dressed in their festive best, to take part in the festivities.

The schedule for the festival was packed for these nine days, with a range of events like the chariot procession, musical concerts and kolam competitions from dusk to dawn. The festival is a treat for people who can get a taste of the tradition and culture of one of Chennai's oldest localities.

The chariot procession saw thousands of devotees enjoying the live tamte (handheld drum) music, and sipping on buttermilk distributed by fellow devotees along the streets. Vendors sold camphor, flowers, coconuts, and other pooja paraphernalia along the way. Camphor scented smoke and

the sound of conch engulfed the area.

Residents living around the temple watched the procession from their windows, away from the crowd. Little children perched up on adults' shoulders to watch the chariot rolling through the streets. Almost every attendee had the camera on their phone open, waiting to get a selfie with the chariot in the background.

Media persons and photography enthusiasts struggled to raise their camera above everyone's head, to get the perfect shot.

Traffic restrictions were in force from 5 a.m around the temple and R.K Mutt Road during the festival. Police diverted traffic to Mandaveli, making sure that no inconvenience was caused to commuters. Meanwhile, dozens of policemen meticulously manned the procession, keeping a close eye on all the activities.



Where fish has to be served discreetly

SHARNYA RAJESH

Caught in the upper caste dynamics of an affluent neighbourhood, Jaya Akka, who runs an eatery on the Elliot's beach at Besant Nagar that serves delectable fish preparations, is under constant threat of eviction. There are times when you have to win her trust before she offers to discreetly serve 'meen kulambu' to go with your dosai.

Though vegetarians make up a minority of the population in Chennai (which is about 97% meat-eating) in localities dominated by upper caste people there are no signs of accommodating, let alone celebrating the city's seafood culture.

Chennai is home to communities of traditional fishers. From the industrial north to the relatively affluent south, one can see fishermen pushing their rickety boats into the sea before dawn, or fisherwomen auctioning fish fresh off the sea.

Still, when people talk about Chennai's food scene, the

conversation seldom leans towards seafood. It usually features preparations like filter coffee, dosai, sambar, even rose milk, which are consumed more by people higher up in the caste

In localities dominated by upper caste people, there are no signs of accommodating, let alone celebrating, the seafood culture

hierarchy. These are only a portion of the food that comes from the



An eatery run by Jaya akka on Elliot's Beach | PHOTO: SHARNYA RAJESH

city's land and water and the people that primarily make the city.

Over the years, this popular imagination of Chennai's food culture has upheld the city's powerful minority aesthetic. And this marginalises the life, work and foods of the fishing community in their own coastal homes.

Jaya Akka is a fourth generation artisanal fisher, and like many other women in her family and community, she runs a street food business, an 'Akka Kadai'. 'Kadai' meaning shop and 'akka', although it literally translates to an older sister, is generally used to refer to women who labour over food, domestic work, or any other humble essential jobs.

Every day, Jaya Akka sets up her food stall just after midday, on the balmy, sea-scent laden shores of Elliot's Beach in Chennai. She serves rice, rasam, assorted

vegetable curries and her infamous fish.

What makes her fish fry exceptional is the 'podu' she envelops her fish with before frying – a coarsely ground mix of spices, unique to each food stall.

Jaya Akka says, "I've been told off so many times for selling my fried fish. Recently, corporation officials threatened to cancel my stall permit after someone filed a complaint. Apparently, the complaint was about littering. So, they'll go to any extent to cause havoc".

Every neighbourhood in the city has an obvious caste-food-space dynamic, but it is particularly evident in the southern coastal areas (such as Adyar, Mylapore), where the marginalisation of the fishing communities is clearly visible as a result of the upper caste dynamics of the locality.

Flowerpot seller left high and dry by rail project

The family has not seen Rs. 500 in 2-3 months

ANOUSHKA SAWHNEY

Hidden behind large boards with 'Delhi-Meerut RRTS' written on them, and machines on Roorkee Road, Meerut, is a small flowerpot shop. Every morning, 30-year-old Preeti, owner of the shop, eagerly awaits customers with a smile. These days, her smile fades as the day wears on.

Due to the metro work, the number of customers has decreased. Preeti said that earlier at least five to seven persons used to come but now only one or two persons come in a day.

Preeti is the breadwinner of the family. She has two boys, who are 11 and seven, and a five-year-old girl.

Inside the shop, the wares kept on display hides the dampness on the walls. The shop has plastic pots, cement pots, mud pots, idols, diyas, etc.

Preeti said that in a day she makes a maximum profit of Rs. 50 or none at all.

"How will I survive with Rs. 50?"

"Sometimes, when there is no vegetable, I ask my children to just have tea and rusk and sleep," Preeti said.

The Delhi-Meerut Regional Rapid Transit System is an 82.15 km rail corridor, which is under construction since 2019. Shops on the route have been asked to shift back. This requires construction for which Preeti lacks resources and

support.

"Before Diwali, water came inside the shop and all my material worth Rs. 1-1.5 lakh was damaged. We could not recover from the loss afterwards."

Sometimes, the water reaches the knee level, Preeti said. "My kids and I fill water in boxes and throw it outside."

"Just to ensure my life goes on, I sell the pots for Rs. 70-80, even if the price is Rs. 100," Preeti said.

This shop is Preeti's only source of livelihood, which is gravely affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing metro work.

"I don't know how we will live on. The future appears dark," Preeti said.



Preeti arranges pots at her shop behind the Delhi-Meerut RRTS site | PHOTO: ANOUSHKA SAWHNEY

A (hi)jab at democracy



MARIAM RAFI

Uncertainty shrouded the future of education of female Muslim students after the Karnataka High Court on March 15 upheld the ban on religious clothing in educational institutions. Moments after the verdict came, parents were seen taking away burkha-clad girls from schools and colleges in Mysore.

The hijab row took birth when a group of six Muslim girls studying in the Government PU College in Udupi refused to remove their headscarves after the school brought out new rules a few weeks before their board exams.

In a domino effect, several other schools and colleges refused to let girls wearing matching scarves along with their uniform to enter the premises. For years, what was seen as a religious symbol worn by Muslim woman was making international headlines. The High Court said the hijab was not an essential religious practice. The Holy Quran asks female adherents to cover themselves when they go out or are in front of unrelated marriageable men.

The makers of the Constitution envisioned an India where the rights of dalits, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis and other minorities are protected.

Girls wearing hijab outside their schools and colleges after the verdict | PHOTOS: MARIAM RAFI

Blanket makers out in the cold in Meerut



Suresh Kumar, a blanket maker; (below) Kumar's shack | PHOTO: SUSHMITA DEY

SUSHMITA DEY

A family at Kanker Khara in Meerut, which has been upcycling old clothes into warm blankets over the past 20 years, is facing a shutdown.

Earlier this month, an enforcement team of Kanker Khara Nagar Nigam, in the presence of the local police force, ordered the shutdown of roadside shops and the family has been given notice to vacate. They said the area is marked for auto rickshaw and bus stands.

According to the owner, Suresh Kumar, this is the third time they have been forced to vacate the shop. Many weavers in his shop are

looking for other jobs to earn a livelihood. Women skilled in weaving, who had come from villages, are now doing daily labour to run their families.

Customers visit their small kiosks and place orders. Besides, buyers from nearby villages and Army people place orders during October just before winter sets in.

"Our blankets are very warm because we weave them by hand, and they can be used for more than 10 years," said Kumar.

He brings raw cotton of upcycled clothes in densely packed bales from the New Mandi, Meerut City, and cleans them in a machine before stuffing them into blankets. A blanket costs Rs. 700 to Rs. 900,

depending on the quality of the material used.

He said, "This year is a hard time for all of us. October to February is a busy season when we used to sell more than 200 blankets. This time we are getting orders only from local people."

"We only need space to sit and operate our business. We do not want anything else from the government, just a place to set up our shop permanently. Otherwise, how will we feed and raise our children," said Madhu, one of the weavers working in the shop.

Moreover, the demand for blankets has come down. They are also doing other work due to the low profitability of the business.



Public toilet is her new home

Rachiyamma's children threw her out of her house



Rachiyamma at the doorstep of her "home" | PHOTO: AMAL RAJ

AMAL RAJ

The space outside a public toilet near Kapaleeshwarar temple in Mylapore, Chennai, is the new shelter for 75-year-old Rachiyamma, who was thrown out of her home by her daughter and son.

A native of Andipalayam, a village in Pollachi taluk, Rachiyamma came here to Chennai with her family back in 2004 in search of a job. She along with her husband were working here in a restaurant at Foreshore estate and lived near Santhome High Road.

Her husband Muruga Swamy passed away in March 2019. After that, she was thrown out of her house by her daughter and son. Since then, she has been living in a space outside the public toilet near the Kapaleeshwarar temple. None of her relatives is interested in

taking care of her.

She has been living here for the past three years with the money that people used to pay her after

"I sleep here on the pavement. Still, I am not angry or sad,"

using the public toilet.

"During the Covid-19 pandemic, some policemen helped me. They gave me food and water and I even worked as a domestic help for some nearby houses here. I sleep here on the pavement. Still, I am not angry or sad with my life here. Maybe it's my fate that threw me here. I like to think in that way," she says it with a despondent smile.

According to her, she still has the health to do work. She doesn't want to live in an old-age home, and intends to work till her last breath.



Karunagapally's lady with the lamp

PRANAY RAJIV

The sight of Sreedevi Dileep, dressed in her pristine white nurse uniform, driving her scooter through the narrow lanes of Karunagapally in Kerala is a familiar one. There is always a sense of urgency in her face as she shuttles across houses of patients requiring palliative care, a service she has been doing for no remuneration for the past 14 years.

Sreedevi Dileep is the head of the palliative care unit of RCPM hospital in Karunagapally and is also the senior-most nurse there. RCPM's unit, which is the first-ever palliative facility in Karunagapally, was set up in 2008 by Dr. Rajendra Prasad, a paediatrician at the hospital.

"I reached out to Dr. M.R. Rajagopal, founder of Pallium India (a Kozhikode-based palliative care trust), to establish a unit here



The palliative care unit of RCPM hospital; (right) Sreedevi Dileep nursing a patient | PHOTOS: PRANAY RAJIV

and we received all the required support. Sreedevi, who was a senior operation theatre nurse then, joined me," said Dr. Prasad.

Since then, she has gone on to run the unit practically all by

herself and all we had to do was give her the support and freedom, he added.

The unit, which has had over 2,500 registered patients, runs primarily on sponsorship, either by

organisations like the Kollam Rotary Club or charitable individuals, but doesn't receive any sort of funding from the government.

This sponsorship is used to buy

medical equipment, including wheelchairs, air beds, walkers, adult diapers, catheters, rice tubes and other medicines needed for palliative care patients.

"Other than the house visits we

do, a major aspect of our job is to connect these patients to good hospitals or willing NGOs or even considerate individuals either for better treatment or for procuring such equipment," said Sreedevi, who does house visits often out of her own time and expense.

"We help individuals with a variety of illnesses such as cancer, renal failure, stroke and also geriatric issues. Often, the hardest part is to just convince the family to provide adequate care and treatment to these people," she added.

V.K. Vinod Kumar, a temple priest, who has been suffering from liver cirrhosis for the past three years, is one of the many patients who get treated by Sreedevi during her house visits.

"Three months ago, I was infected with Covid-19 and my condition has become worse, said

Vinod pointing to his bloated abdomen.

"It is impossible for me to travel for treatment as even the slight movement causes unbearable pain in my stomach and that's why I reached out to Sreedevi to do abdominal tapping, (a medical procedure where a needle is used to drain excess liquid from a body cavity)," he added.

Sreedevi visits Vinod's house at least twice every week to do the tapping procedure and has referred him to various hospitals for a liver transplant.

"I understand that this [the service provided by their unit] is all founded on the charitable minds of a few, and it is unsustainable in the long run. But isn't this the bare minimum we can do," she said before setting off on her scooter for another house visit.

Patience with patients

A day in the life of a municipal health worker in Tamil Nadu

SAI CHARAN NATARAJAN

Mornings are always tightly packed for 30-year-old Revathi, who works as a pharmacist at the Urban Primary Health Center (PHC) in Mayiladuthurai.

At 8.30 in the morning, she starts from her house at Manalmedu, which is 15km from here. Dressed in white, Revathi gives energy to the sleepy workers of the PHC. Walking through the entrance of the PHC building at 10 am, she spots a ditch that has overflowed, filling the pathway with dirt water. “I have reported this to the higher authorities multiple times but no one has taken any action yet,” she says.

Her day starts with checking medicine stocks and writing a report. By that time, her assistant, Ramu, brings in a parcel from the Mayiladuthurai General Hospital. Revathi takes utmost care in handling the parcel, which has Covishield vaccine vials, and puts the entire pack in the freezer.

“People will start coming soon and I have to prepare the outpatient (OP) register,” says Revathi hurriedly eating the idlis that she has brought from home. “Today I am expecting a bigger crowd here as many elderly people are willing to get their third-dose Covid booster shot.”

There are around 25 people near the OP ward, and she quickly fills their details in the register and gives them a token for the appointment. Pregnant women and elderly people got a special row to sit first as the patients await the arrival of the doctor.

From then on, Revathi’s work is completely at the pharmacy, dealing with COVID-19 booster jabs.

An octogenarian couple, along with a dozen people, are waiting for the injection. Revathi verifies the previous vaccination certificates, and gets their mobile phone and Aadhaar numbers entered in the designated mobile application form meant for third dose COVID-19 booster jabs.

“If you are not well, take the day off. I can manage and I will inform the doctor,” she tells a nurse, her



Senior citizens receiving the third dose of the COVID-19 vaccine



Medical facilities offered at the PHC in Mayiladuthurai | PHOTOS: SAI CHARAN NATARAJAN

co-worker, on the phone. When the doctor enters, she updates the arrangements for the day and starts dispensing the jabs to the elderly people one by one for nearly an hour.

“I prefer giving the injection on their left hand because many use their right hand often, which may be painful,” she says after washing her hands and sipping tea. She narrates how working conditions were before COVID-19 and how things have changed drastically now. “The focus of public health is now completely shifted towards dealing with COVID-19,” says

Revathi.

While we are speaking, she is constantly telling everyone to wear their faces masks properly. “There is no point of taking injections without following the masking protocol,” she says. “It is the first line of defence, and prevention is better than cure.”

Revathi, who has a B.Pharm degree, was working in a private hospital before joining the Government service. She is passionate and completely focused on her work.

While arranging the paracetamol tablets on the shelves,

she says, “People who come here are from different walks of life and we have to be patient while addressing their problems.”

According to Revathi, the Tamil Nadu Government has been providing more than enough resources to the Health Department to carry out drives and awareness campaigns.

“We tried hard to go to rural areas and conduct community awareness programme in maternal health and sanitation,” she says, Revathi added that she is happy that there has been a huge response from the people.

Metro work makes commute to Porur an ordeal

NANDHINI LAKSHMINARAYANAN

The two-way traffic lane from Porur to Vadapalani has been made a one-way lane and diversion of routes has been done due to the Chennai Metro Rail Limited (CMRL) work.

“I’m a regular traveller through this route (Virugambakkam to Vadapalani). Since this area connects to Kodambakkam, Nungambakkam and Porur, heavy traffic is often seen here. Usually travelling in a two-wheeler, it takes 15-20 minutes to reach Nungambakkam from here (Virugambakkam) in the morning around 7, while for the same distance it would take about one hour at 9-9:30. In the afternoon it is mostly moving traffic. But, the real traffic is from 6 pm to 9pm. With this route being made one way, though traffic moves, the passage has been shrunk for vehicles to pass through,” said Ravi Shankar, a 39-year-old commuter.

Traffic has been a recurring issue in the Porur-Arcot road-Vadapalani stretch, say a few regular travellers. With the CMRL’s work, diversion of routes has also been a major issue the commuters face.

“Since it’s a straight route connecting Porur, Arcot Road and Vadapalani, traffic has always been there. But, with diversion of routes due to the Metro work, travelling back to Arcot Road and Porur is a bit difficult. Under normal circumstances it takes 45-50 minutes to reach Porur junction from Vadapalani but now it takes an extra 15-20 mins to reach the place due to the narrow passage and bumpy roads,” said Abdul Karim, a 47-year-old auto driver.

With utmost caution, the CMRL workers were welding steel bars to construct the pillars for the open rail metro.

Contrary to what the commuters said, a traffic police constable at Vadapalani junction said there’s been moving traffic in the route and at 9 in the morning there is traffic but now as it’s one-way, the traffic has been relatively been moving and not jammed.

The completion of the entire work will be done in a year and a half, said the traffic constable.

Doctor copes with wave after wave of the pandemic

Udumalpet lacked supplies of oxygen beds and drugs



A patient suffering from cough consults Dr. Swaminathan | PHOTO: ARNAV CHANDRASEKHAR

ARNAV CHANDRASEKHAR

Dr. Swaminathan has spent half of his 6-year medical career practicing in the small town of Udumalpet in Tamil Nadu. Half of his stint here has been spent dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Swaminathan, whose father too was a doctor, has been facing unprecedented challenges for the past year and a half in dealing with COVID in Udumalpet. These days it’s easier to deal with patients. Symptomatic patients turn up at his clinic, where he speaks to them in a calm, reassuring tone.

Matters were far worse earlier. “There were several difficulties during the Delta waves,” says Dr. Swaminathan. “We had to deal with multiple shortages, including oxygen, beds, Remdesivir drugs and other supplies.”

Sourcing essential materials in a small town like Udumalpet is difficult, with large cities grabbing national attention.

Dr. Swaminathan saw the costs of the pandemic up close, with 20 of his patients dying of the virus. But by

the time the Omicron variant of COVID manifested itself, Udumalpet had enough supplies. Ironically, these are no longer being used in large quantities, thanks to the mild symptoms of Omicron.

“Most of the recent patients who tested positive have much milder symptoms. Only those who are unvaccinated or have waited too long to come to the hospital are in a bad condition,” Dr.Swaminathan says. That does not mean all is well, however. Omicron patients are in higher numbers than Delta, although they are not in as much physical distress. That vaccinations and boosters do not seem to deter Omicron infections (though they are blunting the effects of the disease) is worrisome.

But for now, Omicron has given some breathing space to doctors like Dr.Swaminathan - this wave at least, has not killed dozens of patients. The future remains uncertain, as epidemiologists warn that the next strain may not be so mild. If these warnings prove true, then Udumalpet’s doctors will be put to the test again.

Elevating millions: One man and his lofty vision

Dr. Narayan has rendered yeomen service to the underprivileged

PRANAY INBARAJ

Dr. Narayan, , CEO and National Coordinator of the Indian Development Foundation (IDF), with 30 years of humanitarian service, had joined it as a volunteer at the age of 17. He is a Trustee of some of the leading National NGOs based in India working in the field of leprosy.

His specialty is mass health awareness in educational institutions, establishing Bal Gurukuls in India and bridging the

rural-urban divide.

More recently, the IDF has shifted its focus from health awareness to more social education programmes. “We have set up projects for underprivileged students both in rural and urban environments, focussing on developing life skills which help them reach a level playing field with the rest,” said Dr. Narayan. He said the IDF’s philosophy stems from fulfilling one of the 4 pillars of the UN India Development. Aiming to achieve total literacy, the

IDF prides itself in providing not just education, but the right education that students need. During the pandemic, the IDF started a programme called “Suwidahagaji”, to uplift women and their entrepreneurial skills. The goal was to create 1 million women entrepreneurs by 2023.

Asked if they faced challenges in providing their services during the pandemic or whether the programmes they could offer were reduced, a wry smile appeared on Dr. Narayan’s face. “Since the pandemic, the IDF stopped working 24/7 and started working 28/9.” He said their relief services were needed more than ever.

“Since the pandemic began we have supplied over 10 million meals and opened 10 community kitchens. We collaborate with organisations such as ISKCON who are able to supply the food, but don’t have a reliable chain of delivery, which we take care of through our volunteers.”

“I have known Dr. Narayan for more than a decade while working with the Tagore Group of Schools. He is a devoted, dedicated, dynamic and committed servant of humanity working ceaselessly for the IDF’s massive awareness campaigns viz. eradication of TB and leprosy, managing good and free education for underprivileged children, health asylums, leper care centres and the Clean India project. He has been rendering valuable services, igniting, inspiring and involving children and teachers of hundreds of schools all over India,” said Roop N Kabra, a chief mentor at the Tagore Group Schools.

Narikuravas denied proper housing



A street in Periya Nagar; belongings kept outside homes due to shortage of space | PHOTO: ARUSHI BHASKAR

ARUSHI BHASKAR

People belonging to the Narikurava tribe at Thiruvanniyur in Chennai have been demanding relocation to proper housing for years. This has been promised to them during election time.

The Narikurava are a semi-nomadic tribal group who live in various places in Tamil Nadu. They are marginalised in society today, and often do not have access to rights that they are entitled to.

According to Nandhini (goes by her first name), a bangle seller, there has been no progress in the issue of permanent and proper housing in the area since the 70s.

“All the pucca houses here were made with our own money, the

government didn’t give us anything,” she said. “Only in MGR’s time were some huts built for the people here, but after that, nothing.”

Ashwini, who is also a bangle seller, said that no one in the community in Chennai has ‘patta’ (land title) even though the government has given them voter IDs, Aadhar cards and ration cards.

“Our grandparents settled here 50 years ago, but we have nothing to show for it,” she said. “We live in such small houses that we have to put our utensils outside to make space for ourselves.”

Nandhini said that the community traditionally has very few occupations, like making and selling bangles; however, they are

discouraged from practicing even these. Most people end up picking trash as a way of earning their livelihood, she added.

“Policemen near temples create trouble for us when we try to sell our stuff there, even though those places are our main source of income,” she said. She added that a majority of the bangle-selling now happens during festivals, which pushes people even more towards picking trash.

According to Saraswathi T., an activist from Asha for Education, an NGO working with the community, lack of education is a big problem that the Narikuravas face.

“Maybe when kids [from the community] enter college owing to

reservation, more people will be interested in educating their children,” she said.

However, Nandhini and Ashwini had neither Community Certificates, nor Scheduled Tribe (ST) certificates.

“We have never heard of these,” said Nandhini. “There are no opportunities for us. Even though we want our kids to do well in life, we have to see them becoming garbage pickers like us.”

Ashwini said that politicians come during election season and promise them lots of things, including pucca houses. “Once they are elected, they disappear. It’s been happening for years now, we know no one cares where and how we live.”

A ‘Gup’ breaks the glass ceiling in Bhutan, and how

NETEN DORJI

Officially, there is no gender divide in Bhutan. Traditionally, matriarchal societies have inherited parents’ property and men often move into their wives’ homes after marriage.

Constitutionally, women are guaranteed equal rights. And yet, Ugyen Yangzom, who recently became the first graduate gup (local leader) in Bhutan, says that society still believes that women should be in charge of child-rearing and be in the kitchen.

Gup Yangzom, 30, said she stands for elections to be in a position to change society’s attitude towards women.

“People think women can’t shoulder great responsibilities. What we need is just an opportunity. If given the power and representation, we can do equally well or much better than men as leaders,” she explains.

Ever since the country first went to the polls in 2008, Ugyen Yangzom has been the elected leader of Ngatshang Block in Mongar, Bhutan.

Fifteen years before she was elected, the Himalayan kingdom ended more than a century of royal rule and moved towards a democratic system of governance



Gup Ugyen Yangzom wearing Kha-mar Rachu

a peaceful transition that is almost unprecedented in global history.

Ms. Yangzom attributes her win to the overwhelming support she received from the people in her village. For over five years, Gup Yangzom worked as a contract teacher and administrative officer, who helped her to establish a close rapport with the villagers.

Seeing no graduate women taking part in local government elections, she seized the opportunity.

“As a woman, I always wanted to encourage other youth and women to take part in the future.

This is the right time and age for me to help my community and the public,” she said.

The residents of Yangzom district are now appreciating the way she leads the people.

“I have not seen any difference between her work and the work of a male gup. She is handling all the activities that a male gup would handle. She is hardworking and takes full responsibility for all the duties that she has to shoulder,” said Phurba Tshering Doya, a Gewog Administrative Officer who works with the gup.

Calm and passionate about the task, Ms. Yangzom is a university graduate in Bhutanese and English language and literature.

She gets full support from her family.

“My husband is very supportive. He shares household chores, and encourages me to follow the track of my interest.”

Gup Yangzom is at present engrossed with the developmental plan in the gewog (an administrative division) and focuses on getting farm and feeder roads constructed and ensuring water supply and sanitation.

“I want to tell women that we should prove women can equally participate in the lawmaking body. We should make our voices heard by all.”



Gup Ugyen Yangzom with other local leaders | PHOTO: UGYEN YANGZOM

Villagers want this lifeline rejuvenated

Panamaruthupatti lake has been encroached upon and silted



Panamaruthupatti lake | PHOTO: PALANIVEL RAJAN

PALANIVEL RAJAN C

Panamaruthupatti lake, which once was a drinking water source for this town of Salem people, has now been encroached upon and silted, though the State government had allocated money to clean up and beautify the lake. This 2400-acre water-spread once served as a drinking water source for Salem and Namakkal.

Mr Durai, who is a resident and who is also involved in the desilting process, said, “Two years before when MP S.R. Parthiban visited the place he gave the assurance for the removal of Seemai Karuvulam plants grown in the lake and the refilling of the lake using Mettur water.”

Since the catchment areas have reduced, many farmers have migrated to nearby districts losing their livelihood, said Saravanan. “Also, the lack of maintenance has led to exploitation of the lake by unscrupulous

elements.” A 65-year-old farmer Saravanan who has seen the water benefitting the farmers said, “This water used to be the main source for agriculture before the construction of the Mettur dam in 1934.”

The villagers said that the recent rainfall had filled the lake, but as it was not desilted and maintained properly that water went futile. The village people are ready to maintain the lake on their own if the government does the initial process of filling the lake with water taken from Mettur dam.

In addition, people claim that the funds that were said to be allotted for the rejuvenation process which were never even used. “This has made us lose faith in the government regarding this issue,” said Durai.

“This lake retrieval plan has only been in election manifestos so far, we are waiting for the day to see it happening,” said Saravanan.

Minor inconvenience today, for a better tomorrow

Metro work eats up pavements near MRTS station at Thiruvannmiyur, pedestrians in peril

HRIDAY SAHJWANI

The footpaths cornering Rajiv Gandhi Salai near the Thiruvannmiyur Railway Station are covered with heaps of tiles and big stones, leaving no room for pedestrians.

Lakshmi, a 52-year-old Thiruvannmiyur resident, said that in the absence of a clear footpath, walking on the road was risky due to speeding vehicles. The width of the road has already been reduced due to Chennai Metro work.

“The corporation should definitely do something about it or it’s going to be a mess,” she said.

Two corporation workers, who were clearing some of the debris from the pathways, confirmed that the waste was dumped there because of the Phase-2 metro work. They said the corporation has instructed them to clear it soon.

A pedestrian, who declined to be named, said the construction debris was a part of development and



Footpath covered with heaps of tiles and bricks on Rajiv Gandhi Salai | PHOTO: HRIDAY SAHJWANI

people have to be accommodating till the work was finished.

Though some of the debris has

been cleared, the footpaths (or rather the lack of them) are far from ideal for the pedestrians.



Debris on the footpaths leaves no space for pedestrians | PHOTO: HRIDAY SAHJWANI

A kinder Chennai, for all lives

Concept of no stray animals is my ultimate dream, says Shravan Krishnan who was inspired by his mother and grandmother

NANDHINI LAKSHMINARAYANAN

“Definitely, rescuing stray animals has been my priority,” said 31-year-old animal activist Shravan Krishnan.

Passionate and determined to rescue animals, Shravan volunteered for the Madras Crocodile Bank at a very young age. When he was in Class eight he was part of a students group named Students for Sea Turtle Conservation. Recalling his time with turtle walks, he said, “we used to go for turtle walks, collect eggs and keep them in the hatchery or release the offspring into the ocean. It was very exciting.”

Having grown up in a surrounding of animals in Chennai, Shravan says his mother and grandmother were a great inspiration to him to have an affinity towards wounded animals, especially stray dogs.

A short-lived dream

He was just 12, when he represented the Under-13 Tamilnadu state team as a middle-order batsman. From there on, it was raining sixes in his field. He later became a leg-spinner.

He was part of the South zone team. Just when began dreaming of



Animal activist Shravan Krishnan. | PHOTOS: EDEXLIVE

making it big, he had to quit the game. “I left the game in 2015, after sustaining a stress fracture due to over bowling in the divisional games. I had to undergo a spine surgery.” Thinking of his financial situation and stagnant progress of his game, he decided to shift his career path from cricket.

Hotel for Dogs

Travelling has been a great concern for people with pet dogs. ‘Hotel for dogs’ in Chennai gives a quick solution for all. “With my pets around, I was never able to travel freely, so I decided to open a commercial venture for dogs in 2013, so that people could travel freely. We have completed nine years now and are happy to know we are going strong.”

The animal rights activist took pride in iterating the fact that a small shelter was built alongside the hotel to accommodate stray animals.

Journey of B-MAD

“Seeing my passion and work for animals, former Theosophical Society president Tim Bloyd asked me to take over the Besant Memorial Animal Dispensary (B-MAD),” says Shravan. “Ever since I joined it, our group has expanded and we have focused on recovering stray animals.”

On obtaining news about wounded animals, he said, “there

are lots of animal activists in the city who provide information. Even individuals inform us. We treat stray animals for free. My aim is to provide a safe place for stray animals.”



PHOTO: THE LOGICAL INDIAN

Animal birth control program is an initiative B-MAD is trying to implement. “This is a long-drawn process. Though our dispensary has a lot of facilities, we are always on our toes looking for the betterment of the animals.”

Shravan’s vision is: “no concept of stray animals in the country”. But, for this to become reality, “adoption of Indian breed stray animals” is the major solution.

Others must change, not I, says Sanjana, a trans woman

RIYA AGARWAL

“We are just like everyone else, why do people treat us differently,” asks Sanjana Tiwari, a trans woman who runs Deepshika Samiti, an NGO that helps the trans community in the city.

The pandemic has been hard on everyone, more so the trans community. Sanjana has been raising funds for them, as they had lost their sources of livelihood - mostly begging and performing at weddings during the Covid-19 induced lockdowns. “I have been lending people money, but soon I will run out of it myself. We require urgent government intervention to live,” she says.

Sanjana sits behind a desk and sports a warm smile, welcoming all who walk through the narrow doors of her NGO.

She exudes an aura of poise and confidence; however, she wasn’t always like this. “I was a very shy kid,” she admits. Born in a conservative household with an abusive father, Sanjana always had to suppress her identity. Although she always felt like a woman, she was biologically born a male. “I grew up in a family that shunned my femininity. I was forced to live like a ‘man’. I was never allowed to dress up or date people of my preferred gender,” she says. At a young age, she was forced to give up her dream of becoming a dancer to start driving the family autorickshaw. “I wanted to protest against the life I was given, but I lacked the courage,” she says.

After her parents died in 2012, Sanjana underwent a transformation. “I realised that life will pass me by if I don’t live the way I want to,” she says. She



decided to accept herself as transgender and began dressing up like a woman. “My hair is my pride,” she says, pointing to her loosely-tied bun, “it helped me accept my identity. Once I accepted myself, I received the support of my community. I have never felt alone since,” she says.

Known affectionately as ‘ma’ or mother by young trans people, she provides her community with resources she lacked while growing up. “I educate them about sexual health and provide counselling services. I want their families to accept them, unlike mine,” she adds.

Apart from running the NGO, Sanjana continues to drive her family autorickshaw. In 2021, she was also honoured by the Delhi Commission for Women for being the first transgender auto driver in the city. “I face insults and discrimination by people for the way I look.” However she refuses to suppress her identity, for which she has fought so hard. “Other people need to change their mentality, not me.”

Ancient monuments at the mercy of vandals

13th-century structures in Hauz Khas Village left unprotected



AJAY TOMAR

Standing tall after eight centuries, the beautiful monuments in Hauz Khas Village, Delhi, may not last long. These structures, purportedly maintained by the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) and the National Monuments Authority (NMA), are not being monitored by either agency.

With no restrictions on entry or activities for the public, the magnificent structures are at the mercy of vandals who carve graffiti and chip away at them. Groups of youngsters can be seen parrying and littering around these heritage structures.

Prakash Kumar, a 53-year-old gardener at Deer Park, said it is the responsibility of the monitoring agencies to deploy a guard to regulate activities.

The park draws large crowds of people of all age groups throughout the year. "The monuments and the lake are the most visited spots in the park. Especially in winters, college students and other youth can be seen climbing on the top of these structures and creating a ruckus," said the South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) worker.

The timeless edifices, built in 1200 A.D., see messages of love and doodles of hearts scribbled on them. Engravings on tombs were inscribed with gibberish. Hauz Khas fort, Munda Gumbad and Deer Park had come up during the reign of Mughal emperor Alauddin Khilji.

Bimla Devi (47), another SDMC sanitation worker, said, "The monuments are left on their own without any proper fencing. Nor is there any proper check by officials. Children and youth litter around these structures. While scribbling graffiti, they don't realise that they are damaging these beautiful monuments."

Lack of hoardings creating awareness is also responsible for the degradation of these ancient monuments. Devi said responsible tourism is the need of the hour. "The youth of today need to respect and honor these edifices of history,"

People celebrating on a monument in Hauz Khas



Illegal construction near another monument | PHOTOS: AJAY TOMAR

Haphazard parking, cluttered streets



DIKSHITA CHOUDHARY

Despite the Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC) building a multi-level car parking facility, rules are ignored and the pedestrian plaza at T Nagar, which is part of the Smart City project, continues to stay cluttered with parked vehicles. Even a year since, two-wheelers are parked on footpaths, leaving little space for pedestrians.

"Police fine four-wheelers Rs. 200 and just put a penalty sticker on two-wheelers that are parked on the footpath," said Sakshi Kumar, a parking valet. He said that neither the police nor the drivers care about the rules.

The car parking facility is now under maintenance and the GCC has outlined areas on the streets for vehicles while installing 'No Parking' boards at some places and making others only drop and pick-up points for auto rickshaws.

Parking at the multi-level building and on the street is chargeable at Rs. 5 for two-wheelers and Rs. 20 for four-wheelers.

Signposts are mere posters. Vehicle queues suffocate the street. The multi-level parking facility remains unused | PHOTOS: DIKSHITA CHOUDHARY



Women walk past graffiti at the Jama Masjid in Nowhatta, Srinagar | PHOTO: RWIT GHOSH

Kashmiris protest through graffiti

RWIT GHOSH

While the Centre maintains that the removal of Kashmir's special status in 2019 has benefitted the region and its population, the walls of Srinagar tell a different story.

Walls in the bylanes and streets of the older, residential parts of Srinagar are often adorned with graffiti. Whether they are new or old is impossible to tell. All the graffiti is anonymous, considering the severe repercussions of being caught in the act.

Defaced graffiti isn't new; it has long been a part of the silent cold war being waged between those who make their distrust and anger known and those who want to make sure the graffiti is illegible. New graffiti might appear one night, only to be defaced the next day.

Local people swear they don't know who puts up the graffiti on walls and shutters. However, journalists at Press Colony near Lal Chowk say that everyone knows but prefers not to speak about it for fear of receiving a call from the police or the National Investigation Agency.

"The police come at night and paint over the graffiti, but I don't know when they come. I've never seen them," said a butcher at Nowhatta.

On the other hand, local people who do not want to be named say that the graffiti has stopped as those who used to tag the walls are now in jails across the country.

Grffiti is hard to miss in the older parts of the city like in Old City, Habba Kadal, and Nowhatta as well as near Kashmir University. The reason is simple: the more popular parts of the city like the streets around Dal Lake, Lal Chowk and the Badami Bagh Cantonment are frequented by tourists and as a result security in these places is higher.

Since the removal of Article 370, Kashmir has seen an increase in violence that claimed 182 lives in 2021 and 225 lives in 2020.



Children walk past the factory wall in Old Town, Srinagar | PHOTO: RWIT GHOSH



Happy Book House, unhappy book sellers | PHOTO: ROHINI ROY



Unmoored and forgotten

With online business thriving, booksellers in the complex are struggling to survive

ROHINI ROY

The secondhand book business in the new Moore Market, Chennai, also known as the Allikulam Complex, is running at a loss due to the increasing sales of books online.

"Every morning, I open my store, stack the books and hope customers will come. But I barely sell anything and it's been this way for five to six years after people started buying more books online and reading on Kindle and phones," said Nazam Khan, owner of Anna Book Stall there.

Nazam, who had a shop in the old Moore Market Complex that was ravaged by a fire in 1985, said customers who frequented the old market stopped coming to the new venue.

"People come to us when they have to sell old books but we can't keep adding to our stock if we're selling nothing," he added. "My sons are settled. I will keep doing this until the end because this is the only way I know to survive," he said.

For a market that's located in the vicinity of the Chennai Central Railway Station, the lanes are eerily deserted. The sellers, having spread out their paraphernalia, spend time talking to one another, reading newspapers and checking their phones, while patiently waiting for customers. Some, having sold nothing, shut shop in the afternoon.

"We even tried selling our books online but it's a lot of logistics work and gets expensive," said Sashi Kumar V, owner of Happy Book House.

"Even the small replica of the old market made in Chennai Central's parking lot is not maintained properly," he added.

"The replica is spectacularly built, but lies forgotten amid litter in the middle of a bustling parking lot. Many people don't even know the replica exists or what it means, even though they go there quite often," said Priyani Pranab, a research assistant with Madras Inherited.

"You can tell how interested a city is in its heritage by looking at the condition of its monuments," she added.



From top: The old Moore market replica lies forlorn and forgotten; the deserted market lane | PHOTOS: ROHINI ROY

Scarred face, iron spirit

SIMRAN JEET

Anju Rajput, a 15-year-old girl, was returning home from school one afternoon when someone called out her name. The moment she turned, she felt a searing pain as someone splashed acid on her face.

A 55-year-old man, who had been making advances, committed this dastardly crime on Anju upon being rejected.

The acid quickly ate through her skin and facial tissue. She risked losing an eye.

"He defaced and traumatised me for life," said Anju. "I had to drop out of school at an early age due to the intense social stigma. I could only complete the rest of my education after joining an NGO that helped me gather all the courage to face the world."

Anju is a bright, cheerful woman. She has hope in her eyes as she speaks calmly of her arduous journey

so far. She attributed her rehabilitation and confidence to her parents who always stood by her.

It took years of struggle, after so many surgeries, to regain her strength and to finally look into the mirror a face that was disfigured beyond recognition.

Such attacks fuelled by rejection and dejection may destroy a person's identity, but not her spirit.

"The acid can only change our face, but certainly can't ruin our soul," said Anju, her voice brimming with courage.

She is now completing her education to fulfil her dream of becoming a teacher. Her family is very supportive of her aspirations.

After being rehabilitated, Anju and many other such young acid attack survivors work in Sheroes Café in Lucknow, run by Chaavv Foundation. It is purportedly the world's first food café that is run by acid-attack survivors.



Sheroes Cafe run by acid-attack survivors in Gomti Nagar, Lucknow



Undeterred by scars: Anju relentlessly fights for respect with hope and courage | PHOTOS: SIMRAN JEET

MARCH 24, 2022

Chennai's contracting Christian cemeteries

Burial grounds are forced to deal with declining land availability for spots

PRANAY RAJIV

With each passing year, Emmanuel Raj's walk through the Quibble Island Cemetery has been growing harder.

Raj has been visiting the cemetery regularly for 25 years now, to the gravesite of his father. With each passing year, granite tombs have eaten up the footpath to his father's tomb until they have crowded out a previously well-spaced cemetery.

Raj's experience is not an isolated one. Christian cemeteries across Chennai are all dealing, in their own ways, with the eventuality of them running out of space to peacefully and appropriately bury the dead.

According to the 2011 Census, there are 3,58,662 Christians in Chennai, which accounts for 7.72 per cent of the total population and is the third largest religious group in the city.

Christianity, here, is as old as the religion itself, with it being brought to the city by St. Thomas, one of the 12 disciples of Jesus Christ. It is also believed that St. Thomas was killed and then buried in Chennai, with the San Thome Church built over his supposed-to-be tomb.

"It was some time in 2014 that we actively started thinking about the issue of shortage of burial ground. Now we are almost 95 per cent full," said Pal Raj, caretaker of the 1864-established Quibble Island Cemetery, which is run and maintained by the San Thome Church. This cemetery is accessible only to the Roman Catholic and Church of South of India (CSI) denominations of Christianity.

According to Raj, who is the third in his generation to work in this cemetery, there already have been cases of Christian families opting for the incineration technique, especially in the last 6-7 years, considering the difficulty to acquire land for a proper burial.

In addition to private cemeteries



The Quibble Island Cemetery wears a crowded look these days; (left) the Madras Cemeteries Board Trust |

PHOTOS: PRANAY RAJIV; MADRASCEMETRIES.COM

Lourdes Marcel, the assistant parish priest of the Roman Catholic Church, was pragmatic when asked about the eventuality of cemeteries running out of land.

"Considering the circumstances, it is essential for us to look out for alternatives. Two potential options are ash burial and vertical cemeteries. In the first case, the body would be incinerated and the ash produced would be enclosed in a container, which would be then buried following the traditional customs, albeit in a smaller space compared to a normal tomb," said Fr. Marcel.

He said that the issue with this technique is that it is in direct contradiction with basic Christian principles and it takes a lot of effort to convince people to adapt to this.

Despite this dilemma, the cases of Christian families opting for cremation have increased, said

are availing of this option now," said Sahayaraj, manager of St. Mary's corporation cemetery in Mandaveli.

The 150-year-old cemetery also provides families with an option to purchase the burial spot for Rs. 9,000 within one year of the burial. Failure to do so would result in the corporation taking over the spot and handing it over to the next in line. This has forced several underprivileged families to forfeit the burial spots of their loved ones.

St. Mary's cemetery, despite its government credential, is indeed overseen by St. Lazarus church near Pattinappakkam. Father

like the Quibble one, there are three Christian cemeteries in the city that are run by the Corporation—in Mandaveli, Kasimedu and Kilpauk.

These institutions are open to all denominations of the religion. Because of this, these government-run cemeteries are forced to deal with a larger number of burials and are at a greater risk of running out of space.

"Wherever we have space left, we are filling it in. A few years ago the government introduced a new rule by which a deceased can be buried in the same spot as his relative if the first person was buried 14 years ago. A lot of people

Commuters at bay

SOMASREE CHAKRABORTY

is difficult to travel in this manner. Hence each time my brother comes to pick me up. But this time, due to some emergency, I have to go alone to my native place," Mala added, "The public address system too is defunct most of the times."

Manimurali (35), an advocate at the Madras High Court, said, "During mornings and evenings, the bus stand is highly congested. Some of them wait under trees a few yards away, and run when the buses reach the terminus, which is highly risky as it's on the main road. Any time an accident may occur." She added, "I feel the best decision would be to shift this terminus to some other place."

Sanmukhpriya (20), a college student, said, "They can expand the bus stand but that requires space and there is hardly any space left to extend after the flyover bridge construction has started."

"The government has to look after this matter as we are mere drivers, we cannot do anything," commented Varadha Rajan (39), a bus driver who has been driving for 20 years now. He added, "The government needs to take the initiative."

S Kumara Raja (62), from the Federation of Velachery Welfare Association, said, "The ideal location to shift the bus terminus would be the Mass Rapid Transit System premises so that people getting down from the local train can easily board buses to their respective areas or vice-versa."

Anbalagan (55), timekeeper at the Metropolitan Transport Corporation, said, "Every hour around six to seven buses arrive here at the stop. I have seen commuters actually face problems due to the limited space available here."

"The space for the bus terminus or bus stand is allotted by the Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC). After the flyover construction is over, we are planning to have a meeting with the GCC regarding the issue," said R. Kumar Selvam, Metropolitan Transport Corporation planner, when contacted.

Traffic congestion has become a daily affair in the Velachery Vijayanagar bus terminus after a part of the already cramped terminus was demolished by the State Highways Department to construct a double-decker bridge.

More than 150 buses originate from or pass through the bus station, and the long line of buses and the construction work lead to traffic snarls throughout the day.

The bus terminus is able to accommodate only four buses at a time. Therefore, passengers are forced to wait for buses under extreme heat or rain.

"It is my first day here at the bus stand and it feels highly congested. I can barely stand at the bus stand as there is no space left at the stand. I have booked a cab to go to my workplace," said Rahul Subhramanian.

Mala (25), practising Nursing at Appasamy Krishna Hospital and Medical Research Centre, said, "There is hardly any place I can stand at the bus terminus, it is too small in size. I have to stand under the sun with my heavy luggage. It



Vijayanagar Bus Stand |
PHOTO: SOMASREE CHAKRABORTY

Stray-dog menace biting into peace of Besant Nagar residents

SHWETA DABHOLKAR

After Chennai's Elliot's Beach reopened on February 1, residents of Besant Nagar here have been complaining about the stray dog menace due to littering by visitors, particularly on weekends.

"Some of the street dogs near the beach are quite ferocious and bark loudly at passersby," said 30th Cross Street resident Ayman Irfan. Her two-year-old son is too scared to go cycling after he was chased by a dog last week, she added.

Another local resident, Sneha H, said she worries about her toddler getting bitten by rabid dogs on the street while playing. "There are five dogs present at the 16th Cross Street all day. Two of them look really sick and their fur is falling out."

While the problem of stray dogs is not new, it reared its head again when Elliot's Beach reopened after a month following the third COVID-19 wave.

A retired school teacher and resident, B. Vijayalakshmi, said, "Weekend visitors to the beach park their vehicles in the lanes and leave behind trash for hungry dogs to rummage through." On her morning and evening walks, she is careful to steer clear of the dogs who chase people and vehicles.

Echoing her thoughts is 22nd Cross Street resident C. Krishnan, who added that dogs barking and fighting loudly in the middle of the night keep him awake, disrupting peace of the residents. "The weekend crowd hanging around the beach at night has led to an increase in the population of stray dogs. We hear about people getting bitten every now and then."

Dr. Josika, a vet and animal rights activist at Besant Memorial Animal Dispensary, said, "The stray dogs are just hungry and harmless, unless provoked. Our volunteers feed the dogs in this area and bring them here if they are sick or wounded."

Dr. Aresh Kumar from AK Pet Clinic said, "We treat 25-30 dog bite cases every week, of which most are from strays in the area. If bitten, a tetanus injection must be taken immediately." Excessive drooling is a sign of a rabid dog, he added. The Municipal Corporation of Chennai website lists many complaints about stray dogs in Besant Nagar.

However, officials did not answer the calls.

We have to see a dog's perspective too...most of them don't get food or any protection from the scorching heat
-Suresh R, resident of Besant Nagar

Waste by the seaside



Litter continues to mar the beauty of Besant Nagar beach

NEHA SASI

Plastic and food waste litter large areas of Elliot's Beach in Besant Nagar, a popular evening destination for city residents. A walk along the beach showed that garbage dot the beach from the waterfront to the road head, nearly half a km away.

Raja Kumar, who owns a peanut stall at the beach, said that before starting his day, he has to clear all the trash near the spot where his stall is. "We have dustbins near our stall," he said.

Jecinth Joy, who was visiting Elliot's beach for the first time, said that she and her friends had a hard time looking for a clean place to sit.



PHOTO: NEHA SASI

It is not only the visitors at the beach that complain.

K Arumugam is a fisherman. He said that sometimes the plastic and other waste are brought to the water. When he takes the boats

from the shore to sea, some of this waste gets stuck in the boat. This makes the boat stop functioning properly.

Meanwhile, R Sathar collects

plastic from the beach for a living. He said that he earns Rs.10 to Rs.15 for one kilogram of plastic. During weekends, when a larger crowd visits, he can collect 3 to 4 kilograms in a day.

Ramu Nisar, who is a contract worker, operates the beach cleaning machine. He said that 2 machines come every day to clean the litter along the sand. He said that around 300 kg of waste is collected every day. Four workers come here every day to clear the pavements as well as the litter near stalls, said Malar Kodi, a sanitary worker at the beach. "Even when we have installed dustbins here and there, people throw a lot of waste on the sand," said Kodi.

FOCUS

The murals don't cover up the reality of life in Kannagi Nagar

NIRMALA MURALI, NETEN DORJI

Kanchana Periaswamy, a 62-year-old mother of two and a grandmother of five, has to pedal two hours every day to get to work as a mover in Mylapore.

Periaswamy was moved from her house in a Mylapore slum to Kannagi Nagar—a government-mandated place to house the urban poor living illegally in slum sprawls—around 22 years back. And now she may have a permanent roof over her head but she doesn't have anywhere to work

and so she cycles everyday.

"Even people with a degree can't get jobs," said Peraiswamy stirring a vessel in which she was cooking chicken gravy in a makeshift firewood stove on the road outside her house. Her house is a room that functions as a bedroom and a kitchen in a two-floor structure in Chennai's Kannagi Nagar.

In south Chennai, Kannagi Nagar is known for apartments with murals depicting Chennai. Artists from around the world, along with the locality, have turned giant, plain walls into beautiful, eye-catching canvas boards. Every

wall, every mural is an untold story of the non-elite class.

Kannagi Nagar, on the outskirts of the Chennai city, is the largest experiment to house the urban poor and has a population of around 1.25 lakh. Each house here has just one room and a kitchen, which is separated by a thin wall and one toilet shared by two houses.

The area has one police station, one primary school, one higher secondary school, a ration shop and few other grocery shops.

V. Irai Anbu, the Chief Secretary of Tamil Nadu, said that the Government is working on

Kannagi Nagar to improve their living conditions. He said, "The Chief Minister has taken a special interest in Kannagi Nagar, he is working closely with local officials." He added that he knew that the area lacked good-quality water and had appointed officials to tackle the situation. However, he wasn't aware that few of the residents didn't have their ration cards yet.

Director of Kannagi Nagar Marialaya Social Service Society, Nirmala S., said that the livelihoods of slum people in Kannagi Nagar had been badly affected after their

resettlement. "They have been brought far away from the city and they can't go back to their place to earn a living. Earning is impossible for them since they have to spend a huge amount to go back to the same place," she lamented.

Most of the women work as house helps and men mostly drive autorickshaws or are manual labourers.

Five houses down the street from Periaswami's house lives Girija along with her widowed daughter and eight-year-old grandson. She said she wishes the children of the locality move away to hostels. The



A mural on a building in Kannagi Nagar |
PHOTO: NIRMALA MURALI

children here are getting addicted to drugs, alcohol and smoking. Often, young men in their twenties

ask children to buy things from the market and end up sharing drugs with them.

Former street hawkers struggle to survive after eviction from CP

Four months after they were evicted from Connaught Place, former street hawkers complain that they are in dire straits as the NDMC has failed to rehabilitate them

RIYA AGGARWAL

Last week, 35-year-old Puroshottam died by suicide after losing his job as a street vendor here. His relatives confirmed that it was the financial stress of unemployment that caused him to take this drastic step.

The eviction drive began in October 2021 following an order by the Delhi High Court. In this order the court directed the NDMC and the police to remove illegal encroachers and unauthorised vendors from this area. It also declared this area as a ‘no hawking and no vending zone’.

Jaykishan Pandey, whose phone cover shop in CP was one of the casualties of the order, said, “We have been unemployed since the past four months. COVID-19 is anyway hard on us. At this time, the court’s order is uncalled for.”

He also said, “Many of us are unable to eat two square meals a day. We are barely surviving.”

Another hawker, Gaurav, said that some of his peers did not have enough money to pay rent and had been thrown out of their homes.

Gaurav also highlighted Chapter 2 of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act of 2014, which states that “no street vendor can be evicted or re-located until a survey mentioned in sub-section 1 has been completed and the certificate of vending is issued to all street vendors.”

The order came as a result of a petition filed by NDTA (New Delhi Trade Association). This association has owners from large shops as its members. Vinay Behl, a member of NDTA, said, “We demanded the removal of the vendors since they were growing in number. Their shops inhibit buyers from enjoying Connaught place.”

An old hawker, Nafees, said “I have had a shop here for the past 30



Hawkers discuss the next course of action after eviction (above); a no-hawker zone board in Connaught Place, New Delhi

PHOTOS: RIYA AGGARWAL



years. Is it not my right to earn money here?” He also said that he did not have money to finance his children’s education ever since his shop was removed.

Although the order stipulates the

removal of unauthorized shops, very few of the street vendors shops are authorized. A vendor who was allowed to sell in Connaught Place said, “I have work today because my grandfather set up shop

here in the 1980s. Those who came later—in the 1990s and 2000s—have been removed.”

The authorization process is very slow and a majority of the vendors remain unauthorized.

IREL colony residents still scraping for clean water

Despite being surrounded by water, residents have been struggling to secure a drinking water supply for more than 30 years

PRANAY RAJIV

“There are more than 40 families here. We were resettled here by the Indian Rare Earths Limited (IREL) after they took our land about 30 years ago. In addition to the land and a compensation amount, they had promised us proper water connections. But this has not happened to date,” said Ramya Kunnumparath, a resident of the colony.

“Digging a well is not feasible as we are bound to get saline water from it. The lake water has the same issue, except for a brief window during the monsoon. The only panchayat pipe connection to the colony has gone dry years ago. We have been demanding a permanent solution for this situation for so long” she added.

Right now the colony receives water from tankers that are serviced by the Karunagappally Municipality and the IREL. “We

have ensured that these tankers come in at least once in three days. We know that this is not a permanent solution, but this is the only thing which we can do right now,” said Nisha Pradeep, the local ward Councillor.

“In the past, we used to go to the nearby islets in our boats to get clean water. But now, even that has dried up. Then we tried digging in tube wells in different areas here. All of them started pumping out unusable water within a short while,” said Haridasan, a fisherman, like most residents of the colony.

“Until they set up an overhead tank and connect it to Water Authority lines, which will ensure storage and regular distribution of water, these water tankers are our only hope,” he said. But the issue with these tankers are that they are very infrequent and won’t reach all the households in the area, he added.

Even if a non-saline water source for digging a well is identified, the excess amount of iron present in the area’s ground water reservoir is a major issue.

“We had to buy a filter that costs around Rs 18,000 and use it to purify the reddish-tinted water from our well, before we can use it for any purpose,” said Shobha Mohanan, another resident of the colony. But this is not an affordable option for everyone.

“Before every election, all the political parties promise us that they will resolve this issue, but nothing happens,” said Jyothi Krishna who works in a small-scale prawns processing outlet here.

“We often don’t even have enough water to wash our hands properly after working with prawns all days,” she added before lining up buckets and containers and plastic pots in front of her house, awaiting the arrival of the water tanker.



Residents of IREL colony filling their pots with water from trucks | PHOTO: PRANAY RAJIV

People stuck; cops busy collecting fines

The sole traffic signal at Bhagalpur’s Tilka Manjhi Chowk has been inoperative for a week, leading to chaos at the junction



Tilka Manjhi Chowk, Bhagalpur | PHOTO: ARYAN SINGH

ARYAN SINGH

Despite increasing the number of traffic personnel, the Tilka Manjhi Chowk in Bhagalpur is witnessing heavy pile-up of traffic. Sub-Inspector at Tilka Manjhi Police Station, Dasrath Yadav, said that the flaw in the signal lights has been communicated to seniors. “Since this is a machine, it is obvious it will get faulty on some days,” said Yadav.

Public transport drivers and residents complained that the traffic police have been unable to regulate the traffic properly.

Often, ambulances are held up because of the heavy traffic. With dozens of people being held for violating traffic rules, the drivers who were charged with the violations questioned the police for not getting the signal lights fixed. An e-rickshaw driver, Kare Lal, who paid an amount of Rs 1,000 for

violating traffic rules, said, “The police do not see their mistake, and penalise poor people. There is confusion with the way police are manually controlling the traffic.”

The installation of traffic signals was the first step taken under the ‘Smart City’ scheme in March 2020. However, the signal has not worked properly for a month since installation.

Bhagalpur MLA Ajit Sharma, when asked about the issue, accused the Bhagalpur Municipal Corporation (BMC) of planned looting. “BMC would have resolved the faulty signals in a few hours if the Chief Minister was about to visit Bhagalpur. Also, someone experienced in the police department should look after the traffic, not a trainee,” said Sharma.

Among all this, pedestrians find it extremely difficult to cross the road with vehicles moving in a chaotic way.

Meerut’s metro workers struggle under extreme weather conditions

Metro rail construction workers at Gandhi Bagh Road, Meerut, working 12-hours days amid heavy rainfall and extreme cold, say they are not paid on time

SUSHMITA DEY

“It’s been two months, and I haven’t received my monthly salary,” said Kaushik. Other workers also complained of poor living conditions and irregular payments.

The contract workers are working on the 82.15-km Delhi-Meerut Regional Rapid Transit System (Delhi-Meerut RRTS), an under-construction metro rail that connects Delhi, Ghaziabad and Meerut.

Hailing from different parts of India, the workers are not directly contracted by the National Capital Region Transport Corporation (NCRTC) but hired by contractors such as Sunshine Ltd. and Shree Shyam Company.

Mukesh Rajbar, a grinding machine operator from Varanasi, said, “Every day, we work here for 12 hours, from 8 am to 8 pm. We live in a room covered up with tin sheets near the construction site.”

“After work, we come back to the room, cook or buy our dinner and go to sleep exhausted,” he added.

“There are more than 100 workers with me. Some are locals, and some are from other villages near Uttar Pradesh. If one of us gets sick, we cover for him too,” said Mukesh Rajbar

“After every two to three months, our worksite locations change. Earlier, I was working at Begumpul and Baghat Road,” said Mohit Kaushik, a crane



Metro rail workers at the Gandhi Bagh construction site PHOTO: SUSHMITA DEY

operator from Kharboda Chandpura.

Abhishek Kumar, working at the metro construction site at Roorkee Road for the past two years, said, “We have to work in extreme temperatures. When there is work, we have to get it done, right?”

When asked how often they visit their families, Mukesh Rajbar said, “We take contracts according to our convenience. It can be six to eight months per year, then we go back to our village, spend time with our family for a month and then come back for a new contract.”

Besides this, Mohit Kaushik explained how the metro work would not be finished by the end of 2022 as predicted by the officials,

“At the Gandhi Bagh Road, the metro work has just begun. It will take more than two years to complete. It doesn’t matter when they announce this project until. Unless we start the micro-tunnelling technique—used for constructing smaller tunnels for utility diversion for the metro lines—the work will never be completed.”

The metro will run from Hazrat Nizamuddin Sarai Kale Khan metro station, covering Ashok Nagar, Anand Vihar, Sahibabad, Ghaziabad, Guldhar, Duhai, Muradnagar, Modi Nagar South, Modi Nagar North, Meerut South, Shatabdi Nagar, Begumpul with Modipuram at the end.

Inoperative, unhygienic toilets at MRTS stations

Passengers complain of unhygienic conditions in Chennai MRTS stations’ public utilities

DIKSHITA CHOUDHARY

“I have been travelling daily for a year from Avadi to Tirumailai Station and I have only used the public washroom two to three times in an utmost emergency,” said a passenger, Vijayan, 40.

An empty and very old water tank, iron rods, huge stones and bricks were found in the ladies’ pay-and-use toilet of Tirumailai Station. Only one out of the three wash basins was usable, while the toilets were comparatively cleaner than the wash basins installed at the platforms. There were many drinking water basins installed at all of the stations but none of them was clean enough to drink water from. Moreover, one passenger washed his hand in the drinking water basin. Although, a vending machine was installed at the station

platforms which provided 1 litre water for Rs 8 and different quantities at different prices, that too was not operational. However, the toilets at Velachery and Perungudi Railway Station were immensely dirty and foul-smelling, which made even standing there unbearable.

All MRTS stations had a couple of dustbins installed. The platforms were also clean.

Another passenger, Kavitha Raveendran, 21, said, “Being a girl it is very hazardous for my health to use the public washroom, especially during COVID times. I had also complained twice to the staff there but no one cares or maintains it due to the pandemic.”

She also added that the public washrooms are only good at the major MRTS stations such as Chennai Beach, Central Railway Station and Park Street.



An MRTS washroom | PHOTO: DIKSHITA CHOUDHARY

The sound of sexism

For too long, Punjabi pop-song lyrics have revolved around women seeking car rides and baubles from their Gucci-clad men



A shot from the famous Punjabi song ‘Lehanga’ by Jass Manak, where the woman is seen asking her boyfriend to buy her a new dress

ANOUSHKA SAWHNEY

Mainu kadey ta lai jeya kar tu shopping mall ve
Mere nal diyan sab parlour saj diyan rehndiyan
Haaye highlight karaa de mere kaale waal ve
Ve kitho sajaa tere layi sare suit puraane aa
Mainu lehanga le de mehanga jehya marjaneya
Aine paise dass tu kithe lai ke jaane ae

In the above lyrics from the song ‘Lehanga’ by Jass Manak, the girl is asking her boyfriend/husband/ to take her out shopping, get her hair highlighted and gift her an expensive lehanga.

The song was released in 2019 and is known in every household, especially in north India.

An international location, a rich boy, expensive cars, and a sprawling mansion are the perfect ingredients for a Punjabi song. That and a little dose of sexism. Not to forget brands like Gucci and Prada (listen to ‘Prada’ by Jass Manak).

The songs are a hit during weddings or any odd day and are

often foot-tapping. However, they have been questionable for a few years now. During my stay in Chandigarh, I remember hearing Jass Manak, Karan Aujla, and B Praak on every street corner. Someone either had ‘Coka’ by Sukhe and Muzical Doctorz as their ringtone or ‘Lamberghini’ by The Doorbeen and Ragini on the top of their playlist.

I first heard the songs outside my all-girls college in Chandigarh in 2017, when I saw a row of cars with boys inside ambling along slowly--popularly known here as gedi, meaning a ‘leisurely stroll’--with the songs playing at full volume.

To my surprise, this was just a regular day for the boys, who, like clockwork, would turn up at noon every day, since that was when the girls could go out according to college rules.

I had started to enjoy these songs, until one day my friends explained to me the meaning of the lyrics and my only response was “Why?”

Why are women portrayed as materialistic? Who would ask for a

ride like that: “Lamberghini chalayi jaane o Saanu vi chutta deh do. Kithe kalle-kalle jaayi jaane o” (Why are you driving alone in the Lamborghini? Take me along).” Why these lyrics?

The songs are much more than music. They’re a catalyst for patriarchy and sexism on our daily lives. According to a report in The Economist in 2018, the Punjabi music industry stood at Rs. 700 crore and is rapidly growing.

Language and socialisation follow a chain, wherein language influences the way people think and vice-versa. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, “Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. The fact of the matter is that the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group.”

The usages of words in the lyrics showcase a view that suits men.

At the core of these songs are

women who are characterised as betrayers, financially dependent and weak.

In ‘Lahu Di Awaaz’ by Simiran Kaur Dhadli, which was released in September 2021 and has 14 lakh views on YouTube, the girl narrates how “today’s girls are mentally ill” as they take off their clothes to become “famous”. In the lyrics of another song ‘Chaal’ by Lovie Virk and Gurlez Akhtar, the girl sings, “Jinna di chaal jannian vargi raah sadda ki mallange, ni tor jannian vargi raah sadda ki mallange (one who walks like a girl, what will they do about us)”.

I put up an Instagram story wherein I asked a few questions regarding sexism in Punjabi songs: Have you ever tried to discuss this with your friends/family? Do you think not listening to those songs would help in any way? Do you continue listening to the songs even if you know they are sexist?

Out of 77 people who responded, 71 found Punjabi songs sexist. Many believe that not listening to these songs would affect their demand, which would help to counter their popularisation. Some also believed that this would have no impact.

The lens with which we view Punjabi songs has changed over the years. It is probably not the first time you are coming across an article like this. However, the question is, will it be the last time?

An international location, a rich boy, expensive cars, and a sprawling mansion are the perfect ingredients for a Punjabi song. That and a little dose of sexism

Inked memories on the canvas of skin

Bhavya Khatri recommends taking the plunge without over-thinking

DIKSHITA CHOUDHARY

We usually imagine tattoo studios to be bohemian with hipster art all over. While we visualise Bob Marley painted on the wooden or exposed brick walls of a tattoo studio, Irezumi Tattoo Studio in Thiruvanniyur has most of the walls painted in bright blood red. One of them also sports a drawing of a pink cherry blossom tree. The studio had over 15 paintings and showpieces of Lord Buddha and not a single piece of tribal art or rastafarian paraphernalia.

Tattoo is an art and Bhavya Khatri, 25, has inked more than 300 tattoos in his career of two years. Bhavya's father is also a tattoo artist and growing up in watching him, his biggest idol and the one who has taught him tattooing, and the reality TV show Ink Master paved his path towards tattoo artistry. "I used to draw and sketch since childhood, fiddle through the pages of my father's catalogues and paint them. I enjoyed doing things through which I can explore my mind," said Khatri.

For him, tattoos are memories that someone carries on their skin permanently...until their last breath. The first ink he got on his body as a 10th-standard boy was courtesy his father--an S-shaped dragon on his back. ‘S’ is the initial of his mother’s name’s, who is now no more. Out of the six other tattoos he has, this is the most special tattoo Khatri has, as several memories are attached to it.

He also inked himself a third eye on his lower left leg after his mother passed away--it’s on a spot that’s always visible to him, whether he is sitting, sketching or scrolling through his phone. The third eye makes him feel that his mother is still watching him. He wishes to ink his mother’s name sometime in the future as well.

Amongst the 300 tattoos that he

has done, Khatri recalls a portrait of a dog he made on his friend’s arm as his dearest design. “My friend got the tattoo when his dog, Phantom, passed away. It wasn’t only emotional for him but all the memories came crashing like a car all the while I was making the tattoo,” he recalled. The air around felt heavy and the place sounded quieter as he said this.

A huge round white marble art piece gleamed on one of the red walls. It’s hard to take one’s eyes off it. On the contrary, a spooky white yak’s face with a mandala design carved on it and long wooden horns was hung perpendicular to the marble piece. To the left were a dozen animal artifacts-- zebra, giraffe, cow, horse, rhinoceros, etc--with their heads hanging, and four more Lord Buddha statues.

Some things in the room just did not seem to get along, like a wooden artefact on a wooden plank, placed right in the middle of seven paintings of Lord Buddha.

While the paintings calmed my mind, the wooden plank seemed to break the smooth silence of the very moment. On the white wall facing the wall-sized poster of the The Godfather was a beautiful painting of a window on a wooden

wall with ‘Nostalgia 1934’ written on it.

Khatri loves doing geometric art. So much so that he has a geometric Yin Yang tattoo too. His nickname is Yash, which makes him feel as if he has another person hidden in him. That made him get a geometric dual-face tattoo.

“If I draw something and if I really like it, I instantly want it to be on my skin because I would want it to be with me...I don’t think much. The most impromptu one that I got was a lighter tattoo, which I also laugh at sometimes, but I never regret any of my tattoos,” said Khatri.

Indian society often looks down on tattooed people and is judgemental towards them, even though tattoos have been persistent since ancient times. In rural India too it is common to see tattoos of ‘Om’ or people’s names. Khatri says that getting judged for tattoos is the last thing anyone should care about. “It is just the fear sometimes that pulls people back, I would say that if someone wishes to get a tattoo, just go for it,” said Khatri. “And once you get one, you will definitely want more. That’s how people get addicted to telling stories on their skin and enjoy the pain.”



Bhavya Khatri at Irezumi tattoo studio in Chennai

A taste divine

While no gurudwara visit is complete without a dollop of piping-hot aate ka halwa ladled into one’s cupped palms, it is also an intrinsic part of Punjabi households

SIMRAN JEET

My aunt Harpreet, 55, a homemaker, was raised in the national capital and has grown up eating and learning how to make some of Punjab’s most famous traditional dishes. Out of the gamut of dishes she is known in the family circle for, though, the most famous is aate ka halwa, or wheat pudding.

Aate ka halwa is commonly known as “kada prasad” in the gurudwara, where everyone (including me) would have had it for the first time,” said my aunt. “It is like a treat for the attendees. The word ‘gurudwara’ means ‘door to the guru’, so when you visit the gurudwara, you cannot come back empty-handed. Kada prasad signifies God’s sweet blessing that one should never say not to. In Punjabi culture it is loved by everyone so much that it is prepared in households very often. No fancy sweet dish can beat its taste and texture,” elaborated Harpreet.

The soft, smooth, velvety halwa is served hot in cupped hands with dollops of ghee dripping between one’s fingers.

It is made with only four ingredients--whole wheat (preferably coarse), clarified butter (or ghee), sugar and water--in the ratio 1:1:1:3 respectively. When prepared for the gurudwara prayer called ardas, the ratio must be adhered to. The customary recipe should be strictly followed and must be mandatorily kept basic and minimal for the gurudwara.

However, one can tweak ingredients by adding a variety of



Halwa is an integral part of a gurudwara visit

nuts while preparing it at home as a regular sweet dish. Over the years, the dish has evolved--the wheat has been replaced with suji, or semolina, and jaggery, etc.

“I made it during my teens for the first time. It turned out well as I was guided by my father. He familiarised me with the details of the preparation, which I learnt gradually with practice,” said Harpreet.

“Most important is the accurate

Although the halwa is never as perfect as it should be, it still worth the try

ratio of the ingredients that go into the preparation. This determines the final outcome; if this is done correctly, the rest is easy,” Harpreet reiterated.

During winters, wheat halwa is often prepared for breakfast or

before bedtime to keep one warm and cosy. A dash of cardamom powder in the halwa lends it a subtle sweet aroma and flavour. Slow roasting the coarse wheat flour in clarified butter on low heat, adding sugar syrup in intervals and continuous, vigorous stirring are the key to make perfect dark golden halwa with a nutty fragrance with a medium to thick consistency. It should be served hot, sometimes garnished with almond flakes.

Every time I eat kada prasad, it evokes some of my fondest childhood memories when I visited the gurudwara and insisted on some extra hot halwa with folded hands whenever it was served. The thrill is something that hasn’t changed for me in all these years.

Over time I have been attempting to recreate in my kitchen the halwa that I have grown up eating. Although the halwa is never as perfect as it should be, it still worth the try.

Millet metamorphosis

One of Karnataka’s traditional recipes gets a sweet twist

MARIAM RAFI

There were many advantages to shifting to my grandmother’s picturesque home situated in the heart of Mysore. First was the bustling bazaar full of glitzy clothes and trinkets right outside home. Second, my chaotic cousins’ troop that would make me laugh the whole day. And third were the sweet millet balls, or, as we called them, mittha hitt (sweet flour).

Karnataka’s traditional ragi mudde, or dark brown finger millet balls, are usually eaten

with a spicy green or red saaru (peas or meat gravy). In Bibi Ameena Mansion on Sawday Road every Sunday morning, they were, instead, cooked in jaggery water.

Distributed into three different-sized bowls for toddlers, children and adults, these dark brown flour balls sat perfectly with a small hole made on top of each. A fat red bottle of ghee was always placed next to the bowls and one poured a teaspoon into the tiny holes right before eating them.

While my four-year-old

cousin would enviously glance at my medium-sized steel bowl, I would form a tiny circular morsel and cautiously dip it into the golden ghee and place it in my mouth. The sweet, earthy flavour would spread in my mouth and I would gulp it down while my fingers would already be forming the next tiny morsel.

An old stout lady, the heirloom possessor— who learnt the recipe from her mother, who had learnt it from her paternal grandmother in Kurnool—usually clad in long dresses in white or neutrals, would emerge from the kitchen with her dark spheres of multi-nutrient goodness mounded in a steel bowl in her frail hands. She was usually the last one to eat after cooking the arduous meal for everyone.

“My maternal cousins and my brother’s wives never cooked it. In fact, two of my daughter-in-laws out of four don’t cook it either,” said Zainab Bibi Jan, my 70-year-old grandmother when I decided to quiz her about her mittha hitt one Wednesday afternoon.

To make this nutritious delicacy, one must grind together a kilogram of black gram flour, two handfuls of rice, wheat, finger millet flour and a handful of fenugreek seeds. Once this fine-grained flour mixture is ready, one must boil the right amount of jaggery in water, as per taste, in a thick vessel and later filter it by cautiously transferring the first half of the golden brown liquid using a strainer.

“Nowadays, brown jaggery



is usually adulterated with chalk, mud and sugarcane sticks, hence it is vital that one filters the liquid,” she said.

Next, the entire filtered jaggery liquid is brought to a boil and half of it is kept aside to cool. Then the brown flour mixture is poured slowly into it. After strenuously mixing the flour using a wooden stick while continuously adding water to attain the required consistency, and once the paste cools down, it is shaped by bare wet hands to form fist-sized balls.

“It is vital to mix the semi-solid mixture using circular motions well, using a thick wooden stick to prevent any lumps from forming,” she cautioned.

Sadly, she no longer prepares this prodigious delicacy as her arms can no longer handle the strenuous task of mixing the sticky brown flour while holding on to the thick vessel using a steel tong.

“After my sisters and daughters, you are the first grandchild of mine to have asked for the recipe in such detail,” she said with a hopeful smile.

Love is an Easter egg

Tamil directors are increasingly showing their adoration for their idols with subtle nods and references in their films

HARINI MADESWARAN

Kamal Haasan, Fahadh Faasil and Vijay Sethupathi—three of the country’s finest actors—together made headlines when the acclaimed director Lokesh Kanagaraj announced the cast of his upcoming film, *Vikram*, starring the trio.

While the cast by itself was enough to spark excitement among cinephiles, the movie’s first look heightened anticipation further. Several movie buffs saw a resemblance between the first look of *Vikram* and the poster of the Kamal Haasan-starrer *Virumaandi* (2004).

Lokesh Kanagaraj, in many of his interviews and award-acceptance speeches, has spoken about his fanboy moment with Kamal Haasan. It’s an adoration that the director has often left traces of in his earlier movies.

In Tamil films of late, we’ve been seeing several instances where the directors pay tribute to their real-life idols and inspirations in the form of plot devices and scenes.

Lokesh Kanagaraj’s recent hit, *Master* (2021), starring Vijay, has periphrastic revelations of Haasan’s

movie *Nammavar* (1994) in which he portrays the role of Professor V.C. Selvam, who has a big influence on his students. At the end of *Nammavar*, Selvam goes for treatment abroad as he is diagnosed with blood cancer. In *Master*, the protagonist, JD (Vijay), turns into an alcoholic due to grief over the loss of his inspiration, Professor Selvam, who went abroad for cancer treatment.

The physical features and portrayal of the character Dhilli (played by Karthi) in Kanagaraj’s breakout movie, *Kaithi* (2019), are similar to that of Haasan in one of his career-best films, *Virumaandi*.

Gautham Vasudev Menon, another director who is an ardent fan of Kamal Haasan, has made the kada (metal bracelet) an integral part of his daily attire as well as that of his protagonists in films like *Yennai Arinthal* (2015), *Vaaranam Aayiram* (2008) and *Kaakha Kaakha* (2003). The trend of wearing the kada was established in the Kamal Haasan movie *Sathyaa* (1988), where Haasan portrays the role of Sathyaa, an angry youth who is against injustice.

Similarly, Rajinikanth has inspired countless young directors. Desingh Periyasamy, the director of



Heroes in GVM’s films prominently wear the silver kada as part of their daily attire | PHOTO: CHAI BISCUIT

the hit romantic comedy *Kannum Kannum Kollaiyadithal* (2020), had imprinted his love for Rajinikanth in several segments of his debut movie.

The film begins with a shot of a Rajinikanth miniature standing amidst the sprawling superheroes. There are banners of Rajinikanth on the roads, and the café’s interiors are made of Rajinikanth posters, along with the actor’s movie dialogues written on the

walls. The film also has an imitation of a famous dialogue from the movie *Thalapathi* (1991) starring Rajinikanth and Mammootty. Dulquer Salmaan, the lead of Desingh Periyasamy’s film, is the son of Mammootty, Rajinikanth’s *Thalapathi* co-star.

While the directors get inspired by the actors and leave hints of their admiration in their movie, Vijay, a fan of actor and martial artist Jackie Chan, replicates the style in which he chews gum in the film *The Armour of God* (1986). The gesture keeps recurring in Vijay starrers *Master* (2021), *Bigil* (2019), and *Sarkar* (2018).

The posters of films like *Alaipayuthey* (2000), *Minnale* (2001), and *Iruvar* (1997) find a place in *Oh My Kadavule* (2020) and the recently released Telugu film *Shyam Singha Roy* (2021), where the protagonists are portrayed as aspiring actors, writers, or movie buffs, hinting at the directors’ love for specific genre of films.

These references in films have gained a favourable response from the audience, especially among movie buffs who understand and recognise them. But more importantly, they go well with the stories, as the scenes and devices are crafted with logic.



Posters of *Virumaandi* (2004) and *Vikram* (2022) | PHOTO: MAALAI MALAR

Not so black and white

The recent posters of Mani Ratnam’s *Ponniyin Selvan* mark another occasion to revisit the colourism prevalent in Tamil cinema

NANDHINI LAKSHMINARAYANAN

‘*Karuppu dhaan enaku pudicha coloru*’ (Black is my favourite colour) is a famous Tamil song from *Vetri Kodi Kattu* (2000), and it remains popular even today. But does the Tamil film industry really see darker tones as beautiful? The answer is up in the air.

Tamil cinema, or Kollywood, has a deep-rooted history with colourism since it was established at Madras in 1857. Even after decades of making and watching exceptional films, we still associate fair skin with nobler deeds and higher ranks while looking down upon darker skin tones, especially in women.

A few days ago, the much anticipated poster of the epic film *Ponniyin Selvan* was released by Mani Ratnam’s Madras Talkies on their Instagram. Grandeur, visual storytelling, characters that looked like they were straight from Kalki’s book—they were all there. But there was something disturbing about the poster.

The poster depicts Trisha Krishnan as the fair-skinned Chola princess Kundavai Pirattiyar surrounded by a bunch of young female companions with darker skin than hers.

This brings to light that the aesthetic composition of the poster is based on the difference in skin tones between Trisha and the women. But does the difference in skin tone mark a departure from the book?

Well, the answer is no. The representation of a fair-skinned female protagonist is deep-rooted owing to colourism, a concept defined by Alice Walker as “the prejudicial and preferential treatment of same-race people

based solely on their colour.”

This poster is just another example of the discrimination faced by dark-skinned members of the industry. Take for example the critically acclaimed movie *Jai Bhim* (2021), where members of

do I).

Darker heroes are welcomed with open arms, be it Vijayakanth, Dhanush, or Vijay Sethupathi.

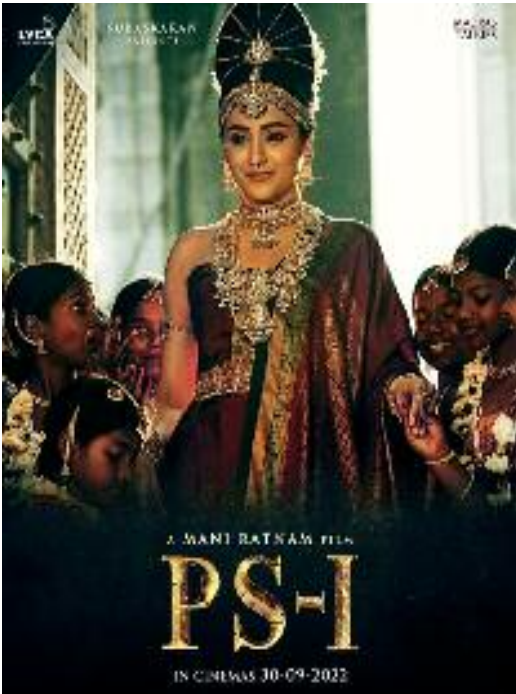
But, female leads with darker skin tones were sidelined mercilessly and confined to the role of comedian, second fiddle, or seductress. Silk Smitha, despite showing great potential as a character artiste in films like *Moondram Pirai* (1982), was pigeonholed into playing the siren.

It was director Bharathiraja who cast dark-skinned heroines in his films—be it Radha or Mucherla Aruna, they had significant roles. This would have signalled a significant change had the actors’ skin tones not been lightened on screen.

In the early 2000s, it was Mani Ratnam who was vocal about creating a significant space for the dark-skinned female lead. In his film *Kamathil Muthamittal* (2002), Nandita Das played the role of a Sri Lankan Tamil fighting for her group’s rights. The character’s skin tone stayed true to the actor’s—no makeup was involved.

Interestingly, ancient India embraced black as a symbol of strength, beauty and power, associated with the powerful goddesses Parvati and Kali. Sculptors creating idols of Hindu gods carved them out of black stone to enhance the deific features of the idol. The stigma around dark-skinned people has largely been a legacy of British colonialism.

Even after all these years, we still associate norms of beauty, power and hierarchy with fair-skinned people. It makes one think: there is a certain amount of politics behind every so-called aesthetic, isn’t it?



Poster of Mani Ratnam’s upcoming *Ponniyin Selvan*, featuring Trisha Krishnan | PHOTO: LYCA PRODUCTIONS AND MADRAS TALKIES

the Irula tribe are portrayed as dark-skinned, while the lawyer Chandru (Suriya), is fair-skinned.

Meanwhile, the real-life lawyer Chandru is actually dark-skinned.

Looking back at the older songs in Tamil films, be it ‘Chiku Bucku Raiyile’ from *Gentleman* (1993), the background dancers have been dark-skinned compared to the female lead. ‘Maida (refined flour) over melanin’ has been a constant refrain in a society obsessed with fair skin.

Director K. Balachander was the first to introduce a dark-skinned male lead in the world of Tamil cinema, now the Superstar of Kollywood—Rajinikanth. The audiences adore his dialogues (so

Hate-watching: the new big hit

TANYA SAVKOOR

“Ugh! Why can’t I stop watching this?” I thought as I clicked on the next episode of *And Just Like That...* (the reboot of *Sex and the City*). Why is it that I was going through all that phoney wokeness that the show was pushing? I had gone to the extent of finding a way to illegally stream the show in India. I wasn’t the only one; a few of my friends had done the same so we could rant about the latest episode on our group chat later.

‘Hate-watching’ is becoming a common trend, especially since streaming platforms, with their never-ending plethora of content, have gained popularity. From reality shows like *The Bachelor*, to fictional shows like *Tall Girl*, internet users have not shied away from expressing how much they hate these immensely popular shows. While some say they hate the concept of 25 contestants competing for the Bachelor’s “love”, others find the show very inauthentic, as the relationships rarely last. However, the show has a 4.43 million viewership, according to Nielsen.

However, hate-watching mustn’t be confused with a guilty pleasure. There is absolutely no pleasure in hate-watching. So why do we hate-watch, when there are so many other shows that we enjoy?

While blaming the COVID-19 lockdowns sounds is convenient, there is so much more to why we continue hate-watching. There is a curiosity to see how bad the show could possibly be. Since viewers express their hatred towards the show on social media, it builds a curiosity as to how well we would be able to tolerate it. It is like offering candy to a child and then telling them not to eat it because it tastes bad.

When the cheerleaders from *Riverdale* performed Elvis Presley’s ‘Jailhouse Rock’ for Archie and others in juvenile detention, it got viewers thinking, “Who is writing these terrible scenes?” It is a way by which we feel like we are better than the contributors of the show (writers, characters, costume designers, etc) or maybe feeling like we are contributors ourselves. It is because viewers tend to invest themselves in the content they are consuming. Some also enjoy watching things fall apart in silly (and evidently scripted) reality shows like *Bigg Boss*. Whether it is the contestants’ exaggerated reactions and arguments (remember the viral “Pooja, what is this behaviour?” meme?), viewers like to watch things go wrong. Is it because we are evil or sadistic? No, it is simply because of the curiosity to see the consequences.

We also enjoy the adrenaline rush we get from watching something bad. Miranda Hobbes (a white lead from *And Just Like That...*) fumbling while talking to Dr. Wallace (a Black woman) was infuriating but created a curiosity about how much worse it could get. Also, the enemies-to-lovers trope is popular because viewers get a kick from plot twists like that.

Recently Netflix announced that the vastly hated *Emily in Paris* was being renewed for seasons three and four. Sure enough, netizens were not pleased. Besides the puerile plotline and predictable twists, Emily’s ignorance about French culture and her repeated snarky comparisons with (white) Americans did not sit right with viewers. But aren’t they the ones to be blamed for the renewal? After all, the show continues to be on Netflix’s Global Top 10 chart of most-watched TV and films.

Writers noticed the popularity of hate-watching. They know what will trigger viewers, and provide just that. Some streaming platforms are putting out average content with a greatly disliked cast like Addison Rae to irk viewers. Most are filled with irritating plot twists and cliffhangers. The only way to stop this onslaught of “unwatchable” shows? Stop watching them!



Happiness comes in small bundles

A newly-wed narrates how her husband’s family recipe helped her forge new bonds

SHWETA DABHOLKAR

The food we eat today is steeped in the stories of those who came before us, and recipes are passed down from one generation to another.

One such recipe is a well-known snack in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, called pudachi vadi. Literally translated from Marathi, it means a rolled-up bundle. And it’s as no-nonsense as the name.

A savoury fried pastry stuffed with dried coriander, grated coconut, and Indian spices with an outer covering of besan (gram flour), it is simple, understated and scrumptious.

The star of this dish is the bright green, fresh-from-the-farm coriander that brings the pud together. The fragrance of gavran kothimbir (homegrown coriander) is warm, nutty and spicy with slightly citrusy undertones. Which is why winters are when most Maharashtrian families tuck into this snack whilst bundled up under their blankets and sweaters.

Enjoyed with piping hot chai at tea time or sweet shrikhand (a traditional sweet made from strained yoghurt) to offset the spice, this dish is an all-time favourite among Nagpurkars, residents of the Orange City.

It was only my second trip to Nagpur; the first one was a couple of months earlier when I visited my in-laws’ ancestral home.

If I loved A, I’d love where he came from, right? From being raised in practically a single-parent family as my father worked in Dubai most of my life, to this big, bustling home with my mother-in-law, father-in-law, A’s 70-year-old

aunt and 94-year-old grandmother, I was biting off more than I could chew.

And so I spent a week with these knowledgeable generations of women who deftly wielded their kitchen knives against vegetables like they were weapons of war. Here’s where I mention I’m no domestic goddess. My husband taught me how to cook rice.

Some of our best days as children are those spent tailing our mothers and grandmothers around the kitchen, waiting to dig into delicious meals that turn into core memories.

For women, as we get married to build new homes, these memories serve as building blocks for relationships with our spouses and children.

After a trip to A’s ancestral village, we harvested fresh coriander from the family farm and were ready to prepare pudachi vadi. They make it only twice a year because of the amount of effort it takes. “After a bountiful winter harvest, every family between Nagpur and Bhandara makes pudachi vadi at home,” says my MIL, or Aai, as I call her. My mother has always complained that I don’t use the commonly used Marathi word to address her.

Months later as I call up Aai from Chennai for the recipe, she reminisces, “I get nostalgic about my childhood every time I bite into one. My mother and maushi (aunt) used to make it. My mother-in-law used to also make it. The pastry layer was thin and the masala was perfect. Her pudachi vadi was *faar sundar* (loosely translated to legendary).”

A retired primary school teacher



Pudi, a traditional Marathi snack | PHOTO: SHWETA DABHOLKAR

who taught in a government school for 30 years, A’s grandmother was renowned for being *sugran*, a classic Marathi term for a woman who cooks well.

The taste of her mother-in-law’s perfect pudachi vadi served as inspiration for Aai to give it a shot when her two sons were teenagers. The first attempt was a success, especially with the children. “Although not as thin as my MIL, the vadi was nice and fluffy. My boys loved it,” she proclaims with a hint of pride.

Saran, or the stuffing, contains a mixture of khobra (desiccated coconut), khush-khus (poppy seeds) and charoli (almond-flavoured calumpang nuts). Some like to add cashews or raisins for extra flavour.

The coconut and calumpang nuts are roasted to a light brown, following which fresh ginger garlic paste, finely chopped onions, and ground green chillies are added into the mixture. A sprinkle of salt and sugar adds the finishing touches.

“My mother would go easy on the ginger and garlic,” Aai had said, as she carefully separated the bundles of coriander, sorted and chopped them. The more hands, the merrier, and I sheepishly pitched in,

happy to help.

It is a slow process that requires patience. The masala has to be roasted well, the outer layer has to be rolled to achieve the perfect thickness. Rice flour and rava (semolina) are added to the besan for binding purposes, with a pinch of salt and oil for extra fluff.

Pudachi vadi comes in various shapes and sizes but flattened rectangles or triangles are preferred. Aai says triangular shapes soak up more oil while frying, like samosas.

After frying and cooling the vadis, they are cut into pieces and enjoyed alone or with condiments. Finding it spicy, I had dipped mine in ketchup. “Sorry, I tend to add more chillies. We all love them,” Aai had laughed, handing me a glass of cold water.

While we laboured in the kitchen, I felt a sense of camaraderie with these women like I’d never experienced before. My mother and I don’t share the easiest relationship. As we divided tasks, worked in unison, and helped each other, it felt like we had all been rolled up into a melange of myriad flavours of women to form the perfect pudachi vadi.

Whitewashed by death?

Deaths of celebrities arouse polarising debates, offering few clues on the etiquette of addressing complicated legacies

RISHIKA SINGH

On February 6, 2022, Indian singer Lata Mangeshkar passed away at the age of 92. With her career beginning in 1949, multiple generations of Indians undoubtedly have strong associations with her voice and music. Followers of Bollywood music can testify to her unique voice and the space it occupied in Hindi entertainment.

However, praise was accompanied by comments on aspects of her personality that are controversial in today's political landscape—especially online. The phenomenon of quick reviews of celebrities' lives immediately after their death is not new, but a discussion on how such passings are to be processed in our culture has not been arrived at yet, much less a resolution.

Take the case of Mangeshkar. On one hand, compilations of her best songs and tributes poured in following her demise, as did words of condolence. On the other, an unexpected theme became a point of focus for many: Mangeshkar's close ties with VD Savarkar.

A controversial figure in Indian history, Savarkar knew Mangeshkar's father well. Savarkar is considered the father of the Hindutva ideology that advocates Hindu nationalism, so his closeness with the singer, who had also recorded songs written by him, was frowned upon by many opposed to the ideology.

Similarly, when actor Rishi Kapoor passed away in April 2020, many were quick to point out how his behaviour was less than exemplary—he was allegedly violent towards people around him and frequently abused people online.

The knowledge of this behaviour did not stop others from mourning and recalling their personal, memorable experiences of watching his films. Given that he died when the coronavirus restrictions were in place, many



Lata Mangeshkar with VD Savarkar | PHOTO: ©MANGESHKARLATA/TWITTER

sympathised with his family for dealing with grief at such an anxious time. They were critical of the critics, who in their opinion had no business saying such things right after his death.

It is difficult to ascertain what the proper etiquette is then, when celebrities pass away. In India, with the importance that is given to celebrities by the average person, celebrities' deaths understandably evoke a lot of responses.

The adage “don't speak ill of the dead” does not seem applicable to all situations. American journalist Glenn Greenwald argued in *The Guardian* after the death of Margaret Thatcher in 2013 that in the case of politicians their deaths should not become opportunities for their supporters to “create hagiography” of their lives. Politicians are meant to serve the public, and obituaries must include negative aspects of their identity.

With non-politicians, the debate becomes more difficult. They do not owe a morally upstanding,

clean record to the public. Nevertheless, their actions outside of their art do form an opinion in people's minds that, if not overtakes, certainly co-exists with the opinion on their art.

The tragedy of death means a complete absence of a person in the future. In the case of celebrities, their contributions, art, and effect on the public will not have new additions to it, only existing in history. This sense of loss often results in the need to say words of appreciation. So should the complicated parts be discussed then?

Any comprehensive account of a person's life should ideally mention both their achievements and where they erred, both being highly subjective notions still. In our personal lives, the deaths of individuals do not merit discussions on the nature of their personality immediately. This is not possible in the case of celebrities, who often impact people on a grand scale, and whose

mourning is done on a collective scale where discussion is bound to happen.

It can be preachy to direct people to notice criticisms of a celebrity immediately after their death, but whitewashing a personality is not the only alternative.

In 2020, Indian journalist Ankur Pathak wrote an obituary of Rishi Kapoor in *Huffington Post India*. He mentioned not just the work and contributions he made to popular culture and cinema, but also the negative aspects of his personality in great detail. That the piece was titled ‘Untangling Rishi Kapoor's Complicated Legacy’ asserts that there is something complicated here, all of which warrants a look.

To lay it all out and let the readers make their own judgement is only one way to discuss legacy. In a time where death has surrounded the lives of most people in one way or another, resisting forcing the perception of a person who is no more is perhaps a possible alternative.

Drooling over Dalgona and Sae-Byeok

SNEHA SWAMINATHAN

Squid Game's final meal—a burly, blood-oozing T-bone steak for entrée and some red wine to wash it down—was a nod to the final fight scene. As the final remaining players chew on the meat hesitantly, the tension between Seong and his rival Park Hae-Soo is seen building up. At the end, when the guards clear their blood-stained plates and leave a steak knife behind, a doomy sign of the final showdown is conveyed.

Whichever way we cut it, food is an important component of storytelling in K-drama. The use of ramyeon in K-drama can also be viewed as a metaphor for intimacy. In Korean culture, long noodles were equated with long life and a long-lasting marriage. Ironically, the historical meaning behind the same has been heavily diluted in K-drama and is used to refer to something immediate and casual. The use of this sexual innuendo can be seen featured in shows like *Crash Landing on You* and *What's Wrong with Secretary Kim*, where the female leads are seen inviting their male counterparts over for a bowl of ramyeon—holding a strong sexual connotation.

Fondly known as Korea's “National Grandmother,” Kim Young-Ok's character in *Hometown Cha Cha Cha* was heavily driven by her love for



Tteok-bokki, a popular K-drama dish | PHOTO: JAE-HA KIM

cooking. Young-Ok's simple yet heartwarming meals to outsiders were a sign of acceptance. Furthermore, Lee Sang Yi's sudden visit to the seaside town to grab a bowl of hot chicken porridge prepared by Kim Seon has a deeper meaning to it. It hints at the emotional relevance of food and how it can keep individuals connected.

Of all K-dramas, *Squid Game* has most brilliantly employed food in its narrative. The scene where the protagonist is seen treating his

daughter to roadside tteok-bokki (spicy rice cakes) on her birthday while her stepfather takes her to an opulent steak-house is a subtle reminder of the social inequality prevalent in South Korea where tteok-bokki is the food for the common man and steak is for the wealthy. The same distinction is echoed when Pakistani immigrant Ali cannot afford ramyeon or Korean instant noodles, which are relatively cheaper. The use of dalgona candy to bring out the feeling of desperation and the race for survival is the highlight of *Squid Game*.

The story is propelled further by using food as a way to demonstrate Frontman's principles of equality and fair game. The use of bento boxes containing carefully measured portions of egg, kimchi, rice and vegetables aptly describe the idea. Not only has Korean food provided K-drama plots with a framework, it has also become a symbol of cultural resonance for many. If it makes the Korean audience nostalgic, it also leaves the non-Korean audience in awe of the use of a plethora of Korean dishes to anchor a story.



Dalgona candy scene from *Squid Game* | PHOTO: NETFLIX

Home, sweeter home



The allure of the show lies in transforming spaces without loosening the purse strings | PHOTO: PRIME VIDEO

DEEPA SINHA

In episode one of season two of *Small Budget Big Makeover*, streaming on FYI TV18, the Chadha family in Pune is trying to reconcile the clashing tastes of two generations. Mr. Chadha, a widower, used to live in Allahabad when his wife was still alive. He is used to open spaces filled with greenery, even if his current home is cramped and cluttered. His daughters, aged 35 and 32 respectively, want their free-spirited and bohemian personalities to be reflected in the objects that define their home. Mr Chadha has more practical concerns—like lack of storage space—while the daughters want the accoutrements.

Enter the well-known interior designer duo Muninder and Vishakha Choudhry, one with the ability to transform any space after looking at it, and the other with the imagination to create the dream home—all on a budget of Rs. 20,000 per room, and within three days.

While there are many home-makeover shows streaming right now, like *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*, *Candid Tell Us*, and *The*

Home Edit, what makes *Small Budget Big Makeover* unique is the value it places on the three concepts of purchase, make and reuse. The team takes the time to understand the needs of home and transform it into a modern, warm and contented area. Besides, the hosts share simple and creative decorative tips with which viewers can beautify their own homes at a reasonable cost.

Every house and its objects have a story to tell. Whether they live in an apartment or a villa, people often desire a space that suits their personality. *Small Budget Big Makeover* reinvents the home according to the taste of each member of the family. Ultimately, it's not the makeover of the house but the relationship of the people staying together.

Every individual possesses a distinct personality, and finding common ground becomes a challenge, a feat that Muninder and Vishakha manage with great tact and skill.

In episode 18 of season two, we meet the Thakurs of Andheri, Mumbai, a kind and considerate joint family that is struggling in their cramped home. There's

furniture in every corner, the kitchen utensils spill out of every available surface. The designers start by disposing of the junk, following which they renovate it using the SST, or “standard, splendid and tough” (the show loves its alliterations and abbreviations) model.

In another episode, involving the Shanoy family, the main problem the Bengaluru-based techie faces comes from the bad planning of the house—a design disaster that has made the entrance lobby claustrophobic. It was impossible to study in the study, and the kids' room lacked cheer. Despite it being a 1,300 sq ft 2BHK house, the family of four spent their lives in the living room. In the show, through careful organising and re-planning, the family reclaimed the rest of the house.

Like any makeover show, the best part is the unveiling of the final result, the surprise and smiles on their faces as they try to reconcile what was to what is; the scepticism in trusting the other and the joy and happiness after the job well done. There is a solution to everything; one can always get something right when one thinks calmly.

The boldest of the bold

How *The Bold Type's* Adena Al-Amin challenges stereotypes

LAILA RASEKH

Western women in pop culture are always shown to be strong, confident, brave, and independent. However, this is not common for Muslim women on screen. In the Netflix series *The Bold Type*, while all the main characters are independent and strong women who try and deal with their issues, the character of Adena, played by Nikohi Boosheri, stands out. Boosheri's character—that of a Muslim girl who is also a lesbian—especially warrants discussion.

Unlike most Muslim women on screen, Adena, the Muslim Iranian woman in *The Bold Type*, is unapologetically a proud Muslim lesbian and photographer. Adena is bold, confident, and independent, and breaks all stereotypes that have marked the depiction of Muslim women on screen—as those covered in a black burqa with no voice and with a heterosexual identity. However, in *The Bold Type*, Adena is very much in charge of her life, her sexual identity, and her choices. I don't remember seeing a character like her in movies and TV series before.

In *The Bold Type*, Adena is from Iran, a country where religion rules the country's culture, customs, behaviours, and values. Iran is a place where the culture of silence and value of the hijab and modesty, and lack of openness towards sex, especially before marriage, makes it difficult for both the sexes to talk about sexuality. In Iran and other Islamic countries, practising any other sexuality other than heterosexual relations is considered a sin.

In the series, Adena is also sometimes scared to go back to her country and has a constant fear of being deported. She always wears her hijab, offers prayers, but still hides her sexual identity.

In comparison to the three other



Adena (left) and Kat in a still from *The Bold Type* | PHOTO: FREEFORM

protagonists of the series—Sutton, Kat, and Jane—Adena has more serious issues to deal with. While she has to keep her sexuality hidden in Iran, she doesn't need to in the city where she now lives—New York.

In real life, there are millions of lesbians living in Iran whose sexuality is not accepted and who, in order to practise their sexuality, have to leave their country and abandon their values. Adena, as an activist, tries to bring a change in the life of the LGBTQ community in Iran through her photographs.

In Islamic countries such as Iran, the practice of any sexuality rather than heterosexuality is illegal. If anyone is found to be lesbian or bisexual, they are lashed.

Adena is bold, confident, and independent, and breaks all stereotypes that have marked the depiction of Muslim women on screen

I spoke to a person who has been living in India for seven years now. Freshta (26) had to leave her

country as her family and society did not accept her sexual identity. “At first, I thought my family would be okay with me and support me. Initially, I told my mother about this. She was shocked and told me not to talk about this to anyone. The next day, she handed over all her gold to me and said I had to leave the country: Go somewhere safe. Going to another country was tough. I had a friend in India who also had to leave Iran for the same reason and she helped me get out of the country,” she said.

When asked how she gets by, she said, “I work in a salon, where people support me and do not shame me for who I am.” For us young Muslim women, Adena has been a long time coming.

The soothing sameness of Sid Sriram’s love songs

The predictability in the musician’s songs is what makes them unique

GODHASHRI SRINIVASAN

You can be forgiven for thinking Sid Sriram’s ‘Mudhal Nee Mudivum Nee’ is a song from an earlier movie *Enai Noki Paayum Thota* (ENTP). The chords sound the same, the beginning sounds like it’s definitely from another song you’ve heard before. This déjà vu wouldn’t be new with a Sid song. But he stays relevant and his songs continue to be heard. In fact, the similarity has ironically become the singer’s USP. How do people, including me, not tire of listening to Sid’s discography?

The answer to that comes from the genre Sid has come to stand for—young romance. Sid’s songs are about love in your teens to twenties—the kind of larger-than-life, symbolic love full of longing, alliteration and adoring worship.

‘Mudhal Nee Mudivum Nee’ (You’re the beginning and the end, too) is the latest example. The song’s protagonist is at the fag end of his twenties and is looking back on his teenage love. He has realised the girl he loved then would be the only one he’ll truly love. He calls her the three seasons, the sea, the shore, the wind itself. “Did you lose yourself in a distant nation, sweetheart?” he asks, and adds, “When I see you again, my world will fill with fireflies.” The same thing in dialogue might have been cheesy (like Gautham Vasudev Menon’s scriptwriting), but in song it’s poignant. That is what Sid’s voice adds.

Songs from *ENTP* are classic



Sid Sriram | PHOTO: LAST FM

examples. Visiri’s lyrics combined with Sid’s vocal capacity makes for a cheerful, magical love potion. His voice effortlessly soars to fantastic high notes, zigzags between quick tunes, keeps a steady rhythm and melts on brooding notes—all in one verse. The kind of vocal gymnastics Sid has come to define in ‘Maruvarthai’ and some parts of ‘Nira’ comes from his expertise in and affinity towards Carnatic

music. His independent album *Entropy* is a case study in how he uses Carnatic templates with an R&B slant. Even within this album, each song is only slightly different. Looking at it from the other side, Sid can also sprinkle a rolled ‘r’ and rounded vowels in songs like ‘Maacho’ and ‘OMG Ponnur’. This is part of his appeal as a singer singing songs for the young lover, and the young, in general.

capitalised on his strengths in Carnatic music and the appeal he had for the kind of quippy romance the song embodies. Another song in the same album, ‘Adada Naana’, was quieter, with straighter vocal tones. This went to another singer. Working with Gautam Vasudev Menon, too, shaped some of his most popular songs. Although Menon wasn’t a lyricist or a composer for *ENTP*, his script-writing lent the movie, and by extension, the song, the fervent young lover’s yearning that characterised Sid’s songs.

There is something to be said about the comfort of predictability in a Sid love song playlist. You can listen to the playlist for hours, even if you’re single. The sameness of his tracks lulls and relaxes, while small modifications in tone keep the list loopable.

Each artist has their own signature tonal feel. For me, Sid Sriram is primarily a man of quippy romance. Meanwhile, there is Pradeep Kumar, whose voice is similar to Sid, in its effortless vocal range. However, while Sid Sriram sings about a younger love, Pradeep Kumar sings more about mature love and understanding (‘Kannamma’, ‘Maya Nadhi’). Will Pradeep Kumar’s playlist of love songs lull the same way Sid Sriram’s songs do? It probably won’t, because there’s much more tonal variety that makes you an attentive listener.

So, even if Sid releases another song that sounds similar, fans will love it.

Book Review

In the face of anxiety

ASHISH TIWARI

Sasha, the 35-year-old protagonist of Jennifer Egan’s short story *Found Objects*, justifies her kleptomania, or should I say ‘lifting’, in a rather compelling way—compelling enough to escape the guilt that comes with stealing—but she hardly can escape that feeling. Take, for instance, her finding a woman’s bag on the toilet floor and before lifting the wallet from that bag she has this to say: “I live in a city where people will steal the hair off your head if you give them half a chance, but you leave your stuff lying in plain

view when she narrates the story to Coz, her therapist. Sasha talks about the day she went on a date with Alex—a non-New Yorker whom she met online—when she stole a woman’s wallet and a slip of paper from Alex’s wallet.

“It began the usual way...” begins the story, and then she goes on to lift a woman’s wallet and flee the toilet, as it’s almost second nature to her, which makes it hard to empathize with her. But for that, we have Coz, the therapist, who reminds her of a plumber incident, which in itself is a story of how she robbed a plumber of his screwdriver, of her being aware that “...this isn’t a great way to live.”

Coz has an omnipresence through the story. At some point it almost felt like he’s the protagonist of this story, not that there’s anything to be spoiled in the latter part of the story but a story that I found funny throughout its beginning and middle, ends in a rather shortlived (hopefully) gloomy way; one could sense this dejection sprinkled throughout this story.

Sasha brings Alex home and after his brief inspection of the house, she pulls him down on the Persian carpet, where they both lie for a long time. While he takes a bath, she reaches for his wallet and finds a scrap of paper with something written on it.

What follows is Egan trying to change Sasha. But does she change?



sight and expect it to be waiting for you when you come back?”

Egan’s story, which went on to become the first chapter of her acclaimed novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, told in third-person, revolves around two of Sasha’s many lifting stints. The story shifts back and forth, from the day she met Alex to the present

There are films in my film

Tamil cinema has, of late, been witnessing a slew of anthology films

NEHA SASI

Not many have the time and mental space today to dedicate 2.5 hours in a day to a movie. And if, at the end, the movie turns out to be a drag, there’s all the more to lose. Enter anthologies to the rescue.

The brief, variegated structure of an anthology film gives the viewers just the right amount of entertainment they are looking for. Interestingly, Tamil cinema has been witnessing a rise in popularity of this genre. *Putham Pudhu Kaalai: Vidiyaadha*, which aired on Amazon Prime Video recently, is the latest one to join the line.

This anthology binds five different stories with the common theme of the coronavirus pandemic. While one of the films, *Loners*, talks about how two strangers find a home in each other, *Mouname Paarvaiyal* shows the unsaid love between a husband and wife.

The most attractive feature in an anthology is the fact that the audience gets to choose what they want to see. If they like even one out of five movies, they are most likely to get off the couch with a feeling of satisfaction (through OTT platforms, the pandemic has brought a lot of these anthologies to our homes). This is not so in a regular two-hour film where you feel as if you have wasted your life watching a bad drama.

Another interesting feature in an

anthology is the cast and crew. These often bring a great many artists to the fore. *Putham Pudhu Kaalai: Vidiyaadha* had actors like LijoMol Jose, Gouri G Kishan, Teejay Arunasalam and Nirmal Pillai on board. The directors span the gamut from Halitha Shameem to debutants like Richard Anthony and Surya Krishna.

Halitha Shameem, who is also a part of *Putham Pudhu Kaalai: Vidiyaadha*, has previously directed

common feature. For example, the 2020 release *Putham Pudhu Kaalai, Avarum Naanum* revolves around a grandfather and his grandchild bonding during the coronavirus lockdown. While some misunderstandings also get cleared, the story is marked by simplicity. This is true also for other films like *Ilamai Idho Idho*—a tale of two elderly friends finding love in each other again during the lockdown—in the same series.

The storytelling in anthology films is non-complicated, circumventing the tropes of villains, song-and-dance and slapstick.

Some, however, break convention by addressing important socio-cultural issues. *Paava Kadhaigal* (2020) spoke about honour killings, each film in the anthology approaching various other social issues from a different angle. *Oor Iravu* is about an inter-caste marriage that culminates in a brutal ending. *Vaanmagal* shows the trauma



Publicity stills from *Sillu Karupatti*, *Putham Pudhu Kaalai* and *Navarasa* | PHOTOS: IMDB, WIKI, TWITTER

one of the most liked films in 2019—*Sillu Karupatti*, also an anthology. In fact, it was one of the first few anthologies that gained wide critical acclaim. Again, it did not have a star-studded cast. This leaves a lot of room for newer, creative artistes.

This brings one to the aspect of storytelling in this genre. Simple storylines with engaging slice-of-life narratives unfolding over a span of a few days are the most

experienced by a family that finds out that their daughter had been the victim of sexual abuse.

Navarasa was released in 2021; the title refers to the theme of ‘nine emotions’.

Starring Suriya, Parvathy, Vijay Sethupathi and directed by the likes of Gautham Vasudev Menon, Karthik Subbaraj and Priyadharshan, the anticipation for its release was testament to the popularity of anthology movies.

Embrace of the quotidian

The remixed, popular versions of Tagore songs that now flood the market have little to do with the legend’s compositions

SOMASREE CHAKRABORTY

The history of anxiety in the Bengali intelligentsia over the “future” of Rabindra Sangeet, especially in terms of dissemination—the “purity” of the style of its rendition by individual artistes—and reception (its “popularity”) is rather long.

‘Shedin Dujone’, one of the popular songs in Rabindra Sangeet, went viral in 2020 when some women students of Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata made an appearance with a lewd distortion of the song written on their backs with *abir* (the coloured powder used in Holi).

The person behind the creative liberties was Roddur Roy, a popular face on social media who had gained a following by composing parodies of Rabindranath Tagore’s songs and sprinkling them with cuss words.

He owned a YouTube channel and had over 17 million viewers with over 200,000 subscribers.

Parodies, adaptations and other remakes of Tagore’s songs became especially popular in the initial days of the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in March 2020, when people, bored and confined to their homes, turned their creative energies to social media. And it’s the trend that shows no signs of abating.

The distortion of Rabindra Sangeet has taken several forms over the years, in all manner of films and indie musical productions. These days the market is flooded with hundreds of such albums, the same songs remixed again and again till they lose all semblance to the original. The song ‘Ekla Cholo Re’ has had a few versions over the years, composed by different composers and musicians for films like *Kahani*, sung by Amitabh Bachchan, and *Bose: The Forgotten Hero*, rendered by Sonu Nigam.

The song ‘Jagorane Jay Bibhabori’ is used in the Bengali film *Ranjana Ami Ar Asbo Na*, sung and composed by Anjan Dutta. Another song ‘Mayabono



Rabindranath Tagore |

Biharini’ features in the album *Bedroom* by Somlata Acharyya Chowdhury. These two songs completely distort the essence of Rabindra Sangeet while breaking several rules of the genre by using excessive instrumentation and Western influences.

Interestingly, Tagore had referred to two inventions of modern technology of artistic/musical dissemination. One of them—the gramophone—he considered to have contributed to the deterioration of the general culture of Rabindra Sangeet through largely distorted rampant mechanical reproduction of his songs since the early 20th century. In the initial phase of the recording of Tagore’s songs, professional singers usually did not care for any faithful reproduction in them of the prescribed notations, and surprisingly both the aspects are occurring in his creativity.

It is not that Tagore was against the idea of the artistic freedom of improvisation; he was all for it,

“What is art? It is the response of man’s creative soul to the call of real”

provided the structure of his musical composition for a particular song remained unimpaired and the artiste was powerful enough. But he had a very selective—to put it mildly—idea of a “powerful artiste.” As late as 1938 he claimed in a conversation with Roy to have heard only one artiste who could successfully render his songs—Sahana Dev. He always admired her voice: it was suitable and embodied perfectly what he had composed.

Tagore had little faith in the ability of singers as well as the majority of the contemporary listeners to perceive and render the beauty of his songs, which singularly bore the clearest mark of his greatness as an individual artiste. The slew of remakes and remixes we are saying now would not have passed muster.

The problem began just after Visva-Bharati University lost its

exclusive copyright to Rabindra Sangeet in 2001—60 years after Tagore’s death. In what one Tagore scholar remembers as “an instance of personal friendship prevailing over political antagonism,” was the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, who convinced the then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao to promulgate an ordinance extending the copyright by another 10 years, which had already expired in the 90s.

What happened after is that the Visva-Bharati music board, without whose endorsement no recorded music of Tagore could see the light of day, had no reason to exist. Any publisher or individual after that could now reproduce Tagore’s works. Several publishers are believed to be ready to hit the market, ending Visva-Bharati’s monopoly.

In light of the many ways in which Tagore’s work is being abused and its essence destroyed, a regulatory body governing his work might be the need of the hour.

Old wine in a new bottle?

How a trend that has existed for as long as Indian cinema suddenly became the go-to phrase for filmmakers

ARUSHI BHASKAR

It all started with the success of *Baahubali: The Beginning* (2015). The movie stormed into theatres all over India, introducing non-Telugu audiences to Prabhas, Rana Daggubati, and S.S. Rajamouli.

However, that's not the only thing the movie introduced. Because of its success across the country, audiences were exposed to the term "pan-Indian film".

Within a few years, Indian audiences would see every other movie being advertised as "pan-Indian" in bold letters.

This craze for "pan-Indian" transcends languages and industries. The recent Telugu superstar Allu Arjun-starrer *Pushpa: The Rise* became a blockbuster in every language it was released in (Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi, and Kannada). It even managed to sideline native films of the languages—most prominently the Hindi film *83* (By native, I mean a film released in a language it was originally made in, not the dubbed version).

From veteran director Priyadarshan's historical action-drama *Marakkar Arabikadalinte Simham* (2021) starring Mohanlal to Ayan Mukerji's ambitious *Brahmāstra* series, these films have generated quite a lot of buzz on social media. However, what exactly is a pan-Indian film?

The answer is not that easy to find.

To put it in the simplest way possible, a pan-Indian film is one that caters to the tastes and sensibilities of people and communities across the country.

But this definition easily applies to movies made pre-*Baahubali*. Indian films have a rich history of



Posters of the Allu Arjun-starrer *Pushpa* in every language it released in | PHOTO: MYTHRI MOVIE MAKERS

being dubbed and remade into other languages: Prabhu Deva's directorial debut, *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana* (2005), a Telugu movie, was remade into nine other languages. Back in 1959, *Mahishasura Mardini*, starring Kannada cinema legend Dr. Rajkumar, was dubbed and released in seven other languages.

Also, this definition fails to take into account the people involved.

I would argue that Sridevi was the first pan-Indian star. She had a cult fan base across the country, and her filmography is testament to the fact that one can be successful with both hard-hitting social dramas, like K. Balachander's

Tamil film *Varumayin Niram Sivappu* (1980), and masala family movies, like K. Raghavendra Rao's Telugu movie *Devatha* (1982) and its Hindi remake *Tohfa* (1984).

There are other actors like her, albeit not as successful. Jayaprada, Sridevi's contemporary, was successful in multiple industries as well. More recently, there is Tabu, who has had blockbusters in various languages. It is interesting, however, that not many male stars have made smooth transitions into other industries (this is a topic for another day, though).

So, how does one begin to unravel the current phenomenon of "pan-Indian" films? According to

Payal Sharma, who is pursuing Film Studies, while pan-Indian films have always been around, the term itself became popular post-*Baahubali*. She says that it's obvious there's a lot of money to be made with such films, so this phrase gets hyped up for all it is worth.

One might make a connection between this trend and the increasing jingoism in public spaces and art forms across the country the last few years. As the emphasis on nationalism takes over almost all other narratives, the idea of films that attract and unite audiences across the sheer vastness of the country appears attractive.

Manasi Apte from the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Madras says that this uniting factor is key to understanding the rise of pan-Indian films. She says that most of these films have Hindu mythological themes—Prabhas, the lead actor of *Baahubali*, is going to act in an adaptation of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, called *Adipurush*.

The ones that don't deal with mythology are either about the struggle for Independence (which is usually shown in the most masculine way possible, as in the case of S.S. Rajamouli's upcoming *RRR*), or are action films with male leads, like Prashanth Neel's *KGF: Chapter 2*, the sequel to his wildly popular 2018 film, also titled *KGF*.

So, it's clear that these pan-Indian films deal largely with masculine themes, with a healthy dose of jingoistic and Hindu narratives thrown in. It's a shame when you think about it—women's stories and experiences should find more resonance across the country, but it doesn't seem like we are getting a "pan-Indian" release with a female lead soon.



Cardboard and couches

NIRMALA MURALI

Look! It's furniture. But wait, it's cardboard. It's furniture made of cardboard. This may sound like a castle made of sand, but this is where things get really interesting. Karthic Rathinam is a 23-year-old entrepreneur and founder of Out of the Box, and he makes cardboard furniture for a living.

Cardboard, really?

Traditional furniture made of plastic, wood, steel and iron all have limited lifespans, eventually ending up as junk, polluting the world for as long as they're around. "Unlike other materials, cardboard is eco-friendly and has a life span of over 10 years. You can recycle and reuse them, and they are biodegradable," says Karthic.

Cardboard furniture can carry up to 100 kgs, are durable, portable, weightless and have a water-proof coating. For Karthic, the goal was to make sustainable, affordable and accessible furniture. "Furniture is an essential, but people keep

making compromises on it. A good bed can help with insomnia, a good writing desk can prevent backache. Furniture is a part of your good health... The way you sit, sleep, and work can determine your quality of life in terms of health. The right furniture is a treat to your eyes, serves its purpose and is also not expensive."

The good part gets better

Cardboard is an unexplored material. We often underestimate what it can offer us.

"It is full of possibilities. If you want a boat to ride in, a chair to sit in, or even a bed, think cardboard. It's hard to find a more adaptable, less expensive, or more available material. And we are making the best use of it by taking advantage of its spectacular features," said Karthic. He says cardboard can vary from a thick sheet—a paperboard to the flat layer—to corrugated cardboard. The corrugated cardboard can be recycled up to 25 times and has a small carbon footprint. "Carbon

footprint" refers to the volume of carbon dioxide emitted by our actions and what we consume. Using cardboard furniture reduces the volume of emissions caused by aluminium and plastic by four to six times.

Vote against climate change

The most frequently used phrase of the 21st century is 'climate change'. If we sit back and think for a minute, we are the reason why climate change is even happening, said Karthic.

We ourselves can contribute to a greener environment by doing as little as switching off unnecessary electronic gadgets and planting trees. We know the harmful effects of plastics, but we still keep using them.

"Choose alternatives to plastic, take your own jute bags to shops, switch over to cardboard furniture instead of plastic. You have options, if you need one. Choose what's best for the environment so that we can prevent major catastrophic events," said Karthic.

Revolution to objectification

The increasingly problematic nature of Bhojpuri lyrics

ARYAN SINGH

Some of the more recent songs released by Bhojpuri artistes are 'GT Road Jaam Ho Jaye, Hath Mein Leke' by Manoj Tiwari, 'Tani Sa jeans Dheela Kara' by Guddu Rangeela, 'Daba Dabake Humro Phula Dela' by Guddu Rangeela and 'Beech Field Mein Wicket Lagaka' by Kalpana. The lyrics of each of these songs are characterised by the objectification of women and legitimising rape.

This, however, is not a recent phenomenon. Songs with such lyrics in Bhojpuri music date back to over 10 years. Catchy with listeners and available on multiple platforms, they're hard to miss. This trajectory has been an unexpected turn for a language once known for songs sparking revolution and social change.

Bhojpuri is a language spoken by a section of people mainly in Bihar and Jharkhand, and in some parts of Uttar Pradesh. Such is the popularity of the language that a district in Bihar was named Bhojpur in 1972.

In the past, songs sung and written by Bhojpuri artistes like Bharat Vyas, Sharda Sinha, Madan Rai, and the 'Shakespeare of Bhojpuri,' Bikhari had a positive impact on society as their works covered a host of social issues like widow remarriage and caste, with an underlying entertainment quotient. But, after the Liberalisation of the '90s and the introduction of cassettes, the Bhojpuri film and music industry found itself surrounded by B-grade movies and songs from pop albums. The desperate attempt to save the Bhojpuri language from becoming a relic of the past has led several content creators to create disturbing works. Today, the box-office for Bhojpuri content depends on vulgarity instead of quality. The revolution in the language has backfired on the people invested in the idea of reviving it.

Bhojpuri literature is a rich field, marked by works such as *Phoolsunghi*, *Ghar Tola Gaon*, and *Jinigike Raah*. The quality of Bhojpuri cinema is evident in the hit movie produced under the Rajshri banner, *Nadiya Ke Paar*, later remade as *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...*, which went on to become a blockbuster. The first Bhojpuri movie, *Ganga Maiyya Tohe Piyari Chadhaibo*, made in 1963 on former President Rajendra Prasad's request, was based on widow remarriage, a far cry from what we call Bhojpuri films today.

Many factors have contributed to the slide in Bhojpuri content. Now, autotune and easy access to smartphones with internet have made the path easier for the promotion of vulgar songs.

The Bihar government has failed to control the spread of vulgarity in the Bhojpuri industry. The State government's ban on a movie like *Padmavaat*, but lack of oversight of obscene Bhojpuri-language content is perplexing to say the least.

Bhojpuri has never been seen as a respectable language by the current generation; the apathy can be attributed to its lack of inclusion as an optional language in schools. Other factors like commercialisation, low budgets in the Bhojpuri Industry, and theatre owners preferring Hindi movies over regional ones has affected the quality of content. Bhojpuri is a living language spoken by communities and thus can never be extinguished. It is now in the hands of the government to safeguard its beauty and glory.



A still of Addison Rae from her music video 'Obsessed' | PHOTO: DEXERTO.COM

What is wrong with self-obsession?

MALVIKA SUNDARESAN

Addison Rae, a TikTok star, released her debut song, 'Obsessed', in 2021, which ranked No. 6 on the YouTube trending page on the day of its release. The song has accumulated over 25 million streams—and a lot of hate.

The song, initially, was drawn to the Twitter mud, with some people complaining about the rise of TikTok singers and some criticising the content of the music video.

However, recently, the hate has seen a shift, which I thought was interesting. The song 'Obsessed' talks about being obsessed with oneself, a self-love anthem about loving yourself so much that even if you were to lose a significant other, you would still be well-off.

In 2011, the boy band One Direction released the Grammy-winning, Oscar-nominated, Beyonce-approved pop-powerhouse 'What Makes You Beautiful'.

While it didn't win a Grammy nor was it endorsed by the Oscars or Beyonce, when Liam Payne uttered "you're insecure/ don't know what for," I'm pretty sure

everyone within a 50-mile radius felt that.

Insecurity as a subject is often under scrutiny, shoving women under its spotlight, as they are taught to be insecure from adolescence to the point of normalisation, before being the subject of saviour complex. Women are taught that they need this skin cream, that new outfit or a brand new body. With the bar being moved constantly, beauty standards fluctuate wildly, leading to feelings of inadequacy.

'What Makes You Beautiful' was not a song played in passing. It was certified quadruple platinum in the U.S., reaching No. 4 on the U.S. Hot 100 chart, No. 1 on the U.K. Singles chart and has amassed over a billion views since its release. For the longest time after its release, one couldn't go anywhere without hearing the riff in the opening or that tantalising pop melody. When the song came out, I was 12 years old and didn't register a damn thing those boys were singing about.

All I knew was I was in love with Harry Styles (a member of One Direction), and when I saw him singing all up in that girl's face

in the music video, my whole world shattered.

And I just promptly switched over to Zayn Malik (another One Direction member).

Several years later, after I grew a couple of extra brain cells, the core message of the song revealed itself to me through its very chorus: "You don't know you're beautiful / that's what makes you beautiful."

One Direction is neither the first nor the last to portray the insecurities of women they're trying to serenade.

This lyrical trope can be seen in other modern examples such as Mac Miller's 'My Favourite Part' with the following verse: "you just don't know how beautiful you are / and baby, that's my favourite part / you walk around so clueless to it all."

In John Legend's 'You And I', he writes, "You fix your make-up just so/ guess you don't know that you're beautiful/ try on every dress that you own / you were fine in my eyes half an hour ago."

Even the world's sexiest man according to *People* magazine, Blake Shelton, has played into this trope with the release of his song

'She Doesn't Know She's Got It', which I think is pretty self-explanatory.

This interesting trend in music—particularly by male artistes—equates a woman's insecurity or lack of self-confidence with some kind of badge of honour.

This may stem from the fact that self-confident women understand their self-worth, which some men may be afraid of.

But, well, that's just a theory.

This may stem from the fact that women who understand their self-worth, may be viewed as independent, which some men may be insecure about.

But, well, that's just a theory.

This trend reinforced the fact that women are what men like because men are able to view themselves as heroes or the "good guys" for "building a woman up."

But, well, that's just a theory.

With the music industry solidifying the "insecure woman who is actually very conventionally attractive but because she doesn't know it, it gives me the opportunity to give her self-confidence" trope, I can see why Addison Rae's song about being self-obsessed as a

young woman could be a little jarring, especially to a world that is so used to serenading insecure girls.

But I can't merely discuss women's insecurities from a male's perspective.

I'm not John Green.

That would be undermining several women in the spotlight in the music industry who have documented the journey of their self-relationship.

Applying the pattern of insecurity we see across the music industry, social media and in real life, young girls are expected to feel insecure about themselves, and deviating from that norm leads to being labelled as "narcissist" or "self-obsessed," especially with the the self-deprecative culture turning every trace of self-confidence into narcissism.

I think Rae's song should be viewed as a healthy relationship with oneself, unhindered by second-guessing oneself.

The most interesting aspect of it all is that Rae does not use self-obsession in a way to drag anyone else down or imply that she lacks empathy for other people.