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Will raising legal age of marriage help women's cause?

Task force to recommend measures to lower maternal mortality rate and improve nutrition levels

AMRIN NAAZ

CHENNAI, FEB 4: Amid talks of raising the legal age of marriage for women from 18 to 21, three instances of child marriages, one of which was not solemnised, surfaced recently near parts of Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu.

A press release by the Press Information Bureau in June 2020 said a Task Force had been set up to look at lowering the maternal mortality rate (MMR), the age of motherhood and improving nutritional levels.

This followed Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's proposal to raise the legal age of marriage of women during her budget speech in 2020.

"As India progresses, opportunities open up for women to pursue higher education and careers. There are imperatives of lowering MMR as well as improvement of nutrition

levels. The entire issue about the age of a girl entering motherhood needs to be seen in this light. I propose to appoint a task force that will present its recommendations in six months' time..." she said.

During his Independence Day speech last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi also talked about the same.

More recently, Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan also suggested that the age of marriage for women be increased. He urged the country to reflect on this.

WHO survey

Highlighting the correlation between early marriages and motherhood, a World Health Organization survey across 29 countries, including India, shows that early child-bearing increases the risk of death during pregnancy and labour.

"Badassbrownfeminist," who

uses social media to create advocacy and educate people about gender, with around 35,000 followers, is opposed to the proposal.

She says: "I have to say the proposal sounds useless - like pouring water on a grease fire. If raising the marriage age for women to 18 hasn't helped much in terms of lowering maternal mortality and age of motherhood, there is no reason to believe that raising it to 21 would help."

She argues that measures like awareness drives on safe sex, contraception and family planning, and making safe abortion more accessible, would be a much better use of resources. Citing safety reasons, she refuses to reveal her name.

According to UNICEF's global programme, 'End Child Marriage', about one in four young women in India are married or in union before they turn 18. However, Oxfam re-

ported that only 501 cases were booked under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act in 2018.

Chandana Hiran, a feminist who filed a petition against Hindustan Unilever for promoting colour-ism through skin whitening products, favours the proposal to raise the legal age of marriage.

She says: "It will ensure that women are not forced to discontinue their education midway."

Arguing that societal norm is a major cause for child marriages, she says: "I don't think people who get their children married care about what the legal age is. They have a different mindset and often look at daughters as a burden."

According to the same UNICEF report, women with no education are six times more likely to get married early than those with 10 years education or more.

PHOTO CREDIT: UNICEF



A community educator (in glasses) explains to the women of Jodhpur, Rajasthan, the harmful effects of child marriage. Under-age marriage is still a reality in India

Mixed reviews for health allocation in new budget

Health Minister calls it 'visionary'; oppn. says it is 'illusory'

ABHIJEET KUMAR

CHENNAI, Feb. 5: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented the Union budget 2021-22 on February 1, 2021, which has elicited mixed views.

The allocation Rs. 2,23,846 crore for the health sector, a 137 per cent increase compared with last year's allocation of Rs. 94,452 crore, in particular, has drawn a lot of attention. While Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan praised the health and wellbeing budget as "visionary," the opposition called it "illusory."

Maneka Yadav, an economics professor in Delhi University, said the budget this year "looks more realistic" than last year. "It is the need of the hour to ramp up India's health infrastructure. If the pandemic has shown us anything, it is that our health sector remains highly vulnerable and weak."

However, public health expert Deeksha Pandey, working with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences,



Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented the first ever digital budget in Parliament on Monday

felt it was an "opportunity gone waste." She said many important sectors such as the tele-medicine, which emerged strong during the

pandemic, hadn't seen any increase in the budgetary allocation. "The AYUSH Ministry has seen a hike in the budget allocation while other

more important national wellness programmes have been ignored," she added.

The All India Institute of Ayurveda has been allocated Rs. 348.87 crore this year as against Rs 313.80 crore last year.

The Finance Minister announced Rs. 35,000 crore for the ongoing vaccination drive against the Coronavirus pandemic. Another important announcement was a new Centre-sponsored scheme of Rs. 64,180 crore to boost health care infrastructure.

However, there was no explanation on where the money would be generated from, especially since the economy has seen a huge slump in the recent past, more so during the pandemic.

Ms Yadav said: "Additional cess on petrol and diesel may be an important source [of revenue]. By imposing additional cuts in the allocation for education and agriculture sectors, the government has made its priority clear."

CREDIT: BUSINESS STANDARD

Roads get safer in T.N.

NCRB data shows drop in number of accidents

ADARSH B. PRADEEP

CHENNAI, Feb. 3: Flagging off a bike rally on January 30, the City Police Commissioner, Mahesh Kumar Aggarwal, praised the efforts of the Tamil Nadu police in reducing the number of road accidents in 2018 and 2019.

The rally was organised by the traffic police personnel to create awareness on the importance of adhering to traffic rules.

According to the Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India 2019 report of the National Crime Records Bureau, the number of road accidents in Tamil Nadu decreased by 10.46 per cent from 63,920 in 2018 to 57,228 in 2019.

The State was also adjudged the Best Performing State in Road Safety for 2018 and 2019 by the Union Ministry of Road Transport & Highways (MoRTH).

The decline in the number of accidents also meant lower number of road accident deaths in the State. There was a significant decrease of 13.8 per cent from 12,216 in 2018 to 10,525 in 2019 in accident deaths.

The data assumes significance as three other southern States - Kerala,

Andhra Pradesh and Telangana - saw an increase in the number of fatalities in 2019, even though their overall accident cases decreased. Kerala witnessed an increase in the

poor road infrastructure from 274 to 5 (98 per cent).

The State government identified and eliminated black spots, provided emergency response to those who met with accidents, and the police and transport departments effectively enforced the traffic rules.

Barring Andhra Pradesh and Kerala that saw a decrease of 85 per cent (from 14 deaths to 2) and 6.9 per cent (from 29 deaths to 27) caused by poor infrastructure, Karnataka and Telangana saw a rise in the number of fatalities by 400 per cent (0 to 4) and 123 per cent (13 to 29).

Major Causes

The major causes of road fatalities in all southern States are over-speeding and careless/dangerous driving, both of which dropped by 4.29 per cent and 43.5 per cent in Tamil Nadu. No other southern State reduced the fatalities caused by these in 2019.

The NCRB data clearly points to the areas in which Tamil Nadu needs to work to achieve zero fatalities. There was a rise in the number of deaths due to driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol from 143 to 157 (9.7 per cent).



Chennai police commissioner Mahesh Kumar

number of deaths from 4,303 in 2018 to 4,370 in 2019 (1.5 per cent), Andhra Pradesh from 7,584 to 7,984 (5.27 per cent) and Telangana from 6,603 to 6,964 (5.46 per cent).

Tamil Nadu's success story was the result of many factors. It drastically reduced deaths caused by

MCD teachers go on strike in North Delhi

ANUSHKA JAIN

NEW DELHI, Feb 4 Munesh Kumar Meena has run out of avenues to borrow money. The primary school teacher says he has borrowed so much in four months that he doesn't know what to do to sustain himself. "I have children, EMIs, rent, car and personal loans to take care of," he says. Nearly 9,000 teachers of Delhi's Municipal Corporation (MCD) schools claim they haven't received their salaries for four months. Nor have they got their multiple arrears and Diwali bonuses for years, they say.

Kuldeep Khatri, president of the protesting teachers' union 'Shiksha Nyay Manch Nagar Nigam, says: "The teachers are front line workers, we have conducted surveys even with the pandemic on."

On January 21, a Delhi High Court bench directed the Delhi government to clear the dues of the unpaid MCD workers. Following this, many MCD workers received their salaries but the teachers did not. They have received the salary for only two months. "We have lakhs in unpaid arrears. We'd be fine if the government paid us even that," says Khatri. The union's plan is to prevent reopening of schools.

No bail for 'anti-national' tribal activist

Stan Swamy has been working against the displacement of Jharkhand Adivasis and highlighting govt.'s failures

AISWARYA RAJ

CHENNAI, Feb. 4: Stanislaus Lourduwamy, a Jesuit priest and activist, has been serving a prison term for almost four months. He has been denied bail multiple times, although he suffers from Parkinson's disease.

Charged with the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and arrested on October 8, 2020, he has worked for the rights of Jharkhand's tribals for 30 years. He has been imprisoned at Talaja jail, Mumbai.

The priest had filed a public interest litigation plea in a Jharkhand court to expedite the criminal proceedings against Dalits and Adivasis charged under the UAPA and the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1908, which were pending before criminal courts. Henri Tiphagne, Executive Director of People's Watch, feels "speaking against the government for Dalits and Adivasis falsely accused of being Maoists resulted in Stan Swamy getting implicated in the case."

Stan Swamy set up the Visthapan Virodhi Jan Vikas Andolan against the displacement of tribals from lands with rich mineral resources. He was arrested after protests in the mid-2010s.



Stan Swamy (left) was arrested under UAPA. At least 16 people have been arrested in connection with the Bhima Koregaon/Elgar Parishad case in 2018

Labelled 'anti-national' and 'anti-development', 20 activists were arrested for the same for their Facebook posts.

Swamy used to campaign against the violation of Adivasi rights and the government's failure to fulfil the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution, which guarantees Adivasi representation in the administrations and control of Scheduled Tribe areas.



Father Mascarenhas, as associate of Stan Swamy, told the NDTV that the priest was about to give evidence in a Jharkhand court when he was arrested. "It does look like that the government is trying to avoid something that could come up in these cases," he said.

Mr. Tiphagne points to how the institutions in the country are worsening. "What the prison authorities do is bad enough. However, the

Human Rights Commission's indifference is worse," he says. "Stan Swamy demanded a straw and sipper as he was unable to hold a cup but he did not get one.

Varavara Rao, a poet, imprisoned under the same charges for the same case, slept in his own urine in prison." He adds that Father Stan Swamy said he did not even know where Bhima Koregaon was.

The National Investigation

Agency (NIA) claimed in a statement that it had found evidence to corroborate Stan Swamy's involvement in the Elgar Parishad incident where the 200th year of the battle of Koregaon Bhima was commemorated on December 31, 2017.

In a written statement, Swamy stated, "I was interrogated by the NIA for 15 hours in a span of five days.

Apart from my bio-data and some factual information, several extracts allegedly taken from my computer implicating my connection to Maoist forces were placed before me. I told them all these are fabrications stealthily put into my computer and I disowned them."

The NIA has taken into custody activists Sudha Bhardwaj, Gautam Navlakha, Anand Teltumbde and Hany Babu, among others, in the Bhima Koregaon case.

"Speaking against the government for Dalits and Adivasis, falsely accused of being Maoists, resulted in Stan Swamy getting implicated in the case."

- Henri Tiphagne

Polio drive in Chennai concludes

ABIRAMI RAMESH

CHENNAI, FEB 02: On 'Polio Ravivar', Polio National Immunisation Day on January 31, 5,000 infants were administered the vaccine in the Alandur zone of the Chennai corporation. The three-day drive concluded on February 2.

Dr. Neelam of Gandhi Hospital, Alandur, said: "There have been no side-effects of the vaccine so far," adding "even infants with mild allergies can be given polio drops. Only those who do not have immunity and have serious illnesses cannot be immunised."

All COVID-19 protocols such as wearing face masks, social distancing and washing hands were followed while administering the polio vaccine. "Although India has eradicated polio, there are many other countries which still report cases of polio," said Dr. Neelam.

Jayarani, staff nurse at the hospital, said: "There's no cure for polio. Therefore, the vaccine is very important." During the three-day drive, volunteers undertook door-to-door campaigning to immunize infants under 5. The programme is supported by about 24 lakh volunteers, 1.5 lakh supervisors and organisations like WHO, UNICEF, and Rotary.

GOOD ON PAPER, BAD IN SPIRIT

Major concerns remain in Union Budget

India's first budget on tablet delivered on many segments but also stepped over areas in need of a helping hand. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's six pillars that laid the foundation for this fiscal year factored in the need to accelerate the battered economy and move towards the projected V-shaped recovery. A fillip to the health sector came in the form of a "137 per cent increase" - Rs 2.23 lakh crore - over the budgetary allocation for the sector last year. The Prime Minister's Atma Nirbhar Swasth Bharat Yojana has an outlay of Rs 6,41,80 crore for the next six years to address deficiencies and reinvigorate the various stages of health care, mainly primary and secondary. An infrastructural boost with an allocation of Rs 1.18 lakh crore for the Road Transport and Highways Ministry majorly benefits the four poll-bound States of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, West Bengal and Assam, and adds to another 8,500 km of roadways under the Bharatmala project. The setting up of Developmental Financial Institutions (DFI) to finance projects of national importance which may otherwise not be funded by banks with lesser capital, surely takes the burden off them.

The 15th Finance Commission's recommendation to allocate 41 per cent of tax revenue to the States has also been addressed. The proposal to assess the States on indicators such as health, education and gender equality to resolve an imbalance in the allocation of these funds is a welcome initiative. The government has also factored in an income of about Rs 1.75 lakh crore from strategic disinvestment, which involves opening up the PSUs, including two public sector banks, to private players. This, along with clearing the field for FDI in insurance sectors, hints at the government's readiness to open up the market for private players. The extension of social security benefits to gig and platform workers is another welcome move. Adequate expenditure on capital acquisition for the defence sector, mainly for those in the armed forces, to update machinery and equipment has been increased by Rs 21,000 crore compared to the initial estimates of 2020-21. Even as the increase comes at a cost of drop in pensions, it was a bold yet requisite move considering the ongoing tensions and talks along the LAC.

However, despite the boost, many concerns remain unaddressed. The pandemic triggered widespread hunger and food insecurity last year. But the budget fails to seriously address this issue despite a three-fold increase in food subsidy. Concerns remain over the efficiency of the Public Distribution System (PDS) and nutrition. The budget has clubbed many nutritional schemes under the Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0, with an estimate of Rs 2,01,05 crore that is 4,000 crore lesser than FY21 (RE). The budget has also cut down its MGNREGA funds from FY21 (RE), which now stands at Rs 73,000 crore. Though schemes like MITRA for the textile industry under the inclusive development pillar paves the way for employment, activists have expressed concerns over the government's lack of commitment to the concerns of those who suffered the most last year. Even the budget estimates for health and the claim of a 137 per cent increase include a one-time allocation of Rs 35,000 crore for vaccination and over 60,000 crore for drinking water and sanitation. The amount that goes into the health and wellness centres is 9.5 per cent lesser than the FY21. The onus is on the government to execute its plans based on the upcoming mid-year revised estimate.

Media gasps in Modi's India

Although all govts want submissive press, threats have reached all-time high under NDA

PALLAVI KESWANI
KAMALA MENON

On Tuesday, Newslandry posted a video on Twitter of journalist Nidhi Suresh being denied entry at the Singhu border farmer protest site. An officer looks at her identity card and dismisses it saying it is "not nationally authorized." Nidhi approaches another officer asking why she cannot go to the border and he is seen laughing off her request.

This incident is the latest in a series of actions the Narendra Modi government has taken to stifle the farmers' protest. The police demanding to see a national media card to let someone near a protest site shows the extent of control the state seeks to exercise over information.

FIRs have been filed against a reporter and the editor of The Wire for reporting on the death of a protester on January 26. Cases of sedition and promoting enmity have been lodged against six other journalists, including Rajdeep Sardesai and Mrinal Pande, who tweeted about the incident.

India's rank of 142 on the World Press Freedom Index - among 180 countries - may appear strange to those reading Union Home Minister Amit Shah's tweets about the government's "commitment to the freedom of press." He also praises the "remarkable role of the media during COVID-19".

The true sentiment is different though. Since 2014, when Mr. Modi became Prime Minister, 135 cases have been lodged against journalists in India, according to a report by the Free Speech Collective (FSC). Of these, 73 cases were filed in BJP-ruled States. Fifty five journalists, many of whom highlighted administrative inconsistencies in handling the pandemic, faced FIRs during the lockdown, says the Rights and Risks Analysis Group.

Media suppression and intimidation are adopted as a tool by political leaders who are intolerant of criticism. Between 2011 and 2016, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa



Photojournalists protesting outside police headquarters in New Delhi

filed more than 200 defamation cases, 55 of them against the media.

When we look at Mr. Modi's days as Chief Minister of Gujarat, we see a pattern of restricting and denying accessibility of information to the media. During his tenure, Mr. Modi was often questioned by the national media on the 2002 riots. His infamous interview with Karan Thapar in October 2007 re-emphasised his intolerance of journalists and uncomfortable questions.

Mr. Modi has made no secret of his dislike for the media. He gives carefully choreographed interviews to select media houses and has abandoned the practice of taking press persons on foreign trips.

For journalists in Gujarat, who covered Mr. Modi for over 12 years, it is more of a re-run of the same film on a national screen. The monologues, one-sided public interaction model has been replicated at the Centre.

In 2019, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman restricted the entry of journalists, including those accredited by the Press Information Bureau (PIB), to her ministry's offices. The lack of press conferences and the friction between the go-

vernment and the media has indeed created a chilling effect on the Indian democracy.

According to "Getting Away with Murder" - another study by FSC - 198 serious attacks on journalists were documented between 2014 and 2019. The arrest of and death threats to journalists have incultured fear in the minds of many. These arrests were not discussed publicly. But when Republic TV editor Arnab Goswami was arrested for abetment to suicide, many BJP leaders, including Amit Shah, Smriti Irani and Prakash Javadekar, expressed outrage.

Held for doing his job
Siddique Kappan, a reporter with the Malayalam news portal Azhimukham.com, who was on his way to report the Hathras gang rape and murder, was arrested by the Uttar Pradesh police on October 5 last year and charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act for "conspiring" against the state. In other words, for doing his job.

The Kerala Union of Working Journalists (KUJW) moved an urgent plea seeking an interim bail for Kappan so that he could visit his ailing mother, which is still pending in the Supreme Court. For Goswami, things were quite diffe-

rent. The Supreme Court granted him bail after a week. Asked about Kappan, the Court judicially stated, "Every case is different." After 122 days and 6 adjournments, Kappan's habeas corpus plea remains pending.

Exercising freedom of press and speech in India comes with an experience - an experience of state mandated violence and labels like 'anti-national', 'sedition' or 'anti-India'. In the aftermath of the Kathua rape case, journalist Swathi Vadlamudi was called 'anti-Hindu' for her cartoons. She received innumerable abuses online. One abuser even hinted that she would meet the same fate as journalist Gauri Lankesh. Journalists such as Prashant Kanojia of The Wire Hindi, Assamese journalist Rajib Sarma, Editor of a Gujarati news portal Dhaval Patel, photojournalist Naresh Khohal, Kashmiri journalist Asif Sultan and many others have been targeted for their work. Two Malayalam news channels, Asianet and Media One, were suspended for 48 hours in May last year for their coverage of the communal violence in Delhi.

For any government in India, control and intimidation of the press come easy in the absence of an explicit constitutional provision protecting the fourth es-

tate. Unlike in the United States, India doesn't unequivocally provide protection against laws that threaten the free press.

The consequence of this was seen in 1975, and later in May last year when a new Media Policy was introduced in Jammu and Kashmir. The policy, in the name of tackling fake news, furthers the Centre's interests of total media control.

The fourth estate derives its strength from constitutional immunity and its own modus operandi. That the media revenues rely heavily on advertising is something the governments have exploited repeatedly.

In 2019, Reuters reported that the government stopped advertising to three major publications for "unfavourable" editorials. Previous governments have not exactly been harbingers of journalistic freedom. The FSC report chronicles journalist arrests since 2010. In the span of four years, till 2014, there were 19 cases against journalists in the country.

However, this should not take away from the fact that there was a significant spike post-2014.

Stifling freedom of expression

April 27, 2020: Journalist Zubair Ahmed arrested for a tweet questioning Andaman authorities on COVID-19 protocols.

June 8, 2019: Prashant Kanojia arrested by U.P. police for allegedly sharing a video that defamed Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath

May 5, 2018: Chattisgarh journalist Kamal Shukla charged with sedition for a cartoon on Judge Loya's death

March 28, 2017: Poonam Aggarwal of The Quint charged with Official Secrets Act, for investigative reporting on the sahayak system. All charges quashed in 2019.

August 2016: Complaints filed against journalist Neha Dixit and Outlook editor Krishna Prasad for story on trafficking of tribal girls
(Source: Free Speech Collective)

'Disappointed with Bollywood for not standing up to govt'

Amazon & Netflix have agreed to be censored because they've no choice: Namrata Joshi

Films in India are increasingly being targeted by the reactionary forces for some reason or another. Significant among them is 'hurting religious sentiment.' The alarming trend set by right-wing elements is becoming a challenge for filmmakers.

In a conversation with S.N. Thyagarajan, senior journalist and film critic Namrata Joshi, winner of the National Award for Best Film Critic in 2004, talks on a range of subjects including the film industry's response to growing intolerance, advent of OTT and social media's influence on film reviews. The journalist argues that these are difficult times to make good films

How did you become a film critic?

I couldn't have become anything else. After finishing journalism from the Times School, I worked as a reporter and subeditor. There was an opening for a film critic at my place of work and I got the job. I have been a film critic for more than 20 years now. But I identify myself as a journalist rather than a film critic.

How has the advent of social media impacted film reviews?

There has been a lot of change since 2010, especially after Twitter became prominent in India. The upside is that people have better access to resources on cinema. The downside is that people review films without knowing about them adequately. Looking at it from a larger lens, people are watching a lot of films because of social media. That is something positive.

How do you see the increasing trend of films coming under the scanner for hurting religious sentiments?



Namrata Joshi

"Indian right wingers are not great artists. I have seen very few good filmmakers come from that side of the spectrum."

Honestly, I am not surprised. Indian right wingers are not great artists. I have seen very few good filmmakers come from that side of the spectrum. They want to control what people see and these are the tactics they employ to advance their agenda. But my disappointment comes from Bollywood, which refuses to take a stand. For instance, the union budget had nothing to offer to the film industry. Yet, a couple of days later, some started tweeting what the government asked them to tweet.

The big establishments of Bollywood have not stood up to the government. Unless the industry tells the government that it is being too nosy, I don't see the situation changing. Also,

OTT platforms like Amazon and Netflix have agreed to be censored because they seem to have no other way out. These are difficult times to make good films.

How has the OTT platform changed the film viewing experience?

I can choose what to review from a wide variety of films that are released on OTT in frequent intervals. This gives me the time and space to appreciate films better. I don't have to rush to a cinema every Friday. Given that the OTTs have a large number of films to offer, I can review the better ones and give the not-so-good ones a pass. But this is a personal view, some members of my fraternity are raring to get back to the cinemas.

What is the essential skill that a journalist should have to become a film critic?

You must understand films. To do this, you should watch and read about it. It is important to have an independent opinion, putting personal biases away. There are some people who believe that a filmmaker can do no wrong but all filmmakers make bad films. For instance, everybody liked "Paava Kadaigal" [an anthology of Tamil films]. I did not. I thought director Vetrimaaran's segment was too violent for no reason, this despite the fact that I appreciate the filmmaker a lot. It is important to call a spade a spade and in this context, a bad film a bad film.

You may get to interview stars just before the release of their films. You should not feel obliged to write a positive review if the film is bad. As a journalist, your obligation is to take news to people.



Powerful commentary on patriarchy, rediscovery

Thappad shows an average Indian home-maker transform

RAGHAVI GARG
RIMJHIM SINGH

Thappad, a film by Anubhav Sinha, sheds light on the deeply entrenched patriarchy and domestic violence. It shows how abuse begins with a slap and how the acceptance of violence once can force a woman to accept it all her life.

The film tells the story of Amrita (Taapsee Pannu) and Vikram (Pavai Gulati), a couple living in upscale Delhi. Everything seems picture perfect until that one moment when, in a fit of rage, Vikram slaps Amrita at a party.

The hurt and pregnant Amrita files a divorce petition against Vikram and is faced with what every woman who stands up for herself faces. She is gaslit by her family members, blamed, emotionally blackmailed and patronised by those around her. But she remains resolute.

The story of Amrita, the protagonist, runs parallel to that of her domestic help Sunita (Geetika Vidya Ohlyan) and lawyer Netra Jaisingh (Maya Sarao). A common link is conveyed in the very first scene where all three women are shown relishing an orange ice candy. It shows symbolically that rich or poor, educated or uneducated, women face similar situations in life.

Taapsee Pannu's effortless transition from an ever-smiling, subordinate woman in her marriage to becoming independent and eventually breaking free walks the audience through a range of emotions.

The most effective scenes are the ones in which women are told how to keep their feelings "in check." The discomfort and dejection on the women's faces are portrayed well through techniques like panning in and headshots. Quite interestingly, the role of Shivani

Fonseca (Dia Mirza), a single mother trying to raise her teenage daughter, kindles an empowering spark.

Shattering conventions, there is a transition in Sulekha Sabharwal (Tanvi Azmi), Amrita's mother-in-law, as she accepts her family's mistake and acknowledges the ingrained misogyny. From using words like 'rishtey nibhana' and 'wahi tumhara ghar hai', Azmi's character takes a 360-degree turn and she ends up lauding Amrita for taking a stand.

The songs set the tone of the plot. Music director Anurag Saikari's composition 'Ek Tukda Dhoop' showcases Taapsee's emotional turmoil.

The happy ending of the movie appears quite simplistic as all women are shown to be celebrating their liberation. However, the protagonists trying to rediscover their love is wholesome and striking because it shows the importance of accepting the evolved nature of your partner.

REVIEW

Budget goodies for three states in election year

MANEESH T | MEENATCHI PRABHU | NITIKA GANDHI

Palakkad/Delhi/Chennai: The Union Budget gave special allocations to Kerala, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, three states that have so far resisted BJP in its efforts to become a truly National party.

Kerala was allocated an investment of Rs.65,000 crore for 1,100 km of National Highway works, while West Bengal will receive Rs25,000 crores for 675 km of highway works, and an upgradation of the existing Kolkata-Siliguri road.

In Tamil Nadu, Rs1.03 lakh crores for 3,500 km of National Highway works.

But is the money going to help the BJP win states where it has

never won before? According to Dr. Stany Thomas, a Political Science professor at Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala, the Budget allocations are obviously politically motivated.

"BJP just can't plant their feet in these States.

The Budget shows their desperation," he said. When asked about the chances of the party finally announcing itself in Kerala, he said that its vote share would increase again in the 2021 Assembly elections slated to be held in May, but the number of seats would not be more than 3.

The state spokesperson of the party, B Gopalakrishnan is more optimistic.

"We are aiming to improve the 30 percent of vote share that we al-

ready have in 12 constituencies. With the allocations in the Budget specifically targeting strategic locations in the state's northern part, where the BJP is closely looking at its stakes, it could well have a decisive role to play in the election results.

According to Kishor Barman, the state Joint General Secretary of the BJP, however, this was not the first time that the central government had allocated funds for the development of the state, and it was not at all fanned by the upcoming polls.

When asked about the Budget grants and its repercussions on the elections, Subrata Bakshi, the General Secretary of the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), which is in power, said: "let the government do anything". He denied further comments.

In Tamil Nadu, the BJP will find it hard to shrug off its performance in the 2016 Assembly elections and the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, where its vote share stood at a paltry 2.86 percent and 3.66 percent respectively.

"Their eyes are definitely on the elections. But even if they give the best of budgets, the caste metrics and social construct of Tamil Nadu does not really work in their favour," said Rimjhim Gour, a political analyst and editor at Burda Media.

According to Sree Sathyan, the party's district President, Chennai East, the budget allocation may not translate to votes in the short-term, but would have a long-term impact.

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"Their eyes are definitely on the elections. But even if they give the best of budgets, the caste metrics and social construct of Tamil Nadu does not really work in their favour," said Rimjhim Gour, a political analyst and editor at Burda Media.

According to Sree Sathyan, the party's district President, Chennai East, the budget allocation may not translate to votes in the short-term, but would have a long-term impact.



Photo Credits: Suhail Ahmed Raza
Silk reeled from cocoons are kept in spindles at the AS Silk Twisting Industries

Import duty raise puts silk players in opposition

MEDHA NIDHI S

Bangalore: The government's Union Budget decision to increase import duties on raw silk and silk yarn from 10% to 15% of its value, has thrown the various players in the country's silk ecosystem into starkly opposing camps.

On the one hand, weavers now have to pay more for Chinese raw silk. On the other hand, silk farmers who raise the silkworm have it somewhat better. Somewhere in the middle are the consumers, who find themselves paying more. The hike is somewhat a reversal of the government's decision in 2012 to decrease import duties on raw silk and silk yarn from 30% to 5% - a decision which led to huge losses for silk farmers and reelers after silk traders and weavers shifted to importing cheaper raw silk from China.

Syed Zubair, a member of the Silk Handloom Weavers Cooperative Society in Bangalore says that most of the weavers in his society were struggling even before the announcement.

Zubair now has to pay more to buy silk for weaving. "We usually blend imported silk along with local silk to increase the cloth's strength. Even customers prefer this blended silk."

To add to his problems is the fact that Chinese silk is more suited to use on power looms as it is less delicate than local silk.

"Most weavers use power looms

now because it increases the productivity of cloth. We can make and sell more", he said.

Silk weavers might now have to increase costs of woven cloth in order to make up for the increased import duties, risking the ire of their customers.

On the other side are the farmers and reelers who will be helped by the increase. A national database of 7,25,314 farmers and 14,716 reelers across the country. Suhail Ahmed Raza is one of them and in the opposite camp.

The owner of AS Silk Twisting Industries in Sidlaghatta, near Bangalore buys cocoons at Rs. 400-500 per kg. The cocoons are boiled water, and silk fibre is unravelled from them. The fibre is then dyed, dried and twisted into bunches to make them easier to weave. It takes about 8-9 kgs of cocoons to make 1 kg of yarn which sells at Rs 3400 per kg, Raza says.

The Chinese raw silk will be about Rs 800-900 more after the increase in import charges. Raza hopes that companies will now start opting to buy local silk instead.

"We have to pay for electricity and for 12 daily wage labourers who handle the cocoons. On top of this there is a 5% GST, so we barely make any profits. If more people opt for local silk, maybe it will make things easier for us," he says. Though the change is welcome, he does not think it will make a huge difference in sales.

"We have had the same customers for 6 years, there won't be any change there," he says.

Dr. BS Angadi, a scientist at the Silk Association of India says that one of the projects undertaken by the Silk Association and the Central Silk Board is to conduct research into increasing the quality of Indian mulberry silk.

"The local mulberry silk commonly produced in Karnataka is very delicate. It is only woven manually. This is one of the reasons weavers choose Chinese silk, which is stronger," he says. "Many customers also don't mind buying Chinese silk because it is much more affordable than 'pure' silk." While locally sourced, handloom silk sarees can range from Rs 5000 to a few lakhs, owing to the transportation charges and human resource that goes into making them, power-loom sarees made from imported silk can be available for as little as Rs 900.

While the increase in prices for imported raw silk might deter weavers from buying Chinese silk, they are still likely to continue purchasing it because of convenience.

"The government is trying to help reelers and farmers, but the weavers will have to pay higher costs now." A better option, according to Angadi, would be to provide Minimum Support Prices for silk farmers, and to subsidise the rates of cocoons so that weavers are encouraged to buy local silk automatically.



Photo Credits: Sanjay Sanjeev
National Highway 66, passing through Thiruvanthapuram

Congress pips BJP in Rajasthan local body polls

JUHI SEERNANI

Ajmer: Congress may have won a greater number of seats than the BJP in the Rajasthan civic body elections held on January 28 but they will need support from the independent candidates to form government bodies.

Of the 3035 wards for which the results were announced on Sunday, Congress won 1,197 while the BJP won 1,140. Congress will need the support of independent candidates who won 634 seats.

Manju Uniraj (52), a political science professor at Rajasthan university said that in the 2015 elections, the results were different because of the Modi wave as the BJP took lead. "This will be a hard pill to swallow for the BJP," she said as she believes that this was a little unexpected but the fact that the state government is in Congress's hands, it wasn't unbelievable for the rest of us.

She said both the parties are going to claim victory as no one knows who the independent candi-

dates are going to support at the moment. Satish Poonia, head of the BJP in Rajasthan claims that the BJP has performed well in Ajmer as they won four seats while congress won only one out of the 9 municipal councils. The rest were swooped by the independent candidates.

When asked about his party's performance in the elections, Poonia said that they will bounce back soon and will always respect the decision of the people. According to the election commission, about 10,000 candidates were fighting for these seats and 76.52 per cent voter turnout was recorded this time which is much more than the 70.02 percent turnout recorded in the previous elections held for these districts.

"The BJP is getting unpopular in the state because of the farmer protests in Delhi," said Monica Jain, a 45-year-old candidate from ward number 71 of the Ajmer district. She lost to Ramesh Soni, a BJP candidate but is happy that her party still won majority of the seats in other districts and thinks that this

setback will make BJP understand the power of people.

According to The Hindu, Ajmer district is the only district in the state where BJP has taken the lead. Out of the 80 wards in Ajmer, the Congress won 18 and the BJP won 48.

Ashok Chelani, a practicing lawyer in the city said that Ajmer is a breeding ground for businessmen and they have a preconceived notion that the BJP will support them in their expansions and don't believe in the socialist ideology of the Congress party.

Among other parties, Nationalist Congress Party won 46, Rashtriya-Loktantrik Party 13, CPI(M) and BhujanSamaj Party won one ward out of the 80 municipalities.

Chelani is confident the Indian National Congress would form the boards in more than 50 local bodies as the party had not allotted symbols to the independent candidates but had given their support to them and they will help the party in affirming their victory in these elections.

TN doctors bike rally to protest 'mixopathy'

MEENATCHI PRABHU

Chennai: Doctors in Tamil Nadu are taking to their bikes to do their bit in the national protest against regulations that will allow doctors in traditional medicine to perform surgery.

A government notification was issued November 2020, after the Coronavirus pandemic killed as many as 1.5 lakh people in India so far. Several doctors from Kanyakumari, Hosur and Tiruppur made the first leg of their journey to Chennai on Feb 1.

The bike rally is set to culminate at Chennai on Feb 14 where representatives from across the state will undertake a common hunger strike in the state capital, heeding the call Capital Chalo, said Indian Medical Association (IMA) State Secretary, Tamil Nadu, Dr A K Ravikummar.

The current agitation is the third phase of the doctors' protest against the 2020 notification brought out by the Central Council of Indian Medicine (CCIM), stating that Ayurveda doctors can perform as many as 58 different surgeries after completing their undergraduate degree.

"Indian systems have their own credibility. But coming into modern medicine with 'half-baked knowledge' will put the patient's life in jeopardy, said Dr Ravikummar.

According to the 2017 Health care policy and the 2020 Education Policy, the Narendra Modi government plans to integrate the different systems of medicine under the 'One Nation, One Health System' by the year 2030. Patients are not "guinea pigs" to test these mixed systems on, Dr Ravikummar said. Even as the IMA expressed strong opposition to the mixing of systems, proponents of Ayurveda see this as a welcome change. If all the systems are integrated, patients can choose between Ayurvedic and Allopathic treatment depending on the severity of their condition, said Dr B Srinivasulu, chief editor of AYUSHDARA and the International Journal of Ayurveda and Pharma Research.

Sports budget cut in Olympic Year

NIHIT SACHDEVA

Chennai: Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports have been allocated a budget of Rs 2596.14 crore for 2021-22, Rs 230.78 crore less than the estimated budget of 2020-21. The reduced budget has come with six months left for the Tokyo Olympics when most of the last year didn't see any sporting activities due to the coronavirus pandemic. For the same reason, the budget last year was revised to Rs 1800.15 crore.

While the amount allocated for the National Sports Development Fund has been halved to Rs 25 crore, the budget for Khelo India programme, which was started by the government in 2018 to revive the sports culture in the country at the grass-root level, has seen the biggest reduction. The amount allocated in 2020-21 was Rs 890.42 crore but for this year, it is 657.71 crore.

For incentives to Sports Persons, the amount has been decreased by Rs 17 crore from last year's Rs 70 crore.

National Welfare Fund for Sportspersons has been allocated

Rs 2 crore, same as last year.

The budget of the National Sports Federations for 2021-22 is Rs 280 crore, which is Rs 35 crore more than last year's budget.

The budget for Sports Authority of India has been increased by Rs 160.41 crore to Rs 660.41 crore.

Replying to a mail by The Word, Rajesh Bhandari, one of the Associate Joint Secretaries of the Indian Olympic Association said that where the government is talking about good health and immunity,

"It felt like coming out of an off-season and then getting back into training"
-- Rohan Bopanna

the budget cut is unfortunate.

Bhandari, also the Secretary of Himachal Pradesh Olympic Association, said that the government should spend more to keep the countrymen fit by opening more gymnasiums, playgrounds and arranging more sports activities. Kee-

ping people fit should be the priority by opening more fitness centres.

J M Fernando, Secretary of the Tamil Nadu Olympic Association refused to comment on the sports budget because he hasn't come across the detailed expenditure sheet yet.

The Tokyo Olympics last year were postponed due to the pandemic. Many athletes were not able to train because of a stringent lockdown starting from March 23. Rohan Bopanna, India's highest ranked Men's Doubles tennis player, told The Word that after the lockdown, it was tough to train because the body was sore.

"It felt like coming out of an off-season and then getting back into training," said Bopanna, who is currently in Melbourne preparing for the Australian Open starting from February 8 where he will play with Japan's Ben McLachlan in the Men's Doubles event.

The Word also reached out via email to former Olympic medalists Leander Paes, Abhinav Bindra and Vijender Singh on the medal prospects for Tokyo Olympics but received no response.

As AAP & BJP scuffle, Delhi roads suffer
BY NITIKA GANDHI

Bribery and bureaucracy in Bangalore
BY MEDHA NIDHI S

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Photo Credits: Divesh Kumar
Protest outside the Riga sugar factory, Sitamarhi, Bihar

to do," said Shribhagwan Kushwaha a farmer union representative.

In July last year, Om Prakash Dhanuka, the Chief Managing Director of the sugar factory run by Kolkata based Dhanuka group asked the Bihar government to help to save the industry and assist in repaying a debt of Rs 65 crores to the farmers. In his letter to the Chief Minister, he said the factory is in huge loss and requested the state government to become the guarantor of the loan which would help in surviving and reimbursing deficit to farmers and workers.

But the state government did not agree. "The government in 2013 became the guarantor of the 16 crores loan of the factory but it became non-performing asset (NPAs), therefore the government don't want

to burden itself again," said a senior government official on the condition of anonymity. The factory's shut-down has become a major issue with the opposition leader in Bihar Legislative Assembly Tejas-hwi Prasad Yadav raising the issue on Social media and targeting the State government. The opposition is planning to call for a one day long protest on the issue.

"The factory owner is responsible for the deterioration of the mill. Due to the policies of the management the factory suffered massive losses and now temporarily closed," said the local MLA, Motilal Prasad. "But our government would not allow the farmers and workers to suffer, I have met the Sugarcane minister and other concerned officials last week, the issue would be negotiated," he added.

Surabhi's Last Hope

Two members of the age-old theatre troupe talk about what Covid-19 has done to them.

TANISHQ VADDI

"Appreciation is the currency of success to an artist," said Padmaja *garu* in a cracking voice. She is trying not to cry, but the tears in her eyes are visible. Her bangles clink against each other as she tries to wipe her eyes with the pallu of her faded blue saree.

Padmaja, a theatre veteran, has been acting for the past 55 years. She is part of the Surabhi theatre group, a family group based in Hyderabad that mostly performs plays based on Hindu mythology. The group is made up of 60-odd members, all belonging to the same family. The Venkateswara Surabhi theatre has existed now for over 135 years. However, the group is struggling because the culture of the art is dying, she added. "As it always happens with dying cultures, there are a few people who are trying to keep it alive; one such mad person is my son."

As we spoke, her son—Surabhi Jayachandra Varma—the theatre manager, walked onto the empty stage. "I went to bring a few articles for the play tonight" he shouted from a distance, placing a bag filled with props, including shiny gold crowns, in the middle of the stage. "I am the 6th generation actor," said Varma, who made his acting debut at the tender age of 4 months.

He didn't have to join the family business, said his mother, who tried to dissuade him from doing that. "I told him that people don't appreciate the art anymore," she said, adding that she told him that theatre is a badly-paid profession with no job security. His reply stunned her, she recalled. He said that not everyone is part of such a great culture as this and that he was bles-



Surabhi actors preparing before a play.

sed to be born into it.

And he is confident that his legacy will continue. "My 5-year-old daughter will be the next generation," he claimed.

Varma knows that passion is not enough; theatre is a risky business, especially in an age of smaller audiences and too many competing sources of entertainment. "My ancestors have a history of winning national awards," he says, adding that as a young child he too had wanted to do that. "But now I am not sure the art has the same reputation it once had."

The Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the situation, he agreed. Most of the artists have started to work as delivery boys. "It hurts me," said the father-of-two in a helpless tone, recalling

how one of his best actors is now working for Zomato. Funding, of course, had become an issue back then. "We begged, that is what we did," added Varma, who received an Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar Award in 2016. "In the time of crisis, a few film stars helped us," Rana Daggubatti who I acted with helped us," he said. "We are very grateful to him."

More disenchanting, however, is the inability to gauge audience's reaction. While the group continues to perform via Zoom, it is simply not the same, said Varma. "When you are performing, in reality, you can hear to the claps and whistles. But in the virtual world, you imagine them and are hopeful that people who are watching it liked it."

Tulsi Baug: Pune's Heart

RIYA

Lost in a labyrinth of lanes and winding alleys, I cannot help but marvel at the architecture of the buildings in Tulsi Baug. Weather-beaten walls with red and blue paints chipping off stand next to some gothic structures. Broken wooden windows and rickety doors seem to be battling against time. Buildings, tinselled with half-naked wires, are cloistered close together, separated intermittently by narrow lanes; they are a striking contrast to the city's larger urban setting.

Nestled in the heart of Pune, these ancient structures house the oldest and most popular markets in the city. Tulsi Baug, a commercial and cultural hub, has many shops and a few heritage temples that attract more people than the fancier shopping complexes in the city. As I stroll down the narrow path, I notice how the paths cut further into narrower lanes that connect other alleys, almost like a maze game.

The smell of vada pav wafts through the air as I hear customers bargain with the shopkeepers, their voices cutting through the hum of the bustling crowd. While the roads line with unique home décor, kitchenware, handicraft and ceramic shops, the alleys bustle with people curiously buying clothes, accessories, footwear at cheap rates.

The buildings aren't the only legacy of the oldest market in the city; it has also housed generations'

businesses. "I have run this shop for 30 years, following the footsteps of my mother-in-law who ran it for 20 or more," says Shobha Kodi, who owns a ceramic shop in Tulsi Baug.

The history of the place links back to the 18th century when the Peshwas were in power in Pune. The land was originally a flourishing basil garden owned by Sardar Khasgiwale and was called Tulsi Baug. It was later sold to Naro Appaji Khire for the construction of Ram Mandir. It had gained massive popularity and was renamed to Tuslibaugwale for some time. The temple, constructed by the Peshwas in 1761, continues to be a major tourist attraction.

The intricate curling designs on the entrance of houses or wooden columns supporting the structures are perhaps the most visible signs of the market's history. And these buildings continue to support the families who have found a home in the buzzing lanes of Tulsi Baug.

Hari Salve, who owns a small jewellery shop tucked away among many others, says he is the second generation to continue with the bu-



Tulsi Baug has seen crowds for several decades.

siness. "My parents migrated from Gujarat and started their business here 30 years ago. Given the popularity, it does well", he says.

Ameesha Mude, a local and frequent visitor in Tulsi Baug, explains why the market is so popular. "We go to malls for specific things, but our go-to has been Tulsi Baug as it has a good variety of products at lower prices," she says, adding that generations of her family have shopped here. "You get everything; it is an absolute treat for us to shop here."

The irresistible mix of ancient and modern, the pull of legacy, the aliveness of Tulsi Baug, makes me long to come back.

Embracing the Colours of the Rainbow



Ashim Das in a saree, one of his favourite attires

SANSKRITI FALOR

Ashim Das remembers being bullied all through his childhood. "I used to be catcalled in school as well as on the streets by men", explains Das, a 21-year-old, who enjoys wearing women's clothes and makeup. "My femininity became an issue."

He seems to have got past those days, however. On a Zoom call, he sports short hair, pink eye shadow and glittery cheeks. "I started doing this when I was very young. I used to drape sarees in my room and put makeup in my teenage years," says Das.

Das, who grew up in Assam, had always been fascinated by women's clothing. "I have grown up watching my mother drape saree every morning, and I loved it," he says. However, his family was conservative, and it was hard to be accepted as someone who loved wearing makeup and women's clothes. "I used to be constantly asked to dress like a man, and I could never feel like myself without makeup and flared dresses and sarees," he recalls.

Anamika Dey, 24, a childhood friend of Das, remembers them playing together. "When we were kids, he used to come over, we'd do makeup together, and he'd wear our lehengas and sarees," she says, adding, "But his mother used to ask him to stop hanging out and playing with women."

Das realised he was attracted to men by the age of 11. However, coming to terms with it was hard, he says. "I am cisgender yet gay. Sometimes I feel like a woman and other times like a man. I am still learning about who I am and what I want to be," he says.

Das completed his undergraduate degree in engineering in Assam. It was an uncomfortable experience he remembers; he was ignored entirely by his judgemental peers. "I was a shadow in my college," he says.

However, things got better when he joined the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), Chennai. He finally felt like he was at a place where he could get accepted for being himself. "I had always been someone who locks myself in front of people, not showing my feminine side to stay away from being bullied. But in NIFT, I was appreciated and loved," says Das, adding that it was life-changing. Ayanab (she goes by only one name), 20, a friend of Das from NIFT, remembers the change. "He didn't wear any makeup on the first day of college and six months later, he was like this transformed person who felt like he could finally breathe."

However, people from his past continue to hurt him; he is still heavily criticised on social media. "People can't let it go. It is very abnormal for our society to accept being gay," says Dey.

Ayanab adds, "He is humble, and I have seen people on social media be cruel to him and pass offensive remarks Dey doesn't respond to these remarks," she adds. "He lets people be."

People, however, don't seem to be able to return the favour. And Das is finally coming to terms with it. "I have been living in Chennai for a year now, and I don't see myself getting accepted here at all. I have always been called many things, and I really don't care if people accept me or not,"

Morsing Maestro

Ghantasala Satya Sai fought against hardship and attained success

UJWALA POTHARAZU

Percussionist Ghantasala Satya Sai taught himself how to teach on a rusted morsing instrument. "I learnt the art of playing this by my own," said Sai, today one of India's leading morsing artists.

Today, he is known for multiple accomplishments. He was the first Indian to have played morsing in the orchestra and the first morsing artist who was given a solo performance. He holds several records including the Guinness Book of World Records, Limca Book of Records, and Asia Book of Records for his accomplishments. He has accompanied maestros like M. Balamuralikrishna, Nedunuri Krishnamurthy, Pandit Jasraj and Amjad Ali Khan, among others and performed at some of the most prestigious venues in India and the world; altogether over 12,000 concerts in 72 countries, including at the UN and UNESCO.

The journey, however, was an arduous one, he admits.

Growing up in Vijayawada, he faced tremendous hardship, losing his father at the age of 5. Though he began training in mridangam very early in life, he didn't have the money to buy the instrument, he says. He struggled even to pay for the bus pass he needed to commute to his teacher's house.

In 1980, he performed during Krishna Pushkaralu—a religious season, occurring once in 12 years, which involves the worship of rivers and ancestors. There he met Yella Venkateswara Rao, a famous mridangist. Rao advised Sai to complete his diploma and pursue advanced courses in Mridangam at Hyderabad.

So he went to Hyderabad, working as a newspaper vendor to pay the rent on his one-room accommodation in Hyderabad. Despite these hardships, he persevered, training in advanced mridangam, and soon accompanied Rao when he performed at concerts in the city.

It was Rao who suggested that he learnt morsing, he says. He started playing along with his guru while holding a teaching job at DAV school. In 1996 he was invited for ITC Grand Kakatiya inaugural function. His performance impressed the manager. "He asked me to stay and perform live for the guests staying at the hotel," says Sai.

It was while he was practising there that he was noticed by one of the guests. The guest called Sai to his room and asked him to play for him. "He then asked me if I knew who he was," says Sai, admitting that he did not till he heard the name of the lungi-clad gentleman who had taken such interest in his music.

The guest turned out to be the famous violinist, L. Subramaniam. Sai soon began accompanying him everywhere, both India and abroad." It was because of Subramaniam sir that realised my dream of playing in Madras Music Academy," he says.

For Sai, however, it all boils down to passion for music, and the small instrument that has given him so much, he says. It has inspired other people to take it up, adds Sai, who has started a YouTube channel to teach and is currently planning to write a book on morsing, the first of its sort. He attributes his success to hard work and tenacity. "If you think you can do this, you definitely can."



Sai playing morsing in a concert.

Taste of Bhutan

A traditional restaurant that stands for woman empowerment

SHERUB WANGMO

There is a low raised table with a square-shaped mattress on the Namgay Heritage Home restaurant floor in Thimphu; it looks like something out of a typical Bhutanese house. I settle down and make myself comfortable. A beautiful smiling girl wearing a yellow-patterned kira and yellow tego comes over carrying a kettle of salted buttered tea and a beautiful Bangchug (a bamboo-knitted container) filled with zaw—a fried rice snack.

I sip my buttered tea, letting its welcoming buttery warmth slide down my throat. As I finished my tea and zaw, a middle-aged woman came up to me with a menu. She opened it to the drinks section—standard in Bhutan where alcohol is offered before food. I order a mug of ara, a pure distilled alcohol into which warmed fried eggs are stirred.

A thick layer of golden butter floats on the surface of the alcohol, making my mouth water even before I take my first sip. The smell makes me dizzy, at first. I try it out (it tastes like vodka) and glory in the warmth spreading through my belly.

We then turn to the food menu. We order Ema datshi (hot spicy chilly mixed cheese), Sikam paa (dry pork with radish), Shakam paa (dried beef cooked with turnip leaf) and mushroom datshi (a mushroom and cheese concoction). The meal, when it arrives is one of the most authentic ones I've ever eaten.

I soon understood why. When I



Tibetan dishes served at the restaurant.

peeked into the kitchen, I found all the chefs were local homemakers "I stay nearby, I have been working here since the restaurant started. All the chefs are village women like me. We come on shift bases" says Am Zam, one of them.

The restaurant, which Namgay Dema started in 2012, in a house inherited from her parents, seeks to offer authentic Bhutanese food free of western influences; in short, food that tastes of home. It is little wonder that tourist guides never forget to put that restaurant in their itinerary to make visitors feel that they have tasted the real Bhutan. "Once upon a time I was also a jobless mother of two," says Namgay, who sees her initiative not as a business enterprise but as something that empowers women. "I believe in giving opportunities to those women who have real talent and can cook pure Bhutanese food," she says, adding, "I wanted to offer a service where you get authentic Bhutanese food in some remote corner of the country."

As I leave the restaurant, satiated after my massive meal, I know she has succeeded.

The Fashionable Indian Thrift Stores

SAYANI DAS

"Seven-day-old thrift account and 600+ followers!" Darisha Kurbah's voice hadn't lost the first flush of excitement from her new business. Owing to the pandemic, the 26-year-old Shillong dweller had lost her job as a web developer. She settled for a clothing store in a rented space in her locality.

But the lure of a thrift store business drove her to create her "@thrift_karencloset" Instagram account. She brings clothing from the local thrift markets and different wardrobes, to customers across India.

Kurbah is one of the many youngsters who started online thrift stores after the pandemic. The growing trend caught up with many buyers willing to switch to online, cheap and sustainable fas-

hion. Dr Agalya Madhaiyan, 26 and based near Chennai, became a thrift store fan when she saw these stores increasing on Instagram. "I started buying from them only during the lockdown," she said, adding, "I was sceptical in the beginning, but after the first buy, I was confident about the quality and the price."

Thrift stores are helping save not only money but also the environment. Poulami Maji, a college student from Kolkata, switched to thrift stores to reduce the pollution caused by fast-fashion. "The more new things we buy, the more we'll discard, and it keeps piling up in landfills or getting burnt. Buying preloved clothes and accessories is just a corrective step to what we've already done to this planet."

The idea of thrift stores has been prevalent for long in the US.



However, the trend has set in India only in the last half-decade. "I was aware of thrift stores for furniture and accessories but finding bran-

ded apparels at slashed down prices was something exciting," said Madhaiyan.

Thrift stores operate in different ways. Like the Salvage Story and Kiabza, some grow by salvaging, collecting and curating items for sale. Others, like This For That, help sellers clear their wardrobe by putting their discarded clothes on sale using their website. An active upcycling chain is developing for both sellers and buyers.

The popularity of thrift stores is increasing by the day. The Raymond James 2019 Fashion Resale Report found that 18 per cent of its 465 respondents, all internet users, used resale sites. This was a 3 per cent rise from 2018. The pandemic boosted India's resale trend, especially among the 18-35 age group, said Kurbah.

While consumers in this field

are fewer than fast-fashion buyers, the proportion of male respondents is still lesser than females. Kurbah's week-old business statistics revealed that only 21 per cent of her DMs were from men. Out of the 65.1k #thriftindia posts on Instagram, only a hundred or two showcased menswear for resale. This could mean a gender-centric disbalance on the one hand but, on the other hand, it could suggest a move towards gender-neutral apparel, said Somdatta Saha, a fashion enthusiast and blogger from Kolkata.

According to Saha, thrift-store businesses on sustainable fashion lines were gaining ground in India at par with the vocal-for-local fashion movement. "This kind of fashion isn't about impulsive shopping, but the idea is to reduce wastage and sustain more."