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Corporate loans did it

Pile-up of non-performing assets led to collapse of Yes Bank

KEERTHI KRISHNA

The Yes Bank branch at Nungambakkam was almost deserted with the staff not ready to talk to the few customers. The bank manager refused to permit this reporter to talk to the customers and the staff. He said any queries about the bank's collapse and its consequences should be sent to the Mumbai office of the bank.

The Reserve Bank of India took over Yes Bank which was struggling with a reported Rs 20,000 crores of non-performing assets and restricted the bank's customers from withdrawing more than Rs 50,000 a day till April 3. The State Bank of India was roped in to infuse funds into the bank.

Economist C.P. Krishnan, one of the Joint Secretaries of the Bank Employees Federation of India, said that the main reason for the collapse of Yes Bank was the surge of corporate loans in the private sector bank started by Rana Kapoor and Ashok Kapur in 2004.

"Loans in Yes Bank have grown on an average of 35-40 percent in the last 4 years. It is an astronomical figure not seen anywhere in the private sector. Loans in the public sector grow around 12-13 percent in a year while in the private sector it is around 8-9 per cent," added Krishnan.

"This is not the first time it is happening in India. Punjab and Maharashtra Co-operative Bank, Karnala Co-operative Bank (Panvel) and Shri Guru Raghavendra Sahakara Bank (Karnataka) have all come under the scrutiny for their financial problems," said Krishnan. He added that in all these banks the loans portfolio had exceeded the



Yes Bank branch at Nungambakkam

|KEERTHI KRISHNA

total deposit. "This should have alerted RBI and Enforcement Directorate" added Krishnan.

Economist S Gangadharan, a professor at the Madras School of Economics, said that demonetisation played a major role in Yes Bank's fall. "The Government found Rs 1 lakh crore worth currency of the old Rs 500 and Rs 1000 notes in possession of Rana Kapoor," he said.

Gangadharan added that once Yes Bank became aware of its impending failure, the owners started selling stocks. "Shares were sold at throwaway prices," said Gangadharan. The RBI should have monitored Yes Bank.

"Regular checks need to be done so that the banks do not get a free pass from the Centre."

Thomas Franco, former General Secretary of All India Bank Officers' Confederation (AIBOC), felt a merger between SBI and Yes Bank would be a strain on SBI.

"Asking SBI to take over Yes Bank when SBI itself is not doing well does not sound well. SBI chairman publicly told he is not in a position to intervene in this matter recently but his hand has been forced now. This is not going to be

a merger. It is going to be an acquisition with SBI investing 49 per cent in Yes Bank."

"If Yes Bank is going to fail and lose money then SBI will also lose which will have significant repercussions."

According to Franco, most of the loans given by Yes Bank were to corporate investors. Different banks work differently. The likes of SBI and HDFC give lots of loans for small amounts to many people but YES Bank gives large loans to a few corporates.

"The loans given by Yes Bank are very bad and which fall under non-performing assets (NPAs). The NPAs of each bank are maintained separately by both RBI and the bank. In the case of Yes Bank, the two NPAs did not match," he added.

"PMC, Lakshmi Vilas Bank and Karur Vysya Bank all have similar problems. PMC and LVB gave loans to business corporates which they shouldn't have been allowed to in the first place. PMC gave loans to the Dewan group while LVB gave it to a business group in Karur," he said about the dwindling finances of other banks.

The Yes Bank collapse has started

ted a political blame game with former Finance Minister P Chidambaram and the present Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman taking jibes over each other.

In a series of tweets, P.Chidambaram asked why State Bank of India should invest in Yes Bank. He also pointed out that the loans given by Yes Bank had shot up by 35 per cent in the last five years.

"I understand FM has made a statement blaming the UPA. That's normal for a government living in ignorance. Does the FM know the numbers that I have tweeted? If she does, will she please explain how the loan book jumped in five years from Rs 55,633 crore to Rs 2,41,499 crore?"

In another tweet, Chidambaram said, "SBI should take over the loan book of Yes Bank for one rupee, recover the loans, and assure the depositors that their money will be safe and will be returned."

Responding to Chidambaram through a press conference, Nirmal Seetharaman said, "I am not here to continue carrying the stories of legacy. Yes, the Indian banking system has had severe challenges thanks to the way in which the government which existed between 2004 and 2014 had handled the matter. I have reasons to put the blame on them."

"The exposure of Yes Bank to some of the very stressed corporates came before 2014," she said.

"These are public domain names and I am not violating any customer privacy. Anil Ambani (Group), Essel Group, DHFL, IL&FS (and) Vodafone are some of the very stressed corporate to which Yes Bank has been exposed," she said.

NPR protests to go on

KRATI PURWAR

The Anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act protest would continue until the AIADMK government passed a resolution against the Act in the State Assembly, said protesters at the Washermentpet, Chennai, on Tuesday.

Also if the Government implemented the National Population Register is implemented in its present form from April 1, people would not show their documents, they added.

One is required to provide name, relationship with the household head, marital status, spouse's name, date and place of birth, duration of stay at the current address, sex, nationality, permanent address, occupation, and educational qualification.

Earlier, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami said people need not provide details of the spoken language, birthplace of parents, and details of parents' Aadhar cards, ration cards, and voter IDs.

On March 11, the State Government said it could not pass resolution against the CAA, a Central law, in the Tamil Nadu assembly.

Shehnaaz Banu, a Madras High Court lawyer, said if Kerala and Pondicherry could rule against the NPR then so should Tamil Nadu government. "Why have they become the mouthpiece of the BJP? Is the Centre forcing them to implement the NPR? What kind of the government is the AIADMK that cannot come and talk to the protesters?" she added.

Pointing to the contradictory statements of Chief Minister



women protesting at Washermentpet | KRATI PURWAR

Palaniswami, where he resented National Register of Citizens and Home Minister Amit Shah who affirmed that NRC would be implemented throughout the country, Banu said she was not sure whom the people should trust. Shamsath, a housewife, said that protest was limited to the Washermentpet area and it was in the hands of the government to dissolve it there or move it across the streets of the city. City wide protests might result in bloodshed and protesters did not want that, she added.

Shamsath said people did not want Tamil Nadu to become Assam. Until Tuesday, the state government used the excuse of the party leader's (former Speaker PH Pandian) death and Holi to delay the decision on CAA, NRC, and NPR, she added.

Shamsath said pregnant women, children, and elderly were sitting

on the streets to protest and they were suffering for a reason, therefore, the government should at least consider their request.

H. Dasthageer, an auto driver, said that protesters were trying to pressure the State government against the NPR and if that would not work out, the protest would become larger.

Nagu, a housewife, said the Chief Minister and the Centre were not only against Muslims but also against the Hindus. They are asking all the communities to prove their citizenship on the basis of documents many of them do not have.

Sultani Beevi, a protestor at Washermentpet, said that the protesters were neither hurting anyone nor were they vandalizing any public property. They would go back only if the NPR was scrapped. "We are fighting for all Indians," she added.

Corona kills Holi festivities

MEENAL VASHISTHA

Owing partly to the slow economy and partly to the public's anxiety of Coronavirus, vendors of Holi colours, sweets and dry fruits and other eateries at Sowcarpet complain of a major dip in sales.

"Last year was better, this year the schools have told kids not to play Holi as Coronavirus is spreading so the business is very low. Last year, I earned about Rs.10,000 in sales, this year I had no sales. If I sell colors worth Rs.100, I get Rs. 15, the rest goes to the distributors at the warehouse, says Karthik Kattavary, 49, a Holi colors vendor.

Small vendors like Kattavary usually sell products on a commission basis. The more they sell the more they earn.

Kattavary sells three kinds of colours—organic colours for Rs. 150, Gulal, the biggest sell, for Rs. 80 and small round boxes of 'Pukka' colors for Rs.8 which he says only young men generally buy. The night is almost over for Kattavary

with a sale for Rs. 300.

Business is equally bad for more prosperous vendors and street hawkers selling sweets.

"The sales have gone down by 70 percent. People have no income to spend, so the sales are bound to be low. This year, there's less craze for Holi. Dry-fruits are usually given as gifts. So this year they may not be visiting friends, so why would they buy as much," says Bharat Kumar, 32, owner of Aashirwad General Store in Sowcarpet.

Niranjan Singh, 35 who sells 'Petha' (sweetmeat) in a basket on a wooden cart says the market is so down that even big shopkeepers are crying. "It's the norm of the market, people don't have any income to buy, how can we have sales?"

Despite being the chaotic usual self, the crowd of Sowcarpet wasn't at the Holi stalls. Potential customers like ten-year old Rishan Jain contribute to the sales by buying plastic water guns.

"They (Teachers) didn't say anything especially about Holi but

we've been given general instructions in the class that we shouldn't play outside and avoid crowded places. But I'm still going to play Holi, not here but in our apartment complex," Jain said.

But amidst, all this, there is one category of shops that are touching sky-rocketing sales because of the scare over the coronavirus.

"The sales have hiked ten times. The rate of masks is changing by the hour. Just this morning, I sold 50 masks and this new stock will finish by tonight. People are scared. They have no common sense. Earlier, I bought a mask for Rs.2 and sold it for Rs.5. Now the same mask is selling for Rs.16 and I sell it for Rs.20. Other Pharmacies are even selling them as high as Rs. 25 to Rs.40," says Lalit Soni, 66, owner of Ramdev Pharmacy in Sowcarpet.

For the past one month, he has had no hand sanitizers. "The distributors are selling everything there itself, leaving nothing for them to give me."

Virus affects tourism and travel

MARIAH DINS

The international and domestic travel industry has taken a hit with the World Health Organisation (WHO) declaring the COVID-19 a pandemic and the Indian Government suspending all tourist visas till April 15.

The number of confirmed coronavirus cases has crossed 120,000 worldwide and over 60 people have tested positive in India.

Despite offering special discounts on air tickets, people refuse to travel because of the Corona virus scare. As a result, tickets are being cancelled in large numbers.

Basheer Ahmed of Travel Agents Federation of India (TAFE) said that the virus had severely affected the tourism industry, especially international travel. Even domestic travel has been affected as people have stopped planning trips. The number of people travelling to Delhi, Mumbai

and Kochi has come down, even after domestic carriers like IndiGo and GoAir offered discounts. A one way ticket from Chennai to Kochi which usually comes up to Rs 2400 is now available for Rs 1700 for April and May.

"Travel to South East Asia, Europe and China has seen a huge number of cancellations. The people are in panic as the Government started imposing travel and visa bans to selected countries. We hope the situation improves," said M. Shankar of Holidays4u, Adyar.

Press Information Bureau says the Government of India had imposed visa ban on China, Italy, Iran, South Korea and Japan.

"Our family had booked tickets to Singapore and Thailand for the month of April. We decided to wait and see if the situation improves, but have decided to cancel the trip as we came to know that the virus is becoming more dangerous all over the world with the

death toll increasing. I feel it is better to stay safe than to regret it later," said Solomon David, who cancelled his holiday tickets due to the spread of COVID-19.

An article published by The Hindu Business Line says, the concerns over the fast spreading disease have ravaged markets and hobbled supply chains as countries around the world grapple with how to contain both the virus and its economic impact. The plunge in stock market prices has intensified with both Nifty and the Sensex down around 7% now, falling below key levels. Interglobe Aviation Ltd, parent of India's biggest airline IndiGo, dropped 10 percent after it said profit for the March quarter could be hit.

IndiGo, one of the leading Indian airlines in terms of market share has reported cancelled flights and fewer bookings in the ongoing quarter, which is likely to lead a negative impact on earnings, according to The Hindu.

With panic among people rising, M. Jagadeeshan, City Health Officer says, "The Government is giving out press releases twice a day and has restricted all mass gatherings in the city. We are keeping a track of people coming from abroad if they are showing any symptoms in order to control the spread of the disease."

"Since this is a respiratory infection, using masks, washing your hands often and using hand sanitizers are the only ways that it can be taken care of. We are trying to keep the citizens from panicking by providing them with the necessary support and awareness."

Jagadeeshan adds that the main cause of people panicking was misinformation spread through social media. To tackle this, the Government has come up with the "Mythbusters" initiative an online website to check the credibility of news spread through social media.

LPG deliverymen not paid by agencies, asked to live off tips

NEIL CORNELIUS

LPG deliverymen in Chennai claim that they aren't paid salaries and are hence forced to live off tips from the customers they deliver cylinders to.

A public interest litigation case filed against the overcharging by the deliverymen came up for hearing at the Madras High Court on Tuesday wherein the advocate speaking for the LPG deliverymen admitted that they overcharged per cylinder.

A report in The Hindu said that the counsel for delivery men said that the deliverymen only asked for extra money because they were not paid a salary. The counsel had also alleged that the agencies had not paid the deliverymen the delivery charges that they were entitled to.

LPG deliverymen at a gas agency in Shenoy Nagar said that their plight was miserable as no one understood them. "This vehicle I use to deliver the cylinders is mine; the uniform I wear I had to buy from my own money; and on top of that I don't get paid by the agency. The only way I can support my family is through the money that the customers give me. They don't believe me but I still insist they tip me. There's no other way I can make a living," said T R Saravanan, a worker at the agency.

According to the deliverymen, the agency has only one officially appointed staff member who gets paid a salary and earns a regular income. The godown delivers 350 cylinders every day from Koyambedu to Ayanavaram. "How is it possible for just one



The Casual Labourers deliver more than 350 cylinders a day |FILE PHOTO

staff member to deliver 350 cylinders across this wide area? That's where we come in. We deliver all 350 cylinders and we are asked to keep any tips that the customers give us," said R Dhanasekaran. (62) who has been working in the godown since 1987.

There are a total of 11 casual labourers (CL) in the godown who all share the same plight. They are employed by the agency with no salaries and are asked to use their own vehicles for delivery.

"It is completely right from the customer's point of view to not pay

us extra. To them, we look like people who are trying to cheat them in order to make some extra money. In reality, this is our only source of income through which we have to make ends meet. Nobody knows about our situation and they don't even believe us," said Saravanan.

The deliverymen do not prefer delivering to houses as they either don't pay money or pay very less.

"We don't even make our money from delivering to houses they only pay Rs.30 per delivery. Even that most households refuse to pay and take videos of us asking for money and circulate on Whatsapp. On the other hand, when we go to deliver commercial cylinders at places like restaurants we get paid at least Rs. 50 some places even pay us Rs. 100 occasionally," said Dhanasekaran.

The deliverymen on average make about Rs.250 a day which, they say, hardly covers their costs incurred during work. "We do this because we have no other option. I've tried working as a labourer to no avail," said Saravanan.

The casual labourers said they were not allowed to form unions

and hence they were not able to demand for salaries. "We have given up on trying to get the agency to pay us. Only a miracle can change their minds," said Dhanasekaran.

Divya Vasudevan, a housewife from Adambakkam said that though she empathized with their situation she felt that it was wrong to make the public pay for the agency's fault. "I understand that they don't get paid but they should at least be a little courteous when asking for money. Once a deliveryman demanded Rs.70 more than the bill and refused to give me the cylinder until I paid him the money. The agency must be brought under scrutiny. It is unfair for the public to pay extra to the deliverymen since we already pay for delivery in our regular bill."

Locals not affected by Coronavirus

MANTHRA KOLIYER

Only people who come to Chennai from other countries are being tested for Coronavirus and no local person has been affected, according to Tamil Nadu Health Minister C Vijaya Baskar.

Speaking in the Tamil Nadu Assembly, Vijaya Baskar said, "As of now, only those who come from abroad are being checked. No local person is affected. More than 8,500 passengers are being screened at the Chennai airport daily. People with cold or runny nose are being checked thoroughly."

"It is better to avoid visiting Kerala or any other state or country which have coronavirus cases. We have taken all precautions and are tracking all those who land at Chennai airport and other airports from various places," the minister was quoted as saying by The Times of India.

R Jayanthi, Dean of the Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital, Chennai, said, "We had one patient who was admitted with symptoms of Covid-19 but he has been tested negative today".



Outside the isolation ward at Rajiv Gandhi Government Hospital | MANTHRA KOLIYER

Dr K Narayanaswamy, medical superintendent at Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital, said, "The hospital has been taking the necessary steps. We would not want the people to panic since 50 per cent of the people have recovered worldwide."

Vijaya Baskar minister said people need not use any type of masks unless they have cold and are above 70 years.

At the RGGG Hospital, Park Town there were no face masks available even upon payment and the hospital was running short of hand-sanitizers. People have been asked to use the provided sanitizer

before entering the RMO's office. The hospital only had 3 sanitizers on the first floor where the isolation ward was.

Head pharmacist at the RGGH, K. Indira said, "We only provide masks for the admitted patients in the ward, the care takers as well as visitors must get masks for themselves". The pharmacist directs the people to the closest pharmacy which is 600 metres away from the hospital. The pharmacy does not have masks and hand-sanitizers.

M. Murali, a student, said, "I purchased the face mask from outside. The college did not provide it for us as well".

'No hostile witnesses'

Police say they protect witnesses from harassment

KRATI PURWAR

Police officers in Chennai say that there has hardly been any case where a witness has turned hostile. They were responding to questions about reports quoting the Madras High Court as saying that witnesses turning hostile had become a new norm and therefore, it cannot be presented as grounds for acquittal of an accused.

S. Elamvazhuthi, J13 Sub Inspector at the J13 Taramani Police Station, said that the police offer protection to witnesses to prevent them from being threatened. "There have been no cases of witness harassment in Chennai."

Referring to cases where an influential person could be an accused, Elamvazhuthi said that class did not play a role in bribing of witnesses but, "usually, a compromise happens between the accused and the witness."

Head Constable Egambaram said love affairs and honour killings were cases where a witness or the victim's family were threatened if they were poor. Cases of rapes, murders, molestation, and where political parties are involved, the

witnesses often came to the police for protection and "in many cases, they are even killed," he added.

The High Court had said that witnesses get lured and bribed and were threatened to retract the statements made to the police earlier. This hindered the process of justice.

K. Palvesam, Law and Order Inspector at the J5 Shastri Nagar, said that in his 20 years of career, he had not come across a case where the witness was lured or threatened. He added witnesses themselves refrained from giving evidence.

Palvesam said witnesses made up their minds that they would be threatened and therefore, did not come forward to hand over evidence or become eyewitness.

Palvesam said that politicians and influential people in Tamil Nadu were not involved in cases like rapes and honour killings but in money laundering and job rackets. In such cases, a witness could turn hostile but a court could refer to the material evidence, he added.

V. Thulasi Das, Sub Inspector at the J4 Kottapuram Police Station, said in his 32 years of career, he

had never found a witness, he presented, backing out in the court. He said he made sure to check the witness statement multiple times and run them by the public prosecutor to prevent any backlash at the last minute or else the police looked like liars.

Das said that thieves and murderers, who had been to jail multiple times or had connections with influential people or political leaders, not only threatened witnesses but also the police.

Das said that an accused with political connections would threaten the police using the politician's name or sometimes they would call the politician and force the police to release them. The case was closed then and there, he added.

N. Rajendran, Inspector at the J6 Thiruvanniyur Police Station, said once the police handed over the witness to the court, the proceedings carried on without any involvement of the police unless a complaint of threat was registered.

Rajendran said "rowdies", who had a criminal record, always threatened the witness and even the police for life. Often, witnesses settles outside court.

People can carry bicycle on metros



MEGHNA.M

Commuters can carry their own 'compact and handy' cycles on the metro for commuting their last mile by paying double the usual fare.

"I usually take the train from Alandur to Thirumangalam and cycle the last mile to my workplace. This has given me the opportunity to use my bicycle rather than rent one from the metro," said S.Ranjit, commuter.

The cycles can be mounted in the special class coaches which can accommodate about 6-7 cycles each.

"Special class was meant for peak hours when there is overcrowding in the metro but now since people want to carry their cycles, the rules have been changed to accommodate this," said C.Balaji, Station Controller, Koyambedu.

The special class coaches on the metros have cushioned seats and more space than normal coaches.

This allows commuters who take their bicycles to use this extra space for storing their cycles. They, however, have to pay double the normal price for this ticket.

According to the press release by the Chennai Metro Rail Limited this has been brought about in an effort to promote eco-friendly and sustainable transportation for the commuters.

"The initiative is a good one as most people had to use the smart bikes or rent another cycle," said Kirthana, commuter.

However, many remain unaware of the recent initiative. "I did not know that such an initiative is in place. They should market their initiatives more for wider awareness," said R.Varun.

"We are waiting to see if this initiative will pick up traction. Accordingly we will take measures later to accommodate all of their concerns."

There still remains ambiguity on what CMRL means by smart, compact and handy cycles as many commuters are still unclear.

"You can take any cycle in the metro. As long it can fit in the metro," said Balaji

He added that the cycles occupy space and people will have to wait for another train if they cannot get on the current train.

"There are no formal records maintained on how many people use it. Since this is a small station there is not much traction but near Annanagar and Thirumangalam there are many who use it," said Arumugam. K, Station Master, Shenoy Nagar Metro Station.

He also said that bicycle enthusiasts use it early in the morning and that there has been a considerable increase in the number of people who use this facility-



People taking precautions to prevent COVID-19

Masks in demand

KRITHI KANNAN

As panic over the Coronavirus grips the city, many chemist shops in several localities have run out of hand sanitizers and surgical masks.

The price of surgical masks has also increased as suppliers have not been able to replenish stock in time. The demand for masks suddenly increased in the last week.

Surgical masks which used to previously cost Rs 3 a mask, now cost Rs 30 a mask at Ganesh pharmacy in Royapettah.

"People are hoarding up masks," said Kumar a salesperson at the pharmacy.

Apollo Pharmacy in Royapettah is selling yellow nose masks at Rs 200 each. While Amazon sells the same masks online at Rs 14 per mask.

Kumar a salesperson at the pharmacy says "Usually people who travel a lot seem to buy more of these masks."

The pharmacy has also run out

of hand sanitizers and is waiting for stocks to get replenished.

The owner of Subam pharmacy at Teynampet said "Due to increasing demand suppliers have not been able to replenish stock. As a result we are forced to buy masks from third party sellers at exorbitant rates. For example the white Honeywell respiratory mask, the market price of which is only Rs 60, is now being sold to us at Rs 180. As a result we are forced to sell the mask at Rs 200."

The salesperson at Muthu Pharmacy said "We have sanitizer bottles available. However a Rs 50 Dettol sanitizer will now cost Rs 75 due to increased demand."

When asked about the effectiveness of these masks, Dr Srimathi Sridhar a general physician at Apollo hospitals said, "Wearing a mask does not guarantee protection. However masks do have the capacity to prevent the inhalation of droplets from an infected person. These droplets are supposed to be the main source of transmission."

Prisoners get a new lease of life

TN Government expands life skill training to prison inmates

KEERTHI KRISHNA

These men, clad in light blue shirts and dark blue trousers, greet motorists with a warm smile and fill up the tanks of vehicles at a petrol bunk in Puzhal on the north-western outskirts of Chennai. For them, this job is a second shot at life. They are all inmates of the Puzhal Central Prison.

The Tamil Nadu Government came up with an initiative in February 2019 to organise life skills training and create job opportunities for prison inmates across the state. As a part of the initiative, similar petrol bunks were set up, as a joint venture with Indian Oil Corporation, in Chennai, Palayamkottai, Coimbatore, Vellore and Pudukkottai.

In the recent State budget session, the Tamil Nadu Government made plans to open five such bunks across the state. "The prisoners who are best behaved and educationally qualified will be selected to work in petrol bunks," said Stanley E, a head constable.

One of the prisoners at the Puzhal petrol bunk said "This is like a second life to us. Every month, some money is sent to my family through Prisoners Co-operative Fund accounts. Additionally some amount of money is stored for us and some of it is sent to the victim."

The inmates who work in the petrol stations and the stalls set up under the 'Freedom' brand have the option to go home for 15 days during any time of the year. "I visit my home during festive periods,"



Prisoner's petrol bunk near Puzhal Prison | KEERTHI KRISHNA

said another prisoner.

Sub inspector Ramesh said that the prisoners had a fixed time slot during which they could work in the bunks. In the remaining hours, they remain inside the jail.

Along with the petrol bunks, stalls selling products made by prisoners are also set up. Bakery products, water bottles, army uniforms, writing pads, food mixes and savouries are made by the inmates inside the prisons across Tamil Nadu.

Shivashankaran S, the head warden in charge of the stalls, said that the Government had special programmes for inmates. "They are given basic education, taught driving, cooking, tailoring and how to make the aforementioned products," added Shivashankaran.

"The inmates are paid for taking part in the training and they get money from the products too."

He added, "Each item is made at a different place. Savouries come from Madurai and Tiruchi, water

cans from Coimbatore and the writing pads used in government offices, and army uniforms are made in Chennai."

This reformation training is given only to convicts, according to Suresh Babu, manager of the Freedom stall. "Only inmates who are going to stay for a considerable amount of time will be given the training."

The prisoners wages will be increased by 50 per cent according to the recent Tamil Nadu Budget.

Prisoners with political connections misuse the amnesty system

MEENAL VASHISTHA

Unlike the rich who can get acquitted from any crime, the poor are suffering the consequences of a callous legal aid system, with policemen often mishandling the evidence in latter's case, according to a lawyer.

"The legal aid system is the worst. The lawyers don't care about their clients. For the leading lawyers to become a successful counsel, each lawyer has to handle at least four pro-bono cases every month. There is no data about that (how many cases a lawyer won or lost). They'll throw stories like they're overworked and underpaid," says Muralidharan D, managing partner at Murali Law Firm.

The system is a trap, says Muralidharan. Since "Speedy Justice" is not defined anywhere in the law, the judge can give three years for both the parties to prepare their

case. If the prosecutor can produce strong evidence, as often seen with established lawyers, the case can get dismissed within six months to a year. But without strong legal aid, the case can even stretch for 15 years.

"If it is election time, the government will not release many prisoners. If it's the ruling party, it will release its own people - MURALIDHARAN D

"In the system, if the person has money, he can get acquitted, even in the rarest of the rare cases while poor people get trapped in the system. Even though they are out of jail, they will be suffering through all those years. They might even lose their job because of that criminal case," says Muralidharan.

Explaining the erratic difference

in the total number of life convicts released since 1992 before their term of imprisonment ended, Muralidharan says the releases are proportional to the conviction rate.

"It's only now life sentence stands until death. Previously in the IPC, seven years made up one life sentence, so if someone was given two life sentences, they'd spend 14 years," he said.

The criterion for the actual sentence undergone by the lifer has varied since 1992. From 12 years for men and 10 years for women, the term was reduced to 10 years post 1996, only to rise to 14 years in 2007 and falling back the same year to 10 years. In 2008, it was reduced to 7 years for male, 5 years for female, both aged above 60 years. Next year, the term was hiked back to ten, followed by a drop to 5 years for those aged 70 years and above.

After a gap of eight years, the term for life sentence has been

Cops want traffic fine hiked

NIMA

With at least 300 offenders being caught in one day, the traffic police at the Tidel Park Junction said the fines for violating traffic rules need to be increased to make the road safe.

Not following traffic signals, ignoring no entry signs, cell phone use and not using seat belt, among others are the top traffic violations today, according to sub inspector P. Raju.

Raju said over 70 per cent of people were riding bikes without wearing a helmet.

"The situation is worst during peak hours, in the morning and evening," said the official.

"Despite increased CCTV surveillance and strict monitoring people are not paying any heed. Most people think that they can afford to pay fines making lives on road riskier."

Over 26,000 accidents were reported because of two wheelers in 2018. It was the highest number of road accidents reported in the State,

according to the record with Transport Commissionerate and State Transport Authority.

P. Raju said if the penalty was Rs. 1000, the people would be more careful. The present fine of "Rs. 100 is low."

At Tidel park traffic junction four policemen monitor and conduct regular inspection round the clock.

According to P. Raju, "Although riders carry a helmet with them, they do not wear it while riding. Some of the riders wear helmets only in front of the traffic police and take it out after leaving the check post," he said.

A minimum of 200 bike riders are fined for not wearing helmets at Tidel Park junction every day.

The revised Motor Vehicle Act passed by the Parliament, which hiked the fines for the violation of traffic rules last year has not come into effect so far, according to traffic officials.

The Act raised the penalty for riding without a helmet from Rs. 100 to Rs. 1000 and suspension of li-

cence for three months.

The revised Motor Vehicle Act introduced new penalties for failure to use seat belt and violation of rules in the seating of children, violation of safety measures for motor cycle drivers and pillion riders, refusal to stop and use of phones, among others.

Mohamed Zayn, who operates a Rapido, said, most customers preferred not to wear helmet during the day time and some were not used to wearing helmet.

"It is important to make them wear the helmet but it's difficult to convince them always," he said.

Over 26,000 accidents by two-wheelers were recorded as the highest number of accidents on road in the State in 2018, according to the records with Transport Commissionerate and State Transport Authority, Tamil Nadu. Those riding two-wheelers are the highest traffic rules offenders even today, traffic officials say.

The officials say that the traffic worsens during office hours and so does the number of offenders.

'The poor and vulnerable are in jail'

Prisoners with political connections misuse the amnesty system

MEENAL VASHISTHA

Unlike the rich who can get acquitted from any crime, the poor are suffering the consequences of a callous legal aid system, with policemen often mishandling the evidence in latter's case, according to a lawyer.

"The legal aid system is the worst. The lawyers don't care about their clients. For the leading lawyers to become a successful counsel, each lawyer has to handle at least four pro-bono cases every month. There is no data about that (how many cases a lawyer won or lost). They'll throw stories like they're overworked and underpaid," says Muralidharan D, managing partner at Murali Law Firm.

The system is a trap, says Muralidharan. Since "Speedy Justice" is not defined anywhere in the law, the judge can give three years for both the parties to prepare their

case. If the prosecutor can produce strong evidence, as often seen with established lawyers, the case can get dismissed within six months to a year. But without strong legal aid, the case can even stretch for 15 years.

"If it is election time, the government will not release many prisoners. If it's the ruling party, it will release its own people - MURALIDHARAN D

"In the system, if the person has money, he can get acquitted, even in the rarest of the rare cases while poor people get trapped in the system. Even though they are out of jail, they will be suffering through all those years. They might even lose their job because of that criminal case," says Muralidharan.

Explaining the erratic difference

in the total number of life convicts released since 1992 before their term of imprisonment ended, Muralidharan says the releases are proportional to the conviction rate.

"It's only now life sentence stands until death. Previously in the IPC, seven years made up one life sentence, so if someone was given two life sentences, they'd spend 14 years," he said.

The criterion for the actual sentence undergone by the lifer has varied since 1992. From 12 years for men and 10 years for women, the term was reduced to 10 years post 1996, only to rise to 14 years in 2007 and falling back the same year to 10 years. In 2008, it was reduced to 7 years for male, 5 years for female, both aged above 60 years. Next year, the term was hiked back to ten, followed by a drop to 5 years for those aged 70 years and above.

After a gap of eight years, the term for life sentence has been

fixed at 10 years for people of all ages. If it is election time, the government will not release many prisoners. The ruling party will only release its own people. So in the case of convicts with connections to the ruling party, the government will appoint a parole board. The prisoners will send their representatives to the parole board and based on the recommendations of the parole or advisory board, the Governor can grant general amnesty.

This is how they misuse the law, alleges Muralidharan

After six years of no release of life convicts, 1650 prisoners were released under General Amnesty on the Birth Centenary of former Chief Minister Dr. M.G.R in 2018. According to the data given by the Prison Department, this is the highest number of prisoners released, all of whom must have completed over one life sentence (seven years) or more.

29 Chennai guitarists unite to jam on one backing track

Neil Cornelius

A collaboration video featuring 29 of Chennai's top guitarists titled Ultimate Chennai Guitarists Chillstep Collective has created a stir in the city's music scene.

The video was uploaded on YouTube and had almost 5000 views at the time of writing this article.

The video features all the guitarists playing a solo to the same beat. "The goal of the project was to see how different musicians perceive the same track," said Chris Jason, the brain behind this massive collaboration.

Chris himself is a very popular sessions guitarist of the city. When asked what made him come up with this project he said, "I've seen many such collaborations on YouTube which were done from the U.S but nothing like this has been attempted in India save for one metal exclusive collaboration that happened a while back. I have been wanting to work on my YouTube content for a long time and I

thought with the contacts I've acquired from the industry I could put together something like this."

Chris also said that this collaboration also brings together the artists of Chennai to showcase their abilities and bring out the vitality of the music scene in the city.

"I never knew there were these many talented guitarists in the city," said Joel Prithvi, guitarist of Nobody, Peng and Defunct.

Chris says that it took three months to put together the entire project. "I first started by making the backing trackbeat along with my friend and made four variations of the track for guitarists so as to match their style. Once I did that, it was a matter of calling and following up with the guitarists. I asked them to shoot themselves playing the video and send it. I then sat with my editor and finished off the editing process."

Mark Shu, the guitarist of Since 108 and the Halo Project said that "It is a really great venture that Chris has put up here. I've always wanted to play for a collaboration



Chris Jason playing at the concert

| SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

like this but I was almost certain something like this would not be possible to execute in India." He also said that this helped a lot of musicians get recognized. He added saying, "Social Media has now become a huge element in the music scene. Any artist can now reach a massive audience instantly. Chris' move to put this video up is going to help the scene on the whole," he added.

Chris says that he has no plans on putting out another edition of the collaboration any time soon. "It is a whole lot of work to put together another such video. I'm not saying it's not on the cards but its not going to happen any time soon. I'm gonna lay low for a while and focus on my work as a session guitarist. Hopefully the video has gained enough traction in the community to give all the musicians a boost forward."

Ezekiel Bernard, the guitarist of Levites and the youngest guitarist featured in the video said, "It is really amazing to have played for this collaboration. It gives up-and-

coming musicians like us really good exposure and also brings us out into the public eye. Playing alongside industry legends like Keba (Keba Jeramiah) and Josh (Joshua Sathya) is really an honour."

"Many people would have come to watch one of the big names like Keba in the video and in the process end up discovering some of the smaller artists which is really a great thing," Joel Prithvi said.

Chris hopes that more such videos would come out in the future as artists wear now putting out more and more quality content by the day.

Chris says, "At the end of the day it is about how the artist gets creative freedom over his piece. Most of these guitarists work as session musicians where they are already under strict constraints of how and what they should play. In this collaboration the artists were allowed to do whatever they wanted and felt original to them which is what makes ventures like this so cool."

Reduce, reuse & recycle

MEGHA MALLICK

The Resource Recovery Centre of the Zone 12 Corporation Office at Alandur is making good use of things thrown out of houses, termed unusable by people otherwise. The workers make different kinds of accessories out of the discarded materials, and sell them at low prices. Around 240 such centres work under the Greater Chennai Corporation.

The things that are newly made include slippers, shoes, bags and floor mats. All the waste that is generated in division 160, under Zone 12, is brought to this centre. Here, the waste is segregated based and bio-degradable waste, like vegetable peel, is sent to another centre to prepare manure.

Ms Sasikala, the in-charge of this resource centre, says, "Our zonal officer, Mr Murugan, took up this initiative. It first started in Zone 1 in Tiruvottiyur, and when he was transferred here, he continued it. This is conservancy work that we do. We collect waste material from all households and then segregate them. First, we pick out the e-waste, like tube lights. There are other wastes like coconut shells, discarded bedding, tyres and mica covers. There are multi-level plastics. Then there are clothes, school bags, slippers and thermocol that people throw off."

The thermocol is compressed



Newly stitched shoes from the collected garbage and available spare part at the Greater Chennai Corporation Resource Recovery Centre | MEGHA MALLICK

into small pieces and given to vendors and suppliers to make glue or shirt buttons. The plastic is also used to make tar or for cement companies. The plastics are used as fuel.

Coconut shells are burnt to make charcoal powder, used for facials, and also for making incense sticks. Slippers are picked up from the garbage and the ones which can be fitted with parts are stitched back and are sold at low prices from Rs.30 to Rs.50.

School bags that are discarded

are stitched back and given to poor students who cannot afford one. Using clothes, bags, floor mats, pouches and lunch bags are made.

Around 12 people work at this centre. There are two shifts - at 8 a.m. and then at 4 p.m. Tailors and cobblers are among the workers. They receive equal payment under the National Urban Livelihood Mission.

To ensure a healthy work environment, the workers use masks, head covers and gloves. Once in six months, a vaccination program is

conducted to ensure immunity. Once in a month, a health camp is organised for a basic check-up.

Mumtaaz, a sweeper in the centre who has been working for three months at this centre, says, "My elder daughter keeps telling me to quit this job. It is so dusty here. We need good water, but the water is not proper here. My salary is Rs 11000, out of which Rs 4000 goes for the rent. I am the only earning member of the household; I cannot afford to quit it even if it is unhealthy."

Nungu to beat the heat

MEGHNA. M

As summer approaches, watermelons and ice apples (nungu) are in season for people to beat the heat in Chennai.

Ram Kumar Selvan, 23, sells ice apples in Kotturpuram from 11 a.m. till 7 p.m. "The stocks run out very fast. As summer is setting in sooner than expected there are a large number of people who come out for this on a hot day."

Surrounded by shells of this fruit which comes from the Palmyra tree, these roadside shops offer the fruit in two forms for consumption. The fruit can be bought and peeled to eat and the other form is the pathaneer which is the juice that is taken from the tree for drinking. The un-fermented drink has short shelf-life and has to be consumed immediately.

K.Sekhar, a customer, said, "Nungu is the best way to beat the heat in Chennai. It not only refreshes you but also is very healthy as it cools the body."

Like Ram Kumar, many come from places like Thenkasi and Theni to sell ice apples in Chennai in the season.

"A month ago I was in Coimbatore selling nungu there as it was in season there. Now, the season for Chennai has begun and so I will be here for the next three months," said T.Kamaraj, who sells ice apples at Balaji Nagar.



Vijaya selling watermelons on the Sterling road

| NEIL CORNELIUS

Ram Kumar said, "An owner from one of the districts harvests the ice apples and then we are hired to sell them at various junctions in the city."

Apart from ice apples, watermelons are also in high demand as the heat has gone up a notch.

K.Vijaya, who has been in the business for over 20 years said that this year the watermelons had arrived early and in large numbers.

They usually arrive by March end to April beginning.

"I gave an order for watermelon from Tindivanam in mid-January but they have arrived early. I sell one watermelon for Rs.100 depending on the size," she continued.

R. Bharati, a customer, said that it was a pleasant surprise that the watermelons had turned up early because the heat was getting unbearable in Chennai.

Hard to document climate change variability: experts

MAHERA DUTTA

In response to a recent McKinsey report which stated that 4.5 per cent of India's GDP would be affected owing to climate change in the next decade, T. Jayaraman, senior fellow at the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation said: "A report must not be completely ruled out. But it should be examined carefully."

Swaminathan said that not all reports were necessarily based on 'scientific evidence' and indicated that a lot of scaremongering happens across climate change. Talking about 'expert opinions' and activism, the researcher said: "There exists a lot of variability in the patterns of climate change across the world which is not easy to capture. Getting evangelical about climate change does little help."

The former professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, confirmed that rising temperatures negatively affect specific industries in India such as the dairy industry with livelihoods suffering as heat stress disrupt supply chains.

He, however, was positive about India's mitigation measures with respect to climate change. "India's investment in the levels of mitigation against climate change is high when compared to its present development status," he said.

Talking of a 'global we' attached to every prevention measure climate change brought with it, he said, "There is a lot of talk about cutting down on meat consumption to reduce carbon footprint. At present, India's per capita meat consumption stands at 4.4 kgs. The United States exceeds 100 kgs. India's deprived need that calorific requirement to supplement their dietary requirements."

"We cannot emulate the West in every aspect," Swaminathan said.

Jayashree Balasubramanian, Director MSSR spoke of the need to converge government reports and academic consultations to understand India's situation better. "There exists a much generalized view of climate change. As a process, climate change too attracts vested interests for pushing of funds etc.," she said.

Dr. K.S. Kavikumar, Head of department, Environmental Economics at the Madras School of Economics said, "Policies need to be based on predictive models of climate change. The knowledge remains hazy. Gibberish futuristic talks of 2050 and 2100 add to the problem."

"Providing availability of water and preserving ground water resources is regular development work which must not be compromised at any cost," he said.

Fito saves Chennai City FC's blushes

Chennai City FC starts AFC Cup with a draw against Maldives based Maziya

NIMA

Chennai City FC played out an entertaining 2-2 draw against Maziya Sports and Recreation Club in their opening fixture of the AFC Cup group stage at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in Chennai.

Spanish striker Fito scored a late equalizer in the dying minutes of the game to save Chennai City from defeat. The goal sparked excitement among the 6,200 fans that turned up to watch the defending I-League and the Maldives based club in Chennai's first ever AFC Cup game.

Fito gave Chennai City FC a 11th minute lead but the home team's shaky start to the second half ended up with Maziya scoring two quick goals through M. Irufaan and I Mahudhee. But Fito had the last laugh scoring an injury time equalizer for the home side.

The unfurling of banners and drumming, a usual way of supporting home clubs in football started late at the stadium. And football players in field were facing similar situation on the field like their fans in the stand.

Chennai City FC team owner Rohit Ramesh said that his team had more ball possession and played well. "We should have won the match but that's football. We should be ready to concede unexpected results," he said.

He added that the team aims to do better in the next game.

Chennai City FC was one of the first teams from the city to play in the I-league, the top tier professional football competition in India, in 2013.

Maziya Sports and Recreation Club came back to India after defeating one of the best teams in Indian Super League- Bengaluru FC last month in the preliminary round of qualifiers. With the loss to the Maldivian team on penalty shootout, Bengaluru FC became the first team to be knocked out of the AFC Cup qualification matches in the preliminary round in last five years.

Ramesh said the performance of Bengaluru FC last month was not relevant to Chennai City FC in any way. "Every club has its own philosophy and various financial back ground. To change Indian football, it won't happen overnight," he said.

He added that Indian football is here to stay and develop the sport. "I am sure the I-League and the ISL clubs are doing what they can do to promote the sport," said Ramesh.

Despite government's advisory to not conduct any social gathering because of growing Coronavirus outbreak fear, Chennai City FC recorded one of the highest attendances at the Jawaharlal Nehru stadium, according to the club official.

The club played at the stadium until 2017 and moved to Coimbatore to play I-league.

Ashok Kumar from Chennai said that the game was mostly dominated



Fito scores his second in the dying minute | SPORTSTAR

by foreign players for both clubs. "This makes difficult for our local players to grow," he said.

"However, we also have best players from Kerala and West Ben-

gal where football is more common."

Ramesh also said the management won't mind considering to play all Indian squad, if the rule

permits to abolish foreign quota. "Our expectation is always to promote local talent. We won the league that way. We will continue to do that," he said.

TFSA: Documenting Asia A riverine trade in Bangladesh

MEGHA MALLICK

The exploitation of the working class is a never ending theme. Bamboo Stories or Baansh Boibhob, as it is referred to in Bengali, is a documentary highlighting this fact and was screened at the Asian College of Journalism as part of the Travelling Film South Asia festival.

Directed by Shaheen Dill-Riaz and released in January 2019, this 96-minute long documentary runs through rivers of north-eastern Bangladesh, portrays the life of labourers and how their life is entangled in the bamboo trade and how they have to deal with dangerous tides and pirates.

It gives an authentic description of the entire journey, from the cutting of bamboos, to making rafts out of them, and transporting them to the buyers through the river.

The documentary starts with a drone shot of a bamboo raft floating on a river in Fenchuganj, Sylhet division.

It slowly introduces the characters, i.e. the labourers who come in at various stages of the trade.

Most of them had their earlier generations in the same business. Shoheed, Shiraz and Hussain are the ones who make a huge raft out of the bamboos that come in.

Nuru, an old man, says how even at this age, he cannot stay at home and rest, because the raft

calls him back.

Another labourer, says, "God has left us with no choice."

The second scene cuts to Shagornal in the same division. Here, we are introduced to Liakot, who cuts bamboo and digs canals in the mud.

He explains what the various uses of the bamboo are. He terms the forest as a sacred place and adds that evil spirits have driven some of the workers to madness.

He also describes the various problems that the workers face while working in dense forests, from sudden intrusion of elephants to leeches.

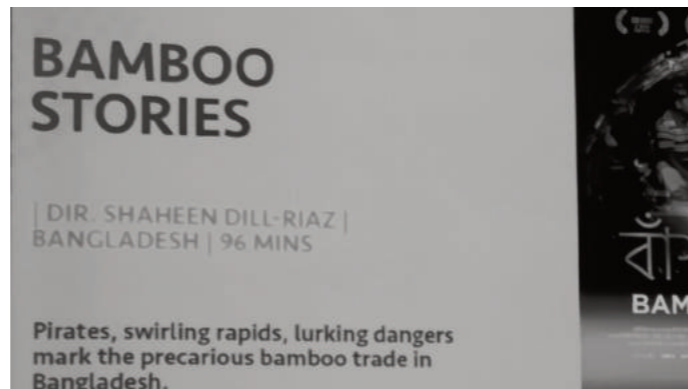
Shoheed talks about their life on the raft; how they drink the river water and ease themselves in it as well. In a later scene, he is shown with his son.

He tells the story of his wife's death in a fire accident and how people ask him to stay away from the family to restrain him from pondering over it.

He says that this is the reason why he chose to live his life on the raft. His grief comes out on the screen vividly.

Pirates are another problem that these men encounter. All they steal is the minimum money and the mobile phones that these workers have, selling which brings in easy money.

Also, the police intrude into their



Screening of Bamboo stories | MEGHA MALLICK

journey often to ask for bribes. Liakot and a few men working under him complain of the low wages that they get in terms of the toil that they put into cutting the bamboo.

Next, we are introduced to Mamun, who has a lease over a part of the bamboo forest. He explains how his forefathers were also in this business and provides details about the stages of the trade. He says that many workers have gone abroad to work in the Middle East countries.

Earlier, there was no dearth of labourers in the bamboo trade. Now, due to large scale migration of labour, there is a scarcity.

The next scene is at Baiddar Bazar, in the capital city of Dhaka. Here, George Miaan comes into the

scene. He deals in bamboo as well as in bricks. He is shown speaking with his labourers and striking deals with buyers; and says that he cannot leave this business, because his blood and flesh is in it.

Most of these people say that they are uninterested in letting their children get into this business. They feel that it is not safe and the children might do better to get proper education and take their chances to get into civil services.

Some of the lengthy scenes are shot by drones, showing the bamboo forest as well as the rafts floating in curves in the water.

The documentary offers a good insight into an otherwise not much-known feature of Bangladesh, its bamboo trade.

Engineering dreams in Kota hostels

MARIAH DINS

Inside the four walls of the coaching centres of Kota, the pressure faced by the students is immense. Hemant Gaba's "An Engineered Dream" which was screened at the Asian College of Journalism as a part of the Travelling Film South Asia Festival- Chennai edition, shows the unhealthy stress on students from different parts of India in the coaching centres of Kota, the city famous for its coaching centres.

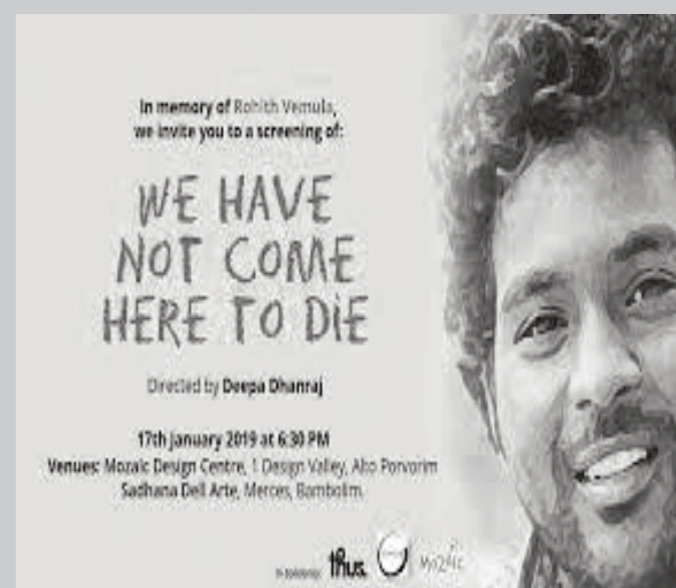
Every year 150,000 students come to Kota with the aim of clearing the Indian Institute of Technology entrance exam which is one of the toughest in the world with an acceptance rate of less than 1%.

Addressing a group of tense looking students, a lecturer from an IIT JEE coaching centre in Kota says, "You stayed inside your mother's womb for nine months, after nine months of coaching with us you will be reborn."

The documentary shows loneliness as a recurring issue and how the expectations of parents are increasing the pressure on the students through three case studies.

A boy who waits for his father to prompt him at every step.

Another student who is taking the test for the third time. "When stress gets the better of you, death is an option," he says.



Poster of 'We have not come here to die'

| THUSCRITIQUE

And the last one is a topper who seems destined for a seat at the IIT.

"My dream is that my son secures AIR (All India Rank) 1 in IIT JEE, so that I can tell my relatives about his success," says a mother.

A sarcastic teenager praying to Donald Trump to start the Third World War so that his exam gets cancelled, clearly shows the pressure which the students are going through.

The festival also screened Deepa Dhanraj's "We have not

come here to die" based on the death of a Dalit Phd research scholar and activist Rohith Vemula, who was unable to bear the persecution from a partisan university administration and Hindu supremacists.

Over the years, students all over the country have protested against caste discrimination and started an anti-caste movement.

The film attempts to track this movement that is changing the issue of caste in India.

Destroyed Homeland

MANTHRA KOLIYER

Director Sedika Mojadidi's documentary "Facing the dragon" is a narrative of the lives of two Afghan women in 2014 as they respond to the Taliban regaining power in their country.

The lead characters in the documentary were Nilofar, a doctor-turned-politician, and Shakila, a journalist for Tolo TV news.

Sedika's documentary was one among the several films/documentaries that were screened at the Travelling Film South Asia festival of documentaries 2020 held between March 6th and 7th at the Asian college of Journalism.

The 82 mins documentary Facing the dragon (2018) cross-cuts between the two characters.

Sedika has shown how their struggles as working mothers end up for the both of them, since they are forced to send their families to Germany and Australia.

Nilofar (politician) raises her voice against the prevalence of patriarchy in Parliament, where she says, "Resistance is an art of endurance."

She promotes a bill banning violence against women. Shakila also pays keen attention to the issues such as violence and abuse against women.



A scene from Facing the Dragon | DOHA FILM INSTITUTE

She loses contact with the director since she received threats and had to lie low for some time.

The documentary sheds light on the problems that the women who are public figures face.

Karim Mohammad, a student of Asian College of Journalism from Afghanistan said, "I have worked with Journalist (Shakila) when I was in Afghanistan."

"This is the real condition of journalists in our country today.

The US has a major role to play in what happens in our country. It is a very sorry state that we are living in right now," he added

The other films included Indus Blues by Jawad Sharif, Scratches on Stone by Amit Mahanti, Memoirs of Saira and Salim by Eshwarya Grover.

In Fact by Debalina Majumder, Listen by Min Min Ho and The Winter Tap by Aashish Limbu & Debin Rai were also screened.

KRITHI KANNAN

"Swimming through the darkness", a film, was screened at the Asian College of Journalism on 7th March as part of the Travelling Film South Asia festival.

This film centers around the life of a blind Bengali swimmer who lives on the fringes of society due to abject poverty.

Instead of making his blindness the centre of the story, the film rather chooses to capture his dreams and hopes in a world devoid of light.

The term darkness in Supriyo Sen's film title refers not only to the protagonist Kanai's blindness but to the various challenges that he faces while attempting to swim long distance.

Kanai who lives in Krishna Nagar, three hours away from Calcutta was pronounced blind at the age of 4.

However despite somehow managing to complete his education, Kanai now supplies water cans to customers in the neighborhood.

Whilst earning just enough to get by, Kanai one day hoped to swim across the English Channel, an arm of the Atlantic Ocean that separates Southern England from Northern France.

Kanai initially started by participating in the 81 km long distance open swimming meet in the Ganga. Despite his lack of vision Kanai had managed to swim an astounding 81 km.

In the documentary, the camera captures his joyful face with a medal adorning his neck, once he finishes his long swim

Kanai does not have a visa or a passport, or anyone to finance him or provide assistance.

He lives with his brother and sister in law, all of whom make just enough to get by.

But this does not stop him from one day wanting to cross the English Channel.

Apart from highlighting his dreams and hopes, the director does not shy away from portraying other aspects of Kanai's life. Kanai is in love with a married woman. The director asks the woman what attracts her to a blind man to which she smiles demurely.

Kanai on the other hand though, despite being stifled by financial constraints chooses to resort to a life of dignity instead of begging on the streets.

The director has not chosen to adhere to a pre written script, but rather he has written to film the movie as it unfolds.



The poster of Swimming Through the Darkness

This gives the audience a clear unfiltered visual of the highs and lows of the protagonist's life, taking them on a roller coaster of joy, sadness, bravery, romance, desperation and vulnerability.

Kanai's story sheds light on the state of the visually challenged in the country.

According to a National Blindness and Visual Impairment survey released by the Health Ministry in 2019, there were about 4.8 million people who were con-

sidered to be blind or visually impaired.

"We often fail to understand what a big challenge it is for them to not be able to access public spaces or take part in day to day activities," says S.Lakshmi a volunteer at Little Flower Convent School For the Blind in T. Nagar.

Helen Keller once said - "Life is a daring adventure or nothing". Kanai truly captures the essence of this quote in his unending thirst for life and adventure.

A king-size umbrella for gods, heroes

MEGHNA M

Dressed in a torn shirt and trousers, C.K Kumar is busy assembling his four and half feet wide temple umbrellas in front of his tiny shop to dry in the sun.

"The business has really picked up over the years. Today one of these umbrellas costs Rs.3,500," he said.

The 50-year-old has been making these umbrellas since he was a young boy.

The job that requires no more than one person to finish, is a family business that was taught generation after generation.

"I have four brothers but only I have taken this up full time. The others have good government jobs. But they help out too after they finish working."

Starting his work at 8 a.m. it takes two days to finish an umbrella.

And the symbols on the umbrella change according to the deity it is being offered to.

If it was an incarnation of Vishnu



C.K. Kumar with his one of his umbrellas. | MEGHNA M

then it would be conch and chakra but Kumar always has a back up of umbrella with flower patterns as it is can be used for any deity.

The size of the umbrella will determine the cost and the time taken for delivery. The smallest umbrella costs Rs. 800.

make sure it had more spring to it. It took me 10 days to finish that. This was designed to make anyone who falls on it land safely otherwise it would have been very dangerous," said Kumar, adding that such an umbrella would cost Rs 45,000 today.

Most of Kumar's orders are from Singapore. He supplies umbrellas to countries like Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Japan, China and Korea. "One man even offered to take me to Singapore so I could set up a shop there and offered to pay me a handsome salary but I didn't go. I couldn't leave my country," he said

Kumar said that all his umbrellas are made by hand from bamboo and the cloth can be locally sourced.

"Only the decorations on it takes time but I have a lot of help from my family. All of the stitches in the umbrella are made by hand we make sure everything comes out perfectly," he said.

"My daughter helps me out with the decorations. My son helps out after he comes back from work. He does this work but he would rather

pursue something conventional."

September is the busiest month for Kumar's business. He says he would barely have time to rest because of the sheer number of orders he receives. He also gets a break.

"Three months in a year I do not have to make umbrellas for any temples as there are no festivals during this time. I have recently received an order for another 16 and half feet wide umbrella. It's going to take some time to finish that," he said

Kumar said his family had been making these umbrellas from the time when Chintadripet was known as Chinna Thari Pettai. "We are Saurashtrian and my grandfather learnt this trade from the Tamils here who made these umbrellas. Slowly they moved out and we have taken over," he said

There are 15 of umbrella makers on the same street. Kumar said that there is no sense of competition among them. "If one of us cannot complete an order we give it to somebody else on the street. There is no monopoly or enmity on who gets to do more work," he said.

Argentina in Madras

MAHERA DUTTA

The Argentinian film festival at the Alliance Francaise of Madras is inaugurated by Mr. Carlos Muscari, head of cultural section from the Embassy of the Argentine Republic in New Delhi on Friday. The festival ran from 9th March to 11th March.

The event also saw Ms. Victoria Molteni, Consul at the embassy of the Argentine Republic, as Guest of Honor. "Through our movies, we want our culture to be known not just in New Delhi but also in other cities," she said after lighting the lamp which marked the beginning of the inauguration.

Mr. Carlos, while giving his inaugural address, said: "This is the third time movies from Argentina are being screened in Chennai. Each time, we get a tremendous response from the audiences here. Movies reflect realities and emotions. It is the only way diversity can be celebrated," he said. "Each movie in the film festival has been carefully chosen and represent important themes of Argentinian life and culture," he added.

The film festival, held by the Embassy of the Argentine Republic in collaboration with the Indo Cine Appreciation Foundation (ICAF), saw many movie enthusiasts at the festival's first screening of the movie I Tita, A life of Tango. The 2017 musical, based on the life of Tita Merello, a famous singer-actress from Buenos Aires, is a biopic which traces the actress's career, starting with her early performances in cabarets of Buenos Aires, through her rapid rise in theatre and films.

Directed by Maria Teresa Costantini, the biopic explores the themes of love and loss and is a poignant tale of ordeals faced by modern women on their path to self discovery.

"We have a fascinating line up of movies for the festival. LA Huella De Tara, (Tara's footprints) directed by director Georgina Barreiro, is a perspective on Bhutia (ancient tradition in the foothills of Himalayas) from the eyes of four young boys," said E. Thangaraj, General secretary, ICAF. "The films are a reflection of social realities of contemporary times", he said.