

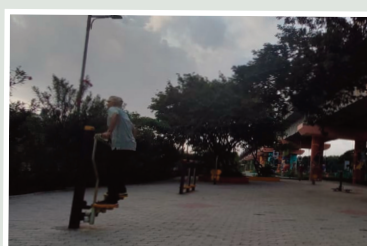
THE WORD

LAB JOURNAL OF THE ASIAN COLLEGE OF JOURNALISM



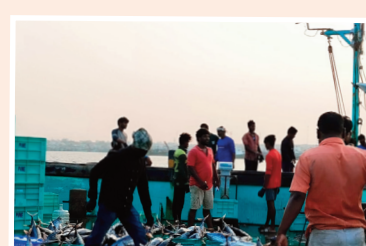
WHY DOES CHENNAI FLOOD?
Inefficient stormwater drains and rapid urbanisation at the cost of the environment are among the factors that contribute to flooding

P3



GENDER GAPS IN PARKS
Only 30 per cent of the women use parks in Chennai, as society has created a different idea of recreation for them

P13



COASTAL GUARDIANS
Three coastal fishermen have been appointed to the Chennai Coastal Zone Management for the first time

P16

LS poll: parties get into campaign mode

Polling in 7 phases will take place from April 19 to June 1

NEWSDESK

Soon after the 18th Lok Sabha elections were announced, politicians hit the ground running, launching fiery campaigns. Even at the 'Start-up Mahakumbh' event in New Delhi on March 10, Prime Minister Narendra Modi couldn't resist taking indirect pot shots at Congress leader Rahul Gandhi saying that "in politics some start-ups need to be launched again and again".

On March 16, the Election Commission of India (ECI) announced the schedule for the elections, following which the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) came into force. As per the code, the party in power should not use its official position to campaign after the election schedule is announced. It also prescribes that ministers should not combine official visits with campaigning, among other rules.

Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar had stressed on the need for parties to adhere to the code in order to ensure fair elections.

The MCC is not legally binding. Typically, the ECI can only issue a notice to violating parties. However, in 2014, they used their special powers under Article 324 of

Lok Sabha 2024	
India Votes	
April 19	Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, MP, Maharashtra, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, UP, Uttarakhand, West Bengal, J&K, Andaman & Nicobar, Lakshadweep, Puducherry
April 26	Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Kerala, Manipur, MP, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tripura, UP, West Bengal, J&K
May 7	Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Karnataka, MP, Maharashtra, UP, West Bengal, Dadra & Nagar Haveli & Daman & Diu, J&K
May 13	Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, MP, Maharashtra, Odisha, Telangana, UP, West Bengal
May 20	Bihar, J&K, Ladakh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, UP, West Bengal, Odisha
May 25	Bihar, Haryana, Jharkhand, Odisha, NCT of Delhi, UP, West Bengal
June 1	Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Punjab, Odisha, UP, West Bengal

CREDITS: VARUN BHANDARI

the Constitution to ban the current Minister of Home Affairs Amit Shah of the BJP and SP leader Azam Khan from campaigning. The ban was lifted only after they

promised to adhere to the Code.

The ECI announced that the Lok Sabha elections will be held in seven phases from April 19 to June 1, simultaneously with the

Assembly polls for Arunachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Sikkim and Odisha.

Tamil Nadu and 21 other states & UTs will complete voting in the first phase, while the second phase on April 26 will cover Karnataka, Rajasthan, Tripura and Manipur, as announced by the Election Commission.

The third phase on May 7 will be the final one for Chhattisgarh and Assam, while on May 13, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand will wind up with the fourth. May 25 will see Maharashtra and Jammu & Kashmir wrap up with their sixth phase.

On June 1, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal are set to finish seven phases of polling. Subsequently, on June 4, the votes are scheduled to be counted, well ahead of the end of the 17th Lok Sabha's tenure. However, the counting for the Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim elections will be done two days earlier.

Byelections will also be taking place in Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, and Tripura.

After the BJP's landslide Lok Sabha victory in 2019, the new INDIA (The Indian National Development Inclusive Alliance) bloc is the major opponent of the National Democratic Alliance.

Anti-CAA pleas to be heard on Apr 9

Amit Shah says the Act will not be revoked

NEWSDESK

The Supreme Court on March 19 granted the Union government three weeks to respond to the petitions seeking a stay on the Citizenship (Amendment) Act Rules. However, the court also refused to stay the implementation of the Act, with the latest notification of the rules being released on March 11 by the government.

The apex court has asked the Union government to respond to 237 petitions challenging the enforcement of the CAA rules. The three-judge bench, comprising Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud, Justice JB Pardiwala and Justice Manoj Misra, has issued notices to the Centre to reply to the petitions before April 2. The next round of hearings is scheduled for April 9.

The Centre, represented by Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, asked for four weeks to file a response to the petitions. This request was rejected by the bench on the grounds that if citizenship is to be granted within this period, the process would be irreversible.

While asking for time to respond to the petitions, the SG said, "The Act does not take away anyone's citizenship. There is no



An anti-CAA/NRC protest in Azad Maidan, Mumbai, in 2019 | PHOTO: RIA WADIKAR

prejudice caused to the petitioners."

Appearing for the petitioners, Senior Advocate Indira Jaising requested the court not to grant anyone citizenship until it arrives at a verdict, or to ensure that the outcome of the petitions has a bearing on the already-granted citizenships.

Advocate Kapil Sibal, appearing for the Indian Union Muslim League, said the notification regarding the implementation of a Rule is supposed to be issued within six months, considering how the CAA has been in the pipeline since December 2019.

He said, "If they have waited till now, they can wait till July or

whenever this court decides the matter. There is no great urgency." Sibal pointed out that if the Act is implemented now, it will be impossible to reverse it, making the petitions futile.

However, the CJI said, "They don't even have the infrastructure in place — the district empowered committee, the central empowered committee, nothing is in place."

In December 2019, the CAA law was passed by Parliament. The Act will provide citizenship to non-Muslim migrants - Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, or Christian communities from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan who entered India before December 31, 2014.

Govt dole hardly helps us, say women

DHEEPTHI OJ

Five months after the Tamil Nadu government launched a scheme to provide remuneration for women homemakers, beneficiaries of the scheme say that the Rs 1,000 they get a month hardly compensates for the hours of unpaid domestic work they do.

"How can Rs 1,000 compensate for the physical, mental and emotional work that I put in everyday?" says C Revathi, a resident of the slum board tenement at Rukmini Nagar in Adyar.

The recognition of "unquantified works of women," both inside and outside their houses, is one of the intentions of the scheme.

"Women play a significant role in society by investing countless

hours in both domestic responsibilities and external work," reads the government order on the scheme.

Called Kalaaignar Magalir Urimai Thittam (Women's Right to Assistance Scheme), the scheme grants Rs 1,000 to women heads of households whose annual income is less than Rs 2.5 lakh. The state has set aside Rs 7,000 crore for the scheme, which is currently benefiting 1.06 crore women across the state.

This was one of the flagship announcements of the ruling DMK government when it came to power in May 2021.

Sharing her day-to-day responsibilities, Revathi said, "I work for over 13 hours everyday from 5 am to 10 pm. After preparing breakfast and lunch for

my husband and children, I go to three houses and do domestic work. I come back in the evening and I sweep my house and wash clothes. Then I go on to prepare dinner."

Besides, she has other responsibilities such as keeping track of her children's education. Although she admits that the Rs

Women homemakers say the Kalaaignar Magalir Urimai Thittam scheme does not help them to make ends meet

1,000 is useful to buy some essentials like medicines, and groceries, she says it doesn't improve her livelihood in any way. "My husband and I have to work day in and day out to make ends

meet. The Rs 1,000 we get doesn't matter."

In addition, given the inflation, Revathi points out that the financial aid of Rs 1,000 barely enables them to buy all the household essentials. "We don't want freebies, reduce the inflation. As of today, a kilo of garlic costs Rs 350, LPG cylinder

is Rs 950. Rates of tomato and onions frequently go over the roof. Rs 1,000 will definitely not help us survive in this scenario."

Her neighbour, Jeeva, also has similar views. "Instead of Rs 1,000,

they can give a government job to one graduate in every family. That will provide a permanent solution to our problems," she said.

Sayidali Fatima, a resident of Malligapoo Thottam in Adyar, says the monthly aid doesn't even suffice for more than three or four days. "Rs 1,000 gets over if I buy fish or vegetables for three days."

Economist Venkatesh Athreya welcomes the scheme. He says it will empower women. "The Tamil Nadu government recognising the fact that women's domestic labour needs a remuneration itself is a welcome move. The financial aid will augment their family," he said. However, Venkatesh Athreya didn't favour money as a welfare scheme. "More welfare schemes need to be implemented to better women's lives," he said.

Time to decode electoral bonds

NEWSDESK

The Supreme Court order that details of electoral bonds be made public has stirred a hornet's nest. After the Election Commission of India published the electoral bonds data on March 14, the news media focused on decoding the data for the readers, with initial reports revealing the highest donors and recipient political parties.

The Reporters Collective, an independent media organisation founded by Nitin Sethi, has been tracking electoral bonds since the very inception of the scheme in 2017. Post March 14, it has published numerous articles under 'EB Tracker,' with emphasis on the interplay of donor corporations with government projects.

The News Minute, Scroll and NewsLaundry have collaborated under the "Project Electoral Bond." More than 30 journalists across the three news organisations have reported over 20 news articles since March 14.

The coverage has probed the possible motives of various donor corporations, along with the role of central agencies in pressuring these firms. These include Future Gaming and Hotel Services PR, Megha Engineering and Infrastructure Ltd, and Yashoda Super Speciality Hospital, Vedanta limited, among others, who were under the scanner of ED and IT departments preceding the donations.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah's claim of the BJP having received Rs 6,000 crore, instead of the actual figure of Rs 8,252 crore, was also reported by most independent news organisations.

Alt News and The Quint in particular also took to fact checking over several misleading claims doing the rounds on the internet, including one claiming that Chief Justice of India Chandrachud 'walked away' during the hearing on the electoral bonds issue.

The Wire said the electoral bonds fiasco has exposed the double standards of the BJP.

Most Independent new media



WHO GAVE TO WHOM

houses reported on the discrepancies in the data released so far by the State Bank of India (SBI). The data was missing the unique code of every bond that would help identify the buyer and the beneficiary. Additionally, the data has left out the bond purchase data before April 12, 2019, which amounts to Rs 4,000 crores.

The SBI had submitted an application on March 11 in the Supreme Court seeking extension till 30 June 2024, which was rejected by the court. The SC also reiterated its directive to the SBI to disclose all details.

Chitlapakkam residents revive their lake

ARUNIMA JHA

Chitlapakkam, a suburb in Chennai, is grappling with a severe water crisis and sanitation issues that have persisted for years. The once-abundant groundwater at just three feet below the surface has now necessitated borewells reaching depths beyond 300 feet.

In the 1990s, Chitlapakkam Lake and the surroundings of Sembakkam Lake enjoyed a high water table, but over the years, poor urban planning has led to a depletion of groundwater resources. The inadequacy of the underground drainage network has further aggravated the situation. The Chitlapakkam Lake, once a



The Chitlapakkam lake before it was cleaned by the volunteers | PHOTO: ARUNIMA JHA

vital water body, has faced encroachments, pollution, and a size reduction, becoming a dumping ground for garbage.

Despite complaints about poor

water quality and water hyacinths in Madambakkam Lake, the Tambaram Corporation dismissed the allegations based on a lab report from the Tamil Nadu Water Supply

And Drainage Board in November last year, as reported by The New Indian Express. "Many of us are getting sick with throat and stomach problems but poor people like me cannot afford to buy bottled drinking water. We have no choice but to drink the dirty water that's available," said 25-year-old Pooja Kumari, who works as a domestic help in the area.

Another 42-year-old resident named Shilpa said, "We have been expressing our concern about the dirty water flowing from our taps, yet no action has been taken to address the contamination issue."

The community, stirred by the deteriorating situation, initiated efforts to revive Chitlapakkam Sumit, a 64-year-old resident of

Chromepet said, "The people in our neighbourhood are the ones cleaning the lake sometimes. But it's disappointing that the Corporation has only made fake promises to fix the problem."

The disposal of garbage near the lake has been affecting the overall hygiene of the area. Rupa, a 37-year-old resident, said, "We don't have anywhere else to throw our garbage. It's tough because the water is already dirty, and we need a better solution to our waste."

The Tambaram Corporation maintains that the water supply is free of coliform bacteria.

However, the lack of trust in official reports and the persistence of health issues have left residents sceptical despite assurances.

Nurses protest for permanency

TN MRB Nurses demand wage hike and better work conditions as promised by the state govt.

VARUN BHANDARI

Even after a decade of honest work and peacefully demanding rights, Nurses in Tamil Nadu are yet to see the light. In 2015, 10,148 nurses who served in Tamil Nadu's government hospitals and primary health centres under contract with the Medical Recruitment Board (MRB) Nurses were engaged in active duty. Within two years of commencement of service, an appointment order was issued, stating that the job would become permanent, but the order is yet to be implemented.

MRB nurses demand to be freed from the shackles of consolidated pay and move to a permanent wage structure. A consolidated payment system means a monthly lump-sum payment of Rs. 18,000. A yearly hike of 5 per cent of this wage was promised, but the last increment witnessed only a meagre sum of Rs. 500.

The nurses' protest was originally scheduled to take place at the Directorate Of Medical And Rural Health Services (DMS) office on Anna Salai on February 21, but the police moved it to the YMCA grounds at Nandanam. Everyone was removed from the demonstration venue and escorted to the buses by the local police.

The demonstrators' slogans faded into the cacophony of the city's traffic as the bus accelerated. When the bus arrived at the newly chosen location, the protesters were asked to gather on what appeared to be an indoor badminton court of the YMCA ground. Water bottles were provided, and the police, who handled the situation with some tact, may have acknowledged that these individuals weren't a nuisance but just demanding their rights. A few tired promises of "voice being heard" were reiterated as the police shared sympathising smiles with the protesters.

G Sasikala, president of the Tamil Nadu Medical Recruitment Board Nurses Empowerment



NO CARE FOR CAREGIVERS: Contractual nurses dismissed post-COVID demand permanent jobs. | Photo: Indrani Pal

Association (TNMRBNEA), led the demonstration. The association's general secretary and a staff nurse, Sabin N was also present during the protest.

Sasikala currently works in the medical ward of the Erode Medical College. As a mother of two teenage children, her work-life balance doesn't exist, she mumbled. Many nurses developed autoimmune illnesses and hormonal issues because of the stress and long work hours during COVID-19. She added that "the government needs to focus on mental and physical health issues as these issues represent a host of other issues."

Many nurses came from far-flung districts of the state to join in the protest. Felix Monica of Tenkasi district was one of them. Monica passed her exams in 2020 and has been a staff nurse ever since. She said "despite limited resources, we have time and again

proven to be the top ranking state in NITI Ayog health index ranking, at least make one permanent position in each PHC so that we keep doing our jobs without the added stress" which also happens to be one of the organisation's demands. Ashok Madhavan, a 2019-batch nursing school graduate with a

(NQAA) certificate, adding, "I do work every work in the PHC aside from mopping and cleaning. He claimed to be qualified, holding a postgraduate degree in nursing, adding that his colleagues in private hospitals were paid more and enjoyed better facilities. The lack of paid maternity leave is another testimony to how the

delivery date and joining date were just a fortnight apart, and she joined without any paid medical leave. She said, "there is no medical or accidental insurance in case of an emergency". She demanded that the government should rectify it.

The plight isn't limited to female nurses. Hemachandra, who has been working for seven years, is still on consolidated pay. He said "I have a family to raise with this limited wage." He was selected through the MRB recruiting exam on the promise of a permanent job. "Making contractual nurses permanent will provide significant psychological relief since I will be able to perform my duties without financial worry." Privatisation of the medical sector does not benefit the poorest of the poor of society, hinting at the contractual nature of hiring and firing, he said. Nurse Jesudel Queen, in her

The State government also promised an ex-gratia payment, which was only partially fulfilled

focus on operating room techniques, is employed at a PHC in Villupuram. He travelled early in the morning to take part in the planned protest. He mentioned he was unable to obtain authorisation from the state government to travel to Delhi to pursue National Quality Assurance Accreditation

very backbone of the healthcare industry has been neglected. Vinodhini, a staff nurse in Trichy who hails from Ramanathapuram, was also at the protest. She was hired in 2020, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. She was pregnant at the time, adding to the chaos of the pandemic. Her

40s, who hails from Kanyakumari and was participating in the protest, demanded job permanency, especially for the older nurses. She was recruited in 2017. She complained about long working hours but with an unflinching determination to serve. She said, "Sometimes I had to work more than 12-16 hours". Ensuring limited working hours in PHCs is one of the demands of the protesting nurses.

Nurses aren't immune to bodily discomfort as Ashwini, a 2015-batch nurse, who is a type-2 diabetic herself reminds one. She participated in the protest despite walking with a limp. Ashwini works as a staff nurse in a post-surgery anaesthesia ward in a city's well-known multispecialty hospital in Chennai. Her health takes a back seat while she is caring for patients as she works in a 1,000-bed multi-specialty hospital requiring utmost diligence. She recalled that at one time, 47 nurses took care of nearly 800 procedures, stressing on the workload these nurses face on a daily basis. She said, "if they fill up job vacancies with proper compensation, it will reduce the workload and result in better care for the patients ultimately."

She explained how without any consideration, nurses hired during peak COVID were terminated from their jobs without any adequate compensation. She said that only some people out of an approximate 2,500 nurses were reinstated only because they went to court; the rest were left out. The state government also promised an ex gratia payment, which was only partially fulfilled.

One protesting nurse said, "Wearing a uniform and taking on the role of a carer in difficult situations without prioritising our own well-being is a practice many of us engage in daily." Another protester added, "Our primary demands are permanent jobs, medical insurance, and standardised working hours. These will not only reduce the stress on nurses but will also improve patient care."

Solid waste management at Koyambedu market wanting

MEGHA GHOSH

The bustling Koyambedu wholesale market solid waste management is not properly functioning ever since the biogas plant was shut down half a decade back.

To handle this large amount of waste well, the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) has started a new process to hire someone to pick up and move the waste from the market.

The CMDA has asked for online bids to handle the waste management at the Koyambedu market. This covers lots of places like the shopping streets, truck areas, service streets, and roads.

Over a hundred workers are employed in the market complex to keep it clean. Ajit, a 32-year-old cleaner, said, "I work for 10 hours, but our pay is very low. Usually, we get Rs 5,000, but I have to do extra work after my shift."

In 2006, the CMDA set up the plant, and a private agency was given the job of taking care of it. However, in 2018, the administration issued a termination notice for its failure to maintain the plant on the Koyambedu market premises.

The wholesalers kept telling the administration about the unhygienic conditions. Nanda Kumar, a 32-year-old fruit wholesaler, said, "When the plant was open, the area used to be very clean, but now it smells so much."

Sarathi, a 45-year-old worker with 6 years of experience in the market complex, said, "When the Biogas plant was opened, we had to gather the waste and separate the organic waste at that time." He added, "We need more workers; cleaning 60 acres of land is not a small project."

"Because of insufficient maintenance, the plant is closed. It would be a good thing if we reopen it, but we are still unsure about the maintenance. Next week, we will reveal the names of our bidders," said M. Indhumathi, administrative officer.

Students lack political discourse at Madras University in Chepauk



A recent protest held by the SFI lacked mass student involvement | PHOTO: INDRANI PAL

INDRANI PAL

Students at Madras University's Chepauk Campus experience a lack of unity due to lesser participation of students in politics. The Students' Federation of India (SFI) unit on the campus said few universities allow student union elections, and still they were the only student body fighting for it. "Now the surveillance of institutions and pressure of building a career try to capture the young minds but that does not mean students are not interested in politics," said Chandrasekhar, a member of the SFI. He adds, "But values that are being set now are very much against students' participation in politics."

Chennai has multiple public funded colleges and universities where students regularly face

academic problems and get involved in malpractices. Yet Chennai's student community remains scattered, failing to protest and agitate even when drastic changes in education are being imposed from the top against the interest of the students.

A sociology student of Madras University, who wished to remain anonymous, said, "our university has issued a circular earlier this year that even taking part in a protest and being a member is a crime."

The authorities withdrew the circular after criticism from the intellectuals. But it shows their values, how they want to control the students and their thought process, says the student.

Venkatesh, a 20-year-old student of Economics, said, "As students we should not be indifferent to whatever is

happening in society and especially when it comes to the well-being of the student community all over the country."

He said that on the Chepauk campus often protests took place to voice the demands of the students and to speak against state atrocities, but there was total lack of unity.

SFI unit secretary Jignesh, a 22-year-old English literature student, said, "It is our task to create the right environment to make the students aware about their rights and the need to be united."

A few months ago, the SFI arranged a study circle on the "Significance of student organisations" in the wake of Central government stopping a Maulana Abul Kalam Azad scholarship for minority students, which heavily impacted Tamil Nadu Students.

LAKSHMI PRABHA

Besides being a young entrepreneur at the age of 22, in *Love O2O*, Yi Xiao Nai He is not just an entrepreneur but also a master of the popular mysterious historical Chinese game, 'A Chinese Ghost Story'. He stays on top in academics and work, though his Achilles' heel is cooking. Xiao Nai seldom looks at girls but he cannot resist falling in love with the 'lioness' of 'A Chinese Ghost Story'. Unlike the other female players, she is remarkable in the top six.

The Chinese series *Love O2O*, revolves around the genre of computer games typically known as e-sports, mixed with the romance and youth genres. The drama is adapted from the novel *A Slight Smile Is Very Charming* by Gu Man and consists of 30 episodes. Yang Yang as Xia Nai (Yi Xiao Nai He), a drop-dead gorgeous actor of China, and Zheng Shuang as Bei Wei Wei (Lu Wei Wei Wei) play the lead roles under Lin Yu Fen direction.

Love O2O is popular since 2016 among people worldwide. Many fans on social media are crazy about this series as it reveals the pros and cons about the computer games in the career aspect. Meanwhile, many youngsters are into video games like PUBG and Free Fire. Free fire games hold a lot of young users at present.

Following the global success of Korean series, Chinese drama is reaching a turning point internationally. Their popularity has especially peaked post-COVID, since 2020. In India, most popular C-dramas are dubbed in Tamil and Hindi that are available on MX Player and Amazon Prime Video. Popular genres include youth, school, romance, office, history, horror and e-sports. Among these, e-sports, in particular, is a popular



A shot of e-sports team ZGDX from the series 'Falling into your Smile' on Netflix

theme in most of the recently released C-dramas, including the above mentioned *Love O2O*.

Electronic sports-based Chinese dramas are quite popular, from *Love O2O* in 2016 to *Falling Into Your Smile* in 2021. Over a half billion people all over the world, peculiarly Gen Z-ers, are addicted to video games, and the growth of the tech-savvy gamers is manifesting in the rising

writing codes for computer games and eventually the couple launches 'A New Chinese Ghost Story', which becomes a success.

In general, many youngsters across the world started to watch Chinese series along with Korean series to kill time during the lockdown. Gradually, young people got addicted to it and preferred different genres in C-dramas.

Following the global success of Korean series, Chinese drama is reaching a turning point internationally

popularity of e-sports as a genre in Chinese series.

Love O2O basically displays practical computer games, coding and hacking that draw in computer science students of top universities. Xiao Nai, a coding monster and hacker, falls in love with his junior Bei Wei Wei, a computer genius, through the game. The male protagonist commences a startup company

In the same genre, 2019's *Go Go Squid*, a game series on the theme of cyber security, proved a blockbuster hit among other e-sports series, themes with 41 episodes. Yang Zi as Tong Nian and Li Xian as Han Shang Yan (Gun) play the lead roles directed by Lee Ching Jung in this series based on the novel *Stewed Squid with Honey* by Mo Bao Fei Bao. After *Love O2O*, e-sports

Chinese series like *Go Go Squid*, *The King's Avatar* and *Falling Into Your Smile* attracted audiences across the globe. These series enhance the realistic world of e-sports throughout the episodes. Many video game lovers got addicted to these dramas and even the non-players are attracted by the concepts.

Many youngsters, mainly on social media like Instagram and YouTube, are sharing reels and shorts which are edited with the popular Tamil, Hindi and English songs. *Love O2O* scenes were edited with the famous Tamil song, Remo from *Anniyan*.

Tong Nian, a computer science student, while cycling on the pedestrian pathway, caught sight of K&K group players of a cyber security game on a bus. In her cousin's internet centre, she bumps into Han Shang Yan, a leader of K&K and a former star of CTF (Capture the Flag) player. CTF is a competitive coding competition.

These series hit the top searches on OTT platforms like Netflix, and Amazon Prime.

Why does Chennai flood?

The city was adversely affected during cyclone Michaung due to inefficient stormwater drains and rapid urbanisation at the cost of the environment

PRIYANKAN GHOSH

My house is on the ground floor and it was completely flooded with knee-deep water. The worst part was that all the sewage drains were blocked and waste water overflowed. So there was bad smell around the building. We had to walk in that water, we had no other option," said Kamala, a resident of Kannagi Nagar, Chennai. The stories were similar all across the Kannagi Nagar tenements.

South Chennai, especially areas like Madipakkam, Semmencherry, and Thoraipakkam, were the most affected. Residents here lacked even basic access to food supplies, medications, and water.

"I had to move to my sister's house where waterlogging was less and ask people in the top floor of her apartment to keep my six-year-old son and five-year-old daughter," said Suresh, who lives on Street 9 in the Semmencherry resettlement colony.

Chennai has around 3,331km of stormwater drains (SWD), 33 micro canals maintained by the Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC), and 14 drains maintained by the Water Resources Department (WRD). The DMK-led government had assured the residents that the SWD could handle any amount of rainfall. The government spent Rs 4000 crores for the SWD project.

However, its efficiency was questioned by the residents when the cyclone Michaung left parts of the city inundated for over 72 hours. People were affected as there was no power during this period. Chennai received 44 cm rain in 36 hours against 34.5 cm in 24 hours in 2015. Chief Minister MK Stalin claimed that the existing SWD are the reason why the city did not experience the horrors of 2015 again.

The post-cyclone assessment reports pointed out the inefficient connection of the SWDs to their disposal points on the canals. Areas such as Vyasarpadi, Pulianthope, and Korukkupet faced heavy inundation. The water stayed stagnant even after three days. The stormwater drains in north Chennai even proved inefficient in holding the 44cm of



People struggle to wade through the road during cyclone Michaung

rainfall, causing inundation in Manali and Thiruvottiyur.

GCC has proposed to complete 3,000 more meters in 30 more locations by 2024 monsoon. The locations identified were EVR Periyar Salai, Anna Salai, Inner Ring Road, Barracks Road, and Rajaji Street.

Dr R Kaaviya, Department of Planning and Architecture, Anna University Chennai, and Dr V Devdas, former chief of State Planning Board, Government of Kerala and Professor at IIT Roorkee, published a study in 2021 titled 'Water Resilience Mapping of Chennai, India using Analytical Hierarchy Process'.

The study highlighted how the city's drains are insufficient in carrying the flood discharge. The drainage system has several issues like inadequate width to discharge flood waters mainly caused by bridge construction, buildings within flood plains, sand bar formations at river mouths waste dumping at natural drains, and lack of connectivity of the micro drains to the macro drainage system.

"In 1991, the city expanded, especially in the western and southern parts. Areas like Velachery and Adyar were made into real estate plots. This is where the CMDA should have been cautious of its actions instead of approving every real estate project haphazardly," said Sumedha

Banik, research associate, Disaster Management Department, IIT Kharagpur.

"The floodplains of Chennai's rivers have completely encroached. So when there's



When there's excessive rainfall there is no place for the rivers to discharge the water

- Sumedha Banik



excessive rainfall there is no place for the rivers to discharge the water without affecting residential areas," added Sumedha.

An evident example is the Pallikarai marshland. This area,

once 13,500 acres, acted like a sponge and was crucial in collecting the city's rainwater from areas like Perungudi, Velachery, Narayanpuram Lake, and Keelakattalai and storing it until the sea level receded.

However, the wetland has been encroached upon by urban infrastructure and residential buildings. Presently, the marshland has shrunk to almost a tenth of its size since 1965, to around 1,500 acres. Even government offices like the Mass Rapid Transit System of Indian Railways and the National Institute of Ocean Technology have been built here.

Green Voice Global, an NGO based in Velachery, works for the conservation of water bodies across the city along with beach cleanups. The NGO had specially employed a team for the Buckingham Canal waste management.

Former engineer and a senior member of the NGO, Karun Ganesan talked about the working of the SWDs. He says the drains built along OMR let off the water in macro drains like the Buckingham Canal.

"The water from the land is supposed to drain to the macro drains such as the Buckingham Canal through various links, that further drain the water out to the sea.

But the government is more

concerned about its economy and development at the cost of existing water bodies that are crucial to flood water drainage. So, the city will have to face the consequences," said Karun.

The city's natural drainage system is based on three rivers — the Kosasthalaiyar River in the north, the Cooum in the center, and the Adyar river in the south.

"During the cyclone, the three river mouths that were supposed to drain water into the sea got clogged because of the high sea level. So, the city just acted like a reservoir holding around 67 TMC of the water in place for over 40 hours," said T Murugusubramaniam, chief engineer, Water Resources Department, Chennai Region.

He added that post-2015, the floodplains of these rivers got congested with residential and industrial activities. Efforts had been made by GCC to relocate such people from the floodplains. The problems extended even beyond that. These rivers over time had become carriers of sewage and garbage from the city. "These rivers were meant to carry the rainwater from the city. When it is already filled with so much garbage, it will affect the capacity to carry the actual rainwater," said the Chief Engineer.

WRD has laid out a plan for the restoration of the drainage system — both repairing the damaged ones as well as improving plans for building the remaining SWDs.

According to R. Vijayaraghavan, chief engineer of Design Research and Construction at WRD, teams have been employed to assess the damages of the existing drains.

Drains in north Chennai will be the first to be assessed and restored.

WRD has started their work in Kolathur where drains are being widened and proper assessment is being done to ensure proper linkage to canals.

Perambur, Royapuram, and Korukkupet are among the next target locations.

"Currently, we are focussing on the links of the drainage systems. The government has approved some of our proposals. So we started with north Chennai," said Vijayaraghavan.

Eco park construction on hold



ARCHITA LAKHOTIA

On February 5, the Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC) organised a public meeting at the Perungudi ward to discuss people's opinion on the construction of the Perungudi eco-park. An architect contracted by the GCC presented the park plan. The members in the meeting questioned how the marshland would be adversely effected by the park. They also said the construction of the park would take a toll on the natural ecosystems.

There have been many protests in Chennai against the park establishment. "We will hold meetings and move further only after people approve. We will also try to alter the proposal design and make sure the vegetation, ecosystem, and residents are safe. If we plan on the construction of the park, we shall increase the feasibility of the water spread area to 100 percent," said the official.

In July 2022, the marshland was declared as a Ramsar site, a wetland of international importance, as convened by UNESCO in 1971.

Situated about 20 kilometres from south Chennai, the Pallikarai marshland is the only natural marshland in the city.

The marshland is also an aquatic buffer for the flood-prone

areas of Chengalpattu and Chennai.

"Once the eco-park is constructed, it will lead to many visitors. This will risk the local community, the wildlife and the ecosystems. Travelers, needless to mention will carry pathogens along with them to the ecologically sensitive areas, which will harm the eco-system we have preserved and protected for so long," said Akhil Anup, a final-year medical student residing near the park. This, he said, will spread new infectious diseases.

On February 10, 2024, another meeting was held by Poovulagin Nanbaragal group which urged the state government to drop the proposal.

Geo Damin, an environmental activist, said, "The construction of this park is over 100 acres of the marshland. Apart from this, GCC is also planning to extend the park to almost 99 acres more, over the garbage dumping land, which covers most of the marshland. Instead, they should hand over the rest of the land to the Forest Department."

Further, he added, "Due to the park construction, approximately 25 new shops have inaugurated which leads to pollution. Apart from that, there have been no restrictions put on the visitors which will bring in litter, and lead to damage to flora and fauna."

Transport woes for commuters



ARUN MAITY

While Chennai aces on many fronts, daily commute is something residents across sections find gruelling.

Their problems ranged from being overcharged by autorickshaw drivers to long wait for buses.

Aarav Patel, a 28-year-old software engineer, avoids autos as he believes that they overcharge.

"I never see the meter on," he said. Patel said that he would consider travelling by autos if they used the meter. "There could be a queue system like in Kerala," said Naman, a 21-year-old college student, recalling his recent visit to Kozhikode, where he saw a line of autos waiting at the rail station.

He also suggested the system of shared autos could be implemented as it would reduce the cost of travel. Patel travels mainly by the metro rail, which he finds to be "accessible" and "convenient". He is looking

forward to the completion of the new phases of the metro, which would cover more areas in the city.

"Auto drivers are rude sometimes," said Karthik Subramanian, a 40-year-old marketing executive, while waiting for a train... However, lack of train schedules on the platform and long waiting times are a "problem".

"It has been more than 30 minutes," said Deepa Sundaram, 35, an elementary school teacher waiting for the train at the Kasturba Nagar station. She said she doesn't know how much longer it will take as there are no train timings boards in the station, and all she can do is wait. Sundaram ruled out autos as an option as it would be costly for daily 'back-and-forth' travel.

Subramanian and Naman avoid buses due to the suffocating atmosphere inside most of them during office hours. The former believes that the number of buses has decreased over the past few years.

Tray to table: Journey of a butter biscuit

NAINU OOMMEN

As one strolls through Maistry Street in Washermenpet, Chennai, they are welcomed by the smell of butter and the sight of close-knit houses with Arabic inscriptions adorning their facades. Bakeries and biscuit factories dot this narrow street as Royal Enfield riders wearing skullcaps struggle to traverse this route. The aroma of butter intensifies as one slowly delves into the street flanked by biscuits arranged flawlessly in front of bakeries as if they are bricks forming the foundations of Maistry Street.

About 200 metres into the street, Mohammed Noorullah sits at the counter of RRA Biscuit Factory, right beside his account books, dusted with maida and powdered sugar. The entire factory consists of two rooms on either side of the street. "The packaging unit is on the left, where our staff start working from six in the evening," says Noorullah. The room on the right side of the street has Noorullah sitting at the counter, with a blue water drum right outside a narrow corridor leading to the biscuit-making unit.

The dimly lit room has men working on either side of it and an oven at the end, like the proverbial light at the end of a tunnel. On either side of the cylindrical room, workers glistening with sweat from the oven's heat are involved in various stages of the biscuit-making process, starting from combining the ingredients. The collective garbed in banyans and lungis work in a rhythm, in sync with other machines in the factory as they stick to their specific roles.

A spiral mixer combines both dry and wet ingredients. The biscuit base contains maida, margarine, sugar, milk powder, salt and water. Other ingredients vary according to the kind of biscuits being made. "Ours is a small company; we bake around five varieties of biscuits, namely butter biscuits, sweet biscuits, ragi biscuits, egg biscuits (called cutting biscuits) and coconut biscuits, which contain coconut oil," says Noorullah. Every day, the factory churns out around 40 batches of biscuits, each batch containing more than 42 trays producing more than 10,000 biscuits combined. Each batch contains 15kg maida, 6kg margarine, and 4kg sugar, both powdered and crystallised. Biscuit crumbs are also added later to add crunch to the biscuits.

The combined mixture becomes a dough, which is later carried over to a black counter where this mountain of dough is transferred. Four people are involved in the process of rolling out the dough and cutting it into shapes. The

Every day, the factory churns out around 40 batches of biscuits, each batch containing more than 42 trays producing over 10,000 biscuits

biscuits are shaped either circular or square depending on the variety. The dough is flattened with a rolling pin into a thin sheet, which would later be cut and baked.

Mohammed Gowsin, 30, keeps his rolling pin aside as he sets to trim his biscuits according to the desired shapes. Gowsin, standing beside a table fan towering over him, uses his right hand to push



down the steel mould, almost trimming the dough completely into a square, which he collects with his left hand. After a row of squares is completed, he neatly

key for branding the biscuits with the letters "SP". Resembling a professional Pinfinger player, Bhaskaran firmly punches each dough individually precisely in the centre in one swift yet firm motion.

Bhaskaran gets through trays of dough within minutes and prepares them for the next process by arranging them on a rack, which is rolled into the oven with the help of wheels.

Just as Bhaskaran is done filling up the rack, a loud sharp buzzer rings from the oven, indicating that the previous batch is finally ready to be pulled out.

Bhaskaran carefully opens the oven, which fills up the room with buttery incense and a furnace-like breeze. The bright orange oven, a light at the end of a tunnel, slowly transforms into a highway to hell for the uncooked biscuits.

"The cooking time of biscuits varies according to their size. The smaller circular biscuits take around 13 minutes in the oven at a temperature of 200 degrees Celsius," Noorullah explains.

However, the bigger biscuits whose shapes vary between circles and squares take around 16 minutes to cook at 180 degrees Celsius," says Noorullah. The hot biscuits are later transferred from the rack and piled up yet again, where they are arranged yet again. The pile of hot butter biscuits still on the baking trays are collected by a worker sitting down on the floor, which is a luxury not accessible to several others. The biscuits are arranged in steel boxes and are later transferred to the packing area, where they are wrapped in plastic covers and sold to bakeries in the city, making someone's teatime nearly perfect.

Kitchen community



TIFFINS AND TOGETHERNESS: Volunteers packing the meals in the community kitchen inside a mosque on Moore Street, Chennai | PHOTO: MURTUZA CALICUTWALA

For Chennai’s Dawoodi Bohras, this community kitchen is what unites them and serves as a unique food model

KAVYA PRADEEP M,
NEETIKA KUMARI &
SOUNDARYA MOHAN

You can find a lot of shops owned by the Dawoodi Bohras in this area. Most of them are engaged in businesses involving hardware, electrical appliances and food,” says an Islamic religious bookseller who sits inside a small shop made of wood that smells like a page from a musty book, on the Angappa Naicken street in George Town. A hand-pulled rickshaw, carrying goods, passes by every couple of minutes, and the honking of vehicles disrupts the interaction between shopkeepers and customers. As one nears Moore Street, rows of glistening hardware shops display their wares while also signalling the presence of the Bohra community who built lives around these businesses.

Dawoodi Bohras are a religious denomination within the Islamic branch of Shia Islam. They are about one million scattered over 40 countries. They are believed to have migrated from West Asian countries such as Yemen and Iran to India in the sixteenth century. “Our ancestors came via sea to India and settled in Gujarat. They came to Chennai in the 18th century as the city was rich in the raw materials required for hardwares and electronics,” says Zoab, who is a chartered accountant. He points towards a framed picture on the wall and says, “This is our current leader Syedna Mufaddal Saifuddin, he guides us.” The fifty-third leader of the Dawoodi Bohra community carries forward the Bohra legacy of the Al-dai Al-mutlaq who guides the community the world over. It was the Al-dai Al-

mutlaq’s vision to uplift marginalised members of the community that resulted in the birth of a unique community kitchen scheme to ensure that even the poorest of the poor do not go hungry. Zoab provides context by explaining how as settlers, not everyone from the community was of the same socio-economic standing. There were people from the community who could not afford to have all three meals a day. Murtaza, who runs a grocery shop in Mannady Street, says, “We believe in brotherhood and equality. We didn’t want our people to go hungry and so we came up with the idea of a community kitchen, which is known as the Faiz ul Mawaid al Burhanniya (FMB).”

The community kitchen is

family.”

This community kitchen prepares both lunch and dinner. The preparation in the kitchen starts as early as four in the morning. By 10 in the morning, lunch reaches every family of the Bohra community. The meal comprises not only regular meals but also their traditional dishes such as dal chawal palida, malida, lacchka and kalamro.

Aside from ensuring its members’ food security, this initiative also takes the load of food-making off women, who usually carry out this role, freeing them up to pursue entrepreneurial and professional ventures. “We don’t have to worry about cooking much as we get our food from the community kitchen. We utilise this time to engage ourselves in

burqas and abayas,” says Khadija Boradawala.

The burqas worn by women, generally known as ridas, are significant to their faith. They usually feature pastel colours that are embroidered with vibrant patterns, which serve as a vivid contrast to more mellow variations of the garment of other Muslim communities.

“The food is delivered everyday of the week except Sunday. On Sunday, we either cook for ourselves or dine out with our family,” says Fathema. She also said that even when Cyclone Michaung hit the Chennai coast in December 2023, they continued to receive the food. She adds, “Even during the Covid pandemic, the community managed food for everybody.”

“Rotis in the kitchen are made by women only. We get into the kitchen at four in the morning,” says Fathema. While Bohra men are the head of the community kitchen, the cooks do not necessarily belong to the Bohra community. “Except for rotis and cakes, dishes are prepared by non-Bohra Muslim men,” says Huzesa.

One would not be wrong in drawing parallels between the premise of the community kitchen and the modus operandi of Mumbai’s iconic dabbawalas. Just as the dabbawalas deliver food to the workplace in their wooden carts, the food provided by the FMB is delivered to all the houses in the community using its own vehicles, with the parcels packed by community members who volunteer their services through a Whatsapp group. The only time there is a pause in activity is for two weeks in February, when the community kitchen remains closed for maintenance.

This initiative also takes the load of food-making off women, who usually carry out this role

located inside a mosque that is administered by the community. There are four mosques for Dawoodi Bohras in Chennai, situated at Angappa Naicken Street, Moore Street, Burhani Towers and Madhavaram, and all of these have community kitchens. “There are around 1,800 Bohra families in Chennai and they are largely spread across three parts - namely Royapuram, Madhavaram and Parrys Corner. In Parrys Corner alone, there are 1150 families,” says Huzesa Miyajiwal, who is the procurement head of the community kitchen. He adds that, “The food is supplied to all the families as per the members in the

business,” says Fathema, who runs a tailoring business from her house.

A large number of women from the Bohra community are engaged in businesses ranging from confectioneries to baking, stitching and making the white and gold Bohra skull caps that have come to be synonymous with male members of the community. While these women usually manage their businesses from home, some have offices nearby.

“The main motive behind the community kitchen is to let us be independent. Since we don’t have to cook, we are left with ample time to follow our passion. I love doing embroidery and designing

Vendors in woe at Loop Road Market

ABHIRUP SENGUPTA

It is our right to be here; some of us have been here for decades,” said Kamala M, a 58-year-old woman fish seller on Marina Loop Road. The stretch of road along the Marina beach has seen many protests over the last five years over the fish vendors’ eviction.

The protests stem from a Madras High Court order directing the Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC) to remove fish stalls along the Marina Loop Road in 2018, citing traffic disruptions during peak hours. Fishermen and vendors, who have been operating in this area for decades, perceive the order as threatening their livelihood, asserting their historical rights over the loop road.

The GCC, responding to the court order, plans to shift the fish market to a new complex, emphasizing the need for formalities, approvals, and compliance with environmental regulations, requiring a six-week timeframe. Legal complexities arose as vendors expressed concerns about the lack of uniform communication and potential economic challenges posed by the relocation, prompting legal interventions such as PILs and requests for increased allowances during fishing bans.

Kamala expressed the sentiments shared by many of her fellow vendors. She claimed, “We just received a verbal notice from a few GCC officials claiming that the new fish market will be ready soon, and we can expect to move there in 2-3 months.”

According to Kamala, while some vendors have been allocated spaces in the soon-to-be-launched marketplace, others remain in the dark, awaiting official communication regarding the shifting process.

Meanwhile, Arulazhahi Sivaraman, a 35-year-old male fish seller, said, “In the last few months following the protest, the reluctance to shift has reduced for many. However, some of us are concerned that we will notice a dip in our sales.” As per Sivaraman, the visibility of fish stalls along the roadside entices commuters to make impromptu purchases in the current setup. He fears that the shift to a structured market environment may lead to a decline in spontaneous sales.



As per GCC’s tweets, 70 per cent of the work on the new complex has been completed | PHOTO: ABHIRUP SENGUPTA

Reflecting on potential competition in the new complex, Arulazhahi added, “Here, as of now, most of these stalls are placed apart. In the new complex, the proximity would be tighter, which may cause additional competition amongst vendors who sell the same type of fish.”

Another fish vendor Ezhumalai said, “Though few of us are looking forward to the facilities promised in the new fish market complex, it will be significantly more inconvenient for us vendors.”

Ezhumalai detailed the current

“

It is our right to be here. Some of us have been here for decades

- Kamala M

”

convenience of procuring fish directly from fishermen near the shore, emphasising the potential added steps and inconvenience in carrying the fish regularly from the beach to the new complex once the vendors shift. He further stated that the GCC should have introduced the same facility they did in Kasimedu, where the fish vendors have been given stalls on the beach.

Asked about the aforementioned concern,

Additional Advocate General S R Rajagopal said that purchasing smart carts for licensed vendors on the Marina and fixing fair rent for the carts would help them move to the new complex. Rajagopal, who had been associated with the suo motu PIL since 2018, said that as part of the solution, the GCC has worked to increase parking regulations by having more police personnel patrol the area during peak traffic hours.

Contrastingly, most fish vendors in the area are still sceptical of these promises following the Madras HC and GCC’s handling of the protests, according to Kanimozhi, a 40-year-old female fish seller with over 25 years of experience at Loop Road. “In the last five years, the Madras High Court has passed many temporary orders shutting us down. We had protested for three months last year, only after which they put a stay on that order,” she recounted.

However, Kanimozhi and many others find solace in the construction progress of the new fish market complex. “Now, many of us are impressed by the construction and the progress made,” she added, hinting at a cautious hope for a better future.

Selvamani said, “We have received no legal order to shut down our shops.” He attributed this to the strict parking norms enforced around his establishment. “It is tough to navigate through traffic here sometimes in the morning and afternoon, as commuters frequently stop and park haphazardly whilst buying fish from the vendors,” he explained.

The current complex was built at a cost of Rs. 11 crores and can accommodate 366 stalls.

Srijit Mukherjee: The Nolan of Bengali cinema

SAPTAK
MUKHERJEE

The history of Bengali cinema can be traced back to filmmaker Hiralal Sen, who made what’s widely considered to be India’s first full-length feature film, *Alibaba and Forty Thieves*, in 1903, eight years before *Raja Harishchandra* by Dada Saheb Phalke. It then entered the era dominated by the likes of Bimal Roy, Ritwik Ghatak and Satyajit Ray, each unique in his own way. We are now in the era of Srijit Mukherjee.

Srijit Mukherjee changed the direction of Bengali cinema, which finally gained someone who understood what the people of Bengal wanted to see. He is the first person to take the Bengali film industry to a Hollywood level.

Srijit’s first film was *Autograph*, with superstar Prosenjit Chatterjee. For this film Srijit got a National Award. From here, Srijit started making several masterpieces of Bengali cinema.

What makes his films engaging is the amount of research he puts in before executing a film. For example,



his crime thriller *Baishhe Srabon* (2011) changed the thought pattern of Bengali cinema.

Srijit showed how small budget can be used to make a good adventure film. Three of his films are based on the adventure stories by Sunil Gangopadhyay. The first film, *Mishawr Rawhoshyo* (2011), was shot in Egypt. The second film, *Yeti Abhiyan* (2017), was shot in Nepal and Switzerland to portray mountain adventure, and the third, *Kakababur Prottyaborton* (2022), was set in the African jungle.

Srijit has always gone for realism, yet he experiments with new techniques.

In Chennai, women take the wheel forward

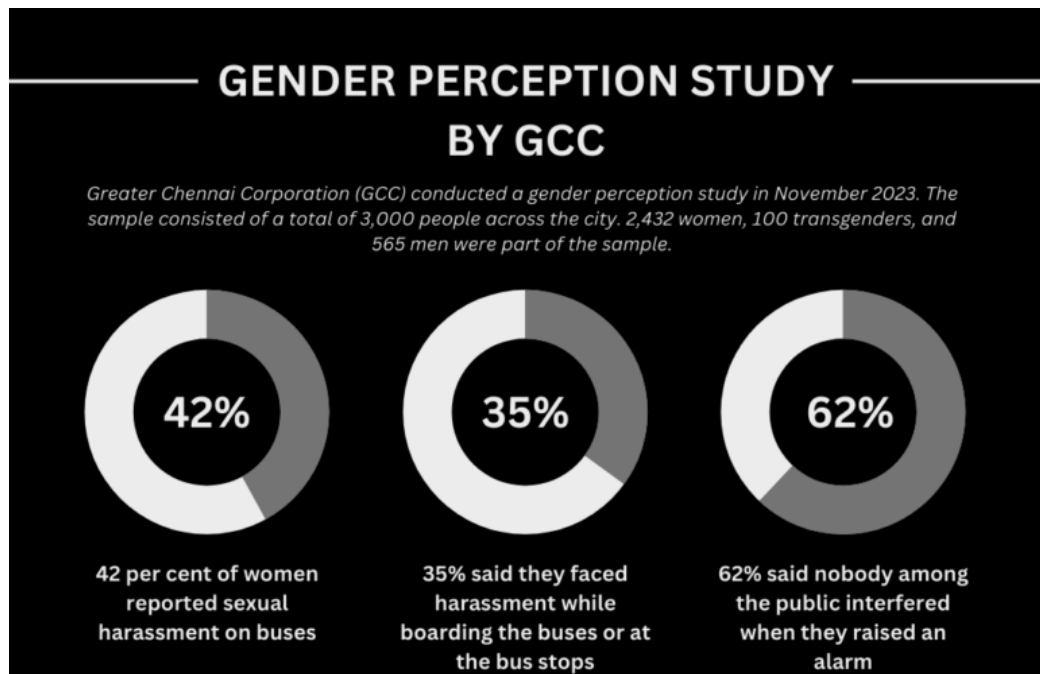
NEHA ARAVIND &
RAGINI DE

At the Guindy metro station, Lakshmi Priya stands dressed in white and black court attire, clutching her bag and looking over her shoulder every few minutes. “If I had taken the bus today, I am 100 per cent sure, I would have faced some form of harassment,” says the 26-year-old High Court advocate. On boarding the female metro coach, her expression visibly relaxes. She puts in her earphones, places her bag on the floor and starts watching videos on her phone.

“If the metro didn’t have a ladies’ coach, I wouldn’t even be taking it,” adds Priya. Addressing these concerns, the Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC) conducted a gender perception study in November 2023. Out of the 3,000 surveyed (2,432 women, 100 transgenders, and 565 men), 42% per cent of women reported sexual harassment on buses, with 35% per cent facing issues while boarding or at stops.

Seema Atri, 32, gets down from a crowded bus at a Saidapet stop carrying her office bag. While hurriedly booking an auto from the stop to her office, she says with a shrug, “All Uber and Ola drivers ask people to pay extra nowadays. And if a woman is driving, I honestly don’t mind paying extra. There is no price for safety.”

The Pink Bike initiative by Rapido, a ride-booking app, currently employs 1,210 women bike riders or “captains” across the



city with 100 active ones. “We can’t make women work every day since they might have family commitments, so we allow them flexibility in their working hours,” says Selvarajan, the head of the Pink Bike department at Rapido.

Maria Monica, an MBA graduate who could not go back to the workplace after her maternity break, has recently signed up to be a Rapido bike captain. She says that she can log in to the rider app when she finds time and easily make Rs 300 a day. “Even though I have my husband supporting me financially, this is a way to make my own money, even if it is just Rs 50,” she adds.

Selvarajan further explained that the initiative, exclusively for

women, ensures safety by not allowing men to book, and any attempts are met with the right of cancellation by the female captain without penalty fees.

At noon, students of the M.O.P Vaishnav College for Women in Nungambakkam throng a narrow lane outside the institution. While many wait for autos, Gopika Rajesh, a final year B.com student is busy trying to book a pink bike. She carries a helmet with her every day because she always takes Uber and Rapido bike taxis. After all, they are cheaper. Besides, she used to fear for her safety with male captains. But since the launch of the pink bike in September last year, she has never felt safer and always books

one to go to her house in Mylapore. “Plus I get to have nice conversations with them without worry,” she adds.

According to the Chennai Gender and Policy Lab report by GCC, women in the city predominantly travel for work (40%), purchasing household needs (36%), education (20%), and social/recreational reasons (16-17%). The most commonly used modes of transportation include buses, two-wheelers, and autos. On an average, women travel 5.8 km to work and 3.6 km to educational institutions daily.

The women-run Trust Enayum Kaikal operates a similar initiative where 250 women members, primarily auto drivers, pool

money. Raji, 52, is the head of the Trust and has 25 years of auto-driving experience. The majority of the members are single mothers or widows, finding joy in the job’s flexibility, and earning an average of Rs 25,000 a month. Enayum Kaikal also serves as a support group, providing financial assistance during crises. She said she felt safe with increased police patrols. Since working with Uber, she feels secure even with male passengers. Women are comfortable with drivers of their own gender and this adds to her job satisfaction, empowering her and allowing her to fend for her two college-going children.

Malini, an auto driver with a decade of experience, operates exclusively from 7 pm to 1 am in the Koyambedu bus stop area. Catering to women who feel safer with a female driver during late-night hours, Malini has earned the trust of many. She mentions that passengers have expressed relief in avoiding potential encounters with drunk male drivers. Pleased with the service, these women frequently book her auto, appreciative of the comfort and safety she provides. Malini finds her job fulfilling not only in terms of service but also in offering a sense of security to her passengers, often receiving tips without asking for extra money.

These endeavours not only provide a means of employment for women but also ensure a secure and comfortable travel experience for their fellow women.

Initiatives like the Pink Bike exemplifies empowerment.

More mosques in line after Gyanvapi

After Ayodhya and Varanasi, Hindu nationalist outfits pursue their claims and demand temples in Kashi (Varanasi) and Mathura

RAJDEEP SAHA

In the Mahabharata, Lord Krishna asked for five villages. We are asking for just three,” said Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath in the Assembly recently.

Adityanath mentioned Kashi and Mathura, two cities where right-wing groups are trying to establish temples on mosque sites. The Varanasi district court has now allowed prayers in ‘Vyas Ka Tehkhana’ (sealed basement) of the Gyanvapi mosque complex in Varnasi. The Gyanvapi mosque was purportedly built by Aurangzeb in the 16th century allegedly after demolishing part of a Hindu temple.

The Sri Ram Janambhoomi Trust treasurer Govind Dev Giri Maharaj has urged the Muslim side to give up the Gyanvapi and Mathura mosques that will “help in building brotherhood”.

However, recent developments suggest that the Hindu right-wing outfits aren’t going to merely stop at just three. Parallels can be drawn with a number of existing mosques that have been built allegedly over temples.

In May 2022, the Sanskriti Bachao Manch, a Hindu outfit, claimed that a Shiva temple existed on the land where the Jama Masjid in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, currently stands. It asked the state government to carry out an archaeological survey, as in the case of the Gyanvapi mosque.

Recently, representatives of the Sanskriti Bachao Manch met Vishnu Shankar Jain, the lawyer fighting the Gyanvapi case.



OMINIOUS PORTENT: The repercussions of the Gyanvapi issue are more than what meets the eye | PHOTO: PAUL SIMPSON / FLICKR

Amidst all this, Maharashtra Navnirman Sena general secretary Ajay Shinde reiterated his stance that two 13th-century dargahs were built on a land parcel belonging to the Punyeshwar temple in Pune.

Shinde made this claim, citing the Gyanvapi example. He also referred to a report by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), which shows evidence of a temple on that spot. Towards the end of 2022, Hindu right-wing groups such as the Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad moving the Karnataka High Court, seeking permission to pray at the Jamia Masjid at Srirangapatna in Mandya district. They claimed that a Hanuman temple existed there before the then ruler Tipu Sultan razed it down in the 18th century.

A yatra in December of the same year, organised by the Hindu Jagarana Vedike, aimed to bolster efforts to reconstruct a Hanuman temple on the mosque site.

Such attempts by Hindu right-wing groups reveal a clever use of both the ASI and the letter of the law, keeping the Gyanvapi mosque case as the precedent, to restore such temples, which could further alienate the minority community and heighten their sense of insecurity in this religiously surcharged atmosphere. Realisation of the dream of building a Ram temple on the janmabhoomi and the court order allowing prayers for Hindus in a section of the Gyanvapi mosque have led to a collective feeling of triumph among many Hindus in the country.

Shrewd politicians know this can be addictive and will be quick enough to exploit such sentiments and to convert them into votes.

Consecration: govt role worrisome

PRITHIVISHAA CHANDRASEKARAN

The Union government’s active involvement in the pran-pratishtha of the Ram temple in Ayodhya has ignited debates on the secular identity of India. The construction of the Ram temple has been a longstanding religious and cultural aspiration for many a Hindu.

The historical roots of the Ram Janmabhumi dispute, dating back 500 years, add complexity to the ongoing discourse. Critics question the extent to which historical wrongs can be corrected, considering the offenders are long gone, and today’s Indian Muslims are not descendants of those involved. Is the construction of the Ram temple an effort to erase physical structures, or is it a symbolic attempt to overcome historical shame and humiliation?

The government’s involvement in the architectural overwriting of religious sites also raises concerns about potential consequences across the country. A brief historical overview of the Ram Janmabhumi dispute underscores the complexity of such matters and the delicate balance required to address deeply rooted religious sentiments.

The appropriation of religious events by the right-wing government is seen as a reflection of its majoritarian agenda. This can only aggravate insecurity among minority communities and challenge the secular provisions enshrined in the Constitution that is meant to protect the rights of all citizens, regardless of their religious and cultural affiliations.

Critics argue that the government’s role in promoting a religious event calls into question democratic principles and the



The appropriation of religious events by the government reflects its majoritarian agenda | PHOTO: INDIA.COM

legitimacy of institutions nurtured over the past 70 years. Some worry that such actions may delegitimise institutions responsible for upholding the nation’s secular fabric. The realisation of the dream to build the Ram temple has undoubtedly gains. Says political commentator Rajesh Verma: “Religious sentiments have the potential to be exploited for political purposes. Politicians must read carefully and uphold the principles of a secular democracy.”

Addressing historical wrongs, promoting inter-community dialogue, and fostering inclusive policies that respect the nation’s diversity can be steps in the right direction. Balancing religious sentiments with the principles of a secular state is essential for maintaining social cohesion and upholding democratic values.

The pran-pratishtha of the Ram temple serves as a reminder of the broader challenges India faces in reconciling its diverse religious and cultural heritage with the principles of a secular and democratic nation.

The ongoing discourse highlights the need for a nuanced and inclusive approach to ensure the continued harmony and unity of the nation.

Fostering mutual understanding and respecting diverse perspectives become imperative for nurturing a harmonious and inclusive society.

The Union government’s promotion of a religious event may delegitimise institutions responsible for upholding the nation’s secular fabric

THE HEAT IS ON



SHORTLIVED FRAGRANCE: As summer temperatures soar in Chennai, it’s a race against time for this flower seller at Theagaraya Nagar to sell her strings, as most flowers wilt by dusk | PHOTO: RIA WADIKAR



PROFHEATEERING: Come summer, Balasubramaniam, a 24-year-old autorickshaw driver, takes on a new avatar. Finding it more lucrative during the season, he sets up an ice apple business. Business is brisk, yet there’s always time to check his notifications | PHOTO RUPESH NAIR

Sandeshkali shadow may fall on poll in West Bengal

YOHAAN VARGHESE

With the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) taking custody of Trinamool Congress (TMC) leader Sheikh Shahjahan on the orders of the Calcutta High Court to investigate the attack on Enforcement Directorate (ED) officials, the Sandeshkhali case appears to be going in the right direction.

Before giving the custody, the West Bengal CID sent him to SSKM hospital for a medical check-up. After he returned to Bhabani Bhawan, the police headquarters, the CBI took custody of Shahjahan.

It was only after the attack on the ED officials who came to search Shahjahan’s premises on January 5 in a ration distribution scam that horror stories of rape, assault and land grabbing by him and his two accomplices Shiba Hazra and Uttam Sardar began emerging. Uttam Sardar and Shiba Hazra were later arrested with added charges of gang rape and attempted murder.

The CBI filed three FIRs on Tuesday – on the attack on ED officials at Shahjahan’s residence, the attack on ED officials in North 24 Parganas district and a third attack on the ED team at TMC leader Shankar Adhya’s residence.

Shahjahan had been on the run until he was arrested on February 29. It was only after the police action against Shahjahan and his henchmen that the beleaguered residents of Sandeshkhali, a village in North 24 Parganas, West Bengal, summoned the courage to protest.

Women from the village expressed their outrage at the reign of terror unleashed by Shahjahan and his cronies for over a decade. They even burnt Hazra’s poultry farm and other properties. The villagers freed a park controlled by Shahjahan’s cronies.

The end of the month brought more protests, with BJP leaders taking digs at the TMC. West Bengal DGP Rajeev Kumar has assured strict action against those found guilty in Sandeshkhali. But the villagers are apprehensive, such is the clout and muscle power the culprits wield.

They fear that Shahjahan and his henchmen will wreak vengeance on them once they manage to extricate themselves. Opposition parties see the Sandeshkhali case as a malaise that is pervasive across the state. With the General Elections round the corner, Prime Minister Narendra Modi held rallies in Barasat, where he made digs at TMC and its Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee after the incident at Sandeshkhali. “Whatever happened in Sandeshkhali is a matter of shame,” said Modi.

“The TMC government is trying to protect the person responsible for this. However,



Sandeshkhali women are pouring out their outrage at the reign of terror unleashed by Sheikh Shahjahan and his associates | PHOTO: PIXABAY

they have received a setback from the High Court as well as the Supreme Court. The storm of Sandeshkhali will reach every part of West Bengal.”

The TMC has a history of leaders found guilty of scams. Partha Chatterjee was involved in the education and recruitment scam, Anubrata Mandal, Mamta Banerjee’s close confidant, was acquitted in the cattle smuggling scam, Abhishek Banerjee was accused in the coal and sand mafia scam, and more. The Sandeshkhali issue was brought to light only because of another scam that was being investigated—the ration scam.

With so many corruptions linked to TMC leaders, the opposition is bracing to leverage it to talk down the TMC government and acquire more favour among the voters across the state.

Opposition parties see the Sandeshkhali issue as a malaise that is pervasive across West Bengal

Navalny demise rattles Russia’s Opposition

GHAZAL CHENGAPPA

The death of Alexei Navalny, Russian political prisoner and anti-corruption activist, in a penal colony has left a void in the pro-democracy movement in the country.

Navalny’s journey into activism began as a lawyer, where he gained recognition for exposing corruption within Russian businesses and government. His anti-corruption blog and investigative efforts earned him a significant following, turning him into a symbol of opposition against the establishment.

The confirmation of Alexei Navalny’s death by his political allies marked a devastating blow to the pro-democracy movement in Russia. Soon after his widow, Lyudmila Navalnaya, received official notification of his death, hundreds of mourners were detained across the country. Kremlin’s actions indicate an attempt to prevent Navalny’s death from evolving into a political event, with detentions occurring in various cities, including Moscow.

The question now arises whether the opposition can regroup under Lyudmila. Thedetentions of mourners suggest the Kremlin’s concern about the potential for a resurgence of the opposition. Lyudmila, once behind the scenes, now steps into a more prominent role, vowing to continue her husband’s cause and rallying Russians to join her.

The opposition faces challenges, with Navalny’s political movement and foundation being declared extremist organisations and barred from operating in Russia. However, Lyudmila’s combination of intelligence, determination, and star power may resonate with a disheartened opposition, offering a chance for unity. The circumstances



Pro-democracy activist Alexei Navalny | PHOTO: WIKI-MEDIA COMMONS

surrounding Navalny’s death are suspicious. Lyudmila has accused President Vladimir Putin of being responsible for her husband’s death. International condemnation and scepticism about the official investigation further intensify concerns about the state’s involvement. Navalny’s death adds fuel to the global debate on demonising Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin’s attempts to downplay Navalny’s significance and portray his widow as a tool of Western intelligence agencies highlight the ongoing information war.

Navalny’s death has profound implications for Russia’s political landscape. International reactions to Navalny’s death may influence the country’s direction. Lyudmila’s emergence as a prominent figure introduces a new dynamic.

Balancing Russia’s historical context, geopolitical complexities, and the opposition’s resilience will shape the nation’s path in the aftermath of Navalny’s death. The opposition’s ability to regroup, Against the state, global perceptions of Putin, and the evolving role of Lyudmila are critical factors which shape the post-Navalny era in Russia. The world is closely watching the nation that navigates through this challenging period ahead.

Corporate tax, personal IT seesaw

A record change in tax collection under Modi

ZAID NAZIR WANI

When Narendra Modi took office as Prime Minister in 2014, Corporate Tax (CT) stood at 61 per cent of the total direct tax collection, whereas Personal income Tax (PIT) stood at 38 per cent.

Today, when the Narendra Modi-led BJP goes to the poll in April-May seeking a third term, CT share stands at 49.6 per cent, with PIT's share being 50 per cent.

So, during his tenure, the share of Personal Income Tax has gone up by 12 per cent, while the share of Corporate tax has decreased by

almost the same percentage.

When Manmohan Singh took office as Prime Minister in 2004, the share of PIT stood at 37 per cent and the share of CT stood at 62 per cent.

When he exited office in 2014, the share of PIT stood at 38 per cent and CT's share was 62 per cent. Comparing the two governments, the Manmohan Singh led UPA had consistently kept high rates of CT share and lower rates of PIT share.

The Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) defines Personal Income Tax as the taxes levied on the net income and capital gains of individuals.

Corporate Tax in India is

defined by the CBDT as the tax levied on the profits earned by companies operating within the country.

The difference in the share of direct and indirect tax in total tax collection has also narrowed down. Currently, the latest FY 22-23 figures show a higher proportion of direct tax share (54 per cent) than indirect tax (46 per cent).

Generally, a higher share of direct tax is considered a good sign for the economy as it signifies a steady source of income for the government.

Additionally, direct tax is usually paid by the wealthier section of the population in India

West suspends 76% of UNRWA'S funds

Aid withdrawal by major west donors' began way back in 2021

ARCHAN KUNDU

On January 28, many major donors of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) such as the US, Germany, and the UK suspended their funds for the UN organisation to aid Palestinians amidst Israel's bombing of Gaza.

The decision came after Israel claimed that 12 UNRWA staff members working on the ground in Gaza were sighted helping Hamas militants.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), soon after the conflict, released a press report stating that 80 per cent of the population in Gaza depends on foreign aid.

A total of 17 countries declined their donations to UNRWA, alongside the European Union, out of which eight were in the top 10 of UNRWA donor rank list of 2022.

Chart 1 shows the share of countries who suspended their donations in the total UNRWA budget pledged for 2023. The remaining budget is shown in orange. The suspended donations account for 76 per cent of the total 2023 pledged budget.

Another press release in 2023 on unemployment in Palestine by the UN stated that the donor aid share to Palestinian GDP fell from 27 per cent in 2008 to 1.8 per cent in 2021.

A decline in the foreign aid to Palestine can be seen between 2021 and 2023 as well in Chart 2. The decrease is caused by a large yearly decrease in the aid by the countries who recently suspended their donations to UNRWA.

Meanwhile, the drop in donations by the other nations was at a much slower rate with very little change as a whole.

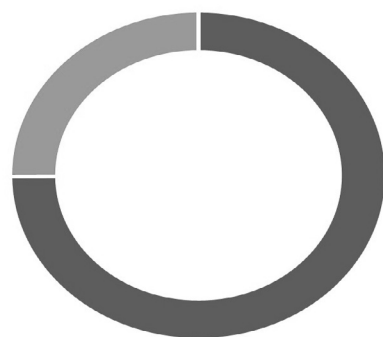
In September 2023, UNRWA released a flash appeal, stating their funding requirements to deal with the emergency that summed up to \$481million.

Chart 3, shows the distribution of the total sum required between Gaza, West Bank, and the Palestinian Headquarters.

Out of the total, 94 per cent was allotted to deal with the genocide in Gaza by itself.

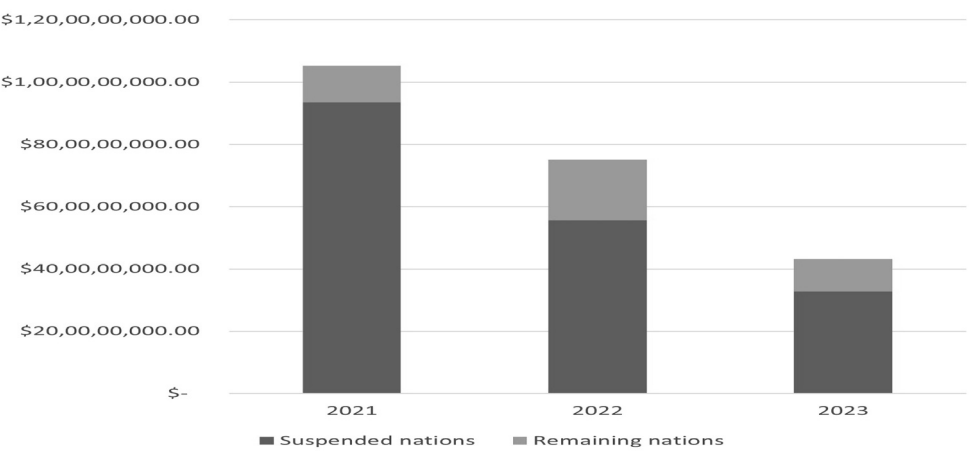
UNRWA said that they are concerned about the suspension of funding by large donors who form the major part of aid to Gaza.

Chart 1:Share of suspending nation in the latest budget



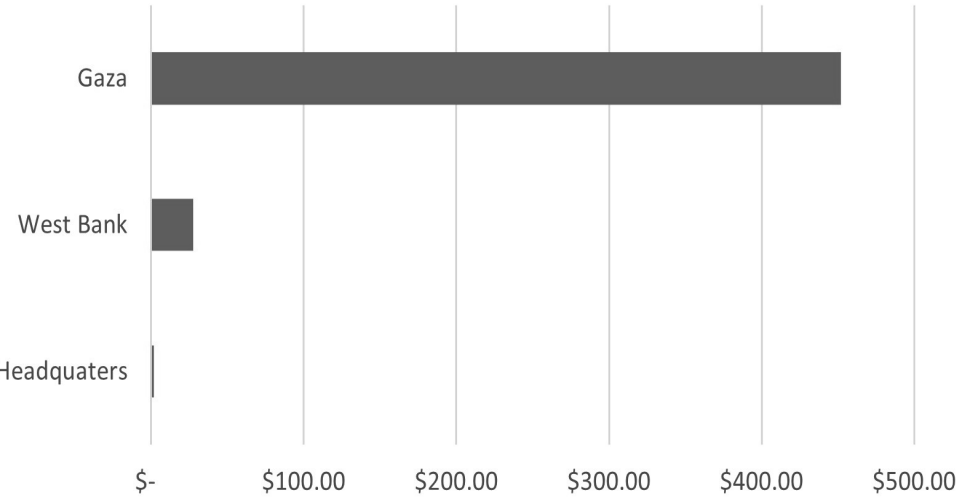
■ Suspended pledge ■ Remaining pledge

Chart 2: Falling trend in pledge to UNRWA between 2021 and 2023



■ Suspended nations ■ Remaining nations

Chart 3: Distribution of latest fund requirements by UNRWA



\$- \$100.00 \$200.00 \$300.00 \$400.00 \$500.00

Israel-Palestine: A look at the street versus state narratives

MAHATHI KATTA & ROHITH SONY

The representative reality is running away with the ball and people in Gaza continue to die," said Sashi Kumar, Chairman, The Asian College of Journalism and the Media Development Foundation, at a colloquium titled Palestine: Endless Occupation, Permanent Crisis, hosted by the Asian College of Journalism, Chennai, on January 14, 2024.

The globally pervading news from three global news agencies; the firing of cartoonists, journalists, and actors with allegations of antisemitic imagery; and invalid justifications in the Palestine-Israel conflict represent how the stance and stories of the Palestinians are not encouraged.

The ongoing Israel-Hamas war that flared up on October 7, 2023, between Hamas and Israel is not new. According to Prof. Ilan Pappé, College of Social Sciences and Director of the University's European Centre for Palestine Studies, and a panellist, the Zionist movement which erupted in Europe during the late 1800s, believed that Palestine would allow for Jewish nationalism to flourish.

During World War I, Britain pledged to establish "a national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine under the Balfour Declaration. The British troops later took control of the Palestinian territory from the



PHOTO CREDIT: ACJ

Ottoman Empire, towards the end of 1917.

This was approved, at least in theory, after the UN adopted Resolution 181, in 1947, calling for the partition of historic Palestine with 55 per cent of the land for the Jews and 45 per cent of the land for the Arabs, while Jerusalem remained an international city.

According to a study published by the Middle East Research and Information Project, Palestinians

believe that there is no need to forfeit their land, to compensate for Europe's wrongs to Jews.

Media bias in reportage is not unusual. Drawing from Walter Witman's work, N. Ram, director of The Hindu Publishing Group and former Editor-in-Chief of The Hindu and Frontline and a part of the panel discussion on the role of the media in building the narrative in Israel's war on Gaza, addressed how The New York Times reportage on the Russian

Revolution, was neither unbiased nor accurate. He argued that this was led by the needs of men who led major Western media. "It was reported more than 91 times that the Bolshevik revolution was on the verge of collapse, much before the actual collapse," said Ram. According to a journal article by The Russian Review in 1943, the representatives of the conservative press in America were not admitted to Russia.

They had to report from the

neighbouring Baltic states, making their reports 'prejudiced and unreliable'.

Anjali Kamat, an investigative journalist, also a part of the panel, provided an anecdote.

Kamat, working as a teacher in Jordan in 2000, was watching a news channel, airing scenes from the Second Intifada, happening in Palestine then. "The mayor cut to a French television station in Gaza," said Kamat. "A 12-year-old boy is cowering against the wall. His father, crouching over, trying to shield the child from the rain of blows. They looked terrified. The boy was shot and died in his father's arms."

This was broadcast on channels across the world. While the tragic narrative remained the same across all channels for an hour, this suddenly changed and tied the father and son to a terrorist group. Major channels such as the BBC and CNN, asked its viewers not to trust the visuals and the Palestinian narrative. Kamat remarked that this was an early lesson for her on how media bias works.

According to a report by the Swiss Policy Research Group, 2019, there are three global agencies: Associated Press (AP), Agence France-Presse (AFP), and Reuters. AP and AFP have almost 4,000 journalists and Reuters has 3,000 journalists.

These agencies are in tandem with global media, accounting for more than 80 per cent of the original news.

"Their view is the worldview percolating into the whole media ecosphere," said Kumar.

Kumar called it the "top-down structure of percolation". International news from these agencies percolates to the national media such as The New York Times, The Guardian, DPA of Germany and PTI of India. There have been increasing cutdowns on the few existing foreign correspondents. "In 2009, Tom Curley, who served as the president of AP, exposed the fact to the public that these three agencies employ more than 27,000 PR specialists, who circulate targeted news," Kumar

said, "High-ranking US officials threatened Curley that they would ruin his agency if they dared to go against the narrative they wanted."

The Guardian fired its long-time editorial cartoonist Steve Bell after refusing to run a caricature of Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu that drew on antisemitic imagery. Kumar referenced the incident and said, "The Guardian, two weeks after firing Bell, published an article about how the Indian government is critical about criticism from cartoonists and standup comedians, showing the double standards".

In another instance, editor-in-chief Michael Eisen of eLife lost his job after retweeting The Onion's satirical post that linked to an article titled "Dying Gazans Criticized for Not Using Last Words to Condemn Hamas."

Hollywood, considered liberal, removed Melissa Barrera from the cast of the upcoming Scream sequel after she posted a message on Instagram demanding world leaders to call a ceasefire in Gaza and Israel, in October, according to The Hindu.

Apart from independent media, social media has become the hub for information about conflict. "Usually we criticise social media, for disinformation and misinformation, but you cannot shut down what comes on X, and Al Jazeera," said Ram. "This is the rare moment when social media can be appreciated for bringing out facts."

The representative reality is running away with the ball and people in Gaza continue to die

-Sashi Kumar, Chairperson, ACJ

Gender gaps in the parks of Chennai

Time, poverty and cultural barriers leave no room to unwind

BIJEESHA BUDHATHOKI

For 24 years now, Shanmugam has performed his daily ritual of visiting the Indiranagar Park in Adyar, Chennai. The 54-year-old builder jogs for about an hour at 7am, he says. “I do it for a healthy lifestyle.”

Back home, his wife Vijayalakshmi performs a morning puja and cooks breakfast for their family of five — she’s a homemaker facilitating Shanmugam’s commitment to a healthy lifestyle. The day in his house starts when she rises at 5:30am. In 24 years, his wife has never joined him on his morning walk, nor has he ever asked her to. He says, “It is not possible for her. There is no time to walk,” he explains. “There are certain formalities women adhere to in our culture, you know?”

A similar routine unfolds in the home of his jogging partner, 60-year-old Dinakaran, echoing the deep-rooted influence of patriarchal structures on women’s participation in public recreational spaces.

Rajan, a 45-year-old IT company administrator from Tharamani, walks in the park in Kasturbanagar all morning, while his wife, Sunitha, handles the demands of breakfast and getting their two daughters ready for school.

Mahalakshmi, a 30-year-old mother, frequents a newly opened park to jog every morning with her husband and one-and-a-half-year-old child. She says, “I see very few women here. Even, I started coming here to walk because my husband pushed me to.” She says she had no time to herself, especially after the birth of her child. “I was saying I can’t leave my baby and go out,” she recalls. “But my husband said he will take our kid along and play with him.”

Her husband, Anand, who has been encouraging her to have time for herself by sharing their household chores, believes most women have to multitask — raising children, performing domestic duties and holding down jobs — which leaves no time to visit parks to unwind.

He says, “Basically this is because of the centuries-old



PHOTO: REDDIT/rmk_1808

patriarchy that runs through our entire nation. This kind of wrong assumption that women should be confined to household work and not go out has led to this.”

Meera Sundararajan, team lead at the Gender and Policy Lab, which recently conducted an online bilingual survey on the usage of parks in Chennai, found that in south Chennai, including Mylapore and Adyar, where there are predominantly upper middle-class families living, more people visit parks, compared to north Chennai, where women won’t go. She says, “After all, they see drunk men who are lying down in the park. They don’t go even though the need for the park is greater there as the area is very congested.”

But, Anandhi S, gender expert and a retired professor of the Madras Institute of Development Studies, says, “It is the flawed infrastructure that poses a challenge. Upper middle-class people can be drunk and pass out in their homes. They don’t need to go to parks after getting drunk. Poor people are always stereotyped as anti-social, which is absolutely wrong.”

The Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC) has shelters for women, but Venessa asserts

none of these shelters are gender-responsive. She says, “Women here drape saris, and in these shelters there is a hall and bathrooms, but a person can’t drape a sari after a bath on the wet floor. There is no space for privacy provided.”

She adds, “These are mere examples. One can also look into slum settlements. There are communities dependent on public toilets and many homeless women dependent on shelter homes, which are not at all gender-responsive.”

Anandhi adds, “Now in such cases, what becomes very clear is that many of the policies and infrastructures do not show any kind of sensitivity towards marginalised groups, who get segregated more in this idea of recreational [spaces].”

She says, “It should be a package on the whole. We need to have specific guidelines and budget provisions for this. Now there is a gender and policy lab in the GCC and it is their duty to do all that and they are taking up certain things and there is still a long way to go.”

Meera also agrees that besides societal expectations, infrastructural limitations also bar women from visiting parks. The

Gender and Policy Lab, which conducted the survey, also found that only 30 per cent women use parks in Chennai. However, Vanessa Peter, a policy researcher and development professional based in Tamil Nadu, criticised the survey as it was an online survey taken just among less than 600 respondents.

She explains, “Parks should be safe and easily visible from different areas. Too many trees can make dark spots where women and girls might not feel safe, so swings or benches can be installed there. For kids’ play areas, having seats nearby helps parents watch over them.”

She also suggests that regularly trimming trees for better lighting and adding clear boundaries, having trained security guards to act when there are cases of harassment and programs for women in parks could also go a long way in making parks an inclusive place.

The lab has given some recommendations to the park department. However, the park department of the GCC seems unaware of the recommendations. R Vijayalakshmi, superintending engineer (Parks, Playfields and CRRT) and head of the department, while asserting that parks in Chennai are accessible to all, says, “I don’t know of any design recommendations made by the lab.”

Anandhi says that society has created a different idea of recreation for women.

Saraswathy, a domestic helper from Tharamani who hops from one house to another all day to clean and cook, says, “I have no time to go park or go anywhere.” The only recreation she has is when she watches TV serials, that too while cooking. “I do household chores in my house in morning and evening and in the daytime.”

Even cooking is seen as something relaxing and recreational for women, says Anandhi.

It is the social conditioning that is instilled in us — the meaning of recreation differs among generations, classes and castes. A woman from an affluent background can buy time for herself if she hires house help. But, women from poor families can barely think of leisure time and hanging out in public parks.

Caste atrocity: no penalty in Tirupur

The accused were let out on conditional bail

JUDAH JERUSALEM

An Arunthathiyar construction worker, Muruganandan, 50, was assaulted in public by upper-caste men, Sakthivel and Muthukumar Naicker in Tirupur on December 5. The reason for the assault was that a Katta Panchayat ruling in a land dispute against Muruganandan was disobeyed. The police refused to record accurate information and additionally falsified Muruganandan’s testimony twice. However, Naicker applied for bail under the Schedule Caste/Scheduled Tribe Prevention of Atrocities Act 2015 and received it on January 6.

The case was registered under the SC/ST POA Act 2015 on December 6 last year by the Madathukulam police SI Venkatesan. The policeman said that the assault was not wholly unwarranted and should be recorded as a fight between Sakthivel Naicker, his son Muthukumar, and Muruganandan. As Naicker posted for bail following a lengthy process of remanding the accused, Muruganandan’s government-appointed lawyer notified him of the anticipatory bail scheduled for January 6.

On the appointed day, however, Muruganandan was not given the chance to justify himself and speak about the dangers of granting bail to the culprits in front of the judge. “When it came for me to speak up, my lawyer and the sub-inspector asked me to wait outside. I complied, but then my lawyer came to me and said that Sakthivel had gotten bail,” Muruganandan said.

The story has its roots in a dispute between him and his younger brother.

Muruganandan’s mother allowed him to build a house on the ancestral land in 2006. He put in the money for the construction materials and labour. However, his younger brother started living in the house that he built, saying that he would live there for a while. However, the upper hand accorded to the dominant caste of Naickers and Gounders resulted in an ultimatum that treated Muruganandan unfairly.

Muruganandan agreed — but the family moved in permanently.

The normal procedure is to take



PHOTO: INDIAN RAIL

the matter to court. When this case is handled legally, it would be lodged under the relevant laws. The illegality of the Katta panchayat eclipses the wrongdoing and the violence that erupted in Rajavoor, which is where the actual problem lies.. This is contrary to what Udumalpet Revenue Divisional



PHOTO: WANDERINGINDIAN/UNSPASH

Officer R. Jaswanth Kannan said: “The issue had been given a twist.”

The FIR lodged also did not invoke the right sections of the concerned act either. Relevant sections that pertain to the Arundathiyar not being allowed inside government temples, them not being allowed to walk with sandals in front of the upper castes’ houses, and getting off vehicles when crossing upper caste members are conveniently let off in the FIR.

“After NCSC director Ravivarma took the Arunthathiyar to the temple wearing sandals, they all came and fell at the feet of the Naickers and apologised for doing such a thing,” Muruganandan said. Untouchability is rampant in Rajavoor, with the upper castes being served tea in different cups and seated in a plastic chair, whereas the lower caste members are served tea in different cups and made to sit on the floor.

The case is lodged under Section 3 (1) r s of the act. This section of the SC/ST POA Act only deals with insulting an SC/ST person, but many other instances of caste violence and injustice went unnoticed. Sections like 3 1 g, which state clearly that members of the upper caste shall not wrongfully dispossess of land belonging to members of the SC or ST caste, nor “interfere with the enjoyment of his rights,” were never included in the FIR.

In the incident of Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi party members, police was posted outside Muruganandan’s house. The house also has CCTV coverage as of now. Despite these measures, on January 2, a badly bruised dead cat was found at his doorstep as a warning, which was also not reported in the FIR. When Muruganandan took it to the police, they dismissed it. “They said that it was some accident and that maybe some car might have hit the cat. But then I asked them, If that is the case, why is it at my doorstep?” Muruganandan said.

“I will sacrifice my life to get justice done,” he says. “My father and his father all bowed down to these people, but only if I don’t bow down will my son learn from me.”

The silent crisis in Indian edu: Rise in student suicides

RUTUJA PARDESHI

Twenty-four-year-old MTech student found dead in IIT-Delhi hostel, suspect suicide.” Headlines as such are printed almost every week. According to the National Crime Records Bureau’s (NCRB) ‘Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India’ report of 2022, the number of students who died by suicide in India rose by 70 per cent between 2011 and 2021.

Maharashtra has been the epicenter of the crisis, with a staggering suicide rate of 18.1 per 1,00,000 people, a five-year high in India. This is significantly higher than the national suicide rate for students, which is 8.0 per 1,00,000 people.

These statistics reveal that individuals between the ages of 18 and 30 are the most vulnerable demographic. According to the same report, Maharashtra accounted for 13.3 per cent of total student suicides in India, adding upto 1,764 students. However they do not provide a breakdown of the reasons.

The reasons behind these tragic incidents are multifaceted, with family problems and mental illness as major factors for the age group of 18 to 30.

Dr. Charudutta Kulkarni, a psychologist from Pune, explains, “Family conflicts and strained relationships between students



PHOTO: ERIC CHOW/BEHANCE

and their parents can create an environment of stress and hopelessness for students, adding on to the pre-existing mental health issues.”

Purvi Jain shared her older sister’s story, “Didi was a really smart student but she never wanted to study Science. My father was the one who wanted her to study medicine. She tried talking to him but it was of no use. A day before her 12th results were going to be released, she decided to put an end to it.”

Academic pressure, coupled with the fear of failure in examinations, forms another

significant catalyst for student suicides.

“No one in the family ever thought she would do something like this, but we know we are to be blamed for not helping her,” she added.

“The system is built in a way that our intelligence is only measured by the numbers on our mark sheets,” said 17-year-old Aaditya Kharote from Amravati, who is studying for the NEET exam to gain admission to a good medical college.

Rajashree Thorat, mother of 18-year-old Madhura, said, “The MCQ-based tests have taken away

the essence of meaningful education. They have destroyed the argumentative thought process, subjective and qualitative articulations, reducing its meaning to mere scores.”

Ayush Ingle, 19, a former student of Aakash Institute, Nashik, a well-known coaching centre in Maharashtra, described his experience of studying there as working in a factory. “The environment in the classes had a huge effect on my mental health. I had to start therapy because I was diagnosed with anxiety and had to deal with panic attacks,” he added.

Cashing in on the desperation of students and their parents, coaching centres now play a dominant role in the education sector.

Ingle discontinued the classes soon after starting therapy but even a and a half year later, he is still in therapy. “In IIT, it doesn’t matter how hard we work; students are judged by their castes and admission quota seats. People otherwise at least try to hide their casteism instincts but in IIT it’s all out in the open,” added Sayali Kale, a second-year IIT Bombay student from Sangli.

Year after year, the student suicide rate in Maharashtra continues to climb. The number of suicides in 2018 was 1,448, which jumped to 1,764 in 2022.

Collegium system still dominated by casteism

PRAGYNESH S

On December 15 2023, Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal informed the Lok Sabha that no recommendations have been made by the High Court collegiums for over 201 vacancies left to be filled in these courts. He also stated that out of the 123 proposals sent by the HC Collegiums, 81 were in various stages of processing with the government.

The statements bear significant importance in light of the Supreme Court pulling up the centre every now and then for ‘halting’ the appointments of judges recommended by the collegium.

In November 2022, the court asked the Centre to explain the delay in appointing judges to the higher judiciary after a petition was filed by Advocates Association Bengaluru. Just a week before the SC direction, then Law Minister Kiren Rijju had criticised the collegium system, calling it opaque and involved in “intense politics”.

What is the Collegium system

The collegium system used by the judiciary to appoint judges in Supreme Court and High Courts. For the SC, the collegium comprises the sitting CJI and four other senior most judges of the SC. The HC collegium comprises the sitting Chief Justice of the

High Court and the four seniormost judges. The recommendations of the HC collegium have to be approved by SC collegiums. Ultimately both the recommendations are sent to the president for approval via the Law Ministry.

Criticism of the Collegium

According to the State of the Judiciary report published in November 2023, out of 650 High Court judges appointed since 2018, 492 belong to the upper castes. However, the report didn’t emphasise the Supreme Court’s judges’ background and did not address the lack of diversity as a major problem. From 1971-1989, 18 judges appointed to the Supreme Court were Brahmins. The fact that only judges get to decide who would get to join them makes the processes inherently ‘undemocratic’ by the sheer definition of democracy.

The NJAC

In 2014 the government proposed the formation of the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) and came up with the NJAC Act (2014) to implement it. The NJAC would comprise the Chief Justice of India (Chairperson, ex-officio), two other senior judges of the Supreme Court, the Union Minister of Law and Justice (ex-officio) and two eminent persons to be appointed



PHOTO: TINGEY INJURY LAW FIRM/UNSPASH

jointly by the Chief Justice of India, Prime Minister of India, and Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha (the Lower House in India’s Parliament). Though none of the criticism by the Central government has specifically targeted the domination of upper caste in judiciary, calls have been made to involve the executive in the selection processes as judges alone are not direct ‘representatives’ of people.

Commuters sweat it out to reach KCBT

Mofussil bus services in Chennai shifted to new bus terminus at Kilambakkam, which was built at a cost of Rs. 393 crore

AMARNATH K

The new Kalaingar Centenary Bus Terminus (KCBT), built at Kilambakkam, Chennai, is all luxurious and capable of changing the face of the city. However, commuters from different parts of Chennai struggle to reach the bus terminus as the transportation connectivity remains insufficient.

The service was shifted from Koyambedu to Kilambakkam on January 24. The terminus, set up at a cost of Rs. 393.74 crore, is 40 km away from Chennai Central. "It is always better to have a bus terminus on the city outskirts," says Sabeen S, an urban planning research advisor with the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA). "It enables easy connectivity with places inside and outside the city in the same way."

Lizabeth Godwin, an Urban Mobility Research Associate at the Centre for Public Policy Research, Kochi, says this is political. The government had to implement the policy that had been on paper within a period. "To move the terminus to the outskirts is not a wise decision without frequent local bus connectivity," says Godwin.

Sabeen says, it will take almost a year for the metro rail to reach Kilambakkam. The government's plan to build an MRTS railway station near the bus stand will also take about a year. "Since neither a metro nor an MRTS station is situated next to the terminus, the KCBT is indeed an unwise decision," says Godwin.

The nearest MRTS railway station is 4km from the terminus. "Uber and Ola auto rickshaws take Rs 200-250 to the bus stand whereas local autorickshaws charge Rs 400-450 rupees," says Rafeek Moideen, a passenger travelling to Trichy. The opening



ABUNDANCE OF INCONVENIENCE: The airport-like driveway of the newly built KCBT Bus Terminal in Kilambakkam, Chennai | PHOTO: AMARNATH K

of the bus terminus has led to a more traffic congestion. Moideen, a resident of Adyar, says it is difficult for common people to spend on taxis to reach the terminal. "From Adyar, autorickshaws charge Rs 800-1,000." It is not possible for

“The government shifted everything to the new terminus without proper preparation.”

- A Anbalagan
Omnibus owners
assn president

common people to spend more than the bus fare to Trichy for reaching the bus stand.

"We took two buses to reach this bus stand from the cancer

centre. It takes two hours," says P Aravind, who comes to Chennai from Ariyur twice a month. "Earlier, it was easy as buses dropped us in front of the Koyambedu Bus Stand within 15 minutes." He travels to the Adyar Cancer Centre, which is 30km from Kilambakkam, for his mother's treatment.

According to N Anbuchelvan (name changed), a government bus conductor, buses go to the Tambaram bus station to take passengers. Even though Tambaram is not too far from Kilambakkam, reaching Tambaram is indeed difficult for passengers.

"It takes time to set up restaurants and other services. The government shifted everything to the new terminus without proper preparation," says A Anbalagan, president of the All Omni Bus Owners Association (AOBOA). According to him, the government didn't give enough time for services to be set up in Kilambakkam.

"Every mechanical facility for our buses is set up here in

Koyambedu and it will take a lot of time to set it up in Kilambakkam," he says. "We have set up body and engine workshops, tyre shops and washing facilities around the bus stand in Koyambedu," he continues. He said it will cost a lot to set up the new shops in Koyambedu as the work would begin from scratch, including the search for a piece of land.

He says the government did the needful in 2002. "When the government changed its location to Koyambedu in 2002, they gave enough time to relocate everything gradually." The government failed to include the association this time. "All we got was a circular on January 23, the day before the shift happened."

As a result of a complaint filed by the AOBOA, the court granted a stay on the mandate that Omni bus services should not operate from the Koyambedu terminus. However, this is just a temporary remedy, as the stay can be revoked any time. The passengers of long-route government buses continue to suffer.

Where political clout palls over legal intervention

Former Minister Senthil Balaji evades judicial scrutiny as ED sword hangs over his head

SHASHWAT SINGH

Former DMK Minister Senthil Balaji, a politician once infamous for jumping ship from one party to another is sparing no effort to escape judicial scrutiny as the Enforcement Directorate's sword hangs over his head.

Hailing from Karur district in Tamil Nadu, Balaji has had considerable influence in both AIADMK (formerly MLA) and DMK (MLA until resignation post arrest). This weighty influence that Balaji holds across party lines within the political formations of Tamil Nadu has ensured, time and again, that his indispensable role, his resourcefulness, and the utility that he could bring to the table for any party makes him largely insusceptible to adversities that befall him.

The ongoing ED investigation against Balaji pertains to a money-laundering case, famously known as the cash-for-jobs scam, that took place when he was the Minister of Transport in the AIADMK, the then ruling party with Jayalalitha as the Chief Minister. Ironically, M K Stalin who leads the current DMK regime, had severely criticised Balaji when he was in the Opposition, and after the 2019 state assembly elections, Stalin not only gave Balaji some of the most lucrative portfolios (Minister for Electricity, Prohibition & Excise), but also is backing him.

The fact that the Stalin-led DMK stands by a sketchy figure only shows their need for Balaji's utility and the party's dependence on him. "I had written an article much earlier, even before his arrest, where I had said that the Chief Minister has to choose

between the political utility of Senthil Balaji and his own political integrity as the leader of DMK," says D Suresh Kumar, a reporter for *The Hindu* who has been covering this case from the beginning.

Senthil Balaji's case is just one example of a big wave of ED probes across the nation. The Modi-led BJP government is being accused of using central agencies to attack the non-BJP ruled states.

"It is only happening in non-BJP ruled states. It is not like people are not accused of corruption in Madhya Pradesh or any other state where the BJP is in power." This narrative not only works in favour of Balaji and the DMK, but Stalin has been using

vulnerability of Stalin's government.

The case against Balaji had precipitated way before his arrest, but had intensified post arrest when he neither resigned nor was made to resign by the Chief Minister. Governor R N Ravi issued an unprecedented order dismissing Balaji from his Ministerial post. The impugned order was initially without the Chief Minister's recommendation; it was later paused after an advisory from Union Home Minister Amit Shah. Article 164 of the Constitution limits the Governor's power to dismiss a Minister, requiring the Chief Minister's advice for appointments. Legal experts criticised the unilateral action, stating that it violates constitutional principles, and can be legally contested. "The Governor's order was totally politicised, it had no legal basis," says Sudhir Kumar.

Tamil Nadu Governor R N Ravi finally accepted Minister V Senthil Balaji's resignation on Stalin's suggestion which came when the Madras High Court intervened stating that Balaji's continuance "serves no purpose and does not augur well with the principles of Constitutional ethos on goodness, good governance and purity in administration".

Balaji now remains in judicial custody seeking bail, which the ED counters by claiming that they have sufficient evidence to prove his complicity. The ED also urged the Principal Sessions Court in Chennai to commence his trial as soon as possible as they fear he might influence witnesses. As the legal battle goes on, Balaji remains in judicial custody in Puzhal Central Prison.

Senthil Balaji now remains in judicial custody seeking bail, which the Enforcement Directorate counters by claiming that it has sufficient evidence to prove his complicity

the very same narrative as a decoy to attack the BJP for using central agencies to their benefit and destroying the federal structure of the country. This is reflective of the DMK's anti-BJP stance and diverts public attention from the

Is *The Bold Type* drama the feminists' utopia?

ISHIKA WADHWA

Sarah Watson's TV series 'The Bold Type', premiered in the US on Freeform on June 20, 2017. It was a hit amongst teenagers and adults as it deals with themes like modern feminism and gender equality in the workplace. The series revolves around three young women, Jane Sloan (Katie Stevens), Kat Edison (Aisha Dee), and Sutton Brady (Meghann Fahy), living in New York City working in a fashion magazine, *Scarlet*, and the challenges they face.

The *Bold Type* challenges traditional stereotypes and embraces diversity. Its diverse cast of characters showcases a variety of experiences and perspectives. From Jane's pursuit of journalism to Kat's advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights and Sutton's journey of self-introspection, each character highlights the intersectionality of gender, race, sexuality, and socio-economic background.

The show confronts systemic issues in the modern workplace, ranging from gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment to unequal pay and glass ceiling barriers.

Whether it's Jacqueline mentoring Jane, Kat finding guidance from Adena or Sutton inspiring fashion designers, the series portrays the transformative connections and collaborative efforts for a more inclusive and equitable culture.

The show also portrays strong female leadership, depicted by characters like Jacqueline Carlyle. Moreover, *The Bold Type* addresses the complexity of modern feminism. For instance, Kat is a biracial lesbian woman who is romantically involved with a Muslim woman. In terms of



A still from the American drama series *The Bold Type*

workplace dynamics, the series portrays the difficulties women face in corporate space, like double standards and unconscious bias.

The show is similar to Darren Star's *Sex and the City* and Josh Schwartz's *Gossip Girl*, sharing a theme of women's empowerment and self-discovery, resonating with viewers of all ages. The themes include female friendship, sexuality and identity, career ambitions, fashion, and style.

Whether it's Carrie's pursuit of a writing career, Samantha's entrepreneurial endeavors, or Jane's journey toward journalism, these shows offer insights into women's challenges and triumphs in their careers.

Similarly, from Carrie's take on love and lust to Kat's exploration of her sexuality and identity, these shows portray characters who embrace their real selves against stereotypes, inspiring viewers on their journeys of self-introspection and acceptance.

The Bold Type stands as a beacon of empowerment and inspiration, challenging societal norms and fostering dialogue about gender equality in the

workplace dynamics. Through its diverse characters and narratives, the series reminds us of the transformative power of solidarity, mentorship, and self-acceptance in driving positive change and shaping a more equitable and inclusive future for all.

Yet, the idea of feminism and women empowerment portrayed by the show still feels like feminism in a utopia where the feminists have conquered patriarchy. Therefore, *The Bold Type* proves that there is a long way to go to achieve gender equality.

The Bold Type stands as a beacon of empowerment and inspiration, challenging societal norms and fostering dialogue about gender equality in the workplace dynamics

KP Park residents in danger as buildings crumble

SANJHU THOMAS

It's been eight months since I slept peacefully," says a worried resident at the tenement at Kesava Pillai (K.P.) Park, Pulainthope, Chennai. The faulty construction of the five-year-old buildings is causing doors to bulge out of the wall and deepening fractures in G Block. It has around 200 people who were evacuated from Gandhi Nagar Island Grounds two years ago.

"My three-year-old son is my concern, and I'm pleading with the person in-charge to help, but he refuses to assist, and at times he asks us to leave the house and live away," said 27-year-old Jayalakshmi, a resident who works as a domestic help. "If I had a choice, why would I be living here? I'm helpless."

Residents said that staying in the tenement is no way better than living in slums. "Both are in a stage of collapse at any time, which is totally unsafe for everyone," said an anonymous resident. He alleged that three-fourths of the money allocated for the construction has been taken away illegally by the workers and supervisors. Another resident requesting anonymity said the people in charge fail to counter the claims about construction delay due to the embezzlement of allotted funds.

Initially, a slum was formed when inhabitants of Gandhi Nagar Island Grounds relocated to the Adyar banks. Gradually they were evacuated to the tenement in K.P. Park two years ago. It is upon the residents' arrival they realised that the block was poorly built and the interior of the building was different from the exterior, which appeared tall and orderly.

The interior walls of the



The interior of a TNUHDB house at Pulainthope in Chennai; (below) a collapsing wall and door at the KP Park apartments | PHOTO: SANJHU THOMAS

building had paint and cement flaking off even after covering the cracks with plaster. The situation has only deteriorated after a year as the cracks in the walls have turned into holes.

"People who could afford it fixed the doors and filled up the gaps with fresh cement and bricks," said Vigneshwari who lives on the 10th floor. "The person in charge expects us to follow the same, which is not the case for everyone."

While the supervisor has started working on the concerns, there have been frequent breakages in the wall since the first week, said the 39-year-old housewife. However, now it gets dangerous as the bricks are falling out of the walls next to the door.

"There were major concerns raised when more than 150 houses experienced the same problem of their doors falling out of the wall next to each other," said the family of 52-year-old auto driver Kumaravel. "Despite this, the housing board committee continues to add plaster of paris without taking any significant action, just providing temporary

fixes." "They did not adhere to the standard cement-sand ratio, which caused this issue, and the quality of the building is so bad that it might collapse at any time," said Velrajan, a 47-year-old resident who is a local builder.

Magenderan, a tenant in the building, said, "As it's early

summer, it's better; but during the winter season it will be worse here due to seepages, and plaster and paint peeling off from the walls and ceilings."

Another tenant, Karthika, 28, who works as a telephone assistant for a private company, said it's difficult to sleep at night without the fear of the ceiling collapsing over those who pass by. "We are forced to be partly awake all the night," she said. "Coming home after work makes me more anxious, and sometimes it's so hard knowing that our home is unsafe."

During a discussion with the KP Park housing board, the supervisor brushed away the residents' concerns.

According to a CUBE official who requested confidentiality, "The private contractor who built the buildings would be asked to fix the construction issues raised by the KP Park residents, as he is liable to fix these problems," because the building is less than five years old.



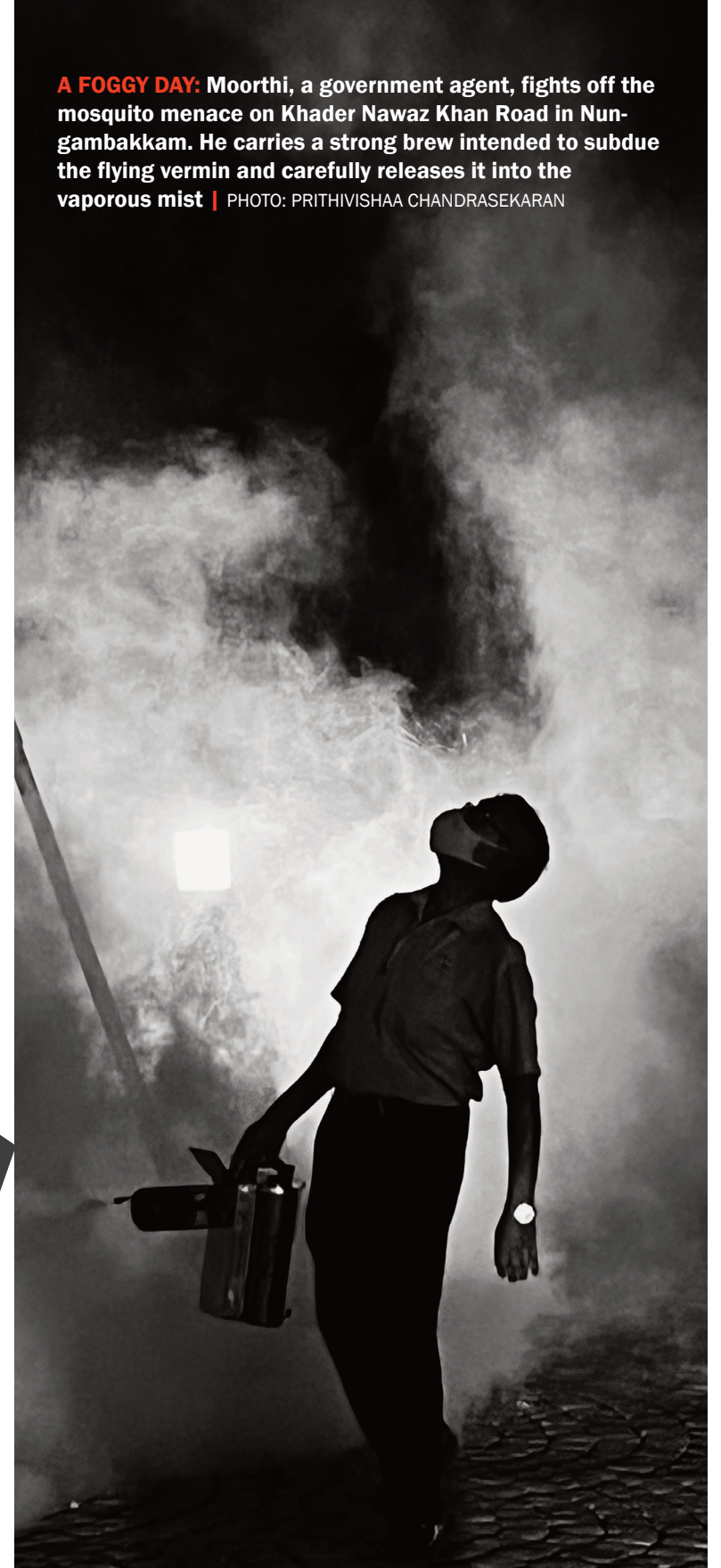


▲ **INHERITORS OF EARTH:** A man who sleeps in front of the Little Mount Metro Station doesn't hesitate to make space for his fellow creature. The photo brings to mind the story *Bhoomiyude Avakashikal* (Inheritors of Earth) by renowned Malayalam novelist VM Basheer. In the story, he asserts that not only human beings but animals too are the rightful inheritors of the earth | PHOTO: AMARNATH K

▼ **A SAFE LAP AROUND CHENNAI:** A girl happily presents a payment QR code as she roams around with her father on his job in Kotturpuram, notwithstanding the heat and the glaring sun | PHOTO: VARUN BHANDARI



With mercury levels soaring above 40 degrees Celsius this summer, Chennaiites are huddling together to beat the summer blues. The shelterless and the sheltered seek an abode alike under the scorching sun. It is a season of hope as residents find solace in familial warmth, and camaraderie envelops the city



▲ **A FOGGY DAY:** Moorthi, a government agent, fights off the mosquito menace on Khader Nawaz Khan Road in Nungambakkam. He carries a strong brew intended to subdue the flying vermin and carefully releases it into the vaporous mist | PHOTO: PRITHIVISHAA CHANDRASEKARAN



▲ **STREETS OVER SHELTER:** Savita, who lives on the footpath near Flower Bazaar in Chennai, braids her daughter Meena's hair to get her ready for school. Meena attends a nearby government school. Savita and Meena have been living on the streets beside the C-1 police station in Flower Bazaar for the past decade. Savita says the footpath is where her life is | PHOTO: ARUNIMA JHA

◀ **GRAVEYARD OF BIKES:** Seized bikes outside the police booth on Mint Road, near Washermenpet metro station, are left to rot in the open. These unclaimed bikes have been here for more than a year now. The Sub-Inspector of Traffic Police PS Krishnaraja said that these bikes have been seized in drunken-driving cases. "In 2023, 68 vehicles were seized by us. The fine in drink-and-drive cases is Rs. 10,000, because of which people in violation of the law do not claim them," he said. After no claims are made for a year, most of these bikes are turned to scrap. The bikes are chained in order to ensure that they are not stolen. They are also under the surveillance of CCTV cameras | PHOTO: NEETIKA KUMARI

RETHINKING

With a shortage in rice supply leading to disruptions in the PM Poshan scheme's midday meal offering in states like Kerala, experts look at grain diversity, reports PRERNA SHARMA

During the pre-Green Revolution era, traditional grains such as millets were staple ingredients in the food habits of people, especially children, offering rich nutrition. However, with the advent of modern techniques after the Green Revolution movement, south India's midday meals shifted to rice and north India's to wheat, sidelining traditional foods." For M Umanath, an expert in Food and Nutrition Security at the Madras Institute of Development Studies, understanding how the Green Revolution altered indigenous, traditionally balanced grain foodways provides important context into understanding Indian consumption patterns today, which have "made meals predominantly rice-centric."

Recent discourse around looking back at traditional foodways, in order to prevent an over-reliance on any one grain, was driven by a recent rice supply shortage that disrupted the Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM Poshan) scheme's midday meal school offering. In February 2024, Kerala ministers convened a meeting to tackle this issue in government schools. This scarcity had already impacted beneficiaries in Maharashtra in March 2023, while in August 2023 teachers in Odisha resorted to providing dry food substitutes like biscuits to children. This has highlighted an overreliance on one food grain (rice), and a strong need to diversify the meal with its alternatives.

"Rice makes the midday meal look like a full carbohydrate-

heavy meal, lacking the fibre that children require. This primarily gives them energy and not all the nutrients they require, thereby making it an unbalanced diet. Sometimes, excess carbohydrates are also a threat to child health. So, we should stop this overreliance and find other ways to tackle this," says AR Soundarya, a nutritionist from the Food Service Management and Dietetics department at Avinashilingam University, Coimbatore.

She adds, "Nowadays, under the public distribution system, government schools are mostly provided with polished rice, which ultimately makes it a starchy product. The amount of nutrients children get from rice depends on what kind of rice they are consuming and how the rice is being cooked. So, most of its nutrient content is lost in the form of starch. Therefore, rotation of the grains offered on the menu is necessary as providing only rice-centric food contributes very little to the nutrient intake of children."

In 2021, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2023 as the International Year of Millets (IYM). Following this, Union Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar highlighted the opportunity for global production increase, better use of crop rotation and the promotion of millets as a major component of the food basket. However, programmes such as the PM Poshan remain rice-centric, overlooking the nutritional benefits of millets. Experts argue that there is a need to diversify meals with alternative grains such

as millet due to their high nutritional value to address potential rice shortages in the future.

"For children to grow, proper nutrients are necessary and rice alone cannot be the solution but at the same time, it cannot be ignored completely as it is a major source of calories to children. However, the government should try to concentrate on grains such as millets apart from conventional staple crops because they are non-glutinous and non-acid forming diets compared to



Rice being served as the midday meal in a government school in Tharamani, Chennai

because malnutrition is caused due to lack of multiple nutrients. This can only be fulfilled with a balanced diet, which fortified rice alone cannot do as it is just rich in vitamin A," says Umanath.

Soundarya draws attention to the fact that schemes such as these are not going to help the overall development of children. She adds, "The introduction of fortified rice could, however, stop the children from eating vitamin A supplements or tablets which are provided in most of the government schools. But, a rotational and balanced diet with a multigrain approach is the need of the hour."

Aside from millets, food experts have suggested a multigrain approach in the mid-day meal for the overall development of children in government schools. Rice is rich in carbohydrates, essential for children's energy and growth as

well as contributing to their protein, calcium, and B-vitamin intakes.

"Therefore, instead of concentrating everything on rice, giving a cyclic menu to children with the inclusion of whole grains should be made compulsory. Schools should incorporate millets, maize, corn, ragi, bajra, jowar, and more for their rich nutrients like calcium, iron, and zinc, surpassing those found in rice," says Dr S Shobana, senior food technology scientist and head of the Department of Diabetes Food Technology, Madras Diabetes Research Foundation.

"Adding vegetables and fruits is not the only option to diversify the midday meal. The inclusion of different ingredients will also develop children's interest in other grains and prevent them from getting bored of eating rice-centric food, especially in south India," says Soundarya. She also adds that it will result in "a better future for India."

As of December 2021, 3.38 lakh metric tonnes of fortified rice have been distributed through anganwadis and govt. schools under the mid-day meal scheme, according to the economic survey

other cereals," says Umanath.

Schemes such as 'Fortifying Rice', a process of adding vitamins and minerals in the post-harvest phase, was launched by the Central government in 2019 to combat malnutrition among the mid-day meal beneficiaries by 2024. It is a cost-effective, culturally appropriate strategy to address micronutrient deficiency in countries such as India with high per capita rice consumption. As of

December 2021, 3.38 lakh metric tonnes of fortified rice have been distributed through anganwadis and government schools under the mid-day meal scheme according to the economic survey. This again will add to the problem of meals being rice-centric.

"If the government wants to completely eradicate the problem of malnutrition, then fortified rice cannot be the only solution

The Pothichoru Model

In Kerala, the DYFI distributes packed meals in 60 government hospitals across 14 districts through a volunteer-driven initiative

ANAGHA JAYAKUMAR

Lalitha M. is no stranger to the Trivandrum Medical College. Ever since her grandchild was diagnosed at birth with a congenital heart condition three years ago, the 55-year-old has paid frequent visits to the Sree Avittam Thirunal or the SAT Hospital situated in the medical college complex. The trip from her home in Panayam in Kollam to Ullor in neighbouring Thiruvananthapuram covers roughly 70 kilometres by road, and is by all means, a daunting prospect for many.

However, for the thozhilurappu worker, the distance is perhaps the least of her woes.

As Kerala's oldest medical college, the Government Medical College in Trivandrum was ranked fifth in the country and the foremost in the state for the number and quality of cardio-interventional treatments last July. The SAT Hospital in particular was recognised as a centre of excellence for rare diseases in December 2022.

Lalitha's family is eligible for medical care and treatment at a nominal cost owing to their low-income status. Her husband is a mason, while she earns from the MGNREGA scheme, which guarantees 100 days of assured work, or thozhilurappu in Kerala.

"We spent two months at the hospital early last year as our child had to undergo a heart

surgery to fix a valve," says Lalitha. For context, the medical college complex spans 575 acres and houses the medical college, the medical college hospital, the Regional Cancer Centre, the Sree Chitra Thirunal Institute, the SAT Hospital, and the Government



Dental College. It is located seven kilometres from both the Thiruvananthapuram Central Railway Station and the central bus stand.

"One has to walk a good distance to get good food," she adds. "The eateries outside the premises serve terrible food and are not affordable. But I haven't had to eat from there in very long."

Instead, Lalitha remains at the hospital and joins a long queue of patients and their aides at 11 am for a packed meal, or a *pothichoru*. "The food quality is alright, just like how we would prepare a lunch at home. There aren't many curries, there is always enough for one person."

The complimentary food packets are made available by the district committee of the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI) as part of its Hridayapoorvam initiative. Launched at the Trivandrum Medical College on January 1, 2017, Hridayapoorvam

— began as a project that provided 300 packed lunches. Seven years on, that number has grown to nearly 6,000 packets daily in the medical college complex alone. "The programme now covers all 14 districts and makes food available to nearly 60 government hospitals across the state, medical colleges, district hospitals, primary health centres and so on," says SR Arunbabu, state treasurer of the DYFI in Kerala.

"Lunch and dinner are provided to patients as well as their caregivers. Regardless of the day, food will find its way to the needy." These numbers are

significant for a nation where food security continues to be a real issue for most citizens. India ranked 111 out of 125 countries on the World Hunger Index in 2023.

In 2018, the country accounted for a quarter of the global hunger burden, with nearly 195 million undernourished people. Making matters worse is the extent of political interference in public policy schemes that were launched specifically to counter the problems of malnourishment and hunger. In 2022, eggs were excluded from the midday meals in 14 out of 19 BJP-ruled states, despite its proven benefits in tackling malnourishment.

Hridayapoorvam stands out from similar initiatives because of the scale of the exercise, and the emphatic participation of women across the state.

Packed lunches are prepared by housewives and mothers belonging to contributing families aligned with the DYFI. They add to the quantity of the rice and vegetables prepared for what would have otherwise been a routine lunch for their family alone. The result is anything from two to five pothichorus, which may be non-vegetarian as well.

Different families prepare their meals differently, but any pothichoru will contain a generous serving of boiled rice; a *mezukkuparatti*, which is a serving of stir-fried vegetables; a *thoran* which has vegetables cooked dry in a coconut base; a

chammanthi or dry coconut chutney, served in the place of an absent gravy; and an omelette. Some contributors add fried fish to this mix as well. The lunch is packed in a banana leaf, which locks in the flavours and the aromas of the

The programme now covers all 14 districts and makes food available to nearly 60 govt. hospitals across the state

-SR Arun Babu, DYFI Kerala treasurer

food, giving the meal a distinct flavour that one associates with the quintessential Kerala meal. The meals are prepared voluntarily in homes so it has its own kind of quality control. The design of this scheme as a double-blind exercise, meaning those who prepare the lunches, and those who get them are complete strangers to each other, connected only by the DYFI's logistical network.

From the heart

A timeline of the distribution of the pothichoru meal packets under the Hridayapoorvam scheme



A calendar is prepared at the start of the year.



Duties delegated to 160 area committees in Kollam district



Duties delegated further to local committees



Local committee informs contributing family 2 days in advance



Each contributor prepares 3-5 pothichoru



Pothichoru collected and sent for distribution at government hospitals

Rows and rows of crumpled paper lie at the entrance of the Pillaiyar Koil Street branch of Amma Canteen. The sheets of paper are held down with stones, and, upon inspection, one realises that they are employment papers. A conversation with the cooks who work at the branch reveals that they have been left out to dry in the aftermath of Cyclone Michaung, which lasted about five days in December 2023.

"We were cooking and serving throughout the cyclone," says R Selvarani, who has worked at the canteen since its inception in February 2013. "The water was so high and so hard to wade through," she says as she gestures around her waist, "and all of our things were drenched, but we were not given leave."

Eager to voice their grievances,



We even had to cook on the day Amma died!

- N Vadivu, Amma Canteen cook

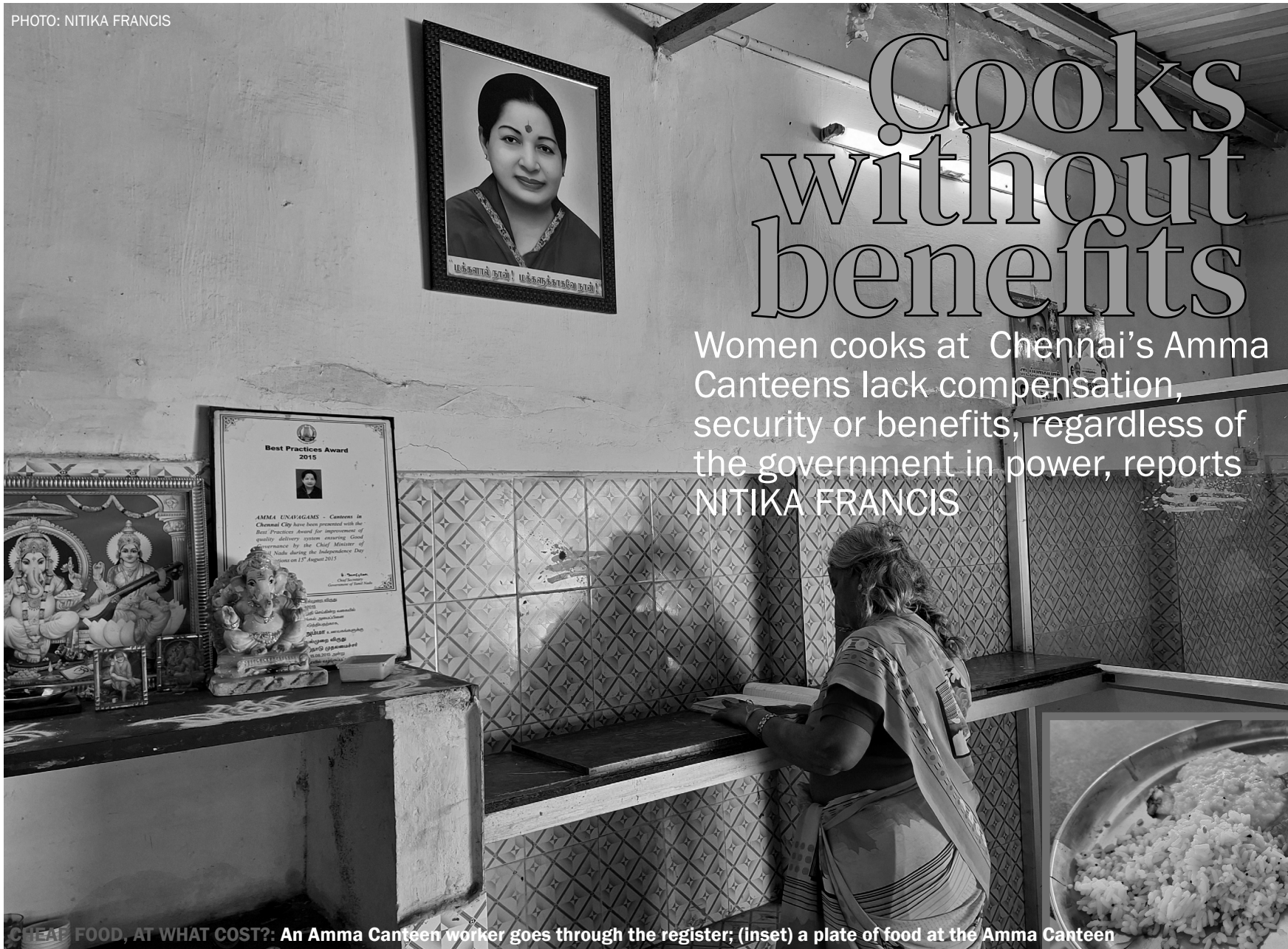


her co-workers pipe in with a readiness and structure that only a thousand conversations about the same frustration can generate. "The number of leaves we get in a year is zero. We cook through rain and shine," says N Vadivu, Selvarani's co-worker of 10 years. "We even had to cook on the day Amma died!"

"Amma" (Tamil for mother) is the name coined by supporters of J Jayalalithaa, the late Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and leader of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). According to *The Frontline*, she ran the state with an "iron grip" for 27 years, until she passed away in 2016.

The Amma Canteens (Amma Unavagams in Tamil) were opened under the AIADMK regime to provide food to the masses at subsidised prices. As of

PHOTO: NITIKA FRANCIS



FOOD, AT WHAT COST?: An Amma Canteen worker goes through the register; (inset) a plate of food at the Amma Canteen

August 2023, there are 393 such canteens functioning across the state. Each canteen hires about three to four cooks, who make and serve the dishes.

According to *Down To Earth*, these canteens prepare 45 lakh idlis (which cost Rs 1 each), 12 lakh servings of pongal (Rs 5 each), and 11 lakh plates of curd rice (Rs 3 each) across the state in a day. Their lunch menus feature curd rice, sambar rice, and lemon rice; a trio of quintessential and beloved Tamil dishes. The meal costs a total of Rs 13.

The cost efficiency, combined with the consistency of the taste, has resulted in many regulars at each Unavagam. "The food they

make here is decent. As a working bachelor, I really do not have the time or patience to shop for provisions or cook, so I come here," says IT professional Kumaran, who has frequented the canteen for about two years.

"I only get one meal at my office, so I come here every time I miss a meal. I have been coming here ever since it started, about ten years ago. Prior to that, I relied on the meals provided by Kamarajar. I don't plan on changing that routine," says Sakti, who works at a bicycle manufacturing company.

"Kamarajar", or K Kamaraj, reigned as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 1953 to 1964

and spearheaded the Indian National Congress' presence in India. He implemented many schemes that outlived his regime, including the revolutionary Mid-Day Meal Scheme, which continues to feed millions of school children all over the country.

The Amma Canteens have also managed to survive a change of regime. Despite the reign of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) since 2021, the customers have remained consistent, as has the salary of the workers.

The workers, who are all women employed through their Self-Help Groups, have received a steady Rs 9,000 a month for 10

years.

"Regardless of inflation, regardless of the fact that we were not allowed to take leaves during COVID, and regardless of the fact that we work 365 days a year, our salary has remained exactly the same," says Vadivu as she eyes the clock on the wall that hangs right next to an image of Jayalalithaa.

She gets up to begin her afternoon service shift. As she serves the quintessential trio of rice mixes, one cannot help but notice a dark burn scar on her hand. The scar was the result of a cooking accident that rendered her unable to use her dominant hand for quite a while. "We aren't given

sick leaves. You take a leave, you miss out on a chunk of your salary."

There are no measures enforced by the state to prevent accidents like this or to compensate victims. Occupational hazards such as burns come with the terrain of cooking, but these kitchens are not equipped to handle accidents and do not have so much as basic first aid kits.

Physical risks aside, these women's stints at the canteens aren't secure as they have no formal assurance of the duration of their tenure. "When the

pandemic happened, funds were low, and quite a few employees were either laid off with nowhere else to go, or were forced to take 10 days off, so that they would receive a significantly lesser salary," says Bhuvaneshwari, the manager of the Zone 13 branch of the Tharamani canteens.

She attempted to change this. Upon receiving continued employee complaints about the leaves, lack of accountability from the Greater Chennai Corporation or any state entities, and stagnant pay, she visited the nearby police station thrice, to no avail.

"All I got from any of my meetings with the Municipal Commissioner was a typical 'paakalaam' ('we'll see'). After the DMK came to power, things did not necessarily change, but I definitely feel hesitant to initiate any more such conversations," she adds.

"I stick to this job for two reasons: I am ageing, I have nowhere to go and no jobs I could suddenly become as good at. And, of course, Amma. She has always done right by us and would have continued to do so," says Selvarani.

The Amma Canteen menu



INDIA'S MIDDAY MEAL PROGRAMME: NOURISHING MINDS, FOSTERING EQUALITY THROUGH FOOD

INITIATIVE OVERVIEW

The MDMS scheme, launched nationally in 1995, provides hot cooked lunches to all Indian schoolchildren, aiming to enhance nutrition and boost school enrollment.

OBJECTIVES OF MDMS

The initiative focuses on increasing school enrollment, improving children's nutrition, and promoting social equality, with roots dating back to 1923 in Madras.

FEASIBILITY&MANAGEMENT

The government evaluated the feasibility in terms of financial and human resources, involving implementing bodies from the start.

Formal monitoring committees, both at national and state levels, ensure proper management and alignment with the scheme's objectives.

PUBLIC IMPACT

supporting 120 million schoolchildren, MDMS contributes to increased enrollment, nutrition improvement, and social equality, as reported in a survey of 70 deprived villages in Madhya Pradesh.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Stakeholders include the central government and state governments. The former's commitment is evident through substantial fiscal support, while the latter manages infrastructure and actual cooking costs.

The Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM Poshan) scheme, formerly known as the Mid-day Meal programme in India, is an initiative designed to tackle classroom hunger, and to ensure that over 120 million children receive daily meals throughout the school year. While this welfare initiative has achieved considerable success, it encounters a notable obstacle of integrating eggs into its menu. Some states governed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) face opposition from the vegetarian Hindu community for including eggs, due to a combination of political, caste-related, and nutritional concerns. This clash highlights the struggle between personal food choices and what the nation's youth really need.

Reetika Khara, an economist, points out in the Mid-Day Meal episode of a podcast called *Bad Table Manners*, "If the chief minister of a state doesn't eat eggs, the chances of children having access to them is next to none." This resistance, especially strong in BJP-led states like Gujarat and Rajasthan, shows how upper-caste feelings influence important decisions. Surprisingly, only half of India's 28 states and eight Union Territories provide eggs as part of the midday meal scheme. In the states that do provide eggs, the frequency ranges from daily to once a week to even once a month, as reported by .coda, a nonprofit newsroom based in New York.

Sachidananda Upasane, a BJP leader in Chhattisgarh, says in an article carried out by *Deccan Herald* people who avoid non-vegetarian food are many, and if eggs are a priority, the government should deliver them directly to homes.

It was the state of Tamil Nadu that led the way by introducing eggs to its school meal programme in May 2012.

Advocates say choices are crucial, suggesting alternatives such as bananas for kids from vegetarian families. This complicated situation sets the stage for a deeper look into the broader impact of reduced protein for children due to the absence or

The egg dilemma

The midday meal scheme tussles with vegetarian sentiments for egg inclusion, especially in BJP-ruled states, writes BHABNA BARUAH



PHOTO: ILO ASIA-PACIFIC

Children await their heavily contentious midday meal in a school in Vadodara, Gujarat

limited inclusion of eggs in the midday meal scheme.

Anita Dayal, a Hindi teacher at the Savitri Pathshala Higher Secondary School in Kolkata, expresses her concerns about the overall food quality, and says, "Children have always faced trouble where the quality of the food is concerned. We have filed numerous complaints to the zonal officer but there have been no positive outcomes to date."

Describing the mid-day meal plate, she says it's mostly rice or chapati with a sabji, and occasionally, soya chunks are included for nutritional reasons. Boiled eggs are served three days a week for students from fifth to eighth standard, with small servings to accommodate students in higher classes. However, fruits are not a regular part of the meal,

and vegetarian students lack options. Students often complain of stomach aches due to the quality of the rice and the water used. "When officials are on rounds and yearly check-ups, only then fruits are served, and mostly it's oranges, and then it discontinues," says Anita.

Piyali Debnath, who runs a school in Kolkata, discusses the government's struggle in ensuring students' adequate nourishment. Amidst the lockdown, the school launched a programme to aid impoverished students who are

unable to afford regular meals. Debnath says, "At first, they gave out dry food such as rice, pulses, sugar, salt, and potatoes every month, but students didn't like it, so it stopped in February 2022."

From March, they've been providing cooked meals, albeit meagre, which include stale and dry fried rice served once a week with limited vegetables. The school serves only vegetarian food because it's owned by a Marwari. This caused problems because some students wanted eggs in their meals, but Marwari students

and parents disagreed.

The programme ended due to protests, leaving economically disadvantaged students with just one meal a day. He adds that during the lockdown, the struggle got worse for students who had nothing to eat. He says, "For students in our school, the midday meal is more than just a lunch - it's often their only meal for the day."

Seema Medhi, a domestic worker residing in Guwahati, Assam, and her son Kishore, a ninth-grade student, express dissatisfaction with the midday meals provided in schools. Kishore highlights that the meals typically consist of one chapati, rice, lentils, and occasionally fruits such as bananas and apples. He mentions that eggs are only provided during election seasons or official visits to schools.

Lipika Gogoi, a local school teacher in Sivasagar, Assam, reveals that the government allocates Rs 7 per student for Lower Primary schools and Rs 4 for Middle English Schools for a mid-day meal plate. Despite the differences in government funding for midday meals in Assam, Deshraj — Gram Pradhan of Jamalpur Rampur in Amethi — says, "Our menu is quite extensive in nutritional value, and we constantly change our meals as prescribed by the state. We provide milk and seasonal fruits to all students, and in the absence of eggs, we offer bananas and milk instead. The inclusion of soyabean and lentils in the menu ensures a complete nutritional value. Additionally, we provide different seasonal vegetables based on availability."

Swati Narayan, an academic and an activist who runs a Right To Food Campaign, created a map using government data and media reports. Released on July 8, 2018, via X, formerly Twitter, it reveals that in 14 out of 19 BJP-majority states, eggs are not provided to children in schools and anganwadis.

Battling these challenges, the recent initiative by the Assam government to provide three eggs a week per student in tea garden regions reflects positive strides in tackling nutritional deficiencies and enhancing child welfare.

Kishore, a ninth-grade student from Guwahati, Assam, says eggs are only provided during the election season or when officials visit schools

A nod to noodles

The dish atho has helped carve an identity and livelihood for Chennai's Burmese Tamil migrant community

ROSHAN ZAHIN & SHRABANA CHATTERJEE

In 1964, Suchima Begum's grandmother arrived in Chennai with no work and no idea of what future they had in this alien land that they had been forced to call "home". Her husband toiled as a daily wage worker in the urban centre and she navigated a different path to ensure her family's survival, a legacy that persists through her granddaughter.

Begum says, "When my grandmother came here she did not speak Tamil nor did she have any resources in Chennai - they were struggling to make ends meet. My grandfather did not earn much at the time either." She adds, "She would make Burmese food such as the marinated egg

preparation pejo or the Burmese atho noodles. She would then go door-to-door to get people to try out this new food, which was alien to people in Chennai to begin with."

She mentions that it took people a lot of time to accept both their people and this food because they considered them to be intruders on their "land".

While their third generation is now settled in Chennai, she says, that to date, they are sometimes looked down upon as people taking up what the locals perceive as their space.

The first few years were extremely tough for them because customers were not familiar with Burmese food and they were not very open in terms of experimenting with a new cuisine.

The turning point, however, was when former Tamil Nadu

Chief Minister and DMK leader CN Annadurai acknowledged the plight of this community and gave them legal rights to set up their stalls in Burma Bazaar and they started getting a regular inflow of customers.

Soghul Atho Shop and Ibrahim Atho Shop are two of the oldest atho sellers in the market. With not much in the way of seating aside from two rickety stools, these two small shacks that spill on to the footpath have no dearth of customers.

There is a tone of pride that is not misplaced in the voice of Begum, who works at Shoghul, as she proudly displays the varieties of atho available in her shop.

She says, "We are third-generation migrants from Burma, so, of course there have been adaptations of the original version and over the years, changes and

additions have been made to the dish. But we try our best to stay rooted and close to the authentic process."

At the Ibrahim Atho Shop, cook Mohammad Raza serves food, to the long snaking line of customers outside, at such a speed that it almost feels as though he has 10 hands.

He says, "We have learnt the art of atho making from our forefathers who came here from Burma with absolutely nothing but a refugee card. We still use our traditional culinary art to prepare them and earn a decent livelihood."

In between servings of atho fry and plantain soup, it is important to be reminded of the displacement of Burmese Tamil refugees and the resilience they were forced to display to survive in an alien land. While customers may flock to their stalls today, the journey was far from smooth.

In The Historical Dictionary of the Tamils, Vijaya Ramaswamy, reminds us that more than 2,00,000 Tamil people had migrated to Burma to work as labourers, but around 1962, they were driven out of the country due to a military coup and forced to migrate to Tamil Nadu.

By then, these people had been so deeply immersed in Burmese culture that most of them did not speak a word of Tamil.

Most of them did not have any land, home, or relatives left here in Tamil Nadu and so they had to start from scratch when they arrived as refugees.

Syed Mohammad, owner of the



A BITE OF AUTHENTICITY: Atho, a Burmese-style noodle dish customised in Tamil style by the Burmese Tamil refugees; (left) raw ingredients being prepared at the Ibrahim Atho Shop before they are cooked into a warm bowl of flavourful atho | PHOTOS: ROSHAN ZAHIN & SHRABANA CHATTERJEE



In Anankaputhur, the prospect of silent looms

Competition from power looms and lack of government aid threaten the livelihoods of the banana fibre weavers

TANISHQ PRIYA

WEAVERS, weaving at the break of day. Why do you weave a garment so gay? Blue as the wing of a halcyon bird. We weave the robes of a newborn child." These lines by Sarojini Naidu were an ode to the weavers of India.

"But as animals go extinct, the art of handloom is also going extinct," said C. Shekhar, a well-recognised weaver based in Anankaputhur in Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

Anankaputhur is a hub of traditional handloom weaving and is particularly known for its banana handloom fibre saree. It is an age-old craft passed down generations, with a strong connection to the land.

Banana fibre has been gaining popularity in the handloom sector. Every year in India, around 5 lakh tonnes of banana trunks end up as waste after being harvested. India is a major producer of bananas in the world. Fibre may be recovered from banana trunks. Furthermore, banana plants grow quicker than other plants, making them readily available.

This dates back to more than a half-century ago, when the community started expanding as a handicraft centre, exporting the famous Madras Real Handkerchief to Nigeria. Madras Real Handkerchief, an eight-yard cloth used by men and women in the African country, was discontinued in the late 1970s when military rule was imposed in Nigeria.

"Weaving is in my blood," said C. Shekhar, a third-generation weaver who has been quietly making fabrics out of the vazhai nauru (banana fibre), which was inspired by the Philippines' traditional weavers.

Shekhar has also experimented with more than 25 natural products with takers in markets as far flung as the US, Japan, and Germany, even if, according to him, the state government is yet to acknowledge his contributions.



While weaving sarees, weavers never take their eyes off the task at hand | PHOTO: TANISHQ PRIYA

government, we still recorded our name in the Limca Book of Records in 2011 by using 25 natural fibres in a single saree," said Shekhar.

However, Shekhar said after a decade of weaving, the weaving cluster at Anankaputhur has gained a wealth of knowledge about natural fibres. According to Shekhar, working with policymakers can generate even more resources for research and innovation.

"Together we can weave a future of tradition where the natural fibre still plays an important role in women's lives when it comes to their comfort," said Shekhar.

The President of the Anankaputhur Jute Weavers Association envisions a park that will manifest the journey from fibre to fashion, fashion to fabric, and fabric to international markets.

This ambitious vision aims to elevate India's position in the weaving industry on a global scale.

In her sixties, Valli Laxmi says, "Weaving is in my hand even after many years." She still has the passion to dedicate her time to the

single-room traditional workshop located within Shekhar's home.

The smoothness of browns in the workshop's decor—dark, terracotta, russet, yellowish brown, mahogany wood — is slowly diminishing, their radiance reducing with time.

“

Together we can weave a future of tradition where natural fibre remains central to women's lives.

- C. Shekhar, Weaver

”

Weavers often pass down their skills from one generation to the next, but in recent years power looms offer a more cost-effective and faster way to produce the

same goods, even six to 12 metres of cloth a day, which can take a weaver a week to produce. Consequently, weavers are starving and are forced to sell the wood from their looms as firewood.

Mohana Krishna, a weaver, visualises a future where natural fibres become more commonplace. With government support, they dream of establishing a Natural Fibre Economic Zone. This ambitious plan aims to harness land and economic resources, paving the way for a booming Natural Fibre Park.

But with the lockdown that began in March 2020, the looms became silent. The weaver, loom owners, and others in the weaving trade were left with no work. Saree orders were cancelled and the workshops shut.

Manju Nalini, 52, also a weaver, says, "All my savings were used up in the first two to four months of the lockdown."

Her employer filed a petition with the Chengalpet Collector asking if there was any government scheme for them, but their hope was shattered as there was no response.

Going swimmingly

As Tamil Nadu gets its first chlorine-free pool, we look at its advantages and downsides

PRANAVESH SIVAKUMAR

With the opening of Blues by Tika Taka in Saidapet, Chennai, Tamil Nadu gets its first chlorine-free swimming pool. The non-chlorine, ozone-treated semi-Olympic swimming pool, which opened to the public two months ago, is 25 metres long.

According to those running the pool, things are going swimmingly. The pool is open for coaching, those with membership, as well as public use.

Swimming coach Sharath Mukundan said the reception has been good for a completely new concept.

"People feel refreshed when they swim. Imagine you go into a river, you swim, you'll be refreshed. That's why a lot of people go to waterfalls. I teach in other pools, but I don't feel the same there."

Mukundan, also running his own swimming academy, personally finds it special and finds the chlorine-free pool more comfortable physiologically.

"In some pools they use bleach. There have been complaints of kids developing asthma in chlorinated pools. My facial hair was becoming brown, until I got here. You can stay longer. There are no health hazards either," he added.

The idea of setting up a chlorine-free pool was born, as Vishnu Alagappan, one of the three co-founders, tapped into a

need for it.

"Post-pandemic, commercial properties were not giving great returns. Since we were following trends and looking at what was growing, we identified an opportunity for this. We thought, let's just start and see with one facility," said Alagappan, who launched Tiki Taka with his uncle and grandfather.

The pool, which floats in their ancestral property, has earned praise for its safety and hygiene. It also convinced some visitors to extend their stay in Chennai.

"I am from Pune, I'm here in Chennai for a sojourn. I was looking for this in Pune but it wasn't available. In fact, we

whole pool every day," Alagappan elaborated.

Before vacuuming, they need to wait for the sediments to settle to the bottom of the pool.

Mornings see a group of people coming in for rehabilitation. Then there's coaching in the morning and evening. And through the day, members might keep dropping in "We need to find a free slot, find trained staff to vacuum and maintain the quality of the water," he continued.

Analysing why more pools don't go the non-chlorine way, coach Mukundan said, "One disadvantage of ozone is it costs a lot to run. But the big advantage is there is no smell or residue in the water."

Elaborating upon the main challenge of maintaining a chlorine-free pool, Alagappan said, "We have 450,000 lakh litres of water in our pool. You cannot quickly drain and get fresh water. It takes great effort and fewer holidays to do so. We've to get the water quality right. If we lose the water, we have a big problem."

This effort to maintain water quality takes up a significant part of the pool's maintenance.

"Our water is potable. We aim to maintain high quality levels. We do a Ph test every day," said Alagappan. Based on the number of users the previous day, pool machinery is operated, the hours adjusted. "The colour doesn't change; in case that happens, that'll be a huge problem. You cannot reverse the colour of the water once it changes."



Blues by Tika Taka in Saidapet, Chennai, is Tamil Nadu's first chlorine-free swimming pool | PHOTO: PRANAVESH SIVAKUMAR



At the conservation lab of DakshinaChitra, Amirthanathan points to the damaged portion of a *dhristi bomma* | PHOTO: SOPHIYA MATHEW

Wading through time's patina

Conservationist L Amirthanathan takes us through the important process of reviving age-old artefacts

SOPHIYA MATHEW

When I retouch damaged paintings I need to imagine the artist's perspective so that the modification is as close as possible to the original work," says Amirthanathan L, art conservationist for more than a decade at the DakshinaChitra Heritage Museum in Muttukadu, on the outskirts of Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Restoration conservation requires direct actions to be applied to the damaged area of an artefact, which leads to the modification of its appearance.

Explaining the challenges of restoration conservation, he shares his experience of restoring a 20th-century contemporary oil painting of elephants, on canvas. "The painting was brought as it had several holes and the canvas was badly nailed to the frame."

Amirthanathan found the exact organic pigment that matched with the black, burnt sienna and viridian green hues in the oil painting, after which he faced a crucial juncture in the restoration process.

Amirthanathan explains, "There were several holes, so after filling the holes with gesso, sawdust and an adhesive mixture I had to imagine the lines wherever the artist had likely given the black outline so that I could complete the painting." This is the case with all restoration conservation works. Amirthanathan follows the symmetry patterns if one portion of a painting is missing. However, in cases where a figure in a painting is asymmetrical or if there is a portrait with a tilted face,

the restoration gets more difficult. "[Then] you do not know where the pupil of the left eye could be positioned if only the right eye in a portrait painting is visible, so a lot of imagination is necessary."

Amirthanathan sits at the conservation lab of the museum with a *dhristi bomma* (mask) in hand and points to its damaged portion. He has applied a wax base for a strong foundation. Further, the surface of the mask has been reinforced with an added



support of papier mache at its back.

The blue, black and white painted mask is not the only object that lends vibrant colour to the conservation lab. Terracotta gollu dolls, a clay sculpture of a bull and a farmer, paintings set in gilded oval frames, and various statues of religious significance that have suffered varied types of damage get a new lease of life in the lab with the help of organic pigments

at times or through the use of chemicals like O-Nitrophenol, acetone, ethanol, hydrogen peroxide and sodium hydroxide, to name the few frequently used.

Situated 25 km south of Chennai, the DakshinaChitra heritage museum attracts several tourists, especially children from various schools. A recent exhibition, 'Preserving the Past: A Conservation Journey', showcased the important role of a conservator in a museum. The exhibition featured varied conservation works done by Amirthanathan,

including a series of illustrations depicting a day in his life by Rebecca Devnesh, a museum management intern, on display.

The beginning of the illustrations reads: "Mr Amirthanathan first goes checking each house (regional spaces in the museum) for objects that could be brought back to life." Though a playful picture of a conservationist is portrayed, with an illustration of him holding glue and fixing broken objects, the conservationist's job is a lot more complex and nuanced.

Objects of various kinds — from an 18th-century Bible to 19th-century Tanjore paintings and wooden carvings, 20th-century chromo-lithographs, terracotta sculptures, clay figures and brass bhuta masks and

lighting lamps, among many — are treated by him. The material is first assessed and the object's condition is documented in the studio adjacent to the conservation lab. Three types of reports are prepared — condition report, treatment report and conservation report — based on the initial assessment.

In case of damage due to pests, the treatment process is started immediately. Depending on the damage, the plan of action is devised by the conservationist, and the museum's collections department is notified. Following an initial phase of cleaning the surface, a testing process determines whether ethanol or acetone is more suitable for the treatment process. After the treatment, the restored object is sent for storage or display. The whole process can take a day or a few depending on the severity of the damage.

Amirthanathan prefers using organic methods rather than chemicals, so he looks for simple solutions; only if they fail to work does he adopt sophisticated techniques common in other conservation labs of different museums across the country. For instance, he found a new method for restoring 19th-century Tanjore paintings. Instead of using Paraloid B-72, a popular polymer used in conservation, he uses a mixture of Arabic gum and chalk powder, applying it in layers for consolidating the paintings.

Despite his anxiety about the extinction of his practice, Amirthanathan is content in his journey. "What keeps me moving forward is the enormous creativity and critical thinking involved during these processes daily"

A foreign nightingale in the homeland?

SHRIYA MURMU

Bagiwai re hom toya dular taken, Dilli dur taken re hon dil dhadkawan' is the line from Tom Murmu's song 'Buru Kocha Nala', released on July 18, 2021. Although a Santhali song, words like 'dil', 'dur', and 'dhadkawan' suggest a Hindi influence. This pattern of 'Hindi-isation' is common in the songs of contemporary native artists, including Porayni Soren, and Nirmala Kisku, and production houses like Sonamani Production, Manjhi Hadam Studio, and Dingra Boyz.

Anuranjan Murmu, stage name Tom Murmu, started his YouTube channel on October 31, 2016, and has around 296k subscribers as of now. With over 50,493,928 views, Murmu has emerged as a Santhali icon with a hint of contemporary touch in his music. But this contemporary touch is changing his songs into a series of infiltrated songs with a loanword structure. The songs 'Koka-Kola', 'Photo Ren Tag Keh Miya', and 'More Botol Paura' are just a few instances. While the latter two have a couple of Hindi terms here and there, it would be wise to say that 'Koka-Kola' is a Hindi song with a Santhali chorus.

Contemporary Santhali listeners might ignore the linguistic nuances but why are Santhali singers using foreign words? The main reason lies in the history of the language. Santhali is one among many languages without written documentation and has depended solely on oral conveyance for the longest period.

Backing this, Geetha Sunil Pillai's 2023 article 'Preserving Identity: The Battle to Save the Fading Santhali Language' on The Mooknayak refers to Shefali Hembram, a researcher from West Bengal, who adds Santhali language has overcome the subjugation of other languages and retained itself for the longest period without a script but there is still a lack of inclination towards the Santhali language.

One of the other major reasons is the generational deprivation of quality education in the indigenous groups. Here, the concept of quality education includes the native language as a medium of education. As per the current state of the native languages, they are not prioritized from the cultural perspective. Thus, the languages stay away from schools and the students from their linguistic identity.

UNICEF in its report on Early Literacy and Multilingual Education in South Asia states that in Jharkhand, a tribal-dominated state in the peninsular India, around 96 percent of the people speak one of the tribal languages where as the Hindi speaking belt of the state consists of only four percent. The research

Tom Murmu, the upcoming Adivasi star from Jamshedpur, Jharkhand | PHOTO: SHRIYA MURMU



also suggests that students who are unable to develop basic language foundation by the end of third grade are most likely to drop out of school due to self-esteem.

Authors Md. Shamsuddoha and Rifat Jahan from the BRAC

A line from Tom Murmu's song 'Buru Kocha Nala' — 'Tension bodol ruar riyam dular pension' — has two prominent English words, 'tension' and 'pension', for which literal Santhali translations do not exist

University in their research paper 'Santal Community in Bangladesh: A Socio-historical Analysis' highlight how Santhali is losing its hold in Bangladesh due to the mainland language, Bangla, a medium in school, is overtaking the ethnic language's position. Neha Banka's 2024 article in *The Indian Express* acknowledges the efforts of Ananta Kisku, a graphic designer-turned-content creator, who calls attention to not only the influx of foreign words but also the prominent space given to foreign words in colloquial Santhali. Supporting the same

argument, Sripati Tudu, assistant professor, School of Languages, Institute of Language Studies and Research, Kolkata, adds in the same article how vocabulary is not only defined by familial relationships but also depends on social relationships. She explains that while the older generation retains a lot of the native knowledge, the younger generation experiences an infiltration in their innate knowledge of their mother tongue.

In the long run, there will be multiple books, and videos depicting the workings of the Santhali language, but music as a pedagogical tool plays an important role in language acquisition, which cannot be ignored. Eton Institute in one of their newsletters, 'The Connection Between Music and Language Learning: Creating a Melodic Vocabulary', connects the thread between music and language learning.

Tom Murmu has so far successfully wooed multiple generations. While reaching out to various tribal groups, he has collaborated with other Adivasi rappers from the Munda and Ho communities, like Ansh Sawaiyan aka Blaze, and Mr. Tribe (stage name). Hence, it becomes significantly important, through his songs, for Tom Murmu to spark a sense of linguistic identity. While Tom rules the YouTube algorithm more often than other Santhali artists, will his musical strings compose for an impending industry where the Santhali language becomes the word loaner?

Thirteen-needle flat brush

ANN JACOB

People get eyeball tattoos and get their tongues slit serpent-like during annual conventions," Vishal Shankar says as he traces the design of Deadpool holding up a heart with his hand onto carbon paper. Shankar started tattooing about 13 years ago and now runs a tattooing school at Dream Inks Studio in Thiruvanniyur, Chennai.

With rangoli-like graffiti on the walls, the building effortlessly stands out from the normal residential house line-up. The basement studio fits every aspect of the stereotypical sketchy studio that one would imagine, like in the movies.

Shankar explains how the real process starts with a consultation where the client can discuss size, placement, and design. Designs less than two inches are minimalist, and the bigger ones go up to four to five inches and are more time and effort-demanding. After discussing the details and

tweaks, the final design is fixed, and the client is also made to sign the consent form. Shivam, who is also a student at the tattoo school, grins when the blue lines of the stencil reveal his soon-to-be tattooed design on his left calf muscle.

The line-up is a small bottle of black ink with a nozzle top, a small plastic cup to hold the ink in the process, the foot pedal on the ground that revs up the handheld machine that is plugged into a power source, a box of tissues, and one last piece of equipment that makes my stomach knot up.

"Go ahead, you can take a look," Shankar says, as my hands hesitantly hold up purple boxes with needles that will soon carry ink to the epidermis of the client. Shankar's hands are now gloved as he applies numbing cream for open wounds on top of the stencil lines.

He goes on to place the needle set on the handheld part of the machine. As he dips the needle set into the ink pot to start the process, the buzz of the machine

falls into the air, almost like it belongs within the walls of the studio.

On a small box-like part of the machine, displayed in red, is the number 7.4, which is the speed of the needle, and Shankar gets right into it.

The needle set that Shankar uses to draw the lines has eight needles, and he's kept a 13-needle set, which resembles a flat brush on the table, for shading with a different hue as well.

The blue lines of the stencil slowly get replaced by messy black pigment as he works his way around the design. He dips the machine into the ink pot now and again while wiping the ink off with a tissue after finishing a few lines.

"We start from the bottom right and move to the top left so we don't have to go over freshly tattooed skin," Shankar says as a squirt of ink shoots out when he goes over a sharp bend in the line he was following. As Shankar works his way up to the calf muscle, the skin jumps to the

rhythm of the needle movement. I signed up for this, I remind myself.

The places closest to the bones twist Shivam's face in pain, and he increases the volume of 'You're a Sky Full of Stars' playing from the speaker. Does it help drown out the pain of having needles hit your skin too many times to count, I wonder.

Unfazed, or rather, enjoying the upbeat tune of the song, Shankar holds the tune with a small hum as he continues to work. Shankar wipes the spilled ink with a damp tissue, revealing the art underneath the spilled stains of pigment.

"Nice, bro," Shivam unclenches his jaw, examines the tattoo, and muses. "I've had people faint twice in here," Shankar says as I ask about people who share my fear of the pointy tool involved. "But I made sure they finished getting their tattoo done even if they had to come back the next day," he adds with a proud grin.

The outlines now reveal a clean image, and Shankar moves on to

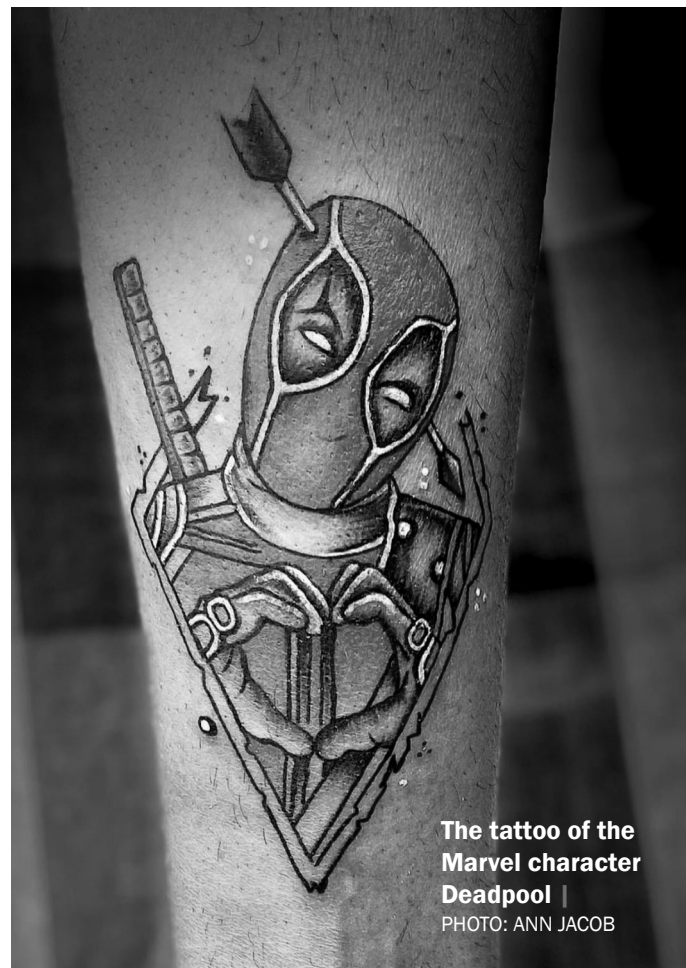
shading, where he uses the pace of his hand movements and the depth of the needles to create the desired shading. The process can also be done by diluting the ink, he explains.

After finishing up the shading, Shankar changes needles to do the same with red. The bright pigment shows up muted on the skin but instantly adds a nice touch to the design.

The white colour is used to highlight, and according to Shankar, it is slightly more painful than the rest. Hues of red grip the tissue Shankar uses to wipe the design down. I sigh with relief before Shivam does; it's safe to say I wouldn't have to pay the hospital a visit today.

Shankar looks pleased with his work, and Shivam smiles down at his Deadpool tattoo and does not look like he just sat through hours of pain.

While Shivam busies himself admiring his new tattoo from different angles, Shankar says, "Pain is temporary, but the art on your body is permanent."



In cane, an unbending tradition

Cane furniture weaving is going out of vogue, but Shankar's dedication to the craft remains strong

RIA WADIKAR

Silent except for the chatter of shopkeepers, cows walking by and the occasional rickshaw, house number 144 on Barrack Street in Nammalwarpet, Chennai, is buzzing with its doors wide open. Through the door you can see furniture stacked every which way and one man at the centre of it all — his hands flitting around, fast and nimble, until a wooden frame in front of you has become a sturdy chair before you know it. "It's all in the cane; it can withstand everything," says Shankar, 51, the owner of this house and its business of weaving cane furniture.

Rudra Shetty, 46, walks in beaming at Shankar, with a set of dining chairs originally woven by Shankar's mother, Jaya. "They're heirlooms in our family and he's the only one I trust to fix them. It comes so naturally to him." However, this skill has not been magically bestowed on Shankar

but painstakingly earned. "Since I was 10 years old I have been helping my mother in weaving the cane fibre. She also learned how to weave in her childhood. Our family has been doing this since my grandparents' time."

Cane furniture has a long and storied history with India. Tracing back to the 2nd Century AD, cane has been used in India in various products, including furniture, due to its abundance in many states such as Assam, Kerala, West Bengal, etc.

The traditional craftsmanship around cane leads to highly durable, flexible and sustainable furniture. "Every piece of furniture I have worked on has come back to my place for repair and gone back good as new," says Shankar. As he sits and talks with his son Rishi, 25, Shankar simply cuts the knotted ends of cane on a chair, so as to preserve as much of the original fibre as possible and unravels the netted fibre like unspooling threads to reveal them

"It's all in the cane; it can withstand everything... This is delicate work and it takes too much time"
- Shankar, cane furniture weaver

as ordinary as the wooden chair now looks. He then gets to work threading them back in no time, mapping the same latticed pattern as before by memory.

In the corner of the room, right above where he sits, is a portrait of his wife, Nivedita, sitting on a chair he had made, which now rests in some other house. Shankar wistfully says, "This style of furniture was popular in the 70s and 80s. It was also used in government offices and their homes, so we had a lot of business and our work got a lot of praise."

But the precious nature of his work is slowly fading. Readymade plastic and wire chairs have flooded the market, with few people buying cane furniture made from scratch and often discarding the ones they

have without bringing them for repair. "We charge Rs. 750 per square foot of cane work, because handmade work is hard and we have material costs of the cane as well." The slowing business hit them harder during COVID-19 as there was no way to bring in new customers.

However, with all the flexibility of the cane that they work with, the family managed to get back up. Shankar's son Rishi, a Computer Applications graduate, spends time off from his day job to set up an online presence for his father's work so that they can get more work.

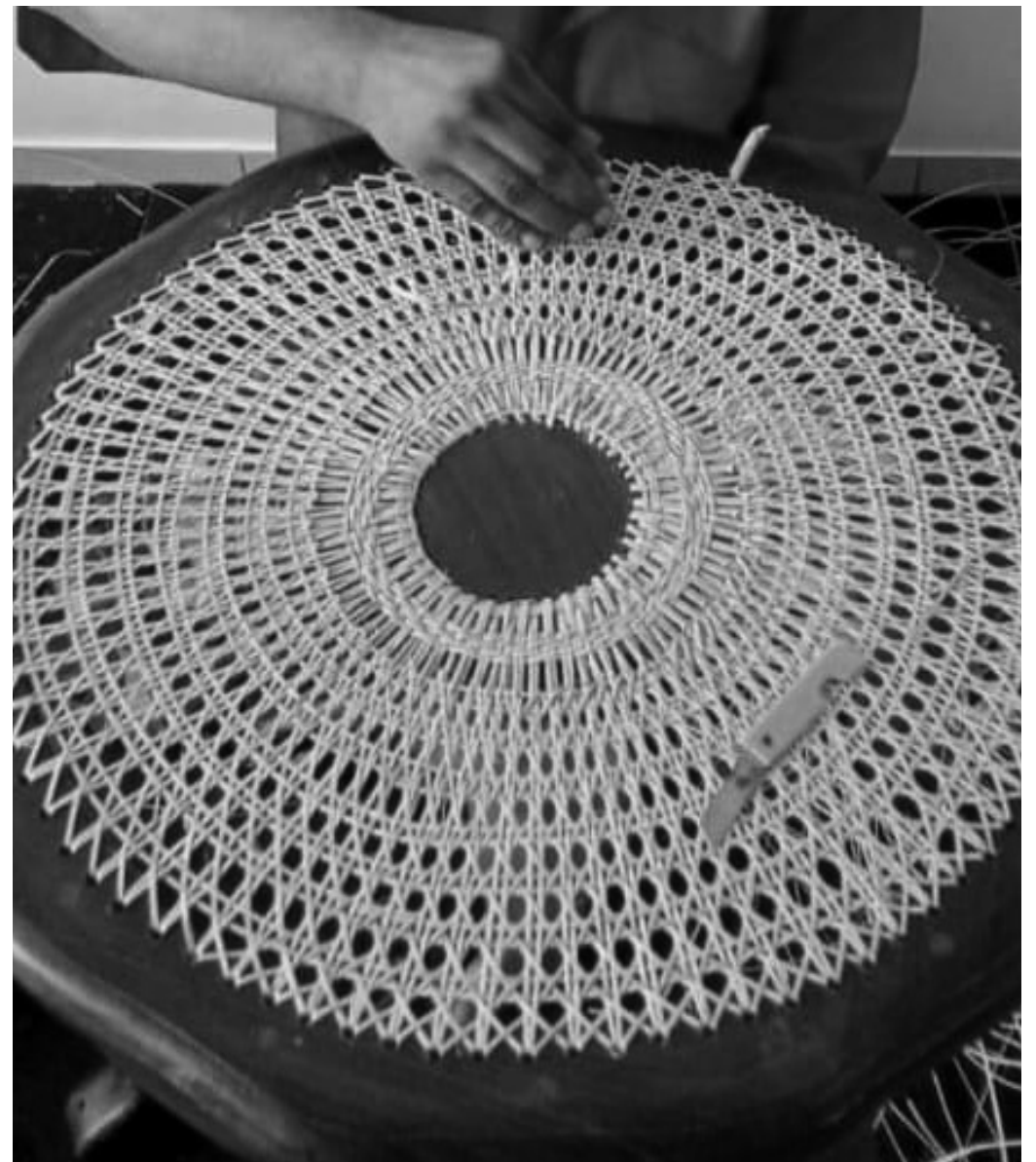
"My son, he did not learn to weave, but he is helping out in his own way," says Shankar, jokingly taunting Rishi.

"This is delicate work and it takes too much time. I might be the last to continue this. Even my brother has moved on to work with furniture manufacturers."

Shankar's dedication and pride for his work shines through, beyond just the physical skill but the immense creativity that he expresses through it. "Every piece is unique, so not every cane fibre will have the same width we need. We only use Assam cane and sometimes it needs to be thinner for complex designs."

An ordinary box cutter held between his thumb and index finger, he carefully shaves down long strings of cane, rubbing them down with a little petroleum jelly so they are smooth to the touch.

Shankar sits around the edge of a round wooden table with a semicircle-shaped wooden block that has two nails in it. He then hammers them until they leave small marks on the table,



TURNING 'CANE' INTO COMFORT: Shankar demonstrates the cane-weaving process; (extreme left) a cane mat woven by Shankar's son, Rishi | PHOTOS: RIA WADIKAR

methodically marking out the equidistant spaces where the cane will be woven into once the wood is drilled. Once he drills the holes, he sits down to thread long strings of the cane, criss-crossing to create a design that Shankar likens to flower petals. "It's not the same with machine-cut chairs. When it's handmade, it's stronger, natural and more authentic."

Holding the cane taut, he loops it through one hole and into the next nimbly and at a speed that indicates this is a familiar dance. With one thread of cane he

manages to weave diagonal lines across half the table and pulls at them to make sure they're tight and in place. Then he ties it into a knot at the end and repeats the process with another thread of cane. The process is hypnotic as the cane moves seamlessly from one end to another, forming a pattern that only Shankar can see until it's finished.

"Think of it like tying shoelaces; they move diagonally — one goes from above and one goes from below, every thread supports the other."

He hums a tune to the rhythms of fibres appearing from one end and disappearing into the next and cuts off the excess fibre with a scissor before knotting it one last time. He's right — a flower does bloom from the centre of the short round table.

One thing Shankar is not quite right about is that it all comes down to the endurance of the cane. To anyone who sees him tirelessly work with lengths of cane fibre, it is evident that it's all in Shankar; he can withstand everything.

Betting on bolt-on bumpers

A smart way to modify your car without sacrificing its soul

ARITRA BHOWMICK

Sai, the mastermind behind Modsters Automotive, isn't your typical car guy. With a decade of experience under his belt, he has overseen the creation of over 400 parts and the transformation of more than 200 cars. But his journey to becoming a renowned modifier wasn't fuelled by childhood passion; it was a path forged through dedication and a thirst for knowledge.

Sai's academic background is steeped in the world of mechanics. He holds both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Mechanical Engineering, and his automotive styling expertise was honed at the prestigious MIT School of Design in Pune. While car modification may not have initially sparked his passion, it blossomed into a fulfilling profession that has allowed him to make his mark on the automotive industry.

"It's not just a recent trend," he emphasises, "It's been like this forever. Even the biggest companies, with their fancy design studios, don't give Indian designers the respect they deserve. They outsource the core design work abroad, leaving Indian professionals to handle the mundane tasks of communication and coordination."

"Our designers are relegated to roles like surface design," he continues, "working on the car's 'skin' while the crucial initial 3D modeling in software like Alias remains the domain of foreign professionals. It's a disheartening reality, and it's not just about a lack of recognition; it's about stifling opportunities for growth and innovation." Sai further highlights the regional disparity. He states, "Chennai, my hometown, offers even fewer opportunities. While cities like Pune and Bangalore boast a design scene, Chennai lags far behind. This is why, despite openings in other cities, I chose to stay here. I wanted to contribute to building a design ecosystem in



Modsters Automotive owner Sai on his shop floor PHOTO: ARITRA BHOWMICK

Chennai, but the limited options left me with no choice but to join a startup focused on product design."

At the startup, Sai worked as a junior designer, collaborating with colleagues primarily doing fiberglass work. "We designed

Sai's vision was to offer modifications that could be seamlessly added and removed, avoiding the damage and inconvenience often associated with "jugaad" methods

and created prototypes for the company, but it wasn't the design-centric environment I craved," he recalls.

Driven by a desire for change and a lack of local design opportunities, Sai took a leap of faith in 2013. After a short stint at a struggling startup, he embarked on a new venture, Modsters Automotive.

Starting from scratch, Sai and his associate literally began in a "10 x 5 room." With his first employee, he tackled a significant gap in the market: retrofit parts. At the time, his vision was to offer modifications that could be

seamlessly added and removed, avoiding the damage and inconvenience often associated with "jugaad" methods.

He collects bumpers of different shapes and sizes from scrapyards, then uses a 3D scanner to create digital models. Once he has a 3D

modifications, as he calls them, should prioritise ease of installation while respecting the car's original identity.

As Sai puts it, "My motto for car modifications is simple: keep it easy to install and respect the car's original identity. No need for messy alterations or permanent hacks. Enhance the car, don't erase its soul." He emphasises clean and reversible upgrades that let owners express their individuality without compromising the car's inherent character.

Sai's 3D-printed fiberglass bumpers aren't just turning heads, they're filling a gap in the market. He caters to a specific demand in major cities like Pune, Goa, Mumbai, Guwahati, Shillong, and even Delhi, where, despite an existing modification scene, customers crave better quality. As Sai puts it, "the only problem is the fit and finish" and his meticulous approach to 3D printing and hand-finishing provides the solution these discerning car enthusiasts seek.

Sai further mentions that car

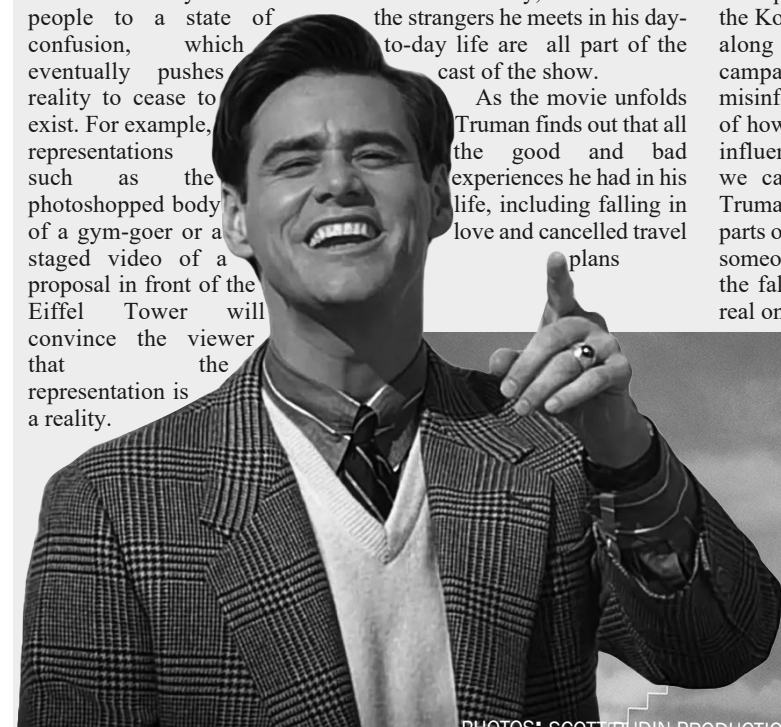


The Truman Show: prophecy of the 2020s

ELSA SUNNY

You wake up in the morning and start doomscrolling your Instagram. Today the algorithm brought you to a bunch of reels which you feel are calling out your 9-to-5 work culture. *Vacation* by Dirty Heads starts playing in your head. "A-a-ay, I'm on vacation every single day 'cause I love my occupation." You end up having a bad work day. But after a while you come across the TV series *The Office*, which captures the beauty of the mundane in everyday life, and you feel like you are living the time of your lives. If you can relate to this, your mind might be one among the millions that confuse representation with reality.

Jean Baudrillard, a French cultural theorist, in his book 'Simulacra and Simulation' talks about the concept called 'hyperreality'. It is a situation where the distinction between reality and representation becomes blurry. This leads people to a state of confusion, which eventually pushes reality to cease to exist. For example, representations such as the photoshopped body of a gym-goer or a staged video of a proposal in front of the Eiffel Tower will convince the viewer that the representation is a reality.



PHOTOS: SCOTT RUDIN PRODUCTIONS & PARAMOUNT PICTURES

Danae Mercer Ricci, journalist and social media influencer, often posts about the duality of social media posts. Her posts demonstrate how to achieve an "Instagrammable" photo by tucking in the tummy, arching the body, and playing with lights and angles. These photos capture both representation and reality equally. It is not really a new revelation that the internet is curated. But for some reason, the representations that we see on social media sites convince the users to believe otherwise.

A tiny representation of an individual's life is often perceived as real. Eventually, the tastes and preferences of an individual will become influenced by an algorithm. The want to hit the gym becomes a need, the want to travel becomes a need to travel.

The contemporary world we live in strangely resembles the 1998 movie *The Truman Show* by Peter Weir. Truman Burbank, the film's protagonist, is unaware that his whole life is part of a show. His family, friends or even the strangers he meets in his day-to-day life are all part of the cast of the show.

As the movie unfolds Truman finds out that all the good and bad experiences he had in his life, including falling in love and cancelled travel plans

are plots by the director of the show. The movie reminds us about the kind of oblivion one may fall into if one lives in a world built with representations of reality. In the film, the makers of 'The Truman Show' create a world inside the real world.

The fake world is filled with representations of the real world. Artificial sun, simulated rain and actors dressed up as doctors performing fake surgery..

Wrestling with the concept of reality and hyperreality, *The Truman Show* has become an eerie mirror of the contemporary world we live in.

The content which we choose to consume as well as the algorithms that caters to our preferences and in-turn lead us to the content have a considerable influence in shaping a person's views, preferences and tastes. The songs that trend on Instagram have a direct impact on its reach on other platforms such as Spotify, Gaana, YT Music, etc.

The Korean wave by BTS led more people to take an interest in the Korean language and culture along with AI-driven political campaigns which create misinformation are all examples of how the content we consume influences our minds. Perhaps, we can take inspiration from Truman Burbank. He found that parts of his life were designed by someone else and eventually left the fake world in search of the real one.

Stories of storytellers

The Chennai-based World Storytelling Institute, through a cross-country network of 125 storytellers, has been reviving the dying art of oral storytelling

SRIJANA KHADKA

Growing up in New York City, Eric Miller fell in love with storytelling at a young age. He grew up surrounded by the arts, and explored theatre and wrote plays as a teenager.

"My father was a playwright, and my mother had her own Dance Company," he recalls. "I went to the theatre with my father because he got free tickets, as he was writing about theatre for a magazine and I also met a professional storyteller Laura Simms, when I was 14."

In February, Chennai hosts a storytelling festival where storytellers from across India gather for various sessions organised by the World Storytelling Institute (WSI) located in Nungambakkam, Chennai.

The institute has been conducting the Chennai Storytelling Festival (CSF) for 12 years and has a network of 125 members around the country, 58 of whom are based in Chennai. Miller is credited with the inception of this concept.

After encountering Laura Simms, he made the decision to experience an ancient culture. For that, he chose India, focusing on south India. During this period, he came across a Tamil book titled *Silapathikaram* (The Ankle Bracelet), authored by Ilango Adigal and translated by Alain Danielou. It was about Kannagi and Kovalan.

Miller arrived in India for the first time in 1988. During that visit, he travelled to the birthplace of Kannagi near Pondicherry, also documented my experiences in a small book and presented it to the then Chief Minister, M Karunanidhi," he says, "This marked my introduction to Tamil Nadu."

He went back to America in 2002. After finishing his academic studies in 2005, Miller decided to return and settle in Chennai. "When you have a plan to settle, you should get married," he

laughs. It was during this period that he met Magdalene Jeyarathnam, who specialises in Psychodrama. "We engage in drama therapy and conduct workshops together, and we got married in 2007."

Magdalene Jeyarathnam is a co-founder of WSI. She is also founder-director of the Indian Institute of Psychodrama, and the East-West Center for Counselling and Training, which offers numerous training workshops, including approaches to counselling children (featuring exploration of therapeutic uses of storytelling, drama, music, dance, visual art, and play in general).

Miller and Jeyarathnam credit writer and



ONCE UPON A TIME: (Clockwise from top) The World Storytelling Institute in Nungambakkam, Chennai; a board displaying news clippings inside the institute; founder Eric Miller | PHOTOS: SRUJANA KHADKA



half years old, she loved hearing stories," she remembers. "Inspired by her enthusiasm and ideas from her school, my friend and I ventured into a summer camp in 2005, where storytelling was our focal point.

Another storyteller, Mohan Krishnan from Raja Annamalai Puram, conducts regular storytelling sessions drawing from Indian epics, folklore, and history to inculcate values, motivation, and inspiration.

He discovered his storytelling abilities when he was four years old. "I had an attack of polio, which affected my mobility and turned me into a storyteller," he says.

Rayathatha began delving deeper into storytelling by purchasing books on the Panchatantra stories, fairy tales, bedtime stories for children, and many more. "My understanding of storytelling deepened when Eric came to India and launched the World Storytelling Institute," she says.

She learned arts and crafts to complement stories from DinoArt, a Singapore-based company, and also learned the art of teaching maths concepts through



storytelling. "I authored my book *GeniusMaths*, in which I incorporated maths concepts from LKG to grade two," she says, "Mohan was a senior executive with the Reserve Bank of India. "In my career as a banking executive, my way of telling stories in communication played a key role in my success at work."

Mohan uses storytelling techniques to train people in soft skills and communication regarding products and services, especially in software and financial services companies. He also utilises storytelling techniques for coaching. "After retiring from banking, I pursued professional storytelling as a training tool. Soon, I discovered it's immense potential in teaching, marketing, entertainment and quite simply transform lives," he says.

Rayathatha mentions that storytellers often encounter

numerous challenges. "Sometimes, things don't go as planned," she says. "Yet, with experience, I manage to overcome these challenges and improve each time," she adds. "We also have to face financial struggles, but we manage."

Director Miller agrees with Rayathatha. "Not many people make a living from this. Most have a husband, wife, or family with money who can support them," he says, "Often, those with While participation in the festival is good, in online sessions, many people prefer keeping their cameras off. However, we can't blame them because it is a global event, and for some, it is in the middle of the night, and they are in bed," he explains.

On being questioned about the attention Miller receives, he says, "I am a foreigner, I am trying to learn Tamil. I am talking about bringing back storytelling."

Non-sticklers for rules stick to beliefs

POULOMI DEB

Around the world, preschoolers make things by gluing toothpicks or popsicle sticks. Though rare, it's also not unheard of to sculpt large-scale sculptures with sticks and branches.

Eight years ago, a painter named Bino Shajan, hailing from the Pulicat village of Tamil Nadu, wasn't accustomed to either of these serious forms of art. But with patience, he became the world's first to strike a balance.

The beam of this balance ranges from 2mm to 2cm – the sizes of sticks Shajan cuts by himself for hours on end.

At The Sunshine House and House of T's art sale in Adyar's expensive restaurant Fika, Shajan is one of the only artists who doesn't rush to say a "hello" to visitors. "He's the most underrated here," says one of the organisers, Thomas Davis.

You move past the bookmarks, paintings and tie-dye T-shirts to find the table furthest away from the event's entrance. A deep-blue placard reads 'Bino's Stick Art', but the tidily sculpted pieces made entirely out of sticks and glue announce the artist's style for themselves.

When Shajan begins to plan out a new project, he sketches it out on paper with a pencil. "Whatever comes to my mind, I make. I don't write books, I leave it up to my hands," he says. He sharpens the pencil every few minutes, insisting it helps him think and portray his plans more accurately.

"I saw many artists using a long stick and carving it. I wanted to be different," Shajan smiles as he opens a bottle of red paint spray, shakes it like a seasoned bartender, and coats

his 3mm stick cuts. Before people arrived at the sale today, he says, he was busy calculating the sizes of the last few cuts and how much he would have to bend them for his latest piece.

"This is how the sizes of my artworks have grown bigger over time," he says. And 'bigger' reaches as high as one and a half metres tall – the (literal) Leaning Tower of Pisa in the world of sticks.

"This next artwork [that I'm making] is my favourite, I will tell you about it after I finish some sales." He looks stoically on as visitors browse his pieces, the most popular of which are the pendants bejewelled with what Shajan calls "random pebbles." He's wearing one of these pendants himself, but he doesn't appear to care for them, saying they are only for attracting customers.

"Language barrier," he says to everyone who speaks in English. Pale brown Tamil letters dot the keychains on his table, surrounded by tiny wooden books and paint palettes. These and the pendants are made as side projects with plastic and wood. Encased on top of the plain tablecloth are proud stick sculptures of a Royal Enfield motorcycle and a shrimp, with a stick guitar and stick veena as the backing track.

He finally reveals his upcoming favourite artwork is a stick rendition of the Thanjai Periya Kovil, one of the largest Hindu temples with distinctly Tamil architectural details, located in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu. "It may take one year, but it's my goal. It's my Tamil culture," Shajan works full-time as a lab technician, hailing from a village in Pulicat, which is where his first exhibition was conducted..

In his eight years of work, this is only his second. He doesn't mind.



Wooden artifacts made by Shajan | PHOTO: POULOMI DEB

"It's my job, will pass it on to my next gen"

Made in Pulianthope: How Dhandapani's molam is keeping an old sound alive

MUHAMMED MUKHTAR

K Dhandapani is popular in the alleys of Gurusamy Nagar in Pulianthope, North Chennai, because of his parai and molam. If you go to Gurusamy Nagar and ask for the *vettayan* — the one who plays the parai, or the traditional drums, anyone will show the way through the crammed alleys to Dhandapani's home.

Parai, dholak, raja molam, katta molam, dhol baja, tarai and tappu are the various types of traditional percussion instruments made in Pulianthope, and mainly played in Tamil Nadu folk performances and funerals. All these drums are handcrafted in a small workshop in Gurusamy Nagar by Dhandapani and his family.

Molam is a single-face, steel-based drum. It has a slight sound variation due to the difference in skin when compared with dholak. It is played for gods in temples and also in funerals. The dholak is mainly played in artistic performances. Goat skin is used for the dholak

and cow hide is used for molam.

"This is my job and this is my livelihood. I will make sure that this will continue for my next generation," said Dhandapani. He also taught his son, D Mageshwaran, and also others who have approached him to learn the skill of making these drums. "The legacy of Dhandachadi has to continue," said Dhandapani about his father.

Dhandapani and his son work on the first floor of their tiny house. The workshop is full of both finished and unfinished percussion instruments. They also make kompu, a wind instrument. Kompu is a traditional trumpet made with wood and the blowing end with a bamboo wedge. Dhandapani's wife, two sons and his brothers also help him in making the drums.

"The process of making is the same for every instrument. The only thing is that the tune varies according to its size and shape," said Mageshwaran, son of Dhandapani. Dhandapani is the fifth generation of his family and has been in the profession for 49 years.

Bamboo sticks are used to make the drum's rims, where the goat or cow skin will be attached. The bamboo sticks are dried and cut in specific measurements.

The next process is peeling the bamboo, layer by layer, to make it thin and pliant. "Only thin

bamboo can be twisted and curled into a circular shape," Dhandapani explained. After the bamboo is peeled, the circular frame is placed around the cylinder at both ends.

The sloppy skin, he said, has to become very firm to make the drum face. "We will spread the skin in an open place and nail it on each edge to make it taut. After this process we will leave the skin to dry in the sun," he remarked.

By now, the hides would be hardened and will be rolled out. This roll of hide will be soaked in plain water and dried again to remove the salt and ensure it attains the attributes of a stretched membrane.

Dhandapani and Mageshwaran will then remove the hair from the skin by scratching and peeling it a knife to make the face of the drum. After it's soaked again, the processed skin will be attached to the circular bamboo frame using jute threads.

He claimed that he can make four pieces of drum faces for the dholak from a sheet of goat skin and 10 drum faces from cow skin for molam. Drums are tightened



Dhandapani plays the drums with his troupe; (extreme left) Dhandapani with a parai and molam | PHOTOS: MUHAMMED MUKHTAR

using the skin belts. Another process followed is heating the skin drum-face, which will produce a crisp and clear sound.

The belts are tied from top to the bottom, connecting both faces of the drum. "If I pull the belts, the face will get tightened and produce a good sound," said Dhandapani.

"It will take three days to complete the whole process of making the drums. It takes one day to soak the skin and another day to peel the hair off the skin to make the drum faces," explained Dhandapani.

He said that nowadays the rate

of skin has dipped.

Earlier, molam was made of clay and goat skin. According to Dhandapani, it has poor durability. "Now we use steel, so that it can last for a longer period and also has good quality."

Alongside the hide-face drum, they've also started making one with a plastic face. "That will be a cheaper drum," said Dhandapani. He also added that good-quality sounds come from animal skin.

Now, Dhandapani is teaching the young boys in the neighbourhood for free. He is raising a troop from the younger generation, just like his father.



The coastal guardians of Chennai

As three fishermen get appointed to the Chennai Coastal Zone Management Authority for the first time, the members reflect upon official apathy and the implications of this much-needed decision

REVU SURESH

On February 12, 2024, a letter signed by the Chennai District collector, Rashni Zagade, reached the house of Jeyakumar, a fisherman who lives on Balakrishnan Street in New Washermenpet. The street, facing the N4 beach in Kasimedu, is home to various families from the traditional fishing community.

"I explained the content of the letter to my father," said Mohana Sundari, Jeyakumar's daughter, a first-year college student. The letter, dated January 1, confirmed the appointment of Jeyakumar along with two other representatives from the local traditional coastal communities as members of the District Coastal Zone Management Authority (DCZMA) for three years. A similar letter was sent to K Bharti from Nochikuppam and Saravanan Kasi from Uroorkuppam in Chennai.

The Coastal Zone Management Authority, constituted at the district, state, and national levels, is an environment regulation body that is responsible for examining project proposals in coastal zones before they are forwarded to the government bodies for approval. They have the power to investigate cases related to alleged violations under the Environment (Protection) Act of 1986 and to create specific management plans after identifying ecologically sensitive areas.

K Bharti, the president of the South Indian Fishers Welfare Association, said that these appointments are a consequence of the long movement led by the fisherfolk, who had been demanding the appointment of three representatives from their community to the DCZMA.

"Since fisherfolks are not in the committee, the government has brought up a lot of developmental activities that have affected the fishermen here," he said.

The third member, Saravanan Kasi, 42, a coordinator associated with the advocacy group Coastal Resource Centre, said, "As per section 6 of the Coastal Regulation Zone notification, it is legally mandatory to appoint three members from traditional coastal communities to the district-level committee." The notification that Saravanan is referring to was issued in 1991 under the Environment Protection Act. The notification, was amended in 2011, was issued following demands by the fishing community to protect their community and the coastal land.

Saravanan said, "Any developmental project has to go through the district committee first," adding, "Our representatives are selected so we can identify any developmental activities that would affect us."

It has taken 13 long years for the government to implement the guidelines given in the 2011 Coastal Zone notification and appoint three fisherfolk to the committee. The appointment of the three members from different parts of Chennai gives official recognition to the views of the

It has taken 13 long years for the government to implement the guidelines given in the 2011 Coastal Zone notification

fisherfolks, whose knowledge, experience, and demands have been neglected by the government for a long time.

Citing an example of a temporary tourism project



LOOKS FISHY: The Kasimedu fishing harbor; (inset) Saravanan in his office | PHOTOS: REVU SURESH

sanctioned by the government within 10 metres of the high tide line, K Bharti said, "These are areas where we store our nets, where boats are kept, and where fish vending takes place. If you bring tourism, our whole

future. He said, "Before going ahead with projects like breakwater or fishing harbors, the government should consult us as we have more knowledge about the depth and pace of the water."

Criticizing the land-use maps published in the coastal zone management plan, Bharti said, "If we look at the local-level map, the government has not mentioned the names of the fisherfolks' villages. They haven't mentioned our local temples, our schools, the places where we dry and store our fish." With these appointments, the 57-year-old who left fishing and joined the business of fish trading, hopes that such a coastal zone management plan will not be

implemented without their consent.

On paper, the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) management notification was brought in with the condition that the livelihood of the fisherfolk would be protected and the coastal areas would be secured.

The notification has marked various zones to protect the land between the high tide line and 500 metres of land from the high tide line. It was done to impose restrictions on the setting up of industries and to prevent their operations. However, in reality, the government failed to implement the guidelines and it kept bringing frameworks that

would allow the setting up of industries.

As per the CRZ notification, the fisherfolk are allowed to do things that are important for their livelihood. But Bharti said, "The officials themselves are not completely aware of CRZ. If we tell them we have to set up a market, they would instantly refuse. However, they are quick to bring in their factories and roads." He said that the Marina Loop Road project and the metro rail project are all violations of CRZ. "We have filed multiple cases at the National Green Tribunal," added Bharti.

Members of Chennai's fishing

community feel the appointment of Bharti, Jeyakumar and Kasi to the DCZMA will make it easier to liaise with the State government. Rupesh, a resident of Nochikuppam, said, "I feel it is a good thing. Now the communication will be easier." He added, "No matter how much the government says it has helped us, it can never be equal to what we are contributing to the economy." During 2017-18, Tamil Nadu ranked third in total marine production of the country, as per the fisheries policy note of 2020-2021 published by the State government. The state earned a foreign exchange of Rs.5,591.49 crore during 2018-19.

Unlike Saravanan and Bharti, Jeyakumar only got to know about the appointment after the letter reached his home.

Jeyakumar, who has been living in New Washermenpet for over 46 years, entered into his father's profession after completing the eighth standard. He is wary about these initiatives.

Over the years, he has witnessed several changes in the sea. He said, "During my father's time, there was a lot of catch. Now, the sea is full of chemicals and there are no fish."

The coast belongs to the fisher community by tradition. But a large number of fisherfolk do not have lands registered in their name despite living in the coastal land for generations. "Those who are in power think that we don't know anything," said Bharti.

The aspiring politician added, "Whatever blue flag the government brings, we only need the flag of the fisherfolk."

Pearl and deferred female ambition

The Mia Goth starrer brought out the pitfalls hidden in an eerily domestic setting

DHRITI SENGUPTA

Will Pearl become the pearl that she desires to be? What if her circumstances don't let her? And, if her dreams are deferred, what will she do?

Die? No. There is rage inside her. Rage that stems out of her life's narrative being written down for her: her mother and her ailing father foretell that she is destined to live the lonely life of a farmgirl. But she firmly believes that she is destined for something else, something that other people crave for.

Pearl released in 2022, during the Covid-19 pandemic, is set in 1918 Texas. The Spanish Flu was going on, and so was World War I. The movie's protagonist, Pearl (Mia Goth), born in a Protestant family, is controlled by her mother's morality steeped in the principles of hard work, sacrifice and discipline.

"Y'all see me for who I really am. A Star," Pearl tells her mother. This encompasses young Pearl's ambition: to escape the airless farm, to secure – her rightful place in the silver screen, to be loved by all. When she is unceasingly unable to do so, the rage in her increases exponentially, making her commit murders.

As the movie goes on, her 'malevolence' makes her burn, smother, and stab.

But it's not like Pearl did not try to get out of the farm. She really did. Howard, Pearl's husband who was serving in the war, was Pearl's first 'ticket out'. But then he left. Her next ticket out was the 'Projectionist' (David Corenswet), who encouraged her to dream. Finally, she auditioned for a touring musical company, but they

rejected her as they wanted someone with 'X-factor': young, blonde and all-American.

Throughout the film, we see Pearl trying, and trying, and trying. Throughout the film, we see Pearl getting dejected, demoralised, demonised, and discarded.

In the opening scene, we see the interior of her house; we see black-and-white framed photos, pale blue printed walls with white crosses hanging, and dolls with terrified expressions. We see Pearl, wearing her mother's pink lacy choker dress, admiring herself in the mirror as a star would do before a show. The next shot shows Pearl dancing underneath a bright spotlight to a sad tone. Her daydream gets interrupted when her mother barges.

Day-dreaming was her escape from her dreary world. "I'm not

going to be a farmer's wife. I'm going to be a star... I'm going to be happy. I'm going to be free. I'm going to be everything that you're not," she tells Ruth.

So, what does one do in these airless circumstances? What should Pearl do when she has been dreaming to escape: dancing in front of the mirror, with a pitchfork in front of her farm animals, with a scarecrow which ends with her french kissing it. But her escape does not come, and so she kills.

"At first it was animals smaller than myself, nothing with feelings, nothing that could hurt me back," Pearl reflects in front of Mitsy, her rich sister-in-law.

One of Pearl's victim with feelings is the Projectionist. "You're not gonna leave me here," shouts Pearl, before stabbing him with a pitchfork and feeding him to Theda.

"I hurt them so they too might know what it feels like to suffer, but poor Daddy didn't deserve that," she tells Mitsy. She smothered 'Daddy' with a pillow. Finally, she slaughters Mitsy with an ax.

"We can love each other... 'Til death do us part. It'd be enough. Just you and me here on this farm. All I really want is to be loved," she says to Howard in her monologue.

Howard comes back home to Pearl in a bright red dress, holding a jar of lemonade; her expression consisting of an unsettling forced smile baring all teeth, and dead eyes.

Adjacent to her, is a table all set, with a pork filled with maggots, and her parents, i.e. her half-

burned mother and dead father, dressed up. She did make a home for him.



Community mic-check

For two decades, community radio station Anna FM has given a voice to the voiceless in south Chennai

AISHWARYA PARMESWARAN & RUPESH NAIR

In a dimly lit room at the corner of the Department of Media Sciences building at Anna University in Chennai, Assistant Professor Surya Narayanan scours through an archive of audio files on a computer. "I'm looking for the opening montage," he explains. After a minute of searching, the tiny speakers in the room blare Anna Community Radio's theme tune.

Narayanan is the station in-charge and one of the many people behind Anna Community Radio or Anna FM, India's first community radio. Established in February 2004, the radio has been the voice of the local community in and around the university. Its programmes focus on creating awareness on topics spanning healthcare, education, the environment, and more. These programmes are broadcasted on 90.4 MHz, and anyone within a 15-kilometre radius of Anna University can tune in. The main areas the community caters to are the Velachery check post, Canal in Kotturpuram, Venkatraman, Mayilai Balajinagar, Chitra Nagar, Kapalli Thottam, Nehru Nagar and Vannandurai.

The programmes are created by students of the Department of Media Sciences and volunteers from various communities. These range from skits to local musical performances, discussions, vox pop, and interviews with experts.

Anna University largely funds the community radio, with Rs. 3 lakh allotted per annum. Furthermore, UNICEF grants or work on government-related awareness programmes provide additional monetary resources. These funds are then used to pay students and community members Rs. 300 for their work on each day's show. "Paying them for their hard work, especially students, makes them feel rewarded, and hence, they work more studiously for the radio programmes," says Sasi Kumar, Assistant Professor, Department



The recording booth where Anna University students and community volunteers operate | PHOTO: RUPESH NAIR

of Media Sciences.

There are currently around 30 community members actively participating and curating programmes. When community members join the radio, they are trained by the Media Sciences students on how to talk to the audience and interview experts. "When I initially started to work, my husband appreciated and encouraged me after listening to my voice on the radio," said Malliga Kaliappan, the community head of Kotturpuram. Listening to my programmes, many women from the neighbourhood joined Anna FM as members," she added.

Scripting and planning for most episodes are done by the students, with some help from the faculty. Then, community volunteers actively take part in the recording and shooting process.

Students communicate with community volunteers through heads such as Malliga about topics vetted by the faculty of Media Sciences at Anna University. "This year, our focus has been on Zero Waste Management and Climate Change," said Roshan, a second-

year student and a major contributor to Anna Community Radio. "We recorded 20 episodes – where students were involved from script writing, to taking vox pops from the people, inviting guests for the program, and anchoring."

"When students from the university approached me in Kotturpuram, I was extremely hesitant," recalled Malliga, who has been working at Anna FM since its inception. "When I agreed to be a community member, the administration promised me that the radio would support women empowerment," she said.

"Programmes such as *Magalir Neram* (Women's Time), *Nalam Peruvai Thozhi* (Get Well, my Friend), *Sakthi Arivaayadi* (Strength and Intelligence) were produced to create awareness among women about employment, education, and health."

Besides creating awareness amongst women, the community radio also curates special programmes for children such as *Siruvai Neram* (Children's Time), which encourages the talents of

children along with teaching them moral values through storytelling. The station also hosts special day programmes set around Environmental Day and National Yoga Day to talk about the significance of the programme. "This radio feels like our own home, where we produce shows that benefit our family and community. Anna FM has provided a platform to many women like me who would not have otherwise stepped out of their houses," adds Malliga.

Creating awareness can be a challenge. However, Anna FM has fused many aspects of the culture of the communities it represents to talk about the remedies for the problems they face. Over the years, the radio has showcased traditional Tamil folk arts in its programmes. "We have recently produced a *Villu Paatu* (an ancient form of musical storytelling) on teaching the correct method of breastfeeding to new mothers," adds Malliga.

Since Anna FM's inception, radio's popularity has taken a downturn. However, it continues to have importance for low-income and marginalised communities in modern times. "The internet is a huge upgrade, but it's not available for everyone," says Dr S Arulchelvan, head of Department of Media Sciences. "Radio on the other hand is still here, and our target audience is still avid users."

Despite radio being its primary platform, Anna FM is making strides at reaching a larger audience, with a new YouTube channel featuring snippets and shows.

"We could continue to expand on other platforms," says Dr Arulchelvan. "However, radio is one platform that works even in the most dire conditions." He points to the example Cyclone Michaung in December 2023, which hampered connectivity. "At the time, our radio was still on, and we provided important information with the help of All India Radio. Until there's a better alternative, the radio will always be our priority."