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City waits for its Mayor

Chennai Corporation elections not held for almost four years

ANEESA PA

The delay in declaring urban local body elections in Tamil Nadu is because of statutory reasons, said an officer at the Tamil Nadu Election Commission. "The government introduced nine new districts and the [Tamil Nadu] Delimitation [Commission] Act [2017], which made the procedure complicated," he said. He added that the elections process was completed excluding the nine districts. "We will conduct the urban local body election soon," he said.

The urban local body election date is yet to be announced in the state even after the declaration of results of the rural local body elections in the beginning of January. The previous election was conducted in 2011 and the tenure of the local bodies got over in 2016. From then, the Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC) has no Mayor or councillors representing its 200 wards. Five new districts were formed bifurcating and trifurcating the existing four districts, taking the total number of districts in the state to 37 in 2019.

Senthil Arumugam, chief secretary of Satta Panchayat Iyakkam, one of the NGOs working to make

electoral reforms in the state local bodies, said that the delay in election is because of the fear of current government that it will lose power. He said that the government was creating reasons to delay the election, and finally, elections happened due to the intervention of the Supreme Court.

"This is the first time that the local body elections are happening in two phases," he added.

Arumugam said that the proxy body which is functioning in the corporation consists of bureaucrats and is not reliable. He added that the public will have better access to councillors during emergencies since they are elected representatives.

"Having a special body of bureaucrats representing public is not democracy," he added.

Representing his organisation, Arumugam had filed a petition in the Madras High Court to ban the announcement of rural local body election until the urban local body election is over.

Sukumar Chitti Babu, Revenue officer, in charge of conducting corporation election at the GCC, said, "We are ready to conduct the election whenever the Election Commission announces the date."



Civic issues abound in the city in the absence of elected Councillors

| CITIZEN MATTERS

He claimed that there are no difficulties in administration due to the absence of councillors and the Mayor.

But most of the officials at Greater Chennai Corporation stayed silent when asked about the delay in the election. "Everything is going normally," said an official, who refused to give his name.

Anitha P. (32), computer assistant at the Education Department said that there was no information regarding election after 2011. She added that there are no issues in coordinating programs.

"It is better not to have elected councillors," said the Accounts officer at the Audit section of the Health department. She said that politicians always meddle with programs for their benefit. "Now, it is going smoother since there is a high-level committee for the audits and special officer who is easy to coordinate with. If the election is declared soon, many ongoing programs will stop for at least two-three weeks," she added.

Another officer at GCC said officers are afraid to speak because of the cases in the court.

Road accidents down but fatalities increase

AATREYEE DHAR

Chennai city has recorded the highest number of road accidents and fatalities despite an overall fall in the number of such incidents in Tamil Nadu, according to data from the State Transport Department.

The number of road accidents came down by 25.60 per cent and fatalities by around 43.10 per cent in 2019 compared to 2016 in the state. Despite various amendments including an increase in the fines for traffic violations made to the Motor Vehicles Act 1988 in order to improve on-road safety, Chennai recorded 5433 road accidents during Jan-Sept 2019.

Under the Sustainable Development Goal on Road Safety for the year 2019, the stakeholder departments such as Transport, Police, Highways, Health and Education work along with district collectors to create awareness and to reduce the number of accidents. These departments work together to ensure that the number of accidents do not exceed the "target".

Even though the number of road accidents decreased in 2019 as compared to 2018, the number of

fatalities increased in the city. Chennai recorded 5725 accidents in 2018 and 5433 in 2019 while the "target" set for 2019 was 4496 accidents. However the fatalities rose by 0.4 per cent with 1002 deaths in 2018 and 1006 deaths in 2019.

The maximum number of acci-

CHENNAI STATS JAN-SEPT 2019
Road accidents: 5433
Deaths: 1006
Deaths due to non wearing of helmets: 55

idents in the state were caused by two-wheelers with 40.94 per cent of total accidents followed by four-wheelers with 28.17 per cent of total accidents.

The maximum number of fatalities involved two-wheelers adding up to 32.59 per cent of the road fatalities mainly due to bike riders not wearing helmets. Fatalities involving four wheelers were 25.41 per cent. Out of a total number of 2801

fatalities, deaths due to non-wearing of helmets amounted to 1588 with Chennai accounting for 55 deaths. Although the number of road accidents on State highways came down when compared to 2018, State highways recorded 14813 accidents followed by National Highways recording 13579 accidents in 2019. Out of a total of 44197 deaths in 2019, fatal accidents owing to the fault of the driver amounted to 43526 which is 98.48 per cent of the deaths.

As per the Supreme Court directives on suspending driving licences for overspeeding, overloading of goods, red light jumping, using mobile phone while driving and overloading of persons in goods carriages, around 12651 licences were suspended for the violation of rules in September 2019.

Regarding the efforts to control road accidents, G. Sundaram Murthy, Regional Transport Officer (Chennai West) said, "We are focusing on minimising road accidents due to drunken driving, use of cell phones and non-wearing of helmets as most of the drivers violate traffic rules during the road safety week."

Work & Bonding



A flower seller making garlands on an evening train from Chennai Beach to Velachery | ANMOL ARORA

'It is a protest against fascism'

ANJALY RAJ

The only thing we can do right now is, "protest, protest, protest," said Aysha Renna, a student activist from Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi.

Renna was here with Ladeeba Farzana, also a student activist from Jamia, at the All Women's Rally against CAA-NPR-NRC at Egmore.

The anti-CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) and anti-NRC (National Register of Citizens) protests started in Chennai on December 19, after Jamia witnessed police brutality against students on December 15 for protesting against the controversial Citizenship Amendment Bill that was passed in Parliament on December 11. Aysha Renna and Ladeeba Farzana emerged as the main faces of anti-CAA protest in JMI after that.

Talking about the never-ending spirit of their protests, Aysha said, "there was a hope that the Supreme

Court will give judgement in our favour, but as it did not happen, the only thing we can do now is 'protest'."

Ishwari, an advocate, who was the first to chant and lead the slogans of *azadi* on Thursday, said, "You see her [pointing towards her daughter], she is nine years old, and she was detained by police at Valluvar Kottam. I will protest because this is the need of this time."

"The protests started on December 19, and we will go on till we need it because it puts pressure on the government," said Vikas B M, an LLB student from Jindal University. He said that the government fears the voices of dissent and the protests are creating a lot more awareness of the issue.

Saraswati, a film-writer, said the CAA was biased not just against Muslims but Hindus living in South India too. "What about the Sri Lankan Tamil migrants living here? Shouldn't they too be getting citizenship?" she asked.

"Not only the CAA, we are also protesting against Section 41 in Tamil Nadu. We are challenging the act in the Madras High court," said Dr. Nargis Sultana who has been actively protesting in Chennai against the act to show her "dis-sent."

Section 41 of the Chennai City Police Act says a person needs to take police permission to stage protests in public places. If not, the person can be remanded in custody for up to 15 days.

Mohammed Ghoush, a protest organiser, said the protests will go on for a year. "We are not just fighting against this Act, we are fighting fascism," Ghoush explained, adding, "The whole problem needs to be uprooted and thrown out even if that means uprooting the government."

According to Ghoush, education plays a major role. The agenda is not just to protest on streets every day. "We need to educate people as well, which we are doing with the



Protestors gathered for an All Women's Rally | ANJALY RAJ

ongoing protests as well."

"The protests are making an impact on people and are pressuring a lot of state governments to speak against this controversial act," said a 20-year-old student who requested anonymity. She says she has been participating in almost all the protests in the city.

She said, "the protests are making people realise that change can be brought about and that hope is still there." Mehruni Shah, a 49-year-old, came from Guindy to take part in the protests. said, "My right, to live as a citizen in this country, has been snatched away, what can I do but protest?"

Airport on Coronavirus alert

ANITA SHRESTHA

The government has instructed all health service providers and the airport authorities to look for passengers with symptoms of Novel Coronavirus—a new strain of coronavirus that has not been previously identified in humans.

The virus has killed 17 people in China, but the airport in Chennai is yet to implement the order, according to a nurse deployed there. However, a senior medical official said the screening had started.

Coronavirus is known to cause illnesses ranging from common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, according to World Health Organization.

WHO says the common signs include fever, cough, shortness of breath, and breathing difficulties. In more severe cases, an infection can cause pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure and even death.

Passengers visiting from different countries, especially mainland China, were not being screened while arriving at Chennai International Airport, according to a nurse who is part of the medical unit deployed at the airport for emergencies.

The nurse said that there are no doctors from government hospitals for the screening and the service hasn't started yet.

However, K. Kolandaswamy, Director at the Directorate of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, said 3 to 4 doctors were screening passengers with influenza-like illness.

Talking over the phone, he said that the Directorate has already instructed airports and hospitals to be alert and look after the passengers coming from China.

"Screening only inside the airport is not sufficient. We have also instructed hospitals and community health centres to check the patient who comes with symptoms of cough, fever, jaundice, diarrhoea and severe acute respiratory infection."

He said that symptom surveillance and collection of travel histories of patients have begun.

"There is no need to panic. The Government is taking precaution. We request people to take preventive measures by washing hands, and avoiding contact with infected people."

He said that the government hospitals are ready to handle such cases and the isolation wards were ready.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Civil



People with face masks at Beijing airport | PTI

Aviation (MoCA) on its official website said that thermal screening of passengers arriving from China and Hong Kong has been extended to Chennai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru and Kochi on Wednesday. Screening at the airports in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata, had started one week ago.

According to WHO, there is no vaccination developed for this infection and it could take many years. It is necessary for everyone to remain alert and be sensitive in protecting one's health.

Looking for better benefits this time

ABHIJIT PAUL

Pensioners and salaried people are expecting a better deal from the Union Budget for the next financial year, that is expected to be presented on February 1.

Murali (62), who has worked in TVS and Ashok Leyland in Chennai and retired as an Assistant General Manager said, "The interest rate on term deposits for the senior citizens has dipped down from 9.5 per cent to 6.5 per cent during the last two and a half years. That indicates the intention of the government to force people to invest in equities."

Rajasekaran, who worked in the Income Tax Department and is general secretary of the Tamil Nadu Senior Citizen Association, talked about the increasing taxes on the old age citizens.

"The basic exemption tax limit for senior citizens should be increased to Rs. 5 lakh. The limit is Rs. 3 lakh at present," he said.

He said many veterans faced problems while filing their Income Tax Return (ITR) as it was an online process and is difficult for them.

It would be better if there was another option to their returns.

Irregularity of pension in non-government sectors should be considered and resolved in this budget, he added.

S. Bala (38), who works in an engineering college, comes under the non-taxable income group.

But he was concerned about the inflation as the price of commodities of daily usage has increased.

Antony (31) and Balakrishnan (42), who work in ICC, a Multinational company are expecting that the income exempted from tax will be increased to Rs. 7 lakh.

They are also concerned about the fuel price and said people, who mostly depended on two wheelers like them, wanted relief.

Gopalan Natarajan, an ex-service person of Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL), expressed concern over inadequate medical benefits from government schemes.

The insurance premium charged by the private sector was around Rs. 30,000 per annum, which covered a claim of Rs. 5 lakh to Rs. 6 lakh.

Health expects to be in the pink

ANITA SHRESTHA

The allocations in the Union Budget for the health sector is sufficient but the funds have to be managed properly, say medical experts ahead of the expected presentation of the Budget on February 1.

According to Dr. Balu, Senior Consultant in the Emergency Department at VHS Multi-Specialty Hospital, the government increased the allocation in 2019 for the health sector. This year too, he hoped the same amount will be set aside for the health sector. "The Budget should be allocated on a priority basis."

The Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) Scheme has been helping the rural and urban poor. It needed more encouragement," he said. More funds should be given for equipping trauma centres, he said. "More number of people are dying in road accidents in comparison to the non-communicable diseases. The government should focus on saving life of the younger population as well," he said.

Navin Kumar, Senior Manager of Deepam Educational Society for Health (DESH), an NGO, said more funds should be allocated to treat non-communicable diseases, especially cancer.

"Due to the change in lifestyle, non-communicable disease cases are increasing and women don't go to the hospital on time," he said.

"Hospital expenses for people are very high and most of the people cannot afford it. If the government allocates adequate budget for preventive treatment and well-equipped trauma centres, it would be more helpful for them," he said.

In July, the government announced Rs 62,659.12 crore outlay for the health sector for 2019-20, which was around 19 per cent over the budget of 2018-19.

--An amount of Rs 6,400 crore was earmarked for the flagship health insurance scheme AB-PMJAY.

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"Due to the change in lifestyle, non-communicable disease cases are increasing and women don't go to the hospital on time," he said.

The government should allocate funds for health camps and screening programs in both rural and urban areas to ensure timely diagnosis and thus reduce the risk, he added.

BUDGET 2020

Commuters seek better facilities

Officials cite lack of patronage a big obstacle at MRTS stations

ABHINAV CHAKRABORTY

Lack of eateries and bad maintenance of existing facilities continue to plague the city's Mass Rapid Transit System (MRTS) that runs between Chennai Beach and Velachery, according to daily commuters.

"All stations need to get refreshment centres. Only a few of them have these at the moment," said Damodaran (22), a law student who was travelling to Alwarpet from Thirumayilai station.

"There are no proper restrooms and the lifts don't work. I can make do with the waiting time of 10 minutes during rush hour, but everything else has to improve," said Saumrit Behera (24), another office-goer who commutes between Thiruvanniyur to Chintadripet daily.

The MRTS, started in 1998 as the country's first elevated railway line at the time, is operated by the Southern Railways.

Part of Chennai's wider suburban rail network, the line serves more than one lakh passengers every day.

According to a Southern Railways official, the number and the type of passengers dictate the kind of facilities that any suburban railway station gets.

"Under the policy changes brought about in 2017, it was decided which station gets what. That is why you see facilities like food plazas or certain kinds of stalls in only some stations," he said.

However, he agreed that main-

tenance of facilities like restrooms and lighting was a concern. In case of complaints, whatever was maintained by the Railways internally was notified to the respective department.

“Under the policy changes brought about in 2017, it was decided which station gets what. That is why you see facilities like food plazas or certain kinds of stalls in only some stations

“On the MRTS, cleanliness of restrooms is definitely on top of the list of complaints we receive. Responsibility of cleaning them has been outsourced, so right now we are somehow managing,” the official said.

The official added that the Railways takes all complaints into account while evaluating the performance of private contractors, who maintain such facilities.

While the frequency between two trains during rush hour re-

mains at a gap of 10 minutes, the same went up to anywhere between 20 to 25 minutes during the rest of the day.

"The MRTS is okay for mass commuting but in terms of frequency, it is still inconvenient. It needs to go up," said Ganesh V.K. (51), a commuter who travels every day from Thirumayilai to Park Town station, before catching a bus to his office in Purasawalkam.

With the number of passengers travelling on the MRTS increasing marginally over the past one year, Railway officials still felt that it was not enough.

"We are not breaking even right now. Running even one extra train costs money. So, with the number (of passengers) we have currently, it makes no sense to run more services," the Railway official said.



Shutters down: More than 20 commercial units at Chintadripet station close to Anna Salai have remained closed, according to daily MRTS commuters | ABHINAV CHAKRABORTY

No income from empty shops at MRTS stations

ABHINAV CHAKRABORTY

On the one end of Chintadripet station which faces the Anna Salai, a total of 22 commercial units have their shutters drawn down.

S.S. Rajan (60), who commutes to his workplace in Velachery every day by taking the Mass Rapid Transit System (MRTS) line from here, does not remember a time when they ever opened.

"The shutters have always been down as these shops never opened. Nothing is available here, which needs to change," he said. Chintadripet station is just one of 16 stations on the MRTS which have large swathes of commercial space that remain un-utilised.

Railway officials said that as and when requirement for commercialisation was identified, space was let out. However, Railway officials have acknowledged that commercialisation could bring in extra revenue.

"There are constraints as far as

raising fares is concerned. So, we have to depend on non-fare revenue, which we collect through facilities such as parking, ATMs, the stalls that you see at MRTS stations," a Railway official said.

"The number of stalls allocated to any station is decided by the Commercial Branch in line with the policy," the official added.

Daily commuters on the MRTS want refreshment centres at most MRTS stations.

Back in February 2009, The Times of India had reported that IRCTC had plans to set up food stalls at 12 MRTS stations. But the first food plaza opened at Thiruvanniyur station only in early 2018.

Apart from Thiruvanniyur, food stalls have been opened only at Thirumayilai station till date. "In the past, we have invited tenders for opening stalls in other MRTS stations as well. But no party expressed interest. Maybe because they felt there weren't enough peo-

ple travelling who would drive their business," the official said.

A few commuters seconded that. Thiruvanniyur resident Saumrik Behera (24), who commutes daily to his office on Anna Salai, said, "They may open shops and places to eat in the station complexes but I doubt how many of them would work as time goes by."

Another Railway official said that the Railways had introduced "New and Innovative Ideas Scheme", under which marketing agencies and businesses were being invited to present ideas for commercialising space in both digital and non-digital mediums.

"We are setting up meetings with marketing agencies with whom we have had dealings in the past. Also, we are receiving proposals for starting massage chairs, sports stores and BMI (Body Mass Index) machines, which will help boost our non-fare revenue figures," the official said.



While Thiruvanniyur railway station has had a food plaza since April 2018 other important stations like Chintadripet (top right) and Thiruvellikeni (left) are yet to see its commercial spaces being let out. | ABHINAV CHAKRABORTY

What transport do Chennaites prefer?

ANMOLARORA

Trains are the best mode of transport when it comes to the cost of travel while also helping you avoid Chennai traffic, said Muthu Kumar, who travels by Chennai Mass Rapid Transit System (MRTS) trains.

A Bank Probationary Officer from Thiruvanniyur, Kumar was sitting inside an almost empty coach of the train starting from Chennai Beach and bound for Velachery here on Tuesday.

The platform at 5 p.m. had a deserted look, which would change during the rush hours of the evening.

Trains come at a frequency of 10 minutes until 10 a.m., and then 15 minutes until 12 noon and 20 minutes in the afternoon on this route, he added. He paid Rs. 5 for a ticket.

"Trains are the most comfortable and they reach on time as well," said Natarajan, a software professional, said as he stood up at the Beach station to catch the train to Chelapattu.

However, the trains are not convenient for everyone in Chennai.

Kumar said, while the trains



Delay in traffic signals creates bunching of buses outside Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital | ANMOLARORA

plying to south Chennai have a better frequency and timing, the situation is different when people travelled to localities in North Chennai like Mathur, Ennore, Minjur, and Ernavoor.

Trains do not go everywhere. Therefore, they have to take share autos, which do not charge more than Rs. 25 to reach the destination. In their absence, they have to rely on private autos to go to Ernavoor, which charge Rs. 200, he added.

As for the buses, it is a no-no for Kumar, as traffic often became an impediment to comfortable travel for him. The buses have a wider

reach though, he said.

Natarajan said "Buses are more crowded and I have to stand on steps to travel. So, I prefer trains."

David Vinodraj, who works as a security guard at Thiruvanniyur, on the other hand said that he preferred buses as it was the cheapest mode for him. He did not make enough to travel by metro, he said.

"The bus comes rather late, sometimes with a half an hour delay. But there is no other option," he said. He was travelling to Broadway to catch another bus to Washermanpet. He paid Rs. 12 for

his ticket to cover a distance of approximately 14 km. The bus was filled to an almost three-fourth of its capacity on the route.

Chennai Metro is making waves as a favourable transit system in the city. Though limited in its route, the number of passengers has been increasing over time.

Ganeshan (59) said that he would prefer metro any day, even when it was not as cheap as buses or trains. Lesser crowd was one reason why he travelled by metro whenever he had to take public transport.

"Crowd is less, it is neat unlike buses and trains," said Sujatha, a professional who took metro to go to her workplace, said. The waiting time had come down to only three to four minutes only, she added.

In the metro starting from Washermanpet and going towards Airport, there were about 20 passengers in the early evening. The metro fare starts as low as Rs. 10 and goes as high as Rs. 70.

Hyder, another passenger, said that he found metros the most comfortable out of the three modes of transport. It is a little bit expensive according to him: "It pinches the pocket."

"For frequent travelling, they can give some pass. I am using their card but it does not help. They should give discounts to frequent users," he said.

He was waiting for a metro line to be built till Ayanavaran as it would make his life much easier, he added. For now, he took a bus which he did not like that much.

In response to the complaints about the bus travel, an official from the EDP Department (responsible for designing systems and programmes) of Metropolitan Transport Corporation (MTC) said that due to congestion on the roads, the buses ran late.

There is also the issue of bunching of buses, wherein three or more buses going to the same area end up coming together, because of the delays caused by traffic signals.

MTC is developing a mobile application, which would inform the commuters about the estimated time of arrival (ETA) of buses at the bus stops.

"This would counter the influence of Uber and Ola. If the bus is delayed, people would be informed on the application and you can then switch your mode of transport," he said.



Wait continues: An instruction at the Uthandi Toll Plaza | ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA

Fastags take the slow lane for now

ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA

February," said Sudar M (32), supervisor of the plaza.

Long queues at toll plazas on the East Coast Road (ECR) and the Old Mahabalipuram Road (OMR) will continue for the time being as the process of getting Fastags will take at least a month longer.

The Tamil Nadu Road Development Corporation and the Highways Department, had in November announced plans to introduce the radio frequency identification tags on the OMR and ECR in line with the Centre's launching it on the national highways. It was decided that the tags would be introduced on the lanes currently dedicated for residents.

Each of the six lanes at the Uthandi toll plaza on the ECR uses cash payments for private vehicles. The line for even public buses was a long one that led to a halt of 15 minutes. "Although we have already processed it [installing Fastag], we do not see it being introduced earlier than the end of

The January 15 deadline to integrate the tags and its quick implementation on national highways has meant applications for it increasing.

C N Raja, 41, who was visiting the office of the Uthandi toll plaza with documents to apply for a Fastag, was told by the supervisor that the process is online. "I travel around the state quite often so I need the tag for my car. I am unaware of how to do it online," Raja said.

The scene is similar at the Perungudi toll plaza on the OMR where the Manager, Kumaresan, said, "We will definitely implement fastags, even if not on all 12 lanes. Presently only cash is used and installing the systems for the tags will take another month as we have not received them yet."

Here the queues for private vehicles was long but the dedicated lanes for public vehicles proceeded at a fast pace.

Dark times for streets, lights are faulty

ANEESA PA

Many parts of the city need more streetlights with proper maintenance. Some streetlights are either not working properly or are hidden by trees. Some interior lanes lack lights in many parts.

Women and children can't go out during the night because of the lack of streetlight in some lanes of residential area at Nadukupam, says Prameela C (42), a resident. The area lacks streetlights in the interior lanes which make walking difficult during nights. The lights in the area facing main road are not functioning properly.

Three adjacent mast lights near the main road have not been working for more than one year, complained S Jayapalan(74) another resident of the area. He said



On and off: Street lights at Nadukupam (left) and Avvai Shanmugam Salai (right) | ANEESA PA

that there are many more lights in several parts of the area which needs to be replaced or repaired.

"The lineman comes often, but he hasn't done anything," he said. Another issue is the lack of

light due to the trees.

"The street light is only for the name; the light is obstructed by shadows," said P. Durai (52), who runs a tailoring shop on the pavement of Avvai Shanmugam Salai. He said that no measures have been taken even despite complaints to the lineman to cut the branches.

Residents at Shastri Nagar and Besant Nagar also complained about trees not being trimmed. "We have two employees in each division with vehicles to attend to complaints immediately and three days in a week are spent exclusively for pruning trees if necessary," said Anandamkrishnan S, Junior Engineer at the Electrical Department of Corporation Zone 13 which include Besant Nagar. He said that issues will be solved

Footpath construction getting delayed

Roadside eateries fear eviction

ANSHUL GUPTA

The Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC) has told the small tea stall owners and other eateries that they will be removed, once the construction of the footpath on both the sides of the Gopathi Narayanaswami (GN) Chetty Road at T Nagar is completed. Construction material is scattered on the work-in-progress new footpaths on both the sides of the GN Chetty Road.

The owners of tea stalls and eateries are trying to find the space between the footpath and the main road, to set up their shops.

Mohideen Abdul Kader (35), who manages a tea shop, says that the owner of this stall has been running it for more than 40 years now.

"They didn't have problem all these years, but now since they are doing something for the public and for beautification of the road, they see us an obstacle," added Mohideen.

The Zonal Officer of Kodambakkam Zone of Chennai

Corporation, said that since all of the shops are unauthorized, the stall owners and those who run them, have been asked time and again to remove their stalls. However, he added that the shop owners will go for one week or so but they will, then, come back again at the same place.

"They also block the way for pedestrians and obstruct parking of vehicles on the road," added the officer.

Sarvanan (46), one of the owners of a small shop selling idlis, vadas and dosas, said that the shops are unlicensed but they don't have any other option but to continue this.

"Who will give permission or license to us? We don't have funds or other options but to remain in this business only," Sarvanan questioned.

The idli shop owner expressed his sorrow saying, "Even, if we ask for permission or permanent solution, if any, to continue our business here, they ask for money." They are left helpless because of the current situation hoping for a change.



Clockwise: Tea-stall managed by Mohideen Abdul Kader; Construction material spread all around; eateries set-up amidst WIP road

ANSHUL GUPTA



Traffic jams on GN Chetty Road

ANSHUL GUPTA

The delay in the construction of a pedestrian footpath on both the sides of the Gopathi Narayanaswami (GN) Chetty Road at T Nagar is leading to traffic jams and hindering the movement of people.

The Greater Chennai Corporation started the work on these footpaths in early November last year, to beautify the GN Chetty Road, one of the busiest at T Nagar.

The work was expected to be completed within one month on whole stretch of the road, according to a resident on the Giri Road, which has one of its entrances from GN Chetty road.

But, the Zonal Officer of Kodambakkam Zone of Chennai Corporation, said that the delay is due to the absence of workers.

"When they are asked to come, they ask for extra wages, which can't be provided before completion of work as they may run away," he added.

The officer's point was amplified by Rojin Jose (35), who works here in this area. He said that the

government starts many works but doesn't complete any of those in time.

"Pongal holidays were for just a week, today is a working day but not even one worker is around. Irregularity from workers and carelessness of Corporation officials have led to this delay," Jose said.

"They have kept the construction material, but that also is not taken care of. We are the ones who are paying taxes, but then we are the only who have to bear the inconvenience too," added Jose.

He even suggested that the workers should work between 9 pm and 7 am as during daytime the road was congested with commuters and people working here.

On the other hand, V.S. Shankar (53), a resident, had contrasting views. According to him, people are not satisfied, even if the government is doing something for their benefit.

"Official works do take time, it's not unnatural. People have to have patience, he added.

Livelihood, education affected at Sathyavani Mutthu Nagar

ABHIJIT PAUL

The evacuation and relocation of the residents of the Sathyavani Muthu Nagar along the Cooum banks has resumed now.

The process meant for "ecological restoration" of the river was started last December.

As many as 2263 families who lived on the Cooum banks adjacent to Park Town Railway Station for some 40 years have been allotted tenements at Perumbakkam, which is 37 km away, by the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB).

The eviction coming weeks before the school exams has affected some 1500 students, according to a report by The New Indian Express. Sathyavani Muthu Nagar people wanted to get relocated only after final examination in May.

"The government made us believe that there will be no trouble and bus services will be provided to the students who mostly read in corporation school in this locality. They also said that the students of primary schools will be admitted near the tenements, but the issue has not been resolved completely,"



A bulldozer ramming down the houses at Sathyavani Muthu Nagar |

ABHIJIT PAUL

said Bismil (38), who runs a chicken shop near this area.

Paranthaman, an assistant engineer of PWD, said "The Government had started the project for the restoration of the Cooum. We are just executing the plan. Only 200 families are left here for relocation and by next ten days, the rest of the work will be done," said

The PWD official also claimed that Rs. 5000 was given to each family for their initial settlement. Coaching classes are being provided by the TNSCB.

Clara (42), whose house yet to be demolished, believes that the new settlement will offer better living condition as the unhygienic surroundings, lack of toilets and

open defecation made life terrible here.

Moreover, during the monsoon, the river overflowed into the colony.

However, many people here work in the neighborhood and say the commute from Perumbakkam will be expensive and time-consuming.

ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA

Frequent travelers to foreign destinations say that any reduction in the number of liquor bottles available for purchase at duty free shops in airports will not impact their purchasing patterns.

The Union Commerce Ministry's pre-budget consultation committee has proposed that the number of bottles that a passenger can buy be reduced to one from two at present.

"If anything, it will just make the consumption of high-end brands of scotch/whiskey a little less in the country. We might have less of those of those now compared to earlier, said Anand Sundar, 50, a non-resident Indian residing in Dubai, who visits the city during holidays.

Muthusubramanian B., 52, a businessman who travels abroad often, said the measure will benefit the elite TASMACH shops that sell foreign liquor. "Many a times, one got to see international duty-free-only brands at the international arrival terminals. I guess that will stop now and we will not get to taste new releases as quickly until the TASMACHs get it."

The Times of India has reported that duty-free alcohol accounts for 50 per cent of airport sales at arrival terminals. However the Commerce Ministry's committee has said the intention behind the planned limitation is not to reduce this figure. "For its segment of customers, high-end alcohol is a giffen good (whose demand does not reduce with price hike). People will not shy away from buying that extra bottle from wherever it is available" said Sanchita Dutta, a professor of Economics at Delhi University.

City-based distilleries say that the change in policy, if it comes through, may come as a relief for distilleries engaged in "backward integration" of spirits.

"In recent years, some of our factories had closed down. If the Centre announces the move to limit duty free alcohol purchase in the budget, our competition from high ends brands abroad will reduce to an extent as companies we do domestic manufacturing for, anticipate a slight spike in demand," said Mrs. K. Kavitaraj, 43, an employee of Empee Distilleries.

She added that the company focuses on backward integration - the processes through which companies purchase and/or internally produce inputs they may need. They will be in a position to take advantage of the move advocated by the Commerce Ministry's pre-budget consultation committee.

Distilleries supply inputs to local brands for their alcohol manufacturing, the demand for high end brands of which may increase if the committee's recommendation comes through.

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For its segment of customers, high-end alcohol is a giffen good. People will not shy away from buying that extra bottle from wherever it is the available.
-Sanchita Dutta, Professor of Economics, Delhi University

Emergency contraceptives hard to find in city

AMRUTHA KOSURU

There is an unofficial ban on the sale of emergency/oral contraceptive pills (OCP) since 2006 and drug inspectors force pharmacies not to have stock in the shops, according to several medical shops here.

However, K.Sivabalan, Director of Drugs Control, said that there is no ban imposed on the pills and that OCPs shall be provided with a doctor's prescription. In other states, this is not the case. OCPs are provided with or without a prescription as it is a common drug.

"Tamil Nadu has a very strong law in terms of drugs and medicines unlike other law-less states", Mr.Sivabalan said when asked why it is compulsory to provide prescription here.

It is next to impossible to find contraceptive pills in the city. Major pharmacies like Apollo and Med Plus don't have OCP supply. "Chennai is the only city where common contraceptives like i-pill is not available", said K.Aarti, a pharmacist in MedPlus. While other medical shops claim to have no stock, some shops demand a prescription.



Common OCPs like i-pill and Levonorgestrel are difficult to find in the city's pharmacies |

THE BETTER INDIA

According to Hari Kannan, owner of a medical shop in Porur, even though there is no stock, if one can provide a prescription then he claims he can give them the medicine in a day or two. He has never stocked i-pills due to the fear of drug inspectors and controllers. The Drugs Control department keeps a

unexpected abortions in the future. Although there is no conclusive study done affect of OCPs in the long run, unregulated use can lead to death. "This is why we stress on having prescriptions," she said. Most hospitals that have medical shops have stock of OCPs, she said. Unmarried women are mostly not

thorough check on the purchase of medicines by small medical shops, according to Kannan. "They are strictly against ---stocking emergency pills. If we do, we will fall into trouble", he claims.

In an unlikely case of the pills being sold, Kannan said that a copy of the patient's prescription should be submitted to the Drugs Control department. He claims this to be a tedious process and so he prefers not to deal with contraceptives.

According to a gynaecologist based in Chennai, excessive usage of contraceptive pills can lead to

given prescription despite their age. They are only given prescription after being put under psychiatric analysis for at least 24 hours, said a general physician on point of anonymity. Even in cases of assault, marital rape and domestic abuse, it is extremely difficult to obtain OCPs.

Another doctor, Nimalan Sivasankar, said that the main reason behind the unofficial ban is because the society views consuming contraceptive itself as promiscuous behavior. "High dosage of contraceptives is what is dangerous. But normal doses do not have any side-effects contrary to popular belief," he said. "Awareness regarding this should be caused in order to benefit those who really need contraceptives."

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Tamil Nadu has a very strong law in terms of drugs and medicines unlike other law-less states and hence prescription for OCPs is necessary.
-K.Sivabalan, Director of Drugs Control

Cough syrup sale still unrestricted

ABHIRUPA KUNDU

Cough syrups are still being sold over the counter even after the ban on certain codeine based cough syrups was imposed in 2016 by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

Syrups like Benadryl, which contains addictive contents, are sold by most of the pharmacies in the city without a prescription said Dr. R. Prakash, a consultant physician at Noble Super Speciality Clinic in Thiruvanniyur.

Pharmacists at Adyar Medical Store, Medplus Pharmacy and General store, Apollo Pharmacy, Shobhika Pharmacy confirmed that they sold Benadryl and Chericof without prescription to customers who came with complains of cold.

Some cough syrups such as Ascoril, Dilosyn and Prodex need prescription, said R. Mohan, pharmacist at Apollo in Thiruvanniyur. He added that syrups like Corex and Phensedyl are completely ban-

ned from sale and not even prescribed by the doctors.

Corex containing chlopheniramine and codiene is one of the 344 drug combination that the Ministry had banned. It can cause dehydration, drowsiness and is unsuitable for diabetic patients because of its high sugar content.

Pharmeasy.in, an online medicine store sells Benydril, Chericof and Honitus without a prescription. The price is ranged between Rs 55 to Rs 160.

Dr. Prakash, said that many keep using their old prescriptions to buy such medicines, and most stores do not verify the date mentioned.

"Though these cough syrups are usually not fatal but if taken in large proportions, they can cause short term memory loss," he said. "Anyone who complains of cough and cold can go to a shop and buy it. Long term use of such syrups can cause dryness in the throat and mouth and also dizziness," he added.

Differently-abled get unique IDs

ANMOLARORA

A card identifying people with disabilities would make it easier for them to access services and benefits meant for such people, said S. Mohan (43) who was among many who came to the District Collector's Office for a special camp to apply for a Unique Disability Identity (UDID) card here on Tuesday.

Sitting at one corner in the busy hall, near the desks where four women volunteers collected the documents and completed the registration, he said that it was a difficult thing to get any identity card made because of the lengthy and formal process.

Mohan has got other benefits given by the government like Railways Pass and Bus Pass, along with a registration recently for a three-wheeler vehicle.

"I am an Orthopaedics case with EDS [Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome]," he said. He walked around with a stick and so it was still easier for him to come for such camps. For many others, it was not the case.

Moving around with the support of her hands, Rani (20) said that she was fine without a wheelchair. However, on the insistence of the Orthopaedic doctor present there, a wheelchair was produced for her use.



Participants registering for the UDID cards | ANMOLARORA

Some others did not get the benefit of wheelchairs and they had to move around the room, navigating through chairs and other people, with the support of their hands.

A survivor of a fire accident that led to disability in both her hands, Pranci Prema (52), said that she had gone to many camps previously to get some support but nothing came out of it.

"I applied for many but received no benefits. That is why I came here," she added. She hoped that she might get a monthly support of Rs. 1000 after she got her UDID card.

The issuing of UDID cards began in 15 states in 2017 on a pilot basis. This project aims to create a nationwide database for People with Disabilities (PwDs). Seven disabilities are covered under the project right now and the number would be increased in the future.

R. Balaji, District Differently Abled Welfare Coordinator, said that through this camp, the Commissionerate of the Welfare of the Differently Abled was trying to reach out to people who did not have access to internet cafes, e-Seva and common service centres. Everything was being carried out with utmost care without any wastage of time, he said.

They were going to different Taluk offices of the district on specific dates where their team and volunteers would collect and verify identity cards such as Aadhar or Voter ID, all the pages of Disability card/certificate, and a recent photograph of PwDs for their registration, he added.

Once the card was issued and generated by the District Medical Officer, these people would be intimated and the card sent to them, he explained.

"It would prevent duplication in cases of people who had more than one disability card," he said. It would help specify the exact percentage of disability too, he added.

As some of the crowd dwindled over time, some still seemed to be waiting after two hours.

V. Balarajan, who came to get registration done for his daughter, had to go back since he did not have a certificate from a designated Medical Officer.

He had come to know about the camp from a local Tamil newspaper, Dina Malal.

Prema, who could not complete the registration, said that she would have to go to another hospital for a "white card" from the doctor, as her prior certificate from Kancheepuram district was not valid here. She had received her Disability certificate earlier from Chengalpattu Medical College Hospital.

Ashwini, a staff nurse at a Mylapore hospital, was volunteering there to help the applicants. She was enclosing the documents with the form and verifying if they had everything that was required, she said.

All you need to know about the Rajini row

THE WORD BUREAU

Actor Rajinikanth's remarks on how the media covered Dravidar Kazhagam founder 'Periyar' E.V. Ramaswamy's 1971 rally have generated controversy. Despite criticism from Dravidian political parties, the actor has refused to apologise.

What did Rajinikanth say?

Speaking on the 50th anniversary celebrations of Thuglak magazine, Rajinikanth praised the magazine and its editor at the time, Cho Ramaswamy, for publishing a report on how nude images of Lord Rama and Sita were displayed during a procession in Salem in 1971. The procession was part of the Superstition Eradication Conference organized by the Dravida Kazhagam.

Rajinikanth said, "No other publication published anything about the rally, but Cho printed it on the front page of the magazine and condemned it vehemently."

He also criticized the then Karunanidhi-led Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government, saying it had tried to seize Thuglak copies as it did not want anyone to read about the incident.

How have the parties reacted?

Both big and small, have responded to the remarks. DMK president MK Stalin said the actor and aspiring politician must think before speaking on such matters.

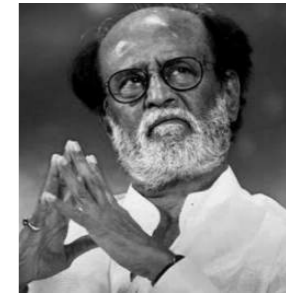
D Jayakumar, Minister for Fisheries and Personnel and Administrative Reforms in the incumbent AIADMK government, asked the actor to apologise for his statement.

Congress MP Karti Chidambaram urged the actor to focus on more pressing issues. The Dravidar Viduthulai Kazhagam has sought an unconditional apology saying that Rajinikanth uttered a "blatant lie that images of Lord Ram and Sita were taken nude".

How did other media outlets report it then?

The Hindu report titled Demonstration against obscene tableaux on January 25, 1971, read: "The tableaux (at the procession) included obscene pictures of the birth of Lord Muruga, penance of sages and Mohini Avatara, a 10-foot long image of Lord Rama was carried on a vehicle and dozens of people kept beating it with chappals". The article also mentioned how the wooden image of Lord Rama was set on fire as the procession concluded.

Outlook's report in 2017, which Rajinikanth quoted to support his statement, had spoken of Karunanidhi's clampdown of news coverage of the rally. It said, "Even as the police came to the Ananda Vikatan press (where Thuglak was printed) to seize the copies, bundles of the fortnightly were flung over the compound wall and found their way to the market, where they were sold at a premium."



City E-toilets are not working

ABHIRUPA KUNDU

Self-cleaning and automated E-toilets in the city are not in working conditions as they lack proper maintenance.

The toilets have not been maintained by the Greater Chennai Corporation due to lack of water supply and sewage related problems, said Mohammad Ansari, Regional Head of marketing at the Eram Scientific Solutions Pvt. Limited, which supplied the equipment for the E-toilets.

Ansari said that the company was responsible for maintaining the toilets upto six months after the installation during 2017. These are public toilets intended to stop open defecation; unlike other toilets these have sensor-based technology to initiate opening of the toilet doors.

They have stainless steel commode and pre-flush and post-flush systems through which the toilets are kept clean and do not need any kind of manual cleaning.

"The toilets initiate a post-use platform cleaning after every 5 uses by which the floor and the pod is kept clean," said A. Malavizhi, Assistant Executive Engineer at the Greater Chennai Corporation. There are 221 E-toilets under the Corporation in 15 zones.

At the Pudupet bus stand, two of these self-sustaining toilets lay in unusable conditions with no water supply. The sensors have stopped working and the doors are kept open. These unclean toilets emit a stinking odor polluting the whole stretch of the road that they are located in.

"There is no water in these toilets and they have stopped functioning; as a result, many people have started misusing them," said auto rickshaw driver Kamala Hasan.



E-toilets in Egmore remain unused as sensors have stopped working. | ABHIRUPA KUNDU

E-toilets at Lakshmiapuram, Velachery and Alandur lie in similar conditions.

Though there are separate units for men and women, people don't follow the instructions.

K.D Mustafa, who runs his own store for sanitary equipment, located opposite the toilet units on Guranak Road, Velachery said that the toilets were serviced and maintained till 2018, a year after their installment, after which the corporation stopped servicing them. He said, "Earlier these toilets were used by shopkeepers in this street but their unhygienic conditions have made them unusable now"

"It has only become a spot for people to drink at night and is totally littered with alcohol bottles," he added.

Earlier the toilet doors opened only when water was available and people had to insert two rupee coins in order to access the bathrooms but the sensors have stopped working now and people have broken the doors in order to get free access.

Many people have also visited the incomplete art gallery since the controversy and the institute is expecting more footfalls.

The controversy began on Thiruvalluvar Day this year when Venkaiah Naidu, Vice President of India, tweeted a picture of Thiruvalluvar whose white robes had been replaced with saffron.

Religion rules the roost at Book Fair

ANJALY RAJ

The 43rd Chennai Book Fair ended on Tuesday with stall owners reporting an increase in the number of visitors and in the sale of books.

"People come to buy some particular book," said Prabhu Raj, owner of Pustak Mela stall. "Only a few come to visit the stalls and buy random books." Prabhu, who stocks books in Tamil, English and Hindi said he has managed to sell almost 1000 books per day during the Pongal holidays.

The footfall in the fair increased by 20 percent this year compared to last year, according to The New Indian Express.

Ravi Verma, who said he earned almost Rs 50,000 a day at his stall, said Hindu "religious books" in Tamil sold the most apart from "motivational, self-help and children's books."

"Comparatively Tamil books sold the most," said Prabhu Raj.

Ravi has been setting up his stall, Book World, at the Chennai Book fair since the last 10 years and he has made the highest of his sales this year. Ravi, another stall-owner from Delhi said he managed to sell books worth Rs 50,000.

"On weekdays when crowd was comparatively low, the sales touched just Rs 10,000."

Komal, another owner, said she never witnessed such an overwhelming crowd in the 12 years of her setting up a stall at the book fair until this year.

There were also students who were attending the book fair for the first time to check on the hype that attracted lots of visitors.

Lack of funds hits Kural art gallery

AMRUTHA KOSURU

The Tamil Nadu Thirukkural Art Gallery began functioning in 2013 but has succeeded in converting only 150 couplets out of 1330 couplets into paintings because of lack of funds, according to an official.

However, the state government has sanctioned funds for a workshop to be held in first week of March.

"The Thiruvalluvar controversy might actually help our upcoming workshop. In a way it has promoted Thirukkural as several people are now keen to learn about Thiruvalluvar and Thirukkural", said Dr. T. Janaki, a faculty at International Institute of Tamil Studies.

Many people have also visited the incomplete art gallery since the controversy and the institute is expecting more footfalls.

"Very few are aware of the existence of Thirukkural. It is only remembered and recited on Thiruvalluvar Day on 16 January" said Janaki, "Now even that is being saffronised and made a joke of"

Owing to lack of funds from the state government, the International Institute of Tamil Studies last conducted a workshop on Thirukkural in March, 2018.

In the workshop, the couplets are explained in detail to several fine arts students and faculty after which each individual is assigned one couplet to paint.

She also added that only 25 artists attended the last workshop. Initially almost 70 artists had attended the workshop.

Several research scholars who preach the writings of Thiruvalluvar simply laugh at the saffronisation of Thiruvalluvar by Venkaiah Naidu, Vice President of India.

The primary idea behind turning the couplets into paintings is to help illiterate people understand the classical text.

ROAD SAFETY WEEK Second day marked with an awareness walkathon

AATREYEE DHAR

Employees and owners of driving institutes approved by the government, vehicle sellers, members of the Institute of Road Transport, Metropolitan Transport Corporation, police drivers, firemen and employees of Apollo Hospitals walked 5 kms from Chepauk to Island Grounds distributing pamphlets on road-safety measures as part of the Road Safety Week celebrations in the city.

M.R. Vijayabhaskar, Transport Minister, praised the police for their initiatives in minimizing accidents owing to non-wearing of helmets which accounts for the most number of accidents in the city.

G.D. Ezhilarasi (45), who owns the Jayam Driving Institute, said, "Since I teach driving, I cannot stop feeling accountable for the deaths owing to faults of drivers in the city."

As the theme for the walkathon speaks about how change starts with youngsters, she blames the youth for speeding on the roads.



A 5 km walkathon from Chepauk to Island Grounds on the second day of the Chennai Road Safety Week | AATREYEE DHAR

Also other people in a hurry break rules by using one-way roads instead of going further and taking a U-turn. She stressed the need for better roads as it will be otherwise difficult to stick rules on congested narrow roads.

As students wait their learner's licence in the common room in the RTO office at Jafferkanpet, owners of driver institutes talk about the road-safety rules they teach their students.

While Ezhilarasi underlines how defensive driving while watching out for cars or pedestrians on both sides reduces the occurrence of accidents, Raghuram (33), another trainer, recalls the need for the students to be acquainted with the technique to drive on slopes.

Hari (21), owner of the Maruti Driving Institute, says both the driver and pillion riders wore helmets during the walkathon,

urguing traffic rule violators on the way to wear helmets.

Hassan Basha, PA to the Joint Transport Officer, listed events for the following five days covering all aspects of road and vehicle safety in the city. The department would be conducting camps for medical check-up of drivers of school and college buses as well as drivers of government vehicles on the 3rd day. The fourth day event is scheduled for awareness programmes in schools and colleges by organising art and speech competitions.

The fifth and sixth day events are scheduled to create awareness about violations such as speeding, overloading of passengers and jumping red signal that can lead to suspension of their driving licences.

The final day sponsored by employees of Maruti and Tata showrooms along with driving school associations has been fixed for creating public awareness of ambulance services in the city to attend to victims of road accidents who are in need of critical care.