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“nCoV a lifestyle disease”

SHRIJA GANGULY

City doctors suggest that the outbreak of coronavirus might be a lifestyle disease and are unsure of a cure.

The disease which originated in China and has reportedly claimed over 500 lives there has sparked a scare all over the country. People who visited China are being screened at airports for the disease.

In Chennai, isolation wards have been set up at the Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital (RGGGH), Kilpauk Medical College (KMC), and Tambaram Government Hospital to quarantine people showing symptoms of the disease.

Some 12 people, including eight Chinese nationals have been discharged from the isolation ward in RGGGH after they tested negative for the virus.

A general physician from RGGGH said, “These wards are to keep under surveillance those individuals who are showing the symptoms.”

Diagnosis becomes tough considering the general nature of the symptoms, that is, regular cold, cough accompanied by fever.

Consequently, every patient who complains of a mild cough or cold

accompanied by fever, is made to take a blood test at RGGGH. Patients with a history of frequent travels, especially international, are paid extra attention.

Initially, regular medicines that are used to cure throat infections and fever are prescribed. However, in case the symptoms persist for a period of time, the patients will be brought under surveillance at the isolation wards.

According to The Hindu, the King Institute, Guindy, is testing the samples for the virus. A Medical Officer at the institute said “None of us is authorised to give out any information even regarding the testing centres as awareness is scarce and the examination procedure is at an infant stage.”

“In 48 hours, after a testing centre was established at Pune, we set up the facility at King Institute. And as far as wards are concerned we have a 24 hour ward in RGGGH, and we have initiated similar centres in every district of Tamil Nadu. The World Health Organization(WHO) is constantly in touch with us, updating us on the situation,” C Vijayabaskar, Tamil Nadu Health Minister, told a press meet here on Wednesday.

All Indian passengers from China, who showed symptoms, tes-

ted negative at the National Institute of Virology, Pune.

Coronavirus is an infectious zoonotic disease caused by bacteria and viruses that travels from animals (usually vertebrates) to humans resulting in respiratory infections including common cold and cough. Novel corona virus (nCoV) is a rare form of Coronavirus that can prove to be lethal. Since, it has 96 per cent similarity with Bat coronaviruses, any contact with bats is likely to be the origin.

T. Balasubramanian, a private practitioner at Shastri Nagar, Adyar said, “It is a lifestyle issue, mostly due to the consumption of bats and snakes; one reason why Indians in China are less likely to contract it unless they come in direct contact with an infected person.”

“The seriousness around the matter is the extent to which we as doctors are wary of treating patients out of the fear of the possible contraction of the disease.”

When asked about what is causing the frenzy about coronavirus which has claimed around 500 lives in China while, in comparison, diarrhoea claims ten times more lives in India, he said, “Even though Diarrhoea and typhoid go under reported, we still are not scared to treat them as we are

aware of the sources of origin, the major reason being poverty and inaccessibility, and the well as its possible treatments. This is not the case with Coronavirus. The uncertainty around a disease makes it even more lethal.”

Other zoonotic outbreaks in the past include rabies, Ebola virus and swine flu.

Detailing the precautionary measures taken by the Tamil Nadu Government, Beela Rajesh, Health Secretary, said “Right now, separate aero bridges have been assigned for all those flights that are coming from China as well as those 7 countries that are declared as the ones carrying infected patients.”

“We have increased the surveillance in the airports and have deployed more medical teams on standby next to the aero bridge itself. At Chennai airport, we are also keeping hand sanitizers and have created separate immigration counters for the incoming passengers from China and the seven other countries. We also have thermal scanners that will pick up the temperatures of people with fever.”

So far, three individuals from Kerala have tested positive. Others with a travel history to China have either tested negative or put under home quarantine.

Democracy blackwashed



A graffiti painted outside Indira Nagar MRTS station following the Anti-CAA and NRC protests, which was blackened a week later

| ANJALY RAJ

SETC workers warn of strike if no pay revision

SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

Employees of the State Express Transport Corporation (SETC) staged a 45 minute demonstration on Wednesday at 320 SETC depots here demanding revision of wages.

The Central of Indian Trade Union (CITU), which is affiliated to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) along with 7 other unions-Labour Progressive Front, Hind Mazdoor Sabha, All India Trade Union Congress, Indian Trade Union Congress, TTSF, MLF, DUU AND AALLF had organised the demonstration.

The unions have demanded an increase in salary, additional employment to reduce intense workload, new buses and improved labour facilities.

“The workload is too much. We have asked for 3,000 new employees. One driver is riding on multiple routes without sleep and increased tension. The pay does not cover the exploitation of labour,” said M. Ravi, who is the State treasurer of CITU and a bus conductor at SETC.

“Tamil Nadu Govt. is favoring private transport stakeholders more than public transport ones because private is often owned by MPs and MLAs,” added Ravi.

A conciliation sitting is likely to set the seal on the pending 2 years-old income resettlement on February 20 here. The meeting will be chaired by Labour Commissioner Dr. R. Nathangopal, State’s La-



SETC Union protest at Pallavan Salai | SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

bour and Employment Department Secretary Md. Nasimuddin, and Tamil Nadu State Employees Union secretary, said C. Nirmala, superintendent here.

“The eight demands by the Unions have been pending for 2 years now. The upcoming meeting will focus primarily on four of these—pension benefit, dearness allowance (which is not given to regular staff and pensioners), incentives,” said C. Nirmala.

Initially, the private buses were given tour permits on the basis of Charter Trip Permit, but now they have started running on the same routes as SETC buses, which affect business, the unions said.

Over 139,000 State transport employees are protesting across the State.

“The salary is stagnant. The prices of commodities are increasing. It is becoming difficult for us to keep up with the inflation,” said M. Damodaran, a CITU member who

has been a technician at SETC for 24 years.

Dayanandam, another Union leader, said “After retirement employees are paid Rs. 2000-3000 a month as pension. Every year almost 520 employees retire; no further recruitment has been made. The absence of workers tends to create more pressure on the existing workforce,” said Dayanandam.

There is a conductor shortage in SETC now, Dayanandam added.

Damodaran said “The workers travel 700 km a trip without any rest, no insurance. The workers have to work 16 hours a day and sometimes on double or triple trips. This often results in them falling asleep behind the wheel leading to accidents.”

Asked about the demonstration, L. Shyamalala, Senior Deputy Manager at SETC Headquarters in Pallavan Salai here, said “Daily some or the other demonstration goes on. We don’t know.”



Fisherwoman at Nochikuppam

| MAHIMA MANIAR

HC orders eviction of Marina fishermen

MAHIMA MANIAR

The Madras High Court directed the Chennai Corporation Commissioner and the city police to evict the fish vendors squatting on the Loop Road.

The Hindu reported that a 24*7 vigil was issued to decongest the road for a free flow of traffic and pedestrians.

Residents of Nochikuppam near the lighthouse for Marina beach have filed a petition against the construction of a concrete footpath on the seaward side of the Marina Loop Road as it encroached upon the livelihoods of eight fishing communities that live there, said K. Bharathi, Founder and President, South Indian Fishermen’s Welfare Association.

Under the Street Vendor Act of 2014, natural markets over 50 years old are declared as Heritage Markets, which protect the livelihood of people from eviction and relocation. However, the Corporation has violated this act, K. Bharathi said. The Chennai Corporation in 2014 had approached the Tamil Nadu State Coastal Zone Management Authority to obtain coastal regulation zone (CRZ) clearance for the widening and beautification of the road. In December 2015, this plea was contested and rejected in the National Green Tribunal that directed the Corporation to not carry out any activity on the Loop Road.

The Marina Loop Road is a 2 km stretch from the Lighthouse to Foreshore Estate. This road and the adjoining beach sustains the fishing

business, including space for parking boats, drying and vending fish, and weaving nets. Initially, there were more than thousand shops, but now, there are about 300 vendors here. Some of the fishermen have set up makeshift shops behind the Santhome Church.

“Our business will be severely affected as it would be away from the beach and hardly any customers would stop by,” said Shakila, a 50-year-old fish vendor.

The fishermen accused the Corporation of helping migrants with licensed shops and stalls from Anna Square to the Light House but not the fishermen who already lived there. “They have also been provided with 900 pushcarts, for which they will have to pay an annual license fee of Rs. 3000 to the Corporation. But the fishermen have received no such help,” said Kalai Sekhar, a 26-year-old boat owner. The road remains congested on weekends when customers park their vehicles alongside the footpath, blocking the road entrance.

Bharathi added that it was only in the last two years that the fishermen start experiencing traffic in the area.

E. Sindhu Priya, an LLB student, said “If the Corporation wants to control the traffic, they can extend the Santhome High Road, but they won’t because there is a church, a Russian diplomatic premises and St. Bede’s Anglo Indian Higher Secondary School. They are not supposed to vacate people from their native place and wreck their livelihoods in the process,” she added.

Unemployed youth fail to get dole

SUKRITI VATS

Out of 4, 42,053 registered youth in Chennai district, only 1,275 received the benefits of the Unemployment Assistance Scheme in 2019, according to G. Kavita, District Employment Officer who oversees the process at the Government Employment Exchange in Santhome. This is when the unemployment figures in the country are on a 45-year high, as reported by the Labour Force Survey last year.

“Only few people are availing the benefits because most do not fall below the family income cut-off. Those with an annual family income of less than Rs 72,000 are eligible to become beneficiaries,” said Kavita.

Started in 2006 by the Tamil Nadu government’s Department of Employment and Training (DET), the Scheme aimed to target both rural and urban areas. Dividing the unemployed youth into four categories, it allocates a monthly amount of Rs 200 for Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) failed, Rs 300 for SSLC passed, Rs 400 for HSC passed and Rs 600 for Graduates, for three years.

Though the income ceiling was increased last year from Rs 50,000, a significant number of unemployed youth in the city are yet to be covered. Additionally, the age-specific criterion restricts older people (40 years and above) from applying for it.

“It’s not a universal scheme like MGNREGS. There are many criteria that the youth have to meet before becoming eligible for this. That’s why not every unemployed person is given assistance. People who don’t match the criteria are directed to the state-organized job fair instead,” said Kavita.

Though there are no financial constraints in the allocation of funds with a budget of Rs 96.12 crores allocated by the government for the scheme in 2019-2020, awareness about it remains low.

On being asked about the impact of the scheme over the years, prominent economist Brinda Viswanathan of the Madras School of Economics said, “I have not seen any policy tackling unemployment in Tamil Nadu. There are a set of special schemes I have heard of, but I have not read anything about their progress or implications.”

Weaning tribal kids away from extremism

SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

Ram Nath Mandandavi (18) used to live under the gun in Chhattisgarh. Two of his family members were Naxalites. In 2012, they had surrendered after multiple threats from the security forces, says Mandandavi.

“The police (Central Reserve Police Force) used to come and threaten the family members. One day they promised to kill one of us if our relatives do not surrender,” he said.

Mandandavi, from Chitrakoot near Bastar, said the youth joined the naxal movement because of the lack of employment and corruption in the area.

However Mandandavi has managed to stay on the right side of the law. He is a volunteer for the Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS). He goes around villages in Bastar and promotes government schemes for a monthly salary of Rs. 10,000.

“I am a national-level volleyball player, but since I do not have the means or the luxury, I will join the security forces like my elder brother,” he said.

Mandandavi, along with 200 youths from Chhattisgarh had come to attend the 7-day National Tribal Exchange Programme at the Youth Hostel in Indira Nagar here.

“The aim of the 12th National Tribal Youth Exchange Programme is to enlighten youth from Naxal-infested districts of Chhattisgarh about democratic values,” said B.J. Prasanna, Deputy-Director at NYKS, Chennai.

“The focus of this programme is to wean the youth away from anti-national and anti-social emotions. The group includes both students and skilled labourers from four districts, Dantewade, Sukma, Bastar and Bijapur,” he added.

According to Prasanna, the programme offers an in depth understanding of food habits and exploration of the diversity of a



Youth attending the third day of the cultural dance competition at Indira Nagar

| SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

given location. It also promotes community-based understanding of different dialects and practices such as marriage.

The programme was initiated by the Ministry of Home Affairs and Youth Affairs & Sports. It was organised by NYKS in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry.

“It is the best way to promote tourism, too,” said K.Kamali, a UPSC aspirant and volunteer here.

Priyanka Kudiyam (22), from the Papanpal village of Bijapur taluk, said that there was corruption in the system that hindered employment. The existing caste system was also an obstacle. “We are

adivasis in our village. There exists a caste system. Some do not eat goats and some do not eat turtles, even birds have caste. It is an old structure and I want to break free of it,” she said.

Kumari Padmini Nag (21), a resident of Bastar, was studying computer science. She said, “We came to know about this tour through CRPF people. More than 5 people from my place had filled out the form back in August.”

K. Kamali, who is one of the many volunteers said, “Most of the students are living in hostels away from home to avoid Naxalites. The people for this programme are chosen from the hostels they live in, though family permission is mandatory.”

Every evening there is a cultural show hosted by the Yuva club here, where people from different districts of Chhattisgarh present their culture through dance. “Currently, Bijapur is leading in the competition,” said Mandandavi.

Subpar state of subways

SUKRITI VATS

The pedestrian subway adjoining Chennai Central station on Wall Tax Road is filled with the strong, pungent odor of urine. Pedestrians come here to relieve themselves more often than they use the subway to cross the road, according to the subway cleaning staff.

"It's mostly the autowallahs waiting outside the station who urinate at the entrance of the subway. People only use this subway, when the traffic police stop them from crossing the road by putting up barricades," said A. Kasturi, a government-hired cleaner who also routinely picks up empty liquor bottles from inside the subway.

However, a relatively cleaner subway in the same area, between Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital and Chennai Central has its own band of troubles. Built to allow pedestrians to easily cross the highly-congested Poonamallee Road, it is occupied by vendors.

"The vendors selling fruits and flowers here take up most of the space, turning it into a one-way passage for pedestrians. I don't know if this is legal or not, but it is highly inconvenient," said R. Rakesh, an engineering student, who daily takes the subway to reach his college.



Homeless people and hawkers take up space in subway | SUKRITI VATS

The issue of vendor's encroachment is not a new one. The subway near Chennai Beach station towards George Town seems to be one of the busiest and the dirtiest in the city. The walls are plastered with pamphlets and the ground laden with fruit peels and dead flowers.

Mohammad Afreez, a resident in the neighbourhood who frequently takes the subway said, "It's a pathetic state of affairs. I understand that vendors are poor, but then the government should do something about their rehabilitation. Also, the walls here are so dirty and the lights, though functional, are covered with cobwebs. There is a need



for some proper cleaning of this place."

While these subways suffer from poor infrastructure facilities, there are many which seem to be perennially closed forcing the pedestrians to cross some of the busiest and accident-prone roads in Chennai.

One of these is Anna Salai, which was once tagged by *The Times of India* as the deadliest stretch in the city.

Three subways along the Anna Salai Road have been closed for months in a bid to connect them with the metro line.

S. Ramamurthy who is in his seventies, is a regular visitor to Anna

Salai, also known as Mount Road. He complained, "This subway (near Government estate metro station) has been closed for more than 3 months now. I usually have to cross the road to reach the bus station. For this I have to walk half a kilometer away to the turn at the Government estate and then walk the same distance back."

Ramamurthy demands an alternative to road crossing, when the subways are closed for renovation. "I am an old person. I cannot easily cross a road in heavy traffic. There should be some temporary arrangement made by the government, for instance a traffic personnel should be made available for this purpose"

The Tamil Nadu State's Highways Department, which operates about 50 subways in Chennai, recognizes the needs of the public; it is unable to do anything at the moment.

R Chandrasekar, Chief Engineer said, "At the most we can get a zebra-crossing drawn on the road for the ease of pedestrians. Though, people need to have patience as the construction work is almost over and the subways at Anna Salai will be opening soon."

He said that subways were regularly cleaned and the department had not received any complaints regarding their condition.

No policy for city trees

VALLARI SANZGIRI

Trees along 2nd Avenue road, Adyar, have destroyed pedestrian pathways and obstructed street lights because there are no proper maintenance procedures.

However, Thirumurugan, Zonal Officer of Zone 13, Greater Chennai Corporation, said that the trees in his area, which included Adyar, were pruned regularly.

Along Old Mahabalipuram Road, one of the trees has withered partially and rests against an advertisement hoarding.

S Bhaskaran, Zonal Officer in Zone 14 of the Greater Chennai Corporation, said, "We prune the trees in our area regularly, but we never conduct check-ups for the avenue trees unless someone complains about it. Five to six people are hired via a contractor to prune the trees in the entire area once a month."

Zone 14 extends from Madipakkam to Tharamani.

When asked about the potential safety risk of this situation, Bhaskaran said, "We have no precautionary measures as such but we will look into this."

According to the Parks department of Chennai Corporation, there are no rules and regulations regarding the maintenance of avenue



Avenue tree along OMR road branches out over Rajiv Gandhi IT Expressway | VALLARI SANZGIRI

trees. One of the personnel in parks department, Srinivasan said, "Avenue trees are treated just as park trees. They are pruned and watered regularly and the park overseer of every zone is to have a meeting every 15 days to take stock of the situation."

Against this backdrop, new parks are set to be constructed under the green smart city initiative in areas like Velachery.

Last July, a tree with rotten roots

had fallen on a woman at 13th Main Road in Anna Nagar. NGOs like Care Earth had said that the incident could have been prevented if the Greater Chennai Corporation had framed a policy with regards to avenue trees.

The corporation had assured that such an incident won't happen again, calling the incident "unfortunate". However, the Corporation is yet to frame such policies for avenue trees.



Although many small groups dubbing themselves as unions are scattered across Chennai, the city lacks a common over-arching Union | LIVECHENNAI.COM

Auto drivers not organised

VALLARI SANZGIRI

Auto-drivers in the city are now part of the unorganised sector, even if they have unions fighting for their rights and livelihood, said Centre of Indian Trade Union's (CITU) assistant general secretary, V. Kumar, on Tuesday.

It has been nearly seven years now that the drivers have been waiting for the government to revise autorickshaw fares.

"As per the rates set some time ago, the first one kilometre costs Rs. 25 after which Rs. 12 is added for every additional kilometre. Today, this system does not take into account the increase in the price of diesel and other living expenses," said Kumar.

"The drivers have therefore stopped following government rules and the industry has now entered the unorganised sector, although the people themselves are extremely organised," he said.

Another problem which has led to this shift is the lack of a single over-arching auto-rickshaw union in Chennai.

Uttaramurthy (40) is an auto driver near TheevuThidal (Island Grounds) bridge, an area where dismantled rickshaws are kept in an orderly manner on the walkway. According to him, there are roughly

16 auto-rickshaw unions in Chennai, of which his is a union independent of any political influence.

"We go to the Central union which is bigger than ours if we have to, but most of the time, we deal with our problems on our own," he said.

However, according to Ramamurthy (62), a member of the union formed by Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party, affiliations with political parties have no effect.

"Thanks to the DMK we have an auto stand on Wallajah Road but other than that the parties can't really do anything to help us with our problems. We have sent petitions regarding the government's fare system many times but our requests are never answered."

Auto-driver S. Hussein (84), who works near Apollo Hospital, Greams Road, claimed that a defunct auto union in Chennai presents an uncertain future - especially for the women auto drivers.

"In every area, there are small auto-rickshaw groups we call unions. Since, in every area there are hardly three to four women auto-drivers they never join the union. Hence, the fare system in the area is decided by the men," he said.

Azhagammal (28), a woman auto driver in Hussein's area said that she does not mind not being part of a union. However, the lack of a larger auto drivers' union has kept women like her from voicing their complaints.

"My sister would also like to become a licensed auto-driver but the fee collected for the licence is Rs. 10,000. We can't pay for it. If there was a union maybe we could have asked the government for some concession," she said. Although Azhagammal claims the license fee is Rs. 10,000, as per the Tamil Nadu Transport Department's website, the grant of permit for auto rickshaws is Rs. 300.

The Pink Auto Project is a welfare initiative by the Rotary International District 3232 to provide auto rickshaws to 200 women as a means to earn livelihood. Reportedly, three to four women have been given auto rickshaws under this scheme.

According to economist Venkatesh Athreya, "The Pink Auto project is a welcome move as a welfare initiative that provides under-privileged women with private employment. But considering the employment is given in an unorganised sector, the viability of these jobs in the long-term remains to be seen."

15 years later, no "No Hawking Zone"

SRINJOY SANYAL

Despite the Supreme Court declaring it a 'no hawking' zone in 1995, the entire stretch of the NSC Bose Road here is crowded with hawkers. The authorities have failed to take stringent action even after several court orders and petitions were filed.

"We can only pass a law. It is up to the Corporation and police to enforce it," said Farookh, an advocate at the Madras High Court. The Madras High Court has asked the Greater Chennai Corporation for CCTV footage of the road, he added.

Asked why continued vigilance is not maintained on the NSC Bose Road, Y. Edison, Asst. Public Relations Officer, GCC, said, "We don't want to make it predictable and that is why we conduct raids at any given time of the day. And, we have caught quite a few of the unlicensed hawkers."

According to reports, though 764 licensed hawkers were relocated by the corporation, another 698 unlicensed ones stayed back.

Rampal, who runs a *chaat* stall



Unlicensed hawkers and parked two-wheelers on the NSC Bose Road | ARNABJIT SUR

opposite Gate no.2 of the HC, said, "There is no guarantee of our business as the corporation officials can come anytime. They snatch our stuff and we have to run with the *thela*."

On the flip side, he added, normalcy is restored the moment the officials leave. Asked why he doesn't have a licence, Rampal, who hails from Uttar Pradesh, said, "The government here doesn't pay any heed to us, so it is difficult to go through the entire procedure."

Musa Hussain selling socks on the pavement, however, is immune

to it all. "They have come and they have gone. I stay here and they can't ask me to shift at any cost," he said. It has been 15 years since the Supreme Court passed the order. So, it is inevitable that people have learnt to tackle the situation. Bharilal, who sells pani puri, said, "The cops generally come around 5 o'clock in the evening. So, if you escape that window, your business is sorted for the day." Thus, he sets up his stall only after 6.30 p.m. every day.

These vendors do lead to congestion, especially during the peak

office hours, and civilians rushing through the stretch connecting Rajaji Salai and Wall Tax Road would concur.

P. Sandeep Kumar, working at Life Insurance Corporation, said, "Anyway, there is a lot of chaos in the morning with people rushing against the clock. The hawkers only add to it." With the hawkers occupying the pavement, there isn't much space to walk on, leading to elbow clashes and further irritation, he explained. What is worse is people are even parking two-wheelers on the pavements.

A State Bank of India employee, however, is of the opinion that everyone does not belong to the same economic background and thus should be allowed to keep at their respective jobs. "They are doing their job. I am fine as long as they are not interfering with mine," Rammarao said.

Krishna, who works as a security guard for a food joint named Suprabatham, said, "*Malik* calls the cops whenever the vendors encroach on our space. We are not bothered as long as they aren't disrupting our business."

A decade on, CUMTA not implemented

SRINJOY SANYAL

The Chennai Unified Metropolitan Transport Authority (CUMTA) Act is yet to be implemented, despite being passed by the Tamil Nadu Assembly eight years ago.

"We are hoping all the member bodies will get together very soon to discuss strategies on how to go about it," said A. Krishnakumar, Chief Planner, Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA).

CUMTA Act was passed in 2011 under the National Urban Transport Policy (NUTP) 2006 to make transportation easier for commuters by integrating the various services, and revising and upgrading plans as and when required. Headed by the

State Transport Minister, it was to have been represented by departments ranging from transport, finance, housing, Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC), Chennai Metro Rail Limited (CMRL), and CMDA among others.

The coordinating body was created to primarily bring the buses, suburban railway, the elevated railways, and metro under one roof, but it is yet to do so.

Asked about the fear of the individual departments losing power upon CUMTA being implemented, R.K. Vedhavathy, Deputy Planner, CMDA, said, "We won't be having that much authority, but it will be good if you look at the bigger picture." Improved planning leading to lesser congestion, more travel-

ling options would be beneficial for people, she explained.

According to R. Balasubrahmanian, Superintending Officer, Special Projects, multi-modal cards will be in operation, thus helping people to change transport without having to buy tickets at the intervening stages. "Chennai will take one step forward to being a smart city with all modes of transport working in tandem," he added.

Last year, *Citizen Matters* had reported CMDA's forecast of 65 per cent of the people in Chennai availing public transport by 2026. CUMTA seems to be directed towards that. With growing concerns over the dwindling number of metro passengers, it can also help plan future developments, feels G.

Navakumar, Assistant Executive Engineer, Bus Route Roads department in the Greater Chennai Corporation.

"The fact that the suburban railway line from Washermanpet to the Airport runs alongside the metro is illogical," he said.

When asked whether CUMTA was rushed as the government was lured by the funds, S. Kirikubaran, Assistant Revenue Officer, GCC, said, "Yes, it was a bit early for the Act to be passed; the city wasn't ready yet. But there was no such motive behind it. Any development needs funding."

Biswadeepa of T.Nagar, said "After all CUMTA is for Chennai and its people. So, it is only fair that we have a say to some level."

Caring for the departed and their souls is their business

SREYA DEB

Angusamy arrives at 8 am sharp every day, sits down with his register and starts making calls.

"The last time we had an off day was the first day of January two years ago," recalls Angusamy, as he leafs through his register to find the date that says "NIL" in red.

Angusamy manages the Besant Nagar Crematorium in Kakkannagar. The "Nil" refers to the day when there was no death for the crematorium staff to deal with.

Four to five bodies are brought in every day from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm from Monday to Saturday, sometimes extending till 6:00. The place is maintained by the Isha Foundation.

The Besant Nagar crematorium



A four-year-old's tombstone at the St. Mary's Corporation Christian Cemetery | SREYA DEB

is squeaky clean, with a sprawling hall and a prayer area for the rituals and an incinerator at the end of the

hall. The machines are cleaned regularly and the disposal system is regularly checked for problems.

Angusamy has been working there for the past 5 years, prior to which he worked as a Territory Revenue Officer. He says that he truly enjoys working at the crematorium and keeps coming back to work here because he feels "blessed by all the souls that pass through here every day."

The cemetery managers are government employees who work in cycles of three years, but Angusamy makes sure he doesn't stay away from the job for more than 6 months. According to him, there is an increase in the number of bodies coming in for cremation in December and January. Angusamy can't say why, but claims that most deaths happen on the days following a full moon.

For the bodies that come in from

the hospital, the manager will require a death certificate issued to the family. But if an individual dies at home or somewhere other than a hospital, the family is required to fill a form detailing how and what disease the patient died.

The Kilpauk Cemetery here, managed by the Madras Cemeteries Board Trust (MCBT) is abuzz with visitors. It initially started off on a small plot of land.

The tombstones by the entrance area are dated 1915, the stones are dated 2018 and 2019 deeper inside. The new ones have shiny plaques, instead of stone tablets with carvings of text.

P. Velu (53), has been working at the Kilpauk Cemetery for four years. More than funerals, his business is keeping alive the memories

of the dear and departed. He makes tombstones and paints epitaphs.

"I charge two rupees per letter," he says, crouched over an old tombstone with a can of paint. He makes Rs. 15,000 a month, from the MCBT authorities.

"Since the people start coming to pay respects around 11 in the morning. That is when I come too. They can see me and hire me," he explains. "There's work every day. People are dying all the time."

Velu identified December and January as the time when he finds more clients. But he said he had no idea why "people usually do not want me to write the cause of death on the stone," he jokes.

At the St. Mary's Corporation Christian Cemetery in Mandavali R. Divakar, a 23 year-old worker

says "There is more work to be done in a cemetery rather than a crematorium."

Here he has a team of five in charge of arranging the tombstone, digging the ground, and burying the body. They get paid by the Chennai Corporation, and sometimes a little more by the families.

This cemetery is much smaller than the one at Kilpauk. The manager is rarely around, although the plot has labourers, flower sellers, and a security guard at all times.

"Business is slow these days because not many people are burying their dead here. They only ask for renewal or polishing of tombstones," Divakar says. "We keep it running because the graves are already here. We cannot neglect that."

Govt under fire for dip in MGNREGA budget

TANISHKA SODHI

The union government has come under criticism for not investing enough in the rural sector, after the allocation for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme under the 2020-2021 budget was reduced to Rs. 61,500 crore, compared to last year's revised estimates which were at Rs 70,000 crore.

At a time when rural distress is increasing and unemployment rates are at a 45 year high, economic experts were expecting the government to increase funds for MGNREGA, which is India's right to work scheme in place since 2005.

MGNREGA provides 100 days of employment for every rural household, and has been credited with boosting the rural economy. Dr. Brinda Viswanathan, a professor at Madras School of Economics who specializes in Poverty and Well-being and Gendered aspects of female employment, said, "There is no way we can reduce allocations for NREGA. There should be better planning to ensure

that the states that need it, particularly post drought, can make use of it. This involves a combination of managing and allocation."

According to a recent report by The Hindu, 96 per cent of the funds allocated for NREGA in 2019-2020 have already been spent, and the Centre has to make do with the Rs 2,500 crore that is left, for the remaining two months.

Muthimena, Additional Director of the Rural Development Department of Tamil Nadu said, "Last year also the budget for NREGA was Rs 60,000 crore, before being revised to Rs 71,000 crore. This is an annual phenomenon; initially they do this, but subsequently they revise it. Year after year it will only increase; there will not be any reduction."

"The revised estimates may go up to Rs 75,000 this year," she said, adding that the wage rate for NREGA workers was also increasing every year.

According to Muthimena, the youth of Tamil Nadu were more interested in white collar jobs than manual work.

"Employment scope is there, but



According to the Economic Survey of 2018, 54 per cent of the people given employment under NREGA were women

| COUNTERCURRENTS

people are not ready at all. They should come forward and embrace skill work."

"NREGA has also created a lot of rural infrastructure. It's not

just work creation; it's also job creation for the poor. The Government of India will not wipe out the scheme, it will continue as long as people are there – but maybe in a

different name," she said.

There has been a marginal increase in the funds allocated for financial year 2019-2020, which was Rs 60,000 crore, but a dip when the

funds allocated for the coming year (Rs 61,500 crore) are compared with the revised estimates of last year (Rs 71,000 crore)

Reetika Khara, development economist and professor at the Indian Institute of Management, said, "In nominal terms, the budget for NREGA has gone down, and in real terms it is going to be even worse. Another problem is that the government has arrears for previous years – many states have not been given the money. Out of the Rs 60,000 crore that has been allocated, a lot of it is going to be used to clear last year's accounts. It's like an all round disaster. The government didn't even bother to make any justifications on why they are not increasing it."

Krishanu Pradhan, Assistant Professor at the Madras Institute of Development Studies believed that it was important to keep in mind the many schools of thought. "Whatever amount you spend, there is a multilayer effect; how much of it can help increase the GDP? In India, studies show that the multilayer effect in NREGA is less than one, whereas if you spend

the same amount of money on infrastructure, the effect will be more than three."

According to him, this was why in this budget, there were more allocations made on capital expenditure rather than on social sector and rural development schemes.

"Any amount on infrastructure spending will ultimately go to those who are working in the infrastructure. It has a huge linkage to the rest of the economy. If you spend directly on the poor, the linkage effect will be less – but if you build their roads, the forward and backwards linkage will be more," he said.

"It looks good when you spend more in a way that the poor get direct benefits out of NREGA. But that doesn't help the amplifying effect on the economy. This is the counter argument as to why to not spend a lot of money on NREGA. The process of the scheme also has a lot of leakages. You can ask for more funding from them but how can you guarantee that there will not be more leakage? Our expenditure on processes is more than actual income in the schemes."

NRIs worried over Budget 2020

SHREYA HARIDAS

Non-Resident Indians are resenting the proposal in the Union Budget 2020 to change the definition of an NRI and make their income generated in India taxable.

"NRIs want to be closer to their motherland, but such measures would push them away," says Deepak Singh, Convener, NRI Welfare Association India. "The Modi government was very supportive of the NRIs, but this move has come as a surprise."

The Union Budget 2020 has proposed to change the definition of an NRI under Section 6 of the Income Tax Act, 1961. NRIs who stay for more than 120 days in India, from the current 182 days, will be considered residents of India and will be

liable to pay tax on their Indian incomes, for example, rents generated from property.

Ganesh Krishnamoorthy, an NRI working in Kuwait says, "Due to my work pattern, I have to be in India for around six months. Thankfully I don't have any income-generating properties in India to be taxed."

Ganesh says that the tourism sector in India will be badly hit as his peers, who have income-generating properties in India, will now go for trips to other countries instead of coming to India.

Some NRIs like Girish Balakrishnan are very confident that they will not be taxed, as they get regular salaries. "Only businessmen will be taxed as their income is varying. The government may come

up with some sort of way to differentiate between salaried employees and businessmen."

But even among businessmen, there are sections which are more prone to taxation, according to Ramaprabhu C, a businessman in Dubai. He understands from the proposal that only business people in India who portray themselves as NRIs and yet stay in India need to worry, as they have to change at least three countries in a year from now to be "stateless".

Hitesh D, a chartered accountant based in Chennai throws light on another provision in the Union Budget, where the dividend tax need not be paid by the company whose stocks are put for sale. The shareholders have to pay tax from their end. "This will hit the stock

market investments and Foreign Direct Investments by the NRIs."

Despite the consolation from the Centre that only "bona fide income will be taxed" NRIs are worried over whether their income from abroad will be taxed if they spend more than 120 days in India. Confusion persists over whether their income from abroad will be taxed when they transfer some amount to their non-taxable NRI accounts.

Casagrand, a builder in Chennai, is worried about how real estate investments will be hit. "As much as 30-40 per cent of our apartments and villas are usually bought by NRIs. They later give them out on rent, for which they could evade tax. GST hit us badly and now this budget is going to bring real estate investments further down."



Tonnes of onion imported from Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh in the Koyambedu market

| SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

Onion prices fall to Rs.35

SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

The price of onions has plummeted from a record high of Rs 160 a kg last month to Rs. 35 now at the Koyambedu market due to better arrivals from Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

"The Koyambedu market has been receiving 50 trucks of onions, with each truck carrying around 10 tonnes of onions," says Elayaraja (36), a loader at the market.

However, traders note that sales have not picked up since Pongal. Despite fresh arrivals and improved quality, sales have been stagnant because of reduction in the number of customers and wholesale buyers.

S. Chandran, President, Koyambedu Market Licensed Merchants Association, says, "We fear the prices will fall to Rs 20 and even less since exports of good quality are still coming in. As much as 80 per cent of the Indian onions come

from Maharashtra and the rest from Andhra Pradesh. Moreover the demand seems to have gone down."

"Vegetables like beans, carrots and ginger which are usually costly have now become cheap in the market. There is very less wastage now because of good quality vegetables being imported," says V.R. Soundararajan, advisor, Koyambedu Wholesale Traders' Welfare Association.

S. Selvaraj (25), a trader of onions and shallots, says, "I used to sell shallots for Rs 200 a kg in December and now it has come down to Rs 50. I have few customers now because now they can afford to go to shops which sell onions for Rs 50, so they do not come to the market like before."

"Now I have to sell 10 tonnes to make the profit that I was making by selling 2 tonnes earlier. Only tomato has a nominal rate," says Ravi Raj(65), a trader at the market.

LIC employees on the warpath

MAHIMA MANIAR

The All India Insurance Employees' Association (AIIEA) staged an hour-long walk-out on February 4 at the LIC-South Zonal office protesting against the disinvestment in LIC through an Initial Public Offering (IPO) announced in the Union Budget.

"This is the beginning of privatization," said T. Senthil Kumar, general secretary, who participated in the demonstration. The employees pointed out that LIC was a profit-making organisation and it had paid the Government a dividend of Rs 2600 crore last year. They demanded to know why LIC should go for an IPO when it was making profits.

Meanwhile former Union Finance Minister P. Chidambaram called the Budget "a movie that bombed after the first show".

Speaking at a session organised by the South Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (SICCI) on February 3, he said the two key challenges for the economy were that it was 'demand-constrained' and 'investment starved'. Chidambaram said the capacity utilisation of Indian industries was 49 per cent which deterred investment.

On the economic slowdown in the last six quarters, he said long term projects with long gestation periods would not help. Instead, the Finance Minister should have allocated more money to MGNREGA and the PM Kisan Scheme to stimulate demand. "The amount given to each farmer under the Kisan Scheme should have been increased from Rs. 6, 000 to Rs. 12, 000 or its scope should have been extended to include tenant farmers," he added.

Awareness of PMJAY very low in Tamil Nadu

SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

More needs to be done to popularise the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) billed as the world's largest government funded healthcare programme. The overall utilisation has been just three to four per cent over the past few years because of lack of awareness, according to T.S. Selvarajayagam, Additional Director of Public Health and Preventive Medicine. Selvarajayagam says, "The integrated PMJAY-CMCHS (Chief Minister's Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme) covers about 1,400 procedures and 2,100 hospitals empanelled under the scheme of which 1,100 are government hospitals and the rest are private. Of the 1.4 crore families about six lakhs have been getting the benefits."

The scheme covers consultation, operation theatre charges, and lab and medicine, according to Selvarajayagam.

Usha Nandini (24) and Shakila

Banu (35) said they had spent Rs. 3,000 and Rs. 700 respectively at the Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital (RGGGH) for MRI scan and CT scan despite having the e-card under CMCHS. "I have been frequently visiting the hospital for the past two months but I have not even heard of this scheme," says Nandini when asked about PMJAY.

However, D.M. Vellingiri, Medical Superintendent of RGGGH says, "We sent a pre-authorization to the United India Insurance Company Ltd., after which we receive a package amount. And at times when patients have to go for extra treatment not mentioned in the initial package, they will have to pay for it."

"The State's health scheme that offers Rs. 1 lakh to Rs. 2 lakh to beneficiaries has been integrated with the Centre's PMJAY which provides a cover up of Rs. 5 lakhs. To apply for the CMCHS scheme the beneficiaries should produce their income certificate, ration card and



Patients waiting outside government hospital with their e-cards

| HINDUSTAN TIMES

Aadhar card. Once they are identified as beneficiaries, they are eligible for both the schemes. A beneficiary can produce the CMCHS card to claim benefits

under PMJAY," says Dr. S. Janaki, Director Clinical and Academic Affairs of the Voluntary Health Services hospital.

N. Kannapan (60), a street vendor,

SHREYA SAMTANI

Tax payers are not happy with the proposal in the Union Budget which has slashed the tax rates but has withdrawn the exemptions to reduce taxable income offered earlier. This proposal is optional and taxpayers opting for the new regime will have to let go of certain exemptions.

"Now we cannot show savings in Life Insurance Corporation (LIC), Public Provident Fund (PPF), House Rent Allowance (HRA), or Health Insurance Premium. Earlier we could save up to Rs. 1.5 lakhs, so most people will opt for the previous regime," says Bala Sundar (25) an employee of UCO Bank Adyar Branch.

According to the new proposal, the income tax slabs have increased, reducing the tax liability on individuals. The individual earning an income between Rs. 2.5 lakhs to Rs. 5 lakhs will not be taxed at 5 per cent anymore but he can claim a straight tax rebate of Rs. 12,500 under section 87A (rebate under this section is available in the form of deduction from the tax liability).

Income between Rs. 5 lakhs to

Rs. 7.5 lakhs will be taxed at 10 per cent while it is currently 20 per cent in the old tax structure. Income between Rs. 7.5 lakhs to Rs. 10 lakhs will be charged at 15 per cent, the current rate being 20 per cent.

Income between Rs. 10 lakhs to Rs. 12.5 lakhs will be taxed at 20 per cent, current being 30 per cent; income between Rs. 12.5 lakhs to Rs. 15 lakhs will be taxed at 25 per cent, current being 30 per cent; and income above Rs. 15 lakhs will continue to be taxed at 30 per cent.

A taxpayer opting for the new regime will have to give up on exemptions including: Leave Travel Allowance (LTA), House Rent Allowance (HRA), conveyance, daily expenses in the course of employment, relocation allowance, helper allowance, children education allowance, standard deduction, professional tax, interest on housing loan, deductions under section 80C (that allows individuals to claim tax deduction of up to Rs. 1,50,000 from their gross total income for certain investments and payments), and other special allowances.

The budget "is just an eyewash, people will definitely ask what has

been done for the income tax; so they have given an option which people will not opt for," says Meena Subramaniam (60), a clerk in Corporation Bank Adyar Branch. N. Vasudevan, Senior Manager at Indian Bank, said that ten years ago, the Indian Bank used to give 13.5 per cent as rate of interest which is now reduced to 6.45 per cent.

The first thing that worries R. Sundaram (70), a retired man who was working in Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL), is decreasing interest rates. "We live off our savings. Price rise will increase our expenditure due to indirect taxes and our savings won't last more than a year. We don't know what will we do after that."

Sundaram and his wife Vasanthi (66), who is a housewife, were expecting their son citizen scheme like Pradhanmantri Vaya Vandana Yojana (PMVVY) that would have promised them a fixed source of income in case of inflation like last year.

Sundaram said one is still required to pay 10 per cent as Capital gains tax on returns from mutual funds.

Decreasing interest rates and increasing prices worry old people who are living off their savings

| SCROLLIN

New IT rules 'disappointing'

SHREYA SAMTANI

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On a different beat

TANISHKA SODHI

Through his book, Carnatic musician T.M. Krishna has enabled us to see the people who have been long neglected in the shadows, said biographer and historian Rajmohan Gandhi at the launch of the singer's book, *Sebastian & Sons*, at the Asian College of Journalism here on Sunday.

The book was released after Kalakshetra Foundation withdrew permission for the event on its premises three days before the scheduled date, for fear that it could "instigate political, cultural and social disharmony."

Krishna said that he was inspired to write the book, which explores the journey of the mostly Dalit Christian mrdangam makers, when he realized that their experiences were missing from the 2013 book he had authored, *A Southern Music: Exploring the Karnatik Tradition*. The mrdangam makers were honored at the event.

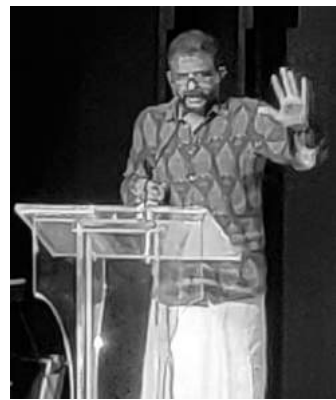
The book was launched by Rajmohan Gandhi and Lok Sabha MP and VCK chief Thol Thirumavalavan in the packed M. S. Subbulakshmi auditorium on the ACJ campus. The book release was preceded by a performance where the

mrdangam players took centre stage. After the release, a panel discussion by Gandhi, Thol and Krishna followed, which was moderated by journalist Kavitha Muralidharan.

In a letter to Krishna's publishers, Westland Publications explaining the decision to decline permission for the book launch, Kalakshetra director Revathi Ramachandran said that the foundation was an autonomous body under the government of India.

This took place after an excerpt from the book, 'Keeping the cow and brahmin apart' was published in *The Hindu*. The piece spoke about how the Carnatic music scene was dominated by Brahmins, while the mrdangam was primarily made by Dalits. It touched upon the irony of the community insisting on cow worship, yet using the mrdangam, which is made by cow skin and the reluctance of people in the Carnatic music scene to talk about it.

Calling the book path breaking, Karthika V. K., publisher of the book said, "Books like these engage with our times, engage with the politics of our times. If this nationalism is about loving something, how can we not question



T. M. Krishna at the launch of his book, *Sebastian & Sons* | TANISHKA SODHI

what that love is made of?" she asked.

"This book is an endeavor of someone with the mind and the imagination to ask questions. It's about finding fault lines, exploring those fault lines, and seeking perhaps questions that people don't see as questions."

"This is not about someone who seeks to destroy but someone who seeks to provide answers and find something behind the object that he loves," she added.

Krishna said that Sebastian &

Sons was a book of history, about mrdangam makers and their movements, the changes in their lives and relationships. "I'm a very self-fish man. I'm talking because I am also very confused and don't know how to get over these problems," he said.

"That is all; the endeavor of an artist and writer is to hope that what the writer is speaking is being reflected upon, and that the reader is engaging with that intensity," said the Magsaysay award winner.

South Indian actress Rohini, present in the audience, said, "He's talking about the things we need to speak about, which is outstanding. Thanks to the controversy, more people are now paying attention to this."

Rajmohan Gandhi said that today, thanks to "some people he should not name", he saw something common in Gandhi, Ambedkar, Tagore, Periyar, Nehru and Bose.

"We know Indian society is remarkable, we also know it is interdependent. The top layers need the bottom layers. In the relationship there is mutual need for the other but also often ignorance. Krishna has captured this relationship," said Gandhi.

Evening ritual on the beach



Fisherwomen near Annai Velankanni Shrine at Besant Nagar Beach spend their evenings playing 'Thai-pass' (a game of dice), as they wait for the male members of the family to come back from fishing. The game is played in groups of four and usually played after lunch

| SIRSHTI LAKHOTIA

Rapido trumps Ola and Uber

SHREYA HARIDAS

From being banned in Tamil Nadu in July 2019, Rapido's Chennai chapter has come a long way to overtake Uber and Ola bike-taxis, thanks to its cheap rides and 'Captains' who would break the traffic rules for you to reach your destination faster.

According to *The Economic Times*, Rapido customers save 60 per cent - 70per cent of their travel costs and spend 30per cent - 40per cent less time in traffic as compared to those who choose to commute in cabs and three-wheelers. When Ola and Uber do not offer rides for less than Rs 45, Rapido offers its customers rides for as cheap as Rs 9. The start-up also has offers like 'power pass' for regular customers, which makes the rides the cheapest in the market.

"In the last three months I have been working with Rapido, the highest amount I got for a single trip is Rs 200," says Captain Selvaraj C.

According to the bikers, or the 'Captains' as they are called by Rapido, what makes the rides so cheap are the rate slabs set by the company.

"Till the first 4 km, the rate is Rs 3 per km. Till 10 km, the company has set a rate of Rs 7/km, and for rides longer than that, the slab is Rs 9/km. But for apps like Ola, it is Rs 8/km, irrespective of the distance. Hence, people prefer us for local rides," says M. Mathavan, a degree holder, who started in Rapido as a part time rider, but is now running full time.

While the flexibility in rates attracts the customers, Rapido's other policies such as easy registration, and fast e-wallet payment make the



Captains register under Rapido. Prem M. says that the Captains don't have to wait for days to receive the e-payments, unlike in Ola.

Sathish K., an employee in MTC, who works in Rapido part-time, earns Rs 200-300 per day, enough to meet his snack expenses. For others like C. Selvaraj, who lost his job in a BPO, Rapido provides him a transit job, till he finds a better opportunity.

"I started as a part-time rider. But now I have made it full-time. I get around Rs 15,000 per month after the fuel and Rapido brokerage expenses. I have to take at least 20 rides per day for this."

Behind all the Rapido operations is a robust technical team that operates from the Rapido office on Anna Salai.

"Apart from the regular rides, we have been working on a new vertical with the food delivery apps Swiggy and Zomato too for the past nine months. We assign most of the part-time riders to delivering foods for these apps, so that the taxi customers are not short of Captains when they need them," says a Rapido official.

Students to help curb child trafficking

SHREYA SAMTANI

As many as 1.17 lakh children have gone missing and of them, 41,000 remained untraced, meaning they were exploited, said Mr. P.M. Nair, IPS (Retd.) and an expert in the subject.

Highlighting flaws in law enforcement agencies, he said "If a child is trafficked and even if he is rescued and sent home by the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), the trafficker is still out there. He takes the child again to some other place."

The solution is for the Child Helpline to work along with the police and CWC collectively. "If the

home is not a safe place for a child, he or she should not be sent back home, and instead, be given to children shelter homes, adoption or foster care till he or she is an adult," he said.

Nair proposed the idea of starting Anti Human Trafficking Clubs (AHTC) in colleges and institutions to establish safe communities and to prevent human trafficking with the help of the youth.

Indian Community Welfare Organisation (ICWO) envisions starting at least 100 AHTCs in Tamil Nadu by June, 2020, said A.J. Hariharan, Secretary, ICWO. "If students find any suspect involved in trafficking, abuse or child labour,



P.M. Nair, IPS (Retd.) put forward the idea of starting AHTCs | SHREYA SAMTANI

they will inform the police or

NGOs," he said.

"Ten students and two faculty members can form an AHT club in a college," he added.

P. Bala Murugan, Program Advisor of the Freedom Fund, said, "Trafficking issues are not understood by the executive agencies completely. They don't understand the definition of Section 370 of IPC (which prohibits all forms of trafficking for exploitation)."

"No policeman is willing to register any case under this section as most of these children are from North India. So filing a chargesheet and conducting a trial will be a problem because the children might not come back, once they are han-

ded over to the parents. Further it is an additional burden for the police. Even higher officials are not interested in filing the cases," Murugan said.

AHTC is working along with the Childline Team (1098). With the help of the police, they go and rescue children who are then produced before CWC and then reunited with their relatives.

The other reasons for the gap is the absence of sensitivity and responsibility in public for other children, lack of parental care and children are being neglected at home, also lack of understanding of trafficking among masses, Nair added.

Sunday sunrise with jogging, picking up litter

SHRIJA GANGULY

While the city was in a deep slumber, Elliot's Beach came to life at 4 a.m., which is quite early for a Sunday. People bent, stretched and geared up for the first ever 'plogging' event in Chennai Plogathon - a marathon event in which the participants jog and pick up litter.

An initiative of the Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC), the event was directed towards building a healthy public attitude for preserving public spaces and assets such as the beaches.

G. Prakash, IAS and the Commissioner of the Corporation, said, "All the zones in the city are actively involved in such events. The objective is to improve community participation to act against public littering by inculcating responsible behavior."

There was free registration and

incentives such as an event t-shirt, a certificate and refreshments. An Organizing Committee member said, "We are expecting around 3,000 participants since it's a free event and on a Sunday."

Each participant was given a bag to collect garbage in, a pair of gloves, and a mask to cover their faces with.

Participants included students, early joggers, activists and volunteers from other organizations across the city.

Archana, a volunteer for a non-profit organization that works with GCC's Zone 13 on garbage segregation, says, "It is rarely possible to clean a beach. However, it is a great initiative. I hope with this we can at least work to-



GCC board at Elliot's beach | SHRIJA GANGULY

wards a habit of not littering the beaches."

Jayanthi, also a volunteer, believes in frequent participation and not just a red-letter day to awaken people's conscience. Although the objective was to have a cleaning drive along the length of

the beach, it fell flat after people traded the cleanliness drive for the sunrise that most of them flocked there for.

Small bins are stationed across the beach but they are hardly used considering the distance between the bins and the stalls selling snacks.

She added, "It is important that the Corporation, apart from just organizing such events, also pays attention to the type of waste being collected since we are not given separate sacks for collecting dry and wet waste."

Ironically, Besant Nagar beach declared as a 'Litter Free Zone' is littered with old pairs of pants and jeans used diapers, bones from the shops that sell fried fish, onion peels and cabbage skins

and plastic spoons to name a few. Riyaz works as a trainer at the Royal Athletic Club and has been coming to the beach for 25 years now. He says, "The need of the hour is to relocate all the shops that are set up at the beach. Almost all of them belong to the fishermen living near the beach. All the fish scales and bones that you see, is the doing of these fishermen cum shopkeepers who neither take the responsibility for cleaning up the mess at the end of every day nor are they held accountable for the same."

The installation of trash bins is of hardly any help since dogs rummage through the garbage and turn the bins over.

What remains to be seen is whether or not such events go a long way in bringing about a change in people's attitude towards the public spaces in the city.

Footwear for all sizes and pockets at Luz Corner

SREYA DEB

At the Luz Corner junction in Mylapore, shopping options are abundant and haphazardly arranged together. However, the shoe market presents a very clear categorisation.

One can find a Bata store and a Max Lifestyle store, but these are next to one room shoe stores. Barring these, the sidewalk is also littered with stalls selling their cheaper footwear - from rubber slippers to leather work shoes.

Seeni Fakir (43), has been working for seven years at Ceylon Fancy Shoe Store, a one room shop lined with glass shelves and stacks of cardboard boxes with shoes. He is a business studies graduate and had moved to Dubai for work. After staying there for ten years, he came back home to help with his uncle's store.

"This shop has been in the family, someone has to do this work," he says. The options at the store range from school and work shoes to sandals and heels. While Fakir admits that their designs are not very varied, they are consistent.

A few feet away from Fakir's shop are a string of street stalls, selling shoes, belts and wallets,

schoolbags and even cutlery. The shoe vendors here are selling much of what Ceylon Fancy does, only at cheaper prices.

The shops have been around for almost 40 years, while the ones on the street are more recent and dynamic.

"This spot has been occupied by shoe stalls for the past 12-15 years," says B. Anand, owner of one such stall on the sidewalk of Luz Corner. "Even if one stall moves away, only a shoe vendor will take up this spot. We set up three years ago." Anand earlier owned a plastic wares stall.

Bala (17) sells belts in the adjacent stall, and points out that the products are cheaper because the leather is fake. These shoes are made of rexine, and wallets and aglets are made from disposed leather scraps.

Both Fakir and Anand agree that the quality of shoes in their shops is the same, because their products come from the same wholesale market in Stringer Street in North Chennai. The difference in prices however, is because of where they are sold from. A pair of fake leather work shoes may cost Rs. 400 from the



A street stall on the streets of Mylapore (l); Ceylon Fancy Shoe Shop which is a rented store



| SREYA DEB

store, but the same pair will cost Rs. 370 or Rs 360 from the street stall.

K. Narayan, at Variety Shoes on the same street explains that this is because the shops have to worry about the rent.

"If we start introducing discounts as high as 15 and 20 per cent, like the street stalls, we will not be able to make enough profit to pay our rents," he says.

The shops not only have to pay rents, but they also have to pay salaries to the employees.

Large glass front stores of Bata and Max Lifestyle are also on the same street. Here the price and the quality are higher. While most of the wares coming from Stringer Street and sold by street vendors are fake leather, the products at Bata are real leather manufactured in other states. Leather work shoes here will start from Rs. 1099.

The target buyers for these high

end stores are very different from the one-room shops and street stalls. Rubber slippers that cost Rs. 299 at Bata, will cost Rs. 200 at the one-room shop and about Rs. 150 at the street stall.

However, despite the large number of vendors selling shoes, there is a complete lack of competition amongst them.

"We don't want to move to a different location because we have always been here and it is familiar," says Narayan.

Fakir believes that there is no scope for competition at all. "People who buy from Bata will not come to our shop, and the others have to come to our shops."

He further explains that the reason that there is no competition between stores at Luz Corner is that they know each other too well.

"For as long as our shop has stood here, so have the other two footwear stores on this street. This is the way we have always done business," says Fakir, "alongside each other."

Moreover, they even send customers each others' way every once in a while - often suggesting the street stalls to those customers with a lower spending power.