

THE WORD

Volume No 19

Issue No 7

March 15, 2019

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EC ups awareness drive

NARESH SINGARAVELU

CHENNAI: As Tamil Nadu gears up to vote on April 18 in the second phase of the Lok Sabha Elections, the Election Commission (EC) is stepping up its voter-awareness campaigns by roping in celebrities and displaying posters in several spots in the city.

Videos featuring actors Vijay Sethupathi and Vivek, cricketer Dinesh Karthik, and squash player Dipika Pallikal, are set to be played in cinemas from this week, said a government official.

Actor Vijay Sethupathi, in a video, is seen urging people to shed the "will-my-vote-even-matter" mentality, and to start actively following election related news.

He prods people to reject the money offered for votes and advises voters to analyse the candidate list and vote for the candidate who they think will serve the nation best.

Actor Vivek, cricketer Dinesh Karthik and squash player Dipika Pallikal are seen spreading awareness about the voter complaint helpline number -1950.

According to a press note dated February 22, 2019, available on the

Election Commission of India (ECI) website, the ECI has strengthened its voter helpline to make it easy for voters to get authentic information pertaining to their voter registration.

The range of services provided by the helpline number, 1950, had been refurbished and made easily accessible, said the press note.

Any user can call 1950 and obtain information about his/her voter details in the electoral roll, check for the status of his/her enrollment application and also lodge grievances.

To keep the political parties in check and ensure they do not violate the Model Code of Conduct, the EC has introduced the eVIGIL app.

As reported by Business Today, the app allows any person to click a

picture or record a 2 minute video in case there is a violation of the code of conduct. The photo or video can then be easily uploaded on the eVIGIL app.

The app will then use the location services of the mobile device to automatically pin-point the location.

Once the picture or the video is submitted, the citizen will get a Unique ID that will enable him to track and get updates on his mobile device.

The citizen can report as many violations as possible.

EC had also prepared awareness posters which would be displayed in metro stations, bus stops, and other prominent public places, said the official.

One such poster will educate voters about the voter verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT)

machines, a feedback system that allows voters to verify that their votes have been cast as intended.

Another poster campaign, which takes cue from actor Vijay-starrer Sarkar, has sought to create awareness about Section 49P of the Conduct of Elections Rules, 1961.

According to Section 49P, a voter who discovers that someone has already voted using their name, can approach the presiding officer, and if they satisfactorily answer questions relating to their identity, the voter is allowed to cast their vote on a 'tendered' ballot paper, which is then locked and sealed away.

Such votes are called 'tender votes' and are used when the margin of votes between two candidates is thin and the margin of victory is less than the number of tendered votes.

However, if a candidate secures victory by a large number of votes, these tendered votes are not usually considered since they cannot tip the scales in any manner.

For the verification process, the voter is required to produce any valid identification recognized by the EC after which they will be allowed to register their vote.



"If someone else voted in your name, worry not," - EC poster on Section 49P.

| AR MURUGADOSS ON TWITTER

New passport centre for North Chennai

PRIYANKA KAUL

CHENNAI: The new Passport Seva Kendra (PSK) on Rajaji Salai has come as a relief to the residents of North Chennai who earlier had to travel 15-20 km to get a new passport or get an old one renewed. The new unit has been set up in the General Post Office (GPO) at Parry's Corner and facilitates the document verification process.

The PSK verifies a maximum of 25 passport applications every day. Two officers from the Post Office itself have been recruited for facilitating the verification process at the centre. Before this, Chennai had only three PSKs in Aminjikarai, Tambaram and Saligramam, far from most localities in North Chennai. The residents here can now select the updated Rajaji Salai unit for the manual verification of documents after online application.

"We have been getting approximately 15-20 applicants per day, as for now. But if it increases, new alternatives will have to be looked into since we cannot accommodate more than 25", an official said.

P. Thanigaivel, a resident of Old Washermenpet got his passport from Nungambakkam 10 years ago. He did not have to travel far and got it renewed from Raja Salai.

Inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on January 28, the services have been sought from the GPO as a third party sourcing.



The 146-year-old landmark will now be named after former CM MGR. | WIKIMEDIA

Chennai Central renaming: Residents remain opposed

NARESH SINGARAVELU

CHENNAI: Residents of the city have largely mixed feelings about the Centre's decision to rename the iconic Chennai Central railway station after the late former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M G Ramachandran.

The announcement was made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in an election rally in Kilambakkam in Kanchipuram district. It was met with criticism by residents and opposition parties alike.

"The naming or renaming of the Central Railway Station is clearly a misplaced political stunt. The timing of the stunt, coming right before an election, is not lost on the people," said Manuraj Shunmugasundaram, spokesperson, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK).

"How can a 146 year-old

historical station be renamed after a political leader just for appeasing a section of the ruling AIADMK?" questioned Shivashankari (22), a software engineer based in the city.

Srinivasan (49), an auto driver who makes frequent trips to the station, said "I've been coming to the station for the last 23 years as an auto driver, and it will be difficult for me to start calling it by any other name."

On his social media page, Vincent D Souza, editor and publisher of a community newspaper Mylapore Times, called for people to flood the mailboxes of the Railway Minister, the Prime Minister, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and the Railway Board with their sentiments about the decision "Like thousands of others in the city and outside, we will continue to call it Chennai Central Station," he said.

The NDA Government had consented to rename at least 25 towns and villages in 2018, according to a report in The Times of India. People have criticised the attempt to gain political mileage by invoking MGR's legacy.

"The governments of Modi and Palaniswamy have feigned some concern or interest in the legacy of MG Ramachandran purely to derive unfair, illegal and what will be short timed political benefit," said Manuraj. Residents have echoed the view. "This is purely an election stunt to bring back MGR's name into the mainstream," reflects Santhosh (24), an IT professional.

However, Mani (55), a tea stall owner from Egmore, supports this decision. "Puratchi Thalaivar [MGR] is still relevant in today's politics. I am happy that the government has recognised his importance," he said.

Unorganised workers float list of demands

AMIR MALIK

CHENNAI: Workers in the unorganised sector have demanded that political parties address their demands and grievances and include them in the manifesto in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

"It is a dark age for the unorganised sector because of the policies that different governments implement at different times. Moreover, the dark age has worsened with the Modi Government at the Centre since 2014. We will hold a nation-wide protest on 27th March," said R Geetha of the Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangam at a meeting organised by trade unions in Tamil Nadu on March 14.

"After 33 years, a meeting for the unorganised workers is being organised. You can imagine our predicament," said Geetha. A loud response from the audience confirmed their pain.

Criticising the Modi government's policies, she said that in a country run by the informal sector, government schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-Dhan (PMSYM) was a lot of public money. According to the scheme, workers would get a pension of Rs 3000 only if they joined it. If they joined the scheme at 18 years of age they would have to pay Rs 55 with matching contributions from the Government. A worker joining the scheme at the age of 29 years would have to pay Rs 100 and at the age of 40 years he or she would have to contribute Rs 200.

"We have been protesting



"Dark age for the unorganised sector" - R Geetha | AMIR M.

continuously against the government. We demand that the changes made in the labour laws be revoked" said C. Thiruvettai, General Council member of Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). Earlier this year, the Union Cabinet approved an amendment to the Trade Union Act, 1926. Union leaders have said that the Government was trying to retain the power to interfere in the trade union activities.

"We reject the changes. What the Modi government did by turning 44 existing laws into 4 codes is unacceptable. They are asking us to inform the management 42 days in advance, rather than 14 days, if we want to hold a strike," said A. Subramani, National Secretary of Welfare Party of India. "In the name of ease of doing business, the Government has allowed 100% FDI. It is helping the corporates as much as it can. I won't say this is the BJP's policies; it is implementing the UPA's policies

with vigour," he added.

Raja Sridhar of the Hind Mazdoor Sabha said that the unorganised workers had been the most affected by demonetisation. Criticising the Prime Minister Jan Dhan Yojana and Ujjwala Yojana, he said that Narendra Modi, "not only left us money less but also pushed us to hunger."

The meeting demanded regularisation of a tri-party committee (Workers, Government and the Union) to have a dialogue, a budgetary allocation of 3 per cent creation of shelters for pavement dwellers and a minimum wage of Rs 75 per hour for domestic workers. Laxman from Orissa, who has been working in Chennai since 1995, said, "We do not have health cover. The minimum accident insurance should be Rs 5 lakh."

A S Kumar from All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICTU) asked, "Who will take care of the migrant workers in the unorganised sector?"

Kasimedu fishermen protest 'sudden' evictions

Port Trust official says they were given notice

N SINDHU

CHENNAI: Fishermen and fish vendors are protesting against the "sudden" removal of around 90 temporary sheds used to store fish in ice boxes, inside the Kasimedu Fishing harbour.

The temporary shelters were taken down by authorities from the Chennai Port Trust, as they needed around 300 metres space to widen the road within the harbour as part of the Ennore- Manali Road Improvement Project (EMRIP).

The fishermen claim that they were not informed or consulted by the officials. Most of the families living in the nearby NTO Kuppam say that the removal of the storage

units has affected their business.

"Last Tuesday, when all of us came for work around 10 a.m., the police and revenue officers came with eviction notices and asked us to vacate by afternoon. As this was a sudden move and not discussed with us, I am sure we will not even receive compensation," said M Balasekaran, a fish vendor.

However, Deputy Chairman of Chennai Port Trust Cyril George, said "The fishermen were informed on 25 February, then a public hearing was conducted on 04 March and even after that the fishermen were given two days of time. They have been asked to vacate time and again from 2010 itself for EMRIP."

As a replacement for the temporary shelters, currently 146 sheds have been built by the Chennai Port Trust in another part of the harbour. However, the fishermen say this is far away from the fish unloading area.

The labourers, who act as middlemen helping in unloading the fish, storing it and transporting it to the market, are now charging extra. The fish vendors also have to deposit rent for the new shelters.

"I have had my shop here for more than 10 years. The officials don't understand it is difficult to shift suddenly. It is easy and cheap only when the ice storage sheds are close to the fish unloading area," said Vijayakumar, a fish vendor.

Oil spills cause a rash of problems for Ennore fishermen

OMJASVIN MD

CHENNAI: The thick patches of oil floating on the Kosasthalaiyar River in Ennore pose a serious threat to health, say the fishermen who work in the area.

The oil discharge about two weeks ago has not only killed the aquatic life in the water but has also been a cause for skin lesions and rashes which is prevalent among most of the fishermen there, they say.

The industries behind the petrochemical discharge are a petroleum company on one side and a thermal power station on the other side of the Kosasthalaiyar river, allege the fishermen.

The oil discharge which is slowly spreading to other parts of

the Ennore Creek, into which the Kosasthalaiyar river flows, has affected the people of Kaatukuppam the most.

V.Desing (41), a fisherman of Kaatukuppam village in Ennore has developed skin rashes in his leg and also in other parts of his body. Desing says the skin lesions and rashes have become very common among villagers, so much so that they don't visit doctors anymore.

"Rashes reoccur as the water is filled with toxic chemicals," he says, adding that there's no point in getting treated medically. "Another reason for not visiting doctors is because of the availability of only private clinics nearby which charge Rs.600 per visit," he said.

According to a study done by the Aquaculture Foundation of India and the Anna University, the Ennore Creek is polluted with toxic chemicals such as mercury, lead, arsenic and cadmium. Skin lesions and rashes are commonly found in fishermen in the Kaatukuppam, Netukkuppam and Mugathwara Kuppam in Ennore.

Sasikumar (51) of Kaatukuppam, goes into the Creek everyday to fish and sometimes gets into the water to catch worms used as fish feed. "When we draw nets back to the boat from the water, we inevitably come in contact with the oil," he says. "We also get into the water to catch worms and get drenched in oil. Even if we take baths three to four times with shampoo, neither the

smell nor the oil stain leaves our body," he adds.

"I've often been getting eye irritation and itching but I can't afford to go to Stanley Hospital for treatment as it costs a day's livelihood," he said. "Hair does not grow in the places where oil patches touch our body," he adds.

As there are very few health centres or clinics in Ennore, fishermen occasionally go to Thiruvotriyur, which is 5 kilometres from Ennore for treatment.

Dr. Muthu Pandian, a general practitioner in a private clinic in Thiruvotriyur, who has been treating people for about two decades now said "The petrochemical products contain hydrocarbons, nickel, copper, and

vanadium. These cancerous chemicals can either block the pores of the skin or even get into the skin."

"Patients normally come to get treated for nausea, itching, headache and fatigue," says Pandian. Most of these issues are likely to get passed on to the next generation too, he claims.

Apart from affecting the ecology, habitat, people's health and livelihood, the toxic chemicals pose a huge threat to the future generation as well. "Our children are born with respiratory illnesses," say P.Bhaskar (40), a fisherman of the Netukkuppam village. The fish from the Creek are not purchased anymore because of the chemicals found in them. The Government has so far

not ordered the petrochemical companies to clean the oil sludge, the fishermen allege and claim that the oil leak is happening on a permanent basis now.

"The only thing that we can do is protest and ask for compensation from these industries," says Desing.

"We want the Creek back to its normal condition and we'll try to at least given our children a better future. We protest. We make complaints. The police tell us that they have passed our requests to the Collector. But the Collector gets transferred often enough that the new Collector needs time to get familiar with the matter," adds Desing. Despite the government's promise, nothing has happened on the ground.



Oil stains lives |OMJASVIN MD



The entrance door of the Amma Fitness Centre cluttered with posters | OMJASVIN M.D.

Amma gym in a state of neglect

OMJASVIN M.D.

CHENNAI: Amma Fitness Center, a gym operated by the Greater Chennai Corporation in Elephant Gate area which a few years ago had about fifty users every day now only has two or three, say people in the neighborhood.

In the recent years, the gym has faced complete neglect from the corporation authorities. The walls are dusty, the chairs dirty and the mirrors are broken. The gym only has one bench press equipment and a few dumbbells of same weight.

"Just a few months ago, somebody had erased the name 'Amma Fitness Center' from the name board and also erased Amma's picture from it," says R. Velmurugan, a scrap-merchant nearby. The name board only reads "Fitness Center." However, a

placard inside has the original name of the gym.

Located on Wall Tax Road in Elephant Gate, the gym was established four years ago by Dr. R. Pratap Kumar, Councilor of Ward 54 in Zone 5.

"There were neither officials nor trainers here to take care of the gym since its inception," says Joseph Durairaj (22), a youth from the neighborhood who goes to the gym occasionally. "We have put our own lock on the gym and have given the keys to a woman who lives nearby," he says.

"Although youth are very much interested in the gymnasium and fitness in my area, the bad condition of the gym and very minimal equipment do not attract many people," says Durairaj.

While the registration fee for a basic private gym costs at least Rs.

400 a month the corporation gyms are free of cost.

"What purpose does the gym serve? Sometimes we use this place as a hangout spot, we sit and chat with friends in the evening. Nobody has really come to inspect the condition of the gym," he says.

The entrance to the gym is cluttered with political posters, posters of birthday celebration of children in the area, and even death notices.

A. Vignesh (21) a resident of the area, says "There is no point in ambitiously setting up gyms all over the State if the Government is not interested in maintaining them."

Citing how corporate gyms are well-equipped, he says "We need better equipment like treadmill, dumbbells of different weights, and hydraulic machines."

Cable TV units want GST cut

NOELA. CORERA

CHENNAI: Tamizha Cable Operators Association (TCOA) has requested the Centre to reduce the GST on cable subscriptions from 18 per cent to 5 percent to help cable operators improve their business.

According to Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) ordered that DTH providers to allow customers to pick the channels they wanted and

pay for the only those channels. Earlier DTH customers paid for an entire package that contained channels that they did not want. Now DTH services had become cheaper than the cable connections.

Santhanam said that the imposition of 18 per cent Goods and Services Tax on cable connections could not be afforded by a majority of the people.

"The Centre has created a situation wherein channels that cost 100 rupees, now cost 1000 rupees.

These increased rates as well as the high rates that some networks charged the cable television operators had thrown a lot of people out of jobs. On top of this, the government has shifted cable TV from the 5 per cent GST bracket to the 18 per cent bracket. That's not good," he said.

Members of the TCOA were present at the Anna Arivalayam to talk to the DMK leader and the leader of the Opposition in the TN legislative Assembly M K Stalin to discuss a suitable course of action in order to get the government to reduce these taxes on cable TV subscriptions.

"All channels should be accessible to the people, especially the poor. The state government is trying to get rid of cable operators, and this means the loss of many jobs," Santhanam said.

"We have written to the GST council, now we have Stalin's backing as well," he added.

A cable television operator said the new TRAI rule would help people living in other states where the cable prices were high, unlike as in Tamil Nadu.

Local cable operators feared that they would lose their revenue share because of this new rule.



The Tamizha Cable Operators Association (TCOA) during a press meet in Chennai. | GOOGLE IMAGES, TCOA

Maa Ulaa to expand its service

Bike-taxis run by differently abled, aims to cover all of India

NIKEETA GAUTAM

CHENNAI: It started with adversity that K. Balaji (36) had to face because of what he says were long working hours at a corporate office. Balaji, who caught a disease affecting his spinal cord, went into depression after leaving the job. He joined yoga classes and he used to drop his yoga teacher Ramalingam at home.

Ramalingam then suggested that Balaji start a two-wheeler taxi service. Upon this suggestion, Balaji started Maa Ulaa, a bike taxi service in January, 2016. He was joined by Mohamed Gaddaffe as a co-founder and investor later.

Now, the service engages around 80 drivers in Chennai, 30 drivers in Tirunelveli and around 10 in Madurai. All the drivers are differently abled.

"The Tamil Nadu Government has been providing scooters to all the differently abled persons since 2005," said Gaddaffe, who is a polio patient.

Balaji said "Also, it is very difficult for differently abled people to stay in a corporate setup for more than 3-4 hours, so this re-sharing platform is a convenient option for them to earn."

In the beginning, it was very hard for the bike-taxi to get passengers as people used to hesitate to get on a bike ridden by a differently abled person. However now, Balaji says that most Chennaiites recognise their t-shirt and board with Maa Ulaa's logo. The drivers charge Rs 10 per km.

Maa Ulaa, which has been operating from 8 pm to 6 am till now has not charged any fee for the drivers. Now, the company is gradually turning into a profit-making company. Maa Ulaa launched an app in January as the first step



Mohamed Gaddaffe, co-founder, Maa Ulaa, on his bike-taxi. | NIKEETA GAUTAM

towards commercialisation and expansion. The company from now onwards will levy two per cent of the drivers' revenue as a service charge.

"We are gradually planning to expand our service to other States for which we need a cash flow," said Gaddaffe.

The company plans to provide helmets for the passengers and a holder for GPS devices for its drivers very soon.

The bike-taxi service is registered in Social Welfare Ministry as a non-profit service. However, the company is waiting for authorisation from Road Transport Ministry to register itself as a profit making company now.

A. Muthu, joint transport commissioner, said "Bike taxis are not legal in Tamil Nadu. But, due to its increasing popularity and since it has become a convenient means of travelling for many people, proposal has been sent to the government for legal approval."

Maa Ulaa was approached by Ola and Vroom. But, the startup wanted to keep its business and at the meantime wanted its drivers who are all differently abled to work on their own time.

"We never pressure our members. If we get acquired by a bigger company, we can't continue this flexible work schedules," says T. Alagurajan. (26), one of the bike-taxi drivers.



Cold storage to aid vendors in the Koyambedu fishmarket | N. SINDHU

Cold storage gets a facelift

N. SINDHU

CHENNAI: Vendors at the Koyambedu wholesale market will now be able to store their vegetables and fruits for up to a month at the newly inaugurated 2,500 tonne cold storage facility which belongs to Tamil Nadu Co-operative Marketing Federation Ltd (TANFED).

The facility was renovated at a cost of Rs 2.15 crore, for the first time since it was installed at the market by former Chief Minister J. Jayalalitha in 1995. It has been upgraded with provisions to set different temperatures for different commodities which would ensure a longer shelf life for vegetables and fruits.

The vendors are charged between Rs 14 and Rs 150 a month depending on the commodity and the quantity they want to store.

"The vendors can store fruits,

vegetables and dairy products like milk, curd, ghee, butter and milk for a minimum of three days and a maximum of a month at the cold storage. We also plan to install trolley systems and lifts later to avoid manual operation," said John Ashirvad, store manager at the TANFED cold storage unit.

Though the facility offers longer shelf life, it does not guarantee the good quality of vegetables. So some vendors do not prefer using the cold storage facility.

"I prefer selling all the vegetables I have before the day ends. Sometimes when we keep the vegetables in the cold storage, they tend to shrink, especially tomatoes and brinjals. People then refuse to buy those vegetables and we are forced to dump them at the end of the day," said Durairajan, a vegetable vendor at the market.

Earlier, due to poor maintenance of the cold storage facility, vendors

had used mini cold storage units within their shops or private cold storage units on Poonamallee High Road and Madhavaram where the costs are much higher. The vendors also had to incur transportation charges and this was one of the reasons behind the rise in the prices of fruits and vegetables, they said.

"The facility was poorly maintained. Different vegetables used to be stored together at the same temperature because of which they would sometimes rot and start stinking. As not many people were using the facility two years back, the officials also started storing non-perishable commodities like green chillies and coriander," said Rajammal, a vegetable vendor at the Koyambedu vegetable market.

Similarly, eight storage facilities were also opened at Madurai, Thiruvannamalai, Virudhunagar and Tirupur in Tamil Nadu.

Creating wealth out of waste

NIKITA SINGH

CHENNAI: A one-room shop situated amidst the tenements in Chitra Nagar in Kotturpuram has survived 20 years just selling waste to people in the area and elsewhere. Aseem (42), who runs the NSA Waste Mart for the past two decades dispatches the paper waste to the Paperman Foundation for recycling, while the glass bottles and card board boxes and are usually bought by the local residents.

A 22-year old student Nandini, who lives across the street, regularly sells her paper waste to NSA. "I have bought plastic and glass containers from the waste mart. We buy it for a price much cheaper than the market rates," she said.

The colony houses mostly daily wagers including domestic workers, construction workers, plumbers and drivers, who buy goods from the NSA for reuse.

"Much of the waste is collected from the affluent streets around Kotturpuram. The collected glass and metal waste is clean and reusable," says Aseem, who was taken over the scrap business from his father and later expanded the business putting in place sustainable practices WHAT ARE THEY? after coming in contact with the Paperman Foundation.

Dheeraj, a 25-year-old owner of jewellery shop in the area, says "The mart helps us reduce the waste in the area, although there is a lot more awareness required. People still throw out the waste from their windows here. Neither, do they segregate waste unless its glass or paper that they can sell."

A day in the corridors of justice

PRAGATI K.B.

CHENNAI: On the crowded sidewalk of the busy Parry's Corner, opposite the Madras High Court building, street hawkers are haggling with customers. Winding her way through the crowd, Tanvi N. S. nods and smiles at the hawkers, most of them, her clients.

Her office has been fighting their eviction case for years now.

Tanvi works with her parents V. Suresh, National General Secretary, PUCL and Nagasaila, both veteran advocates. Their modest office in Hussaina Manzil has a portrait of K. G. Kannabiran, her parents' mentor, as the only piece of adornment on the walls.

"They still abide by his principles, of charging on the basis of the case and not on the basis of the client," Tanvi says.

Most of their clients are marginalised and underprivileged.

"We don't get enough money and cannot afford more lawyers. Our office has a clerk, my father, mother and me. One junior joined

recently. My parents are two lawyers doing the work of six," she says. Because of the sheer workload her parents had, she got an opportunity to submit her first final arguments before a judge just three months into practice, in 2015. Junior lawyers generally wait for years before arguing their first case.

That case, she recalls dealt with police atrocities against a group of refugees. "The judge agreed that yes, there was police harassment and misuse of power, and yet dismissed the case," she says.

"I keep wondering if I should have presented it differently and whether I wasn't the right person to tell the judge. I don't know," she says.

"People my age are not opting for such litigation anymore. Law school does not prepare us for it either. The coaching is very corporate law centric," she says.

Tanvi earns Rs. 30,000 per month, after having worked for three years; but her friends in the corporate law sector started with a pay package of Rs. 8 lakh to Rs 12 lakh per annum.

"The pay gap is huge. And that is the appeal of those jobs," she says and adds that she has herself contemplated jumping into the corporate sector. "Of course it bothers me that I can't afford to take those exotic holidays that some of my friends can," Tanvi says.

As Tanvi goes about preparing and organising documents, records and manuals for the day's hearings, she explains that she has a service matter, regarding recruitments to the post of Sanitation Inspectors with the Greater Chennai Corporation, tabled before the court.

Completion of a certificate course after 10th standard was one of the criteria for these appointments until the rules were amended and a post-graduate diploma was mandated instead. The Gandhigram University had wrongfully claimed monopoly in this latter course for over 30 years now, to the chagrin of the students of other universities and colleges. Gandhigram students were given preference in recruitments because of this, and Tanvi's clients, students of one such university- the

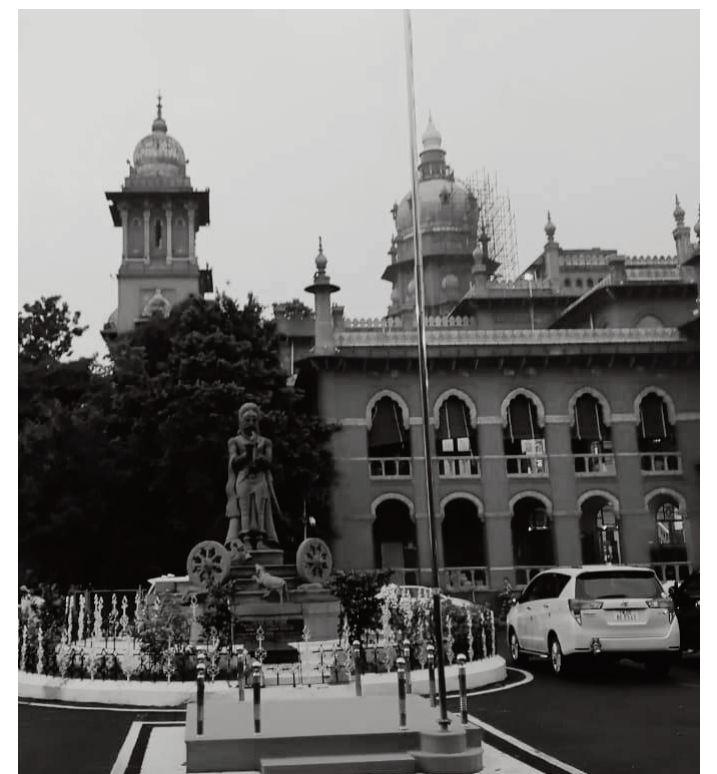
Madurai Kamraj University were contesting this.

"This is the third litigation in the matter and I'm tired of this case," she says. However, Tanvi's office has successfully stayed the recruitment of 110 posts until the matter is resolved.

While Tanvi waits to argue this matter, her father is arguing a "high-stakes" matter in Court Hall 6. He has been appointed amicus curiae in a suo motu case regarding the illegal mining of beach sand on the coast of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Orissa.

"Beach sand has radioactive material in the natural state, which when extracted fetches a lot of money. Lakhs of tonnes of this sand has been mined illegally, and my father has been trying to prove this," Tanvi explains.

"I'm not saving the world. I don't want to have a savior complex, because it is unfair to the victim. I'm not doing them a favour by appearing for them on a case, I'm only doing my job," Tanvi says and adds that not giving herself too much credit is how she manages to go on advocating everyday.



Madras High Court building. | PAVITRA VENKATESWARAN

Mahilas build trains at ICF

Women's team also provides services for retired employees

NEETHU S

CHENNAI: Welding, hammering and forging steel have always been considered difficult tasks performed only by men.

However, at the Integral Coach Factory (ICF), women fitters and welders of the Mahila Shakthi Squad have broken this perception and helped build a train by welding metal.

The Mahila Shakthi section of the factory is engaged in fabricating heavy structures like stainless steel sidewalls and arc welding.

They weld and forge the shell of the coach into the correct shape; the task that previously belonged to male workers.

Some of the women are also involved in the making of temperature sensing devices and inspection of lights, cables and circuit breakers.

"Twenty five women are working in my section. The squad is all about teamwork. In my section, it's just like everything fell right", said R Sharulatha, Senior Section Officer of shop 20.

The Mahila Shakthi members of this shop had manufactured an entire coach last year.

The brainchild of ICF General Manager Sundanshu Mani, the



Mahila Shakthi members working at the welding section in the ICF | V GANESAN

Mahila Shakthi division was started in March 2018.

"Members of this section are proving that women can take up manufacturing works and not just soft, simple jobs" said Lavanya, Chief Publicity Officer, ICF.

"The squad is the first such group of its kind in the Indian Railways", she added.

Hema Ramesh, Assistant Personnel manager, ICF, said "Currently ICF has 130 members in

nine Mahila Shakthi teams".

"A majority of the squad consists of workers in the age group of 22 to 57 years", she added.

The workers have completed ITI and diploma courses and selected after training and test.

"I was very happy to be a part of the team. It encouraged me in many ways", said the 61 year old Muniyammal, a retired welder who was in the Mahila Shakthi team till last year.

Apart from the heavy tasks, the Mahila Shakthi team in the settlement section are providing services for the retired employees.

"We feel proud and supported that people are recognising our work", said Lekha M, member of the team.

"Our work might seem like a tough task for others, but people working here are thrilled to get in the production of coaches," she added.

Their life is waste

NIKITA SINGH

CHENNAI: The pungent smell of rotting waste and toxic air particles are nothing unusual for the 43-year-old Saroja, one of the hundreds of workers who separate waste at the garbage mounds in the Kodungaiyur dump yard along the Tondiarpet High Road.

Saroja, who belongs to a family of rag pickers like many of her counterparts, has been rummaging through the waste with bare hands and at times barefoot for the past 30 years.

"We injure ourselves at times. We are aware of the risk of infections, but we cannot afford to go to the doctor each time. Many of us have already extracted respiratory issues and skin allergies," she said.

The area's rag pickers—many of them senior citizens, disabled persons and children, have been battling to get formally inducted as a worker of the Greater Chennai Corporation for years.

At present, the Chennai Corporation formally employs about 45 workers at the dump yard which is 269 acres and receives at least 1,600 tonnes of waste every day.

A Superintending Engineer at the Solid Waste Management department of Chennai Corporation said that the government body did not plan to employ any more



Rag picker near Kodungaiyur dumpyard | NIKITA SINGH

workers at the dumpyard.

"We provide masks, aprons, shoes and jackets to the workers at the dump yards. Two sets of uniform are provided to each of them. Every three months medical camps are conducted for the dump yard workers. Moreover, loans are made available to them through the National Safai Karamchari Commission."

However, the rag pickers said they did not get these in the absence of a formal contract.

"There are no other jobs that I

can get," said a 27-year-old Manoj, who had begun working as a rag picker at the age of eight and had never been to a school.

"I earn Rs 500 a day here but there are many risks involved. We even find bio-medical waste here at times."

Although the Chennai Corporation official denied any chances of medical waste being dumped there, several rag pickers said they dealt with the red and green coloured bags of medical waste.

Women face phone harassment daily

MUSKAAN SHARMA

CHENNAI: One in three Indian women in Indian metro cities reported receiving lewd calls and text messages, according to a recent survey by Truecaller, a popular phone number identification app with a 100 million active users in India.

Sangeeta Priya, 20, a B.Sc. 3rd year student at Dr. MGR Janaki College of Arts and Science for Women said that among her classmates, receiving explicit text messages is "quite common."

"They are mostly WhatsApp messages. They introduce themselves and when we say we do not know them, they call it a wrong number but try to continue the conversation on pretext," she added.

While the students discuss these incidents among themselves, they rarely confide in their parents about them.

"The students do not tell their parents as they fear their phones might be taken away, so they tell us. But since the numbers are different every time, we cannot do much to help other than asking them to block the numbers," said a professor in the English

department of the college.

However, another student, G Greeta, 18, said that a month ago her entire class of 44 students received WhatsApp video calls from the same number over the period of a week.

"Two of our classmates lost their phones around that time. We think someone accessed our class's WhatsApp group from one of the phones," she added.

The phenomenon of phone harassment is rife as 52 per cent of women surveyed by Truecaller said that they received calls or texts once a week filled with sexual content; while 45 per cent said they received sexual videos and pictures, 9 per cent of women reported facing such harassment almost daily.

Additionally, the survey reported that 38 per cent of women reported the harassment in 2018 to the police as compared to 10 per cent in 2017.

A sub-inspector at the Cyber Crime Cell said that even though they were aware of the recurrent unwanted messages and calls on apps like WhatsApp, they had not received a high number of complaints about them from women.



Growing popularity of coworking spaces

NIKEETA GAUTAM

CHENNAI: Entrepreneurs, professionals and freelancers are getting logistics and opportunity to interact with like-minded individuals with less effort and expense in coworking spaces.

Coworking spaces which are offices shared by employees from different organizations, are disrupting the traditional work environment.

Breejesh Ganesh, Founder of Acuzen, a software startup, who uses Artisans Lab as his office space, says "Here, we get to meet professionals and freelancers from diverse background. We engage in insightful conversation and sometimes get to collaborate in business deals."

People from diverse backgrounds including IT, digital design, writing and others come to our space, says Abdul Rahman, founder of Artisan Lab which started in 2017.

Rahman says that when they started their space, they had to educate youths and startups about concept of sharing working space for rent.

Spaces like AtWork, Artisan Lab and Karya are not incubators. They only provide space and a platform to get mentorship and investment.

AtWork launched in 2014 when the concept of co-working had just begun in Chennai mainly targets the early stage tech-based startups. "Coworking space is not only about getting a table and chair, it is about sharing each others' experiences, learning from each others' mistakes, asking



Professionals from diverse background coworking at Karya space. | NIKEETA GAUTAM

suggestions from people around, helping with each other's network and growing," says Ashwin Shanker, founder of AtWork.

These spaces charge Rs 5,000 to Rs 8,000 per desk monthly depending upon the needs of the customer. Basic facilities like desk, chair, electricity, WiFi, parking and tea or coffee, meeting halls come under the basic package for every co-worker.

There are other places which

provide coworking spaces for high-end MNCs and corporate sectors.

"It is a cost-effective option for companies that want to set up certain departments here," says Karan Madan, Chennai Center Manager of Ikeva.

Similarly, Smart Works, another coworking space caters to the needs of BPOs and MNCs. These spaces charge around Rs 10,000 to Rs 12,000 per desk a month.

Artisan Lab welcomes

foreigners and backpackers too. Karya hosts events including board gaming, meet-ups and idea sharing platforms during nights and weekends. AtWorks frequently organises workshops on design thinking.

The high end spaces Smartworks and Ikeva hosts formal mentorship programmes for the startups co-working with them.

Founders and coworkers say that only professions requiring

repetitive operations like software, marketing and designing can thrive in co-working spaces. Departments like R & D, human resource and other areas which always require research are not found working well in this kind of work environment.

Sandhya Raju, community manager of Smartworks says that retail is an area which cannot come in the co-working space as it has to deal with a large number of customers.

Though coworking spaces are becoming popular, there are some challenges, mostly because of absence of a startup policy till recently when Tamil Nadu government released 'Startup & Innovation policy 2018-2023' in January 2019.

K. Yevanth, branch manager of Osprey Shipping, a Singapore based company has set up its space in Karya. "This is a better option because we can start with just two months of deposit and every logistics is taken care of."

"However, we had to leave iShare, a coworking space based on Anna Salai nine months ago because a big company came up with a huge number of employees which compelled the small departments like us to move out," he shares.

Another challenge is that if the companies register their office address with the name of the coworking space, the founders can have problem.

"Many times, we get into trouble when the co-habiting companies don't file their income tax on time," says Ashwin Shanker.

Couple feeds 80 homeless people daily

MUSKAAN SHARMA

CHENNAI: In her kitchen in Madipakkam, 30-year-old Shareen Joshua cooks lunch for herself, her husband, Johnson and around 80 others every day.

The couple has taken it upon themselves to provide a meal a day to the homeless around the city through their NGO called 'Feed of Love'

"In 2014, while on our way to home, we saw a man crying with hunger at the Velachery station. We gave him a food parcel we were carrying and kept coming back to give him packets of food every day until one day we were told that he died in the night. We started Feed of Love to help out others like him," said Shareen.

When they started out, the couple bought packets of food from eateries and restaurants but had to stop as the process became too expensive and the quality of food deteriorated.

"From 2017, I started to cook food everyday by 2 p.m. and my

husband ensures it is distributed by 6 p.m.," she says.

While the couple buys all the essential food supplies with their own money, they do receive occasional donations of rice, oil and money from their friends and neighbours.

But the donations are not regular so the couple spends around Rs. 17,000 every month on supplies other than fresh vegetables.

"Some months we might get a few bags of rice but then we won't get any for the next two months. Since we do not have any constant sponsor, the donations are random," says Jonathan.

The duo reaches out to the homeless in Tambaram, Pallavaram, Chromepet, Guindy, Alandur and some areas of Velachery and Taramani.

They are supported by seven volunteers who reach out through social media but, the volunteers are not regular and assist them only for a little time.

"If we can get more volunteers we can expand our reach, cook

more and feed more people", he says.

However, the couple does not feed everyone on the streets.

"We reach out to people who cannot afford to feed themselves regularly. These are people who are deaf and dumb or suffer from mental illnesses. Most of them are extremely old and frail and cannot move," says Shareen.

To ensure that only the neediest get the food, Jonathan does what Shareen calls "a 24 hour check".

"He dresses up like a homeless person and sits with the beggars for a day. We get permission from the local police to do so.

He sleeps with them too and keep a lookout for anyone who gives them food or enough money to buy food. Another friend of ours keeps checking on him once in every four hours," she says.

The two also keeps in touch with the people they help and monitor them for over a year. When they gain their trust, they try to rehabilitate them by sending them to government shelters.



Jonathan Joshua distributes packets of food to homeless women in Madipakkam | MUSKAAN SHARMA

Police thwart protest

AMIR MALIK

CHENNAI: Around 520 workers were detained on March 12 to prevent their protest against Royal Enfield and they were released late in the evening, according to a union official. "The police took us to Chrompet police station, 200 workers were from Royal Enfield and the rest were from other unions," said Sampath from the Working People Trade Union Council.

"Around 175 workers were terminated. Some office bearers were sent to other States," he added. A senior police official said "The demonstration was not allowed as the Model Code of Conduct for the Lok Sabha election has come into effect barring any procession." However Sampath said "We had earlier taken the permission. The police did not communicate us about the conduct." The workers have been demanding increase in wages and bonus and permanent jobs.

Chandrika, a labour activist, said "This was the third protest in a

series by workers from various factories including L&T Valve, Simpsons, Rane TRW Group, GE Alstom and Amrutanjan. Much as in the previous protests in Thiruvottiyur and one in Hosur, the police detained the workers. However this time, the police did not even allow the workers to assemble and raise slogans."

Sampath claimed "Our protests have reached Global ears. Industrial Global Union has urged the Royal Enfield management to withdraw all action against us." The Financial Express quoted the global union as saying that "We are deeply concerned over continuing violations of workers' rights and vindictive actions against the staff at Royal Enfield's Oragadam plant in Chennai."

"More than 290 workers were subjected to the vindictive action. Around 174 trainee workers, employed for more than 480 days, legally eligible to become permanent workers, were sent home" Valter Sanches, the global union leader was quoted as saying by The Financial Express.

Regulate Tik Tok, say users

NEETHUS

CHENNAI: Tamil Nadu Information Minister M Manikandan might want the Tik Tok app banned, but the public in the State is split on whether there should be a blanket ban on the platform or just proper regulation of it.

Manikandan recently announced that the State would move to ban the app due to its explicit content. However, according to reports in The Hindu, IT experts believe that the app, which has over 100 million downloads on Play Store, can only be regulated.

Tik Tok allows users to upload 15-second videos on social media platforms.

"As people who are passionate about acting use Tik Tok, banning it would take away an opportunity to express their talents. It should be regulated," said Deepika R, a student of Dr. MGR Janaki College, Chennai.

Midhila Madhav, a researcher at Anna University, believes the app should be banned. "People are getting addicted to it. It is full of vulgar and explicit content," she said.

According to some, suspending/ banning accounts of those who misuse the app will help. "Instead of a complete ban, specific accounts that publish and share vulgar content must be banned," said Mahalakshmi R, a resident of Adyar.

Apart from explicit content, the app also throws up 'challenges' promoting public nuisance. In Kerala, the police had to issue a warning to youth who were dancing in front of moving vehicles as part of 'Nillu Nillu' challenge.

According to a report in The New Indian Express, a 23-year-old jumped in front of a train in

Vyasarpadi last October, allegedly because he was trolled for dressing up as a woman in one of his Tik Tok videos.

Selvapriya K, a lab technician in Adyar, said that making the app a paid app would reduce the menace.

Karthika Selvaraj, a lecturer in a city college, thinks the app is diverting youngsters from studies. "Young school children are recording videos in their school uniforms, thereby disclosing their whereabouts, which is making them vulnerable to bullying," she added.

Others said it is disrupting social life. "Instead of people-people relations, there are people-technology relations now," said Karthikayan, a resident of Adyar.

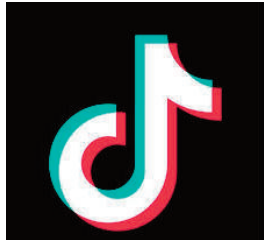
Most respondents believe users upload explicit videos to make it go

viral online and gain popularity.

"Proper channelisation can convert this app into an app to showcase talent," said Manikandan R, a resident of Thiruvanniyur. However, Ananthan K, a resident of Santhome said it was high time the government banned it. "It's the fault of the government. Some countries have already banned the app," said the 28-year-old.

A Sub Inspector at the Cyber Cell, Vepery, said "apps like Tik Tok are very vulnerable. While it makes a celebrity out of its users, it also exposes children and adults to a wide range of risks. It is better not to download such apps."

He said that the cell was getting a lot of complaints about the content posted in the app. "As it is a Chinese app, we cannot ban it. It can be done by the CERT-In [Indian Computer Emergency and Response Team] and we are taking measures to prevent the creation and spreading of obscene content," he added.



Chennai City FC to pull out of Super Cup

NOEL A CORERA

CHENNAI: Chennai City Football Club (FC), along with six other I-league clubs, have announced their decision to withdraw from the Hero Super Cup, until the All India Football Federation (AIFF) clarifies the future of the I-League.

The Super Cup, a knockout tournament, is scheduled to start on March 15 with the top six teams each from the I-League and the Indian Super League (ISL) competing. Four more teams from the remaining eight will join the tournament after battling it out in the qualifying rounds.

Recently crowned the I-league champions after beating Minerva Punjab FC in their last fixture, Chennai City FC might have to play in the 2nd tier of the new format of Indian Football formulated by the AIFF.

Under the new format, the I-League and the ISL will be merged and a new league will be formed. Only the Kolkata giants Mohun Bagan and East Bengal will be in the first division of the new league.

The Chennai City FC which recently shifted base to Coimbatore was on the brink of relegation to the second division of I-League last season. However, it managed to turn the tide, unlike its counterpart Chennaiyin FC, which came last in the ISL this season.

However, Chennaiyin FC will still play in the first division of the new premier Indian league, along with the Mohun Bagan and East Bengal.

However, I-League CEO Sunando Dhar told the press, "There might not be relegation and promotion for the first couple of seasons."

This means that for the next few

years, Chennai City FC will have to fight it out in the second division.

Last season, the same happened with surprise I-League champions Aizawl FC. However, they appealed to the AIFF and protested against the merger of the two leagues, which was then cancelled. This year, Chennai City FC, Quess East Bengal, Mohun Bagan, NEROCA FC, Aizawl FC, Gokulam Kerala FC and Minerva Punjab FC are protesting against the inefficiency of AIFF.

22-year-old winger Alexander Jesuraj, who was in town for personal reasons, hopes to play in the top division one day. "All my teammates are ecstatic about becoming I-League champions this season. We heard about the merger, but we haven't thought much about it yet because we're still celebrating," he said.



Akimoto (centre) with the chefs at AKI BAY | PRIYANKA KAUL

For the love of Japanese food

PRIYANKA KAUL

CHENNAI: If you're a fan of Anime or you read Manga comics, you obviously must have dreamt of slurping Ramen or Sushi the traditional way- with chopsticks! To make this dream come alive, Satoshi Akimoto has brought delicious Japanese food to Chennai.

Owner of the AKI BAY @TVR, Akimoto quit his job in the R&D department at Nissan, Tokyo to start the restaurant in Chennai. Akimoto and Chennai got first acquainted to each other a few years back when he was sent for a 10-month long project in the city. Even at the age of 43, there was nothing that could stop him from doing something different.

In Chennai he found the 'authentic' Japanese food was spicy, in complete contrast to how it tasted in Japan.

"In Japan, there are 35,000 ramen (noodle) restaurants and 7,000 new ones open up every year as it is like a staple food there. Here, I could actually introduce the original ramen and get people acquainted with it, other than sushi which has already gained popularity," says Akimoto who took a two week intensive course to learn cooking before opening a restaurant.

It was a big decision to quit his job and leave his family in Japan to come to Chennai and exhaust all his savings on a new venture. He had to sell his apartment in Japan for funds. His wife, jokingly, had

said she wanted to divorce him, but he was firm on his idea.

In Chennai there were other problems.

"There have been times when we had no electricity, and I held my phone's flash light while the customers had the food. Isn't it a sign that they actually enjoyed the food? That is encouraging enough for me," he grins.

"It was my last chance to jump into a new country and be the number one," he says.

On whether he was ever scared that his idea might sink, he replies with a confident smile.

"No. If I ever had even a bit of doubt about it, I would have actually never started it."

AKI BAY @ TVR in RA Puram can boast of its authentic Japanese cuisine because of the team in the kitchen.

One of the chefs is from Japan while the other was recently taken on board and has 17 years of experience in Japanese cuisine.

Chicken Gyoza (dumplings) and Chicken Karaage (Japanese fried chicken) are the most loved, apart from Paintan and Chintan (ramen variations).

Keeping in mind the Indian palette, more extensive and spicier add-ons might be introduced in the menu soon as the Japanese population in Chennai is just around 1500.

"I want Chennaites to enjoy the authenticity for which AKI BAY was opened. But some exclusives might be added soon as well," he said.

REVIEW

Some gore and screams, but very little more

PRAGATI K B

CHENNAI: The trailer of the play ends with "this is not for the faint hearted." Later, the anchor, after asking the audience to turn off their mobile phones, sombrely again announces "the play is not for the faint hearted. In case of emergencies, the exits are on the right, left and back."

However, Subject UH1317, touted a psychological thriller, merely offered loud screams, some gore and straightforward visuals to an audience who were anticipating a jolt and scare show.

Light and Blind Production's second play, Subject UH1317, is an investigator's reconstruction of a Russian sleep experiment conducted on three prisoners during the Cold War.

The investigator pores over documents and dictaphone records to learn of the horrors that transpired within the sealed chamber where the experiment was conducted. This particular experiment is supposed to be a Creepypasta legend, a user-

generated microfiction aimed at scaring readers, and one doesn't know if it is based on true facts.

The prisoners or subjects are promised freedom after 30 days in return for their cooperation with the experiment. Their confinement chamber is administered with Gas 761A, which eliminates the need to sleep and has "enormous military potential."

All three convicts are sexual offenders with very dark and murky pasts. As days pass, we see them getting restless with violent mood swings.

The smallest of stimuli elicits a strong reaction. And all along, the audience waits with bated breath for the shock that they were promised, but in vain.

On day 14 of the experiment, the gas has affected the subjects' cognition and their personal fears start taking hold.

We are made privy to their offences and their life events which lead up to the offences through their hallucinations.

This segment of the play makes wonderful use of music and had

the potential to give the play some layered depth. But simplistic reading of complex issues, even though boldly portrayed, was an opportunity lost.

An artist that likes to inflict pain upon his lovers and portray that pain in his paintings because "pain is an emotion that has not been celebrated," a young Oedipal son that commits matricide since he loves his mother and "that was the only way [he] could have [her]," and a repressed cross-dresser who pushes his son into prostitution- all get a linear treatment.

The actors did a commendable job in these scenes of reckoning. Worthy of mention are Hari Ramakrishnan, the director of the play, who played the Oedipal son; Shubb Mukherjee, the artist; Denver Anthony Nicholas, the cross-dresser and Ponni Suresh, the cross-dresser's son.

There was enough blood in these scenes, added by make-up artist Dasaradhan, to make the "faint-hearted" gag and the rest sigh.



The cast engaging with audience during the show | NEHA M

A CHANGE FROM WHAT WE GET

NEHA MALARA

CHENNAI: With no stage, no lights, no costumes and no director, the play 'What SHE wants', was a change from the usual crop that preaches feminism. Eight women and seven men took to the Besant Nagar beach early Sunday morning (March 3) for a play whose cast was the city.

Clad in black, the actors broke character and storyline as they engaged with the audience. The idea behind the 20-minute play was to get people to question their idea of feminism and equality. It focused on the issues faced by a girl child, a young woman, a newlywed and a woman in her late fifties. This was meant to convey how women face barriers in all stages of their life.

They presented scenes from everyday life; from public to private spaces; from home to office to parks; they presented the subtle and inherent biases against women.

While sexual harassment is an oft-repeated issue for many, we forget that society discriminates in many other, often ignored, ways. The play implored the audiences to question their own behavior towards the women in their life.

The play was performed by Yaazh street play team and organized by the Dhagam Foundation, which has been at the helm of women empowerment in the city since 2015. It protested against the rise in tax on sanitary napkins. It also undertook a massive survey of 600 public

toilets to show the poor state of sanitation for women.

Scripted by Saivarsha Seetharaman, the play was as engaging as it was simple. With no great proclamations or theories, it aimed at a simple objective that celebration of women cannot be confined to a single day while their problems are ignored on other days.

It hit the mark as many people engaged in conversations with the performers after the play.

"We need more platforms to discuss such issues. Not just the greater issues like domestic abuse and sexual harassment but also small things that make them uncomfortable," said Nithin R, a college student.

Govind Murugan, Convenor of the volunteer-led organization, said, "Sexual harassment is not the only problem women face. From birth to death, there are problems. We need people to understand and give them clarity on their own behavior." He said plays like these were meant to not preach but get people, especially men, to question their attitudes.

He emphasised, "Men are the main audience as they need to change first." He also said that the larger issues aside, even small things like casual sexism in everyday life needed to be addressed.

Murugan also stressed that the government had not even begun to accept the daily struggles of women. He felt that the women were criticized if they raised their voice against any issues.



'Subject UH1317' was performed at Alliance Francaise this Sunday | PRIYA PRINCE



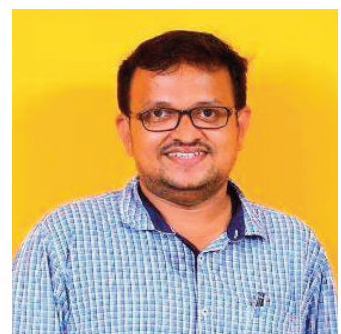
A mime in time to save lives on the road

NEHA MALARA

CHENNAI: Every Sunday, Veeramani Sekar paints his face white, hangs a board with safety rules written on it around his neck and stands at traffic signals in Ambattur.

For the next two hours, he tells people to put their seatbelt on, taps on their windows if they are talking on the phone and even helps people put their helmets on. Sekar is deaf and dumb but his expressions have been the life of Ambattur for the last two years. A mime artist, you are his target if you are breaking traffic rules.

Sekar is part of the Accident Free Nation, an initiative by the Thozhan Foundation that is working to create awareness of traffic rules in the city since 2012.



Veeramani Sekar | THOZHAN

He is loved by the people, who enquire after him if he misses even a single Sunday at his unofficial post at the Ambattur signal.

However, not everyone approves of his "vigilantism".

Radhakrishnan M, Founder of Thozhan, says, "People often

threaten or shout at him from their cars or bikes but at that distance, he thinks they are encouraging him. So, he carries on blissfully unaware."

Three people from the Foundation are always around him to keep the situation from going out of hand.

Sekar became a part of the Accident Free Nation after an accident four years ago where his daughter, Annusha, who is now in third standard, was injured.

Since then, he has performed at events in colleges, schools and firms. However, he prefers the streets as it gives him greater mobility.

It is hard to imagine the shy Sekar as a crusader of civic responsibility. But the minute he starts miming, it is hard to take

your eyes away from him. His movements are deliberate as he clips his imaginary helmet on, drives an imaginary car while talking on the phone.

However, his most endearing moment is when he says sorry, with his tongue hanging out and head tilted to a side. He has had more practice with the "sorry face", as he calls it, than with his other movements.

Sekar said that two drunken men, one bearded and the other well-built, almost hit him at the Tiruvanniyur signal.

"They were speaking so fast, it took me a minute to read their lips and understand that they were furious. When people speak so fast, I have to focus hard on their lips and cannot see their facial expressions. Thank God, the

Thozhan people came to rescue me," he said laughing.

He seems unfazed by these incidents and continues to use mime effectively.

"Mime is a global language plus it is difficult to get angry with someone with a comical face. I think everyone should learn mime, especially the policemen," he said. If policemen also "mimed" to tell motorists to follow traffic rules, they would be more inclined to follow the rules.

Following traffic rules is a major concern for the city. According to the "Road accident analysis in Tamil Nadu, January 2019", the city recorded 114 deaths due to road accidents. Among the road accidents in the state, 47.28 per cent were due to not wearing a helmet.



Sekar at one of his demonstrations | THOZHAN