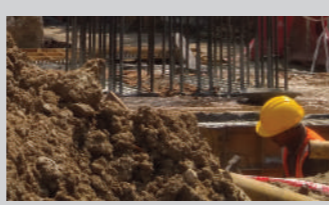




Kerala, WB & saffron tide

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Sand shortage hurts TN

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A room full of happiness

Page 5



Chennai metro has seen an increase in the number of daily passengers after reduced fares from Monday.

'Metro fare cut not poll-related'

NIHIT SACHDEVA

Chennai, February 25: The AIADMK on Thursday said the decision to reduce metro fares had nothing to do with the upcoming State Assembly elections while the DMK called it a political move.

AIADMK Spokesperson A. S. Maheswari said the decrease in metro fares was not a temporary measure. "We don't want to politicise this. Some opposition parties are trying to politicise it but our CM does not have such short vision [and] we don't want to view it with a political angle," said Maheswari, former Tamil Nadu Congress's State women's wing president who joined AIADMK in 2016. She said that the move was intended to lessen the traffic and encourage people to make maximum use of metro.

DMK Spokesperson Dr Kanimozhi NVN Somu, referring to Chief Minister's announcement on February 20, said, "If you had to do it genuinely, you should have done it long before. Why just 45 days before your polls?"

Dr Kanimozhi said the government was increasing fuel prices on one hand and reducing metro fares on the other. Since people were avoiding metro due to the coronavirus pandemic, the move would not benefit the public.

However, The Hindu on Thursday reported an official of Chennai

Metro Rail Limited (CMRL) as saying that after the reduction in fares came into effect on Monday, nearly 86,000 passengers a day were taking the metro and that the officials were expecting the ridership to touch one lakh a day very soon. Chennai Central station with nearly 7,000 daily commuters had seen the maximum footfall followed by 4,500 in the airport and Thirumangalam stations. The numbers had earlier increased from 55,000 to 74,000 a day after the phase I extension project from Washermenpet to Wimco Nagar was opened last Sunday.

CM Palaniswami on February 20 announced that metro fares had been reduced

According to the new structure, the maximum fare, which was Rs 70, is now Rs 50. The new fare structure is - 0-2 km - Rs 10, 2-5 km - Rs 20, 5-12 km - Rs 30, 12-21 km - Rs 40, 21-32 km - Rs 50.

Passengers who book their tickets using the QR code or use CMRL smart cards will get a 20 per cent discount. Those taking the metro on Sundays and public holidays will get a 50 per cent discount (only applicable for daily tickets).

Selvarajan, a commuter, said that the number of passengers would increase due to the hike in fuel prices.

Mohammad Ismail, another commuter, said that since most people used local train due to cheaper fares, the number of metro users might not increase drastically.

-> Revised metro fares
0-2 km - Rs 10
2-5 km - Rs 20
5-12 km - Rs 30
12-21 km - Rs 40
21-32 km - Rs 50
-> 20% off for CMRL smart card and QR code users
-> 50% off on Sundays and public holidays for daily tickets only

PHOTO CREDIT: NIHIT SACHDEVA

MAYANK KUMAR

Sitamari, Feb 24: Petroleum products are being smuggled from Nepal into India where the demand for fuel and prices have shot up. The Himalayan kingdom of Nepal and the Indian state of Bihar share a 600-odd-km-long porous border with numerous village roads which cannot be guarded all the time.

A local syndicate is taking advantage of the porous borders, employing poor villagers in the smuggling racket and making huge profit, according to unconfirmed reports.

On Wednesday, petrol in Nepal cost Rs 69 a litre (110 Nepalese Rupees) while diesel cost Rs 57.71 (92 Nepalese Rupees). The price in Bihar was Rs 94.19 per litre for petrol while diesel cost Rs 87.45 per litre.

Adityanath Mishra, a resident of Sitamarhi, said he made at least seven trips a day to and from Nepal via Bhitmore border on his motorbike to fetch petrol from a pump bordering the Nepalese district of

MEENATCHI PRABHU

Tiruvallur, Feb 23: If you're a blue-collar man here hoping to catch the train to get to work on time in the morning, you may have to think again.

The Southern Railways' announcement that only women and authorised employees can take the train during peak office hours has been met with contempt, both from men and women.

A Narayanan, a construction worker, waits in a long line and needs to be at work at 10.30 AM. Men like him, contract-based workers with no documents to show proof of employment, are at a disadvantage in such situations.

They wait in line for the counter to open at 9:30 AM, once the peak hours have passed. There is a restriction again in the evening hours between 4:30 PM and 7:00 PM when most of the office goes return home.

"This is difficult for us. The bus is too expensive for me, and it takes much longer because of traffic. If I take the train, I have to face loss of wages," says Narayanan

N Balaji, who works at a leather company in Pattabiram, says "They've made us resort to such fraudulent methods just to get on a train."

He has managed to get an extra ticket through women who are willing to help.

Though there are rules stating that these men cannot be given tic-

kets, there are no strict measures in place at the platform to check all

passengers entering the train. B Ravi's wife waits with her husband for the bookings to open for men. "How can I travel alone and leave him here?" she asks. Ravi works as a daily wage labourer and says he cannot get the authorisation letter from his employer that the railway authorities ask for.

B R Suresh, who runs his own business instructs his daughter on what to say to get a ticket for him as well. One of the common excuses to get extra tickets for men are "She's an elderly lady and can't walk," or "She's waiting at the back, just give me the ticket."

"I travel all the way from Sriperumbudur to go to work, and I reach work only at noon," says P Purushothaman.

These measures are enforced by the increased number of ticket-checkers at major stations.

Recently, Railway Minister Piyush Goyal said in a tweet that students could travel in trains, from February 15 onwards.

The suburban railways has been opened to the public in three phases.

The workmen trains catering to rail employees, essential service workers and health care professionals in Phase I started right after the nationwide lockdown was lifted.

During Phase II, women passengers were allowed to travel during non-peak hours.

Currently, in Phase III, the general public can travel during non-peak hours.

Price hike drives fuel smuggling from Nepal



A petrol station in Nepal's Dhanusha district.

Dhanusha. Many others in the border town are using the village roads to smuggle diesel and petrol.

"Petrol and diesel in Nepal are cheaper by Rs 25 and Rs 29 respectively in comparison to India," said Rajnarayan Mehta a resident of Shrikhandi Bhatta village near the Indo-Nepal border.

Himanshu Verma, a villager, said he earns Rs 4,000 a day. "I had a relative at a nearby petrol station just 12 km across the border, he sends petroleum products in the night

through the village roads and I sell it in the nearby market," he said. "Many petrol stations owners at the border are involved directly or indirectly in the chain," he added.

"I think petroleum products worth many hundred crores are smuggled daily into India through seven border districts of Nepal daily," said Satish Jha, a social scientist based in New Delhi who specialises in Indo-Nepal relations.

But the quantity of fuel being smuggled and their value could not

be verified. It is not clear if it is a largescale racket involving a syndicate or if it is just villagers making a quick buck by selling a few hundred litres of petrol and diesel.

There were reports that the Nepali paramilitary forces recovered a truck loaded with petrol to be smuggled to Bihar early Tuesday.

"We are keeping a strict vigil at the border crossings in view of the news of smuggling, but it is not practically feasible to stop this due to the porous border," said a senior Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) official on the condition of anonymity.

A district-level official of Nepal who wished to be unnamed, said "let the villagers earn a bit, the pandemic has destroyed businesses and created unemployment. As long as they are not creating any disturbance to security it's ok."

Nepal gets the supply of petrol from India. According to a 1956 treaty between the two countries, Indian companies import petrol for Nepal from the Gulf countries. It is sold at the cost price, only refinery fees are charged due to which the fuel retails cheap in Nepal.

Sharmila, 26, sells toys at a stall set up on the pavement bordering the beach. She said life in lockdown was difficult after her husband was rendered jobless but the reopening of the beach has brought her life back on track.

But there were problems in setting up the stall with people claiming to be corporation staff insisting on the stall being removed and thugs demanding protection money of Rs 1000 every week for the stall.

Chennai, Feb. 25: Thirteen year-old Reyaz Ali, from Uttar Pradesh sells panipuris on Besant Nagar Beach here to help his family of six members.

"Our impoverishment brought us here, and when life just started to be on track we were hit hard by the lockdown," said Reyaz.

Beaches were shut by the end of March 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic leaving many like Reyaz out of business.

Reyaz's family was forced to return to his village and resumed work a month ago. "It is not profitable but at least we sleep with a full stomach," he added.

The last year has definitely been a struggle for others too.

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'New railway rules unkind to labourers'

Short end of the stick



Men waiting outside the station to get their tickets.

to open at 9:30 AM, once the peak hours have passed. There is a restriction again in the evening hours between 4:30 PM and 7:00 PM when most of the office goes return home.

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Plea to tighten cybercrime laws

JUHI SEERNANI

Chennai, Feb 23: Two law students have demanded changes in cybercrime laws to monitor minors accessing social media and to set up a mechanism to criminalise morphing of pictures and videos and revenge porn.

The students, Skand Bajpai and Abhyudaya Mishra have filed a public interest litigation petition urging the Supreme court to direct the Law Ministry to either frame a new law or amend the existing ones.

Skand said that there had to be some law that protected the people. According to the 2019 NCRB data, the number of reported cyber-crimes against women in the country spiked up to 8379 from 6030 in

2018. In 2017, it was 4242. The spike is a screaming reminder of cyber-crime becoming a major problem today's digital world.

"I know a friend who went through blackmail just because she didn't want to talk to a guy on the internet. He threatened her of morphing her pictures. She was so scared and terrified," said Skand.

He added that he came across innumerable accounts on Instagram that earned money by selling illicit and obscene content. The administrators of these accounts delivered rape videos, child porn and one could access these accounts conveniently by typing keywords like 'Pic Seller' in the search bar.

"A lot of women are victims of this mortifying trade. Not just

women, but minors who can access social media as there is no proper age verification mechanism that prevents them from opening their accounts on these social media applications and exposes them to exploiters," said Skand.

Skand also said that the victim blaming was always a part and parcel of revenge porn. The victim might have recorded the videos and clicked the pictures. They might have even sent them to the perpetrators but the fact that they were disseminated without their consent was something that made it a crime but there was no precise law that protected victims of revenge porn.

Revenge porn is covered under Sections 67 and 67 A of the IT act. This act states that if the person has

willingly shared their images with someone then the perpetrator has an argument to make and that's what prevented a 19-year-old engineering student from filing a complaint against the man who was blackmailing her.

"I had shared those images with him. I should have been more careful," she said.

When she stopped talking and ignored him, he shared her intimate pictures with her friends on Facebook and threatened to share them with her college authorities. She then asked one of her friends' father in the police department to call him. "He did get scared and deleted everything. But I am scared that he might blackmail me again. The fear will never go away," she said.

Mohammed Faisal, owner of a

Hidden cracks in Kerala's artificial-turf revolution

MANEESH T

Palakkad, Feb 25: Artificial turfs for playing football pose the risk of serious injury to the players if the turfs were used unscientifically, said Usman P, captain of the Kerala State senior football team.

The proliferating number of artificial turfs has led to players moving away from natural grass/mud surfaces.

Usman, who rose through the ranks, playing 'sevens football' (seven-a-side) tournaments on make-shift, mud-surface stadiums across the State, said that playing on artificial turfs would help budding players to hone their skills earlier and better, but they

must be guided properly.

"The surfaces can only be used to teach basics of ball control. If someone plays three or four days continuously on them, and does some hard training, I am 100 per cent sure that they will get knee injuries," he said, speaking to The Word.

Usman, who himself had a knee injury while playing on an artificial turf in Thrissur, said the quality of material used to make the turf, the lack of adjacent warm-up facilities, and the inappropriate use of long-stud boots instead of short-stud ones are the other factors that make the players injury-prone.

"Playing on paddy fields, we used to warm-up before the game. But now, people

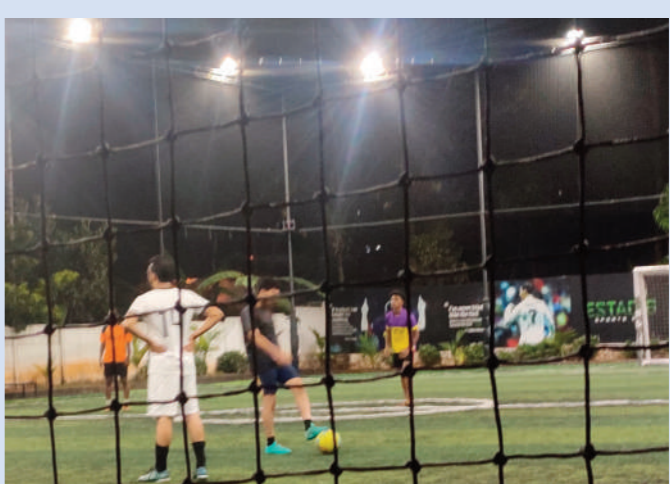
just book the time slots at their convenience, go to the turf, and play right away," he added.

Aashi Edappal, the founder of 'Amiashis', a firm that has already set up 35 artificial turfs, admitted there were injury concerns while playing on such turfs.

Mohammed Fazel, the owner of 'Estadio turf' here said the turf-culture was suited even for conducting tournaments. "The organisers have lesser concerns. We even provide them the footballs," he said. Fazel, who charges Rs.600 for a one-hour slot without floodlights, and Rs.1200 for slots after 7 p.m., said the number of turfs in the area had increased substantially in the past year.

Aashi said football-crazy districts like Malappuram and Kozhikode have more than 200 turfs at present, and that more were in the pipeline. The turfs, made of polyurethane binders and recycled rubber granules, are imported primarily from China, and cost a minimum of Rs.20 lakhs (which includes floodlights).

According to Usman, most of the turf owners do not replace the rubber granules regularly, increasing the chances of players getting injured. He added the "business" would eventually replace football played on hard, muddy grounds in the State, completely. "But whenever I play on these turfs, fear is all that I have in mind," he added.



Regular players sweating it out on a turf in Palakkad.

PHOTO CREDIT: MANEESH T

Good verdict, bad examples

Citing of Hindu epics in Priya Ramani defamation verdict raises some questions

In a huge relief to journalist Priya Ramani, a Delhi court acquitted her in the criminal defamation case filed by former Union Minister and journalist M.J. Akbar. Ramani had accused Akbar of sexual misconduct - during a job interview in 1993 - amidst the #MeToo movement in 2018, following which he filed a defamation lawsuit against her. While acquitting Ramani, the court noted that women shouldn't be punished for raising their voice against sexual misconduct, adding that the right to reputation was not greater than the right to dignity. The verdict has been celebrated by women journalists and social activists across the country as a landmark judgment which has recognised that affluent men in positions of power can be sexual predators, and raising a voice against them shouldn't lead to the intimidation of the victim by the judiciary.

Women speaking out against sexual harassment often find it difficult to prove the allegations and are asked questions like why they didn't talk about it when it happened and so on. The Delhi court judgment has certainly come as a relief to sexual assault survivors. It has urged society to understand the pain and trauma a woman subjected to sexual assault undergoes, and underlined that the survivors have a right to speak about their experience even after decades. More importantly, the Ramani judgment trashes the long-held argument of 'defamation' of a public figure. It gives precedence to the right to dignity over the right to reputation.

However, a reading of the judgment by Justice Ravindra Kumar Pandey does raise some questions. The language and allegories that have been used contain the very factor that empowers men to sexually violate women. He conveniently forgot to mention the status of women in the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* while using the epics to drive home the point that sexual misconduct is 'shameful'. Through the rhetoric of these epics, society has for long tried to vindicate men, all so subtly, excluding the few 'bad ones' from the rest of Good Samaritans. Women, on the other hand, have been seen as a group that carries societal shame and respect on the bodies. By giving the example of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the judgment has subtly re-imposed the idea of good-natured Hinduism in which the misogynistic celebration of women is revered. What it does is to make the whole case one of sexuality and reverence, rather than male impunity and sense of entitlement.

However, despite its problematic symbolism, the judgment quashes the stereotype of poor people being the predators. It has established that people with 'stellar reputations' can be equally predatory and that their reputation is not a guarantee of anything. Hence, in a patriarchal social hierarchy, the judgment stands out as an important intervention. It is a huge victory for the #MeToo movement and will hopefully allay the fears of the survivors and enable them to speak out without fear in the future.

Ramani put it aptly when she said: "I think my victory will definitely encourage more women to speak up."

Is it more than Facebook vs OZ?

The tech giant seems wary of sharing power in digital space

When Facebook decided to stop sharing news content on its platform in Australia "with a heavy heart" last week, the tech giant started a battle with Canberra in what appeared to be unchartered waters. The move, which Prime Minister Scott Morrison called "arrogant," came in response to the proposed media bargaining code drafted by the government and the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), a government entity to protect consumer rights and prevent illegal anti-competitive behaviour.

After hectic negotiations with Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg, Australia passed the final amendments to the News Media Bargaining Code on Tuesday. And Facebook announced that it would restore the sharing of news content.

The new law calls on tech giants, including Facebook and Google, to pay for the news content that appears on their platform and notify the news companies about the changes in the algorithms that they deploy. The regulator had come up with the law in the backdrop of the fact that these giants held a near monopoly of the digital space. An inquiry by the ACCC had found that of every A\$100 (\$77) spent on digital advertising in the Australian media, A\$81 went to Google and Facebook. The ACCC had also allowed news generators to negotiate as a bloc with the tech giants for a fair deal, failing which the social media companies would attract penalties up to A\$10 million.

Facebook argued that the law sought to penalise it for the "content it didn't take or ask for". It said that news publishers used Facebook to increase their reader base, adding that news content was minimal on its platform and made up only 4% of a user's total feed. It also stated that there were 5.1 billion free referrals to Australian news generators which was worth A\$407 million. Facebook added that it realised the importance of journalism in a democracy and had built free tools to support news organisations globally. Google, even though critical of the Australian government, decided to strike deals with news outlets and pay them. Microsoft, in contrast, threw its weight behind the proposed legislation.

The Australian Prime Minister found support beyond borders. Julian Knight, head of the British parliamentary committee overseeing the media industry, told the BBC that it was "irresponsible" of Facebook to ban authentic news generators during the pandemic, which might lead to a spurt in fake news. Mr. Morrison also raised the issue with Prime Minister Narendra Modi to gain support. "There is a lot of interest in it. People are looking at what Australia is doing," Mr. Morrison told the media.

To launch Facebook News, the company said it needed the "right rules" in place. However, what qualifies for "right news", who decides what is "right" and for whom the rules are "right", are questions that are left unanswered. The supporters of the law argue that the tech giant had previously pushed for more video formats in its algorithm without notifying news outlets and gave prominence to those sites which carried fewer advertisements and loaded faster. These tactics often deprived the news generators of their ad revenue.

If news is not a big revenue source for Facebook and Australia not a big market, why did the company lock horns with the government? The tech giant says it supports quality journalism by paying local content generators in the U.S. Why, then, did it oppose the Australian law? Facebook has a genuine fear that the other countries might follow suit. The bottom line is that the company is not ready to allow collective bargaining power to the news generators and wants to call the shots on its terms. There is an urgent need for the countries worldwide to study the Australian government's law to prevent hegemony and market monopoly.

Kerala, West Bengal & saffron tide

The ruling parties in both the States seem to be on a firm footing despite the BJP's efforts to penetrate them

AIŠWARYA RAJ

Kerala and West Bengal gear up for combat as elections to the State Assemblies approach. In West Bengal, the Bharatiya Janata Party has emerged as a formidable force while in Kerala, even though it has not made any major breakthrough, its increasing popularity is disconcerting. Nevertheless, the ruling Left Democratic Front in Kerala and the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal clearly have an edge over the saffron party.

The fight in the upcoming polls in Kerala is mainly between the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its allies under the LDF and the Congress-led United Democratic Front. The local body elections, held in December 16, 2020, reinforced the popularity of the ruling Left Front. Despite the uproar over the gold smuggling scam and the involvement of Central agencies like the Enforcement Directorate and the NIA, the alliance fared well.

However, the possibility of the BJP winning more seats than the one seat it won in 2016 cannot be ruled out. The entry of the 'metro man,' E. Sreedharan, into the BJP may help the party's image but whether it will translate into votes is still a moot question. The party's experiment of fielding cricketer S. Sreesanth as a candidate from Thiruvananthapuram in 2016, for instance, fell flat. The octogenarian can hardly make an impact among the youth. He may, however, succeed in swinging the votes of the liberals and apolitical sections. The BJP's vote share may increase.

The tensions between the BJP and the Bharath Dharma Jana Sena (BDJS), political outfit of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam that represents the numeri-



Tough road ahead: While the recently concluded municipal elections in Kerala reinforced the popularity of the LDF led by Pinarayi Vijayan, chief minister Mamata Banerjee has successfully portrayed the image of the BJP as 'outsiders' in West Bengal



cally strong Hindu Ezhava community in the State, will impact the former's electoral prospects. The Left alliance may benefit from the Ezhava vote bank. But the votes of the Ezhava creamy layer, earlier with the UDF, may be retained by the BJP.

The Left-Congress poll alliance in West Bengal is another factor that can influence the election outcome in Kerala, as it has left many questioning the leadership of the two parties. The BJP has missed no opportunity to come down heavily on the Left. A tweet by the party after the communists in Puducherry commemorated former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's death anniversary sparked a row. "Dear West Bengal and Kerala, [the] Left Front's priorities are crystal clear - bat for China. Reject the outdated Communist ideology, Communist hypocrisy and Communist tyranny. They neither empathise with our soldiers nor our citizens," the party tweeted.

The BJP's influence in the religious sphere was reinforced by its victory in the Pandalam municipality, epicentre of the Sabarimala stir. The NDA's votes in the municipal elections came at the UDF's cost. The saffron forces, clearly, penetrated the UDF vote bank. The rift in the Congress and the shifting of allegiance by the Kerala Congress (M), led by Jose K. Mani, to the LDF has weakened the UDF further. The ruling Left Front should play its cards well if it is looking for another term.

In West Bengal, ruled by the Left for 34 years, it is disconcerting to see how thin its chances of getting even a decent number of seats are. Its voter base is likely to suffer further due to the people's dislike for the Congress.

Chief Minister and Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee won the 2016 elections with an "appeal all" strategy. Even though the BJP's vote percentage fell from 17.5 per cent to 10.2 per cent, the

party garnered around 56 lakh votes, up from 19.5 lakh in 2011. As many as 10,000 voters voted for the saffron party in 262 of the 294 Assembly segments. But in 2021, Mamata is pitted against a much stronger BJP and Muslim leaders like the influential Furfura Sharif cleric Pirzada Abbas Siddiqui and Hyderabad MP Asaduddin Owaisi.

More of the same

The BJP's trump card -- "Ram Rajya" -- has become a war cry against the Trinamool's "Durga Maa". While Dillip Ghosh, State BJP president, has bragged about "Adarsh Purushottam" being the emperor of all, Abhishek Banerjee, TMC MP, has proclaimed that Mamata will fight like 'Ma Durga' to defeat the BJP. The exchange has exposed both the parties, which are no different when it comes to capturing the Hindu votes. The BJP's promise of reviving the State's 19th century renaissance glory has been received with applause by many.

The party has cleverly softened its stand on the Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens ahead of the polls in the State. However, this comes at a cost. The huge population of Matuas and Dalits, who migrated from East Pakistan during and after Partition and were living in the constant fear of being deported, saw the CAA as a ray of hope.

The BJP's silence on the implementation of the CAA, on the other hand, has enabled the TMC to lure the Matuas. Mamata Banerjee visited them and promised them that everyone was an Indian citizen.

The BJP's conjectures on West Bengal as Narendra Modi and Amit Shah speak broken Bangla and try to appropriate the Bengali icons of the national struggle will do more harm than good as the TMC has ensured that the BJP is portrayed as "outsiders". Mamata Banerjee's patriarchal card will have more influence on the masses than the Ram Rajya call of the saffron party.

REVIEW

An unconventional story of mother and daughter

Girl in White Cotton talks about a neglected child forced to take care of her ailing parent

AMRIN NAAZ

The words "I would be lying if I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure" in Avni Doshi's debut novel *Girl in White Cotton* fixates the reader from the very beginning.

Published in August 2019 by Fourth Estate India of HarperCollins, the book was shortlisted for the Booker Prize last year.

Girl in White Cotton is a story of an unconventional relationship between Tara and Antara, mother and daughter. Narrated by Antara, an artist in Pune, it traces her journey from being a neglected child to an unloved mother.

Tara abandons her husband and, along with Antara, joins an ashram to become a disciple and mistress of a guru. There they meet another disciple, an American devotee named Eve or Kaali Mata, who takes care of Antara while her mother ignores her. When her position in the ashram is replaced, a humiliated Tara leaves the ashram and begins living on the streets. Antara's father and grandparents come to their rescue. Antara's mother has a lover, Reza Pine, who plays an interesting role in taking the narrative forward when the plot feels dull.

Cut to the present. Antara is married to Dilip and is attending to her mother who is slowly losing her memory, since the onset of Alzheimer's. Antara does not know how to take care of someone who has never bothered about her.

Through the dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship, the author tells us that not every woman wants to accept motherhood. The usual glorification of a selfless and caring mother in literature reinforces that in a woman's life, motherhood marks an important milestone. *Girl in White Cotton* does not follow that trope. It comes nowhere close to motherly affection, care-giving and selflessness.

Even the birth of Antara's child, to support her marriage, has no sig-

Through its dark and crude storyline, the book makes the reader uncomfortable at some point. But that feels necessary to question the things that we usually ignore.

portable. But that feels necessary to question the things that we usually ignore.

The women, portrayed as rebellious, eventually give in to the patriarchal structure. The men in the book are secondary characters. But they influence the actions of both the main characters.

The intermingling of the past and present is smooth. Although there are some parts in the storyline that are not consistent with the larger picture, the explanation of scenes, smells and tastes of ordinary things create a clear imagery as the story flows.

Tara is slowly forgetting her past while Antara is struggling to live with hers. In the end, which is open to interpretation, both lose their sense of reality.

As we put the book down, we keep looking for answers but we end up with more questions. If this is what you look for in a book, maybe this should be your next pick.



The book by Avni Doshi (right) was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2020



No stereotypes, no exaggeration

The film deals with an unlikely love story

ANUSHKA JAIN

Is Love Enough? Sir is Rohena Gera's independent film that was recently released on the streaming giant, Netflix. It premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2018 but was released only last month.

Starring Tilotama Shome and Vivek Gumber, the film explores an unlikely love story of a house help and her employer. In supporting roles are actors Rahul Vohra, Chandrachor Rai and Geetanjali Kulkarni.

Despite having a relatively uncommon plot, the film manages to do justice and cover the stories of both the protagonists, contrasted by their starkly different backgrounds, in full detail with sensitivity. Ratna (Shome), a widow from a small village in Maharashtra, moves to Mumbai to earn a living and escape the stigma attached to her widowhood.

Ashwin (Gumber), her employer, is a writer who moves back to India from the U.S. after his brother dies and starts working at his father's architecture firm. By the end, both the characters find themselves in very different situations.

While the story is good, with characters well sketched out, there are some ambiguities, particularly with how the story ends. What is with Ratna's acceptance of Ashwin, despite all the problems that she fo-

reuses and rejects the relationship earlier?

While there would also be a question of caste in a relationship between a wealthy, America-educated architect and an Indian maid, the film barely addresses it. It touches upon it lightly - and mostly deals with the class issue.

Based and shot in Mumbai, the film has a healthy share of the city skyline, sea, fish markets, red buses and, of course, the local train. It even features Maharashtra's Palki season and the Ganesh festival. So that's a well done, for the film's cinematography, premise and audio. Kinneineng Kipgen and Chetna Rawat's costume designs are superb, the delivery is average. Ashwin is constantly shown in drab and dreary clothes, suitable for his bachelor lifestyle, in sharp contrast to his lavish home and high financial status. While Shome's sarees are appropriate for a maid working in Mumbai, her blouses are good, so that is one point to the designers.

Usually we see the elites use a specific lens while covering the lives of people like Ratna or the 'subalterns.' However that isn't the case in *Is Love Enough? Sir* - no brown face, stereotypes or exaggeration. It is a good film that is well made - which makes it better considering that it is an independent one.

Sand shortage hurts TN

SAYANI DAS

Chennai. V Ramanathan had anxiously waited for a year-and-a-half to resume a stalled building project. The owner of Devan Builders in Chennai had been waiting for a required supply of river-sand to complete this project. He could not start a new project without first completing this. The lockdowns had only delayed the process.

Some 935 mining leases were active across the state last year according to district reports of the Department of Geology and Mining, Tamil Nadu. Out of these, almost 40 percent were granite mines from which blue metal and M-sand are produced in the private sector.

According to an article by The Hindu, there are almost 1,200 M-sand manufacturing units working across the State today. The article also read, "However, only about 270 have been approved by the PWD for product quality. While 67 applications are under scrutiny, about 400 have been identified as operating without approval. Once the policy is in place, PWD will have more powers to control adulteration, said officials."

Still, some suppliers find sand hard to get and whatever they get is a poor substitute.

K. Vivek of Revathy Agencies, a dealer in sand and gravel, also had



Sand shortage compounded developers problems and stalled many building projects in the Tamil Nadu.

a narrow escape in the covid year when the sand industry in the State plunged further. "There was rarely any river-sand supply during the lockdown," he said.

The lockdown had only aggravated an already existing problem in the state. The real estate industry in the state was badly affected by the 2016 demonetisation which had led to poor sales and increase in unsold properties. Later, the government restriction imposed in 2018 on river-sand mining by private players had affected the sand supply to the dealers and construction builders.

Vivek said, "After the government started selling [river] sand, we would receive only 2,000 loads of

sand which is much less than before."

According to Vivek, before the restriction was imposed, state builders received around 30,000 lorry-loads of sand everyday. This has reduced to around 2,000 loads currently. Builders estimate that Tamil Nadu requires 50,000-70,000 loads of sand every day.

The online sale by the government hasn't helped as there is usually a delay of 2 months between booking and supply of material. "That is a loss for sand truck loaders and for our business," said Vivek. As an alternative, sand dealers like him have moved towards manufactured sand or M-sand.

Ramanathan had seen many pro-

jects being stalled during the lockdown. The labour scarcity, added to shortage of river-sand, had hit him hard. "River-sand is the best option, but the time and money I need to spend in procuring it is what puts me off," he said.

The shortage is being plugged by sand made by compacting construction debris.

According to Ramanathan, what is called M-sand was now the only substitute for river-sand for construction purposes. Granite mined from the hills is crushed and refined to produce M-sand.

"Construction debris cannot hold as strongly as M-sand does so that's not even a choice," he said. He added, "There are plenty of quarries for M-sand, so there is no shortage in its supply."

Sudhir Kumar, an architect and member of the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL), pointed out that, as in the case of sand mining a few years back, "the unchecked granite mining by private players will also have knee-jerk reactions due to ill-defined laws in this regard."

K Lakshmi, a journalist with The Hindu says almost the entire mining sector that produces M-sand is under private players who are not bound by any regulatory measures from the government.

Sherub Wangmo

A decapitated Buddha statue, whose face alone has been modified in ThalavattiMuneeswarar Temple, a Hindu temple, is just one example of a distinct Buddhist tradition that once thrived in Tamil Nadu.

Locals, who worship the statue are unaware of their god's history. The ThalavettiMuneeswarar (Thalavetti is Tamil for decapitated) is one of some 150 decapitated statues of Buddha found all over the state, experts say.

But why should anybody pay any attention to the provenance out of the way temples in Tamil Nadu?

In the upcoming election in the state in April 2021 with millions of Hindu voters, the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, is making a determined bid to win a state it has never won before. And with its core support base of Hindu hardliners, never has religion seemed as important.

Here in Tamil Buddhist traditions are affected by the local Vedic tradition, therefore we have only around 11,000 Buddhists in Chennai." Says Dr. MA. Velusamy, Assistant Professor at Department of Social Science, Alagappa University, Karaikudi.

However the Buddhist commu-

nity in the state tries to reinstate the religion by launching research platforms, building temples around the state and the professors writing more books on the religion and making it accessible to the public. The



Statue of deity Muni

The Sri Lankan Buddhist Temple is one of the biggest in the state. The tradition most followed here is Theravada but there are few Mahayana and Non-Sectarian as well. Mahayana believes that aspirants should not just seek personal enlightenment but enlightenment of all beings. The Theravada school suggests that the seeker should gain insight from his own experience, application of knowledge and critical thinking.

Dr. Velusamy further explains before Dr. Ambedkar's influence was IyothecThass's initiative for the preaching in the southern part of India like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Kanchipuram. That is why the name of the initiative is called South India Sakya Buddhist Society. Under his initiative two shrines were brought up, one in Perumbi and another in Tiribul in Vellore district Bodhi trees which are commonly found in the area are also associated with Buddhism. It is said that Gautam Buddha got enlightened under the Bodhi tree which is currently in Bodhi Gaya, Bihar. According to history the Bodhi tree in Theosophical Society Buddha in Basant Nagar is believed to be grown from the sapling descended from the original Bodhi tree

first Buddhist monastery to come up in 200 years was built in 2018 at Perambur with a 6-ft Buddha statue installed with a smaller statue of Dr. Ambedkar placed in front of it.

Buddhism is said to have disappeared from Chennai as of an unknown date but was revived as of the 9th century. And also modern Buddhism in Tamil Nadu is associated with Dr. Ambedkar, said Dr. G John Samuel, Director of Institute of Asian Studies at Sholinganallur. He further says that the Buddhism practiced in Sri Lanka is rooted from Tamil Nadu.

Finding use for temple waste



Pack of incense sticks popularly called Phool made from paperwaste.

Photo: Comapny Photo

UJWALA POTHARAZU

A company is looking to make a small dent in the tone of waste being dumped into the Ganga everyday--be recycling temple waste and making incense sticks out of them.

Called Kanpur Flowercycling Ltd, the company is more popularly known as Phool, the Hindi for flower. It collects floral waste from temples, according to Ankit Agarwal who founded the company in Uttar Pradesh's Kanpur in 2017.

The idea of Phool started during

the Sankranti festival while Agarwal and his friend Yakub were sitting on the steps of Ganges, witnessing devotees take a dip in the sacred river Ganga and noticed the waste flowers being dumped. Then they decided to find a solution.

"It was a success only after one and a half years of their struggle of experimenting and pitching their idea to stakeholders and Ankit's saved money", said company spokesperson Ekta Jain.

Initially, the company used to collect 12 kg of waste everyday and gradually increased to collecting 4.2-4.7 tons of waste everyday. "In UP around 8.2 tons of temple waste is being dumped into the river Ganga and that is collected by the Phool workers and recycled", said another PR member.

Around 1,50,000 tons of Municipal Solid waste per day is being generated in India. "We are even planning to collaborate with the Municipal Management with a motive to recycle more waste", says Ekta.

The waste is handcrafted by 73 rural women so far who were earlier marginalized labourers. "In the coming years we want to employ more women and encourage them", says Ekta. "Only women work in our company", she added.

Phool.Co products consist of incense cones, incense sticks and vermicompost.

Prisoner rehabilitation in Hyderabad

TANISHQ VADDI

The Indian Oil Corporation Limited petrol bunk outside the Chanchalguda Central Jail in Hyderabad is an example of a new kind of justice.

The men operating the petrol pump are all convicts. They are serving prison terms for a variety of offences.

The Chanchalguda Central Jail, which shares a wall with the petrol pump, has 40 convicts working in different time slots under the jailer Lakshman Reddy. It is an Indian oil petrol bunk named "My Nation" fuel filling station which is run by the Telangana government.

Neither the Jail warden nor the Director General of Police (Prisons) spoke to The Word. Much of the sourcing for the story came from a man who works at an establishment selling handlooms made by the prisoners.

The source, when asked about handlooms, said: "Being a prisoner is not easy I agree they must have done something horrible to be here in the first place but we need to give them a second chance and when they come out of the prison they need to be better human beings."

After experiencing so much time in jail it is not easy for them to go back to the outside world. Making handlooms using them in the petrol bunks helps them to figure out what they can do once they have done their time here, he added.

According to a report in the Times of India, the released convicts who are allowed to work in



Prisoners operates a food court near Chanchalguda Central Jail in Hyderabad.

the petrol bunk after serving their term are given a salary of Rs 12,000.

The prisoners have not only been disciplined but efficient too. The jail inmates in the year 2017 have earned a staggering amount of Rs 4 crores profit for the prison. The prison authorities have assured that the amount would be used for the development of the prison. The prison authorities further said the jail inmates would get 50 per cent of the profit that is made.

L.Chaturvedi JCL in the Labour Department in Government of Telangana in Headquarters said "not all jail inmates are blessed with a family that can work. We have instances where the inmates have old parents who cannot work and single parents who are in jail whose children are too young to work and taken care of by someone. For that purpose, few inmates send the

money to their families". When asked about the shortages of labour in Telangana he said there is nothing of that sort he chuckled and said in fact there is a surplus after the covid-19 pandemic. He further talked about wages they earn he said the prisoners earn the same amount as any other outsider would earn. It depends on the hours they spend working. All the labour rules apply to them despite being in prison.

The prisoners earning profit has not only been confined to Chanchalguda central jail if further spreads across the entire Hyderabad city. The prisons department in fact manages 20 petrol bunks in the city. Apart from making handlooms and working in petrol bunks, the inmates manufacture steel used in schools, hospitals and police training centres. They have been used in catering services too.

Telangana Today, a Hyderabad news outlet said Telangana state made some Rs 600 crores by employing prisoners. This was the highest in the country, the report said. Tamil Nadu with Rs. 72.96 crores come next and Maharashtra is third with Rs. 29.40 crores.

Kerala has also permitted prisoners to work in the petrol pumps.

>The 1,350 prisons in the country consist of 617 Sub Jails, 410 District Jails, 144 Central Jails, 86 Open Jails, 41 Special Jails, 31 Women Jails, 19 Borstal School and 2 Other than the above Jails.

>The highest number of jails was reported in Rajasthan (144) followed by Tamil Nadu (141), Madhya Pradesh (131), 8,085 (1.7%) prisoners were Post Graduates and 5,677 (1.2%) prisoners were Technical Diploma/Degree holders

>There are 3 central jails 7 district jails, 33 sub-jails, a women's jail, a borstal school, 1 open jail and 4 special jails.

>There are in telangana prisons 6717 inmates with 86.3 per cent occupancy rate

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How a royal dish became a household name in India...

SANSKRITI FALOR RIYA

Passed on from the Mughal rule in India, Biryani is the most sought after dish in the country. The origin of this spiced rice and meat dish has been traced back to Persia. After the collapse of the Mughal Empire however, Biryani was primarily credited to being a Muslim dish until its popularity hit the roof and the dish became a cultural phenomenon. From inspiring social media content to being a favourite in the culinary world, biryani has long transcended the boundaries of being just a food.

The Royal dish, that was once exclusive, has slowly made its way up to be an integral part of the Indian cuisine in recent times. Mohammad Sayeed, Professor of Sociology at OP Jindal University, says the ITC hotels in India have helped popularize the idea of Biryani in the country. Now there are special accounts on social media platforms that are specifically devoted to either cooking the dish or tasting under food vlogging. Mo-

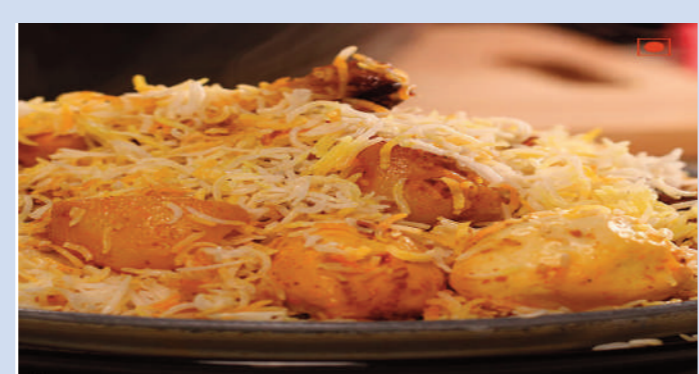
reover, there are number of restaurants across the country that specialize in only making biryani.

According to Swiggy's 5th StateATistics annual report, chicken biryani has been the most ordered food on the app, with about 3 lakh new account holders debuting on the platform to order this dish. It was ordered more than once every second in 2020, making it India's favourite food item.

This was perhaps followed by the biryani fever when people also popularized memes on the dish that hilariously favours biryani over everything else. Others use Instagram handles to familiarize their followers with the different kinds of biryani dishes from around the nation.

According to a book titled Biryani by Pratiba Khan, the word biryani comes from birinj, which is a Persian word for rice. The ingredients for the dish were expensive and difficult to procure, therefore it was only meant for kings.

What was once a dish credited to a certain community, has now spread across the country with its



Kolkata is famous for its variation of the biryani

own variations. The delicacy, which was originally only paired with spiced meat, was even introduced under the vegetarian category. Besides the Hydrabadi Biryani, which is the most cooked one in hotels, the list includes Lucknowi, Bombay, Thalassery, Ambore and Kalyani biryani among others.

It stands out from other Indian dishes for its method of preparation which takes both time and effort. The rice, spices and meat or vegetables are layered over one another

as the stronger flavours travel from the bottom to the top, making it a sensory treat. The rice is colorfully flavoured with garlic, cinnamon, rosewater ginger, cardamom, nutmeg and saffron.

Chef MachindraKasture (58), who was the first chef for the President of India in the RashtrapatiBhavan, points out the factors that contribute to the popularity of biryani. "It is a wholesome and complete food to consume. It has rice, spiced chicken and gravy, all in

one, which makes it more attractive to people," he says. "Biryani is one Mughlai dish that can be played around with and we can see the results in its variations across India."

Apart from the various adaptations of the dish in different regions, it has often been subject to curious experiments. Chef Kuldeep Singh, who is also a culinary artist and worked in the Tajgroup of hotels says, "People either use alternative ways to cook or have family recipes passed down the generations that they are protective of."

He recalls working with the famous Chef GulamRasool who is a master of Avadhi cooking, in Delhi. "While making traditional Biryani, Rasool would add itra to the dish. This further enhanced its taste and smell," he says. "People have also experimented with it, mixing it with Spanish or Mexican bases. For instance, some introduced the Paella Biryani, which is a fusion of the famous Spanish paella rice and Biryani."

While the experiments with the dish have been largely innovative, there are some biryani styles that

have stood out differently for a very long time. "My visit to Bhatkal in Karnataka introduced me to a new version of biryani," says Professor Sayeed, "the family had served me the dish that had noodles instead of rice which I was supposed to eat by hand. It was one of the best biryanis I had till date."

It is due to these experiments and protection of the long family generation recipes that chefs have complained against the loss of authenticity in biryani. Famous food historian Colleen Taylor Sen remarks, "Although biryani is one of the most popular dishes in the Subcontinent, there is a lot of debate about what makes it 'authentic' biryani. While some claim that biryani made with mutton is authentic, others tend to add seafood, fish, vegetables, even fruits to it."

However, some believe that it is important to absorb the local bits in food to continue its legacy. Professor Sayeed says he does not believe in the word authentic. "For me, authentic denotes control and tradition which is not future-oriented. This hinders growth of anything new.

Biryani has become more popular because of the variations and styles it is cooked in now."

Online delivery options and the added discounts have only helped people access their favourite dish. The popularity of the food item has been so widespread that even politicians have used it to their advantage. Several parties over the years have distributed biryanis to win votes during elections.

Having been credited to the Muslim community, biryani is often toyed around and used for political gain. The most recent incident was after the AAP victory when BJP claimed that the former was celebrating by throwing a feast for certain communities by distributing biryanis. As per Economics Times, the orders for biryani was the highest during the time in Delhi.

Interestingly, Chef kasture remarks, "While politics divide, food brings people together." Biryani is perhaps one food item that amalgamates cultural boundaries and is loved by Indians across the world.

ARTS & CULTURE

Of tiny tales and terrible experiences

Poets prefer online spaces to traditional ways, but the drawbacks of online are many. Garima Sadhwani explores the evolution of Instagram poetry

Bhumika Singh doesn't like being called an Instagram poet; she feels the term is misrepresented in pop culture. "People usually assume that an Instagram poet is someone who writes cliché lines, and I did not do that," she says.

Bhumika started writing and publishing poems on Instagram four years ago. She did so until she deactivated her account a year back. She says, "My writing evolved as I received appreciation and feedback. But I am more grateful for the connections I developed."

Once mostly a place to share photographs of vanity-inducing vacations or coffee dates with

friends, Instagram is evolving into an area of uncountable possibilities. Content creators with diverse offerings—from comedy to beauty tips—have mushroomed all across it. While this translates to social media fame and opportunities for the "creators", as they are called on Instagram, for you and I, it offers easy access to diverse content.

Amidst the sleek eyeliner tutorials and millions of Prateek Kuhad covers, poetry has carved a not-so-little space for itself on Instagram. Poetry, an art form that was earlier restricted to literary circles and high-end elitist parties where a ghazal or two would be shared, is now out in the open—to be written and read.

"Instagram is revolutionary because it doesn't need gatekeepers. Instagram does justice to people's poetry and its spirit in that way," says Aseem Sundan, who started writing as a child, inspired by the poet Agha Shahid Ali. Having read Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste, Aseem wanted to speak truth to power. He found his voice in resistance poetry and felt it was his duty to lend it to movements.



Poet Aseem Sundan.

He started posting his poems online when "box poetry" as he calls it, was all the rage.

A poem was born in Shaheen Bagh when the Anti-CAA protests broke out. Aseem says that people did not share poems published in books during the movement, but those available online. He ex-

claims, "Poetry is free now. People are the means of amplification for resistance poetry."

Poetry has often been interlinked with freedom and for all the right reasons. It won't be an overstatement to say that "Bol ke lab azaadhaiere, bolzubaan ab takte-rihai" by Faiz, still give people

goosebumps. Instagram has furthered this relationship because it doesn't exclude those without privilege. Viplav, another poet whose letter series "Heer" recently went viral, started posting on Instagram to maintain consistency in writing. And he'd choose the internet over anything else, any day, because of the reach it offers. Though he does worry that internet freedom is slipping away with social media censorship, so far, Instagram has given him gratification and the sense of a community. It also gave him the freedom to play around with the format and create dynamic content, he adds.

While these "creators" have found love and support on Instagram, their audience, too, has found solace in their words. Anika Rajkhowa, a literature graduate, says, "When I cannot sleep at night due to troublesome thoughts, that's when I take resort in the art of poetry."

Reading online is not only efficient and inexpensive, but it also introduces you to underrated and lesser-known poets. says, "Poetry is felt and absorbed better when

you just pass by it, and it fills you up with emotions," says Sania Halim, an undergraduate student. "It's not like reading a long novel."

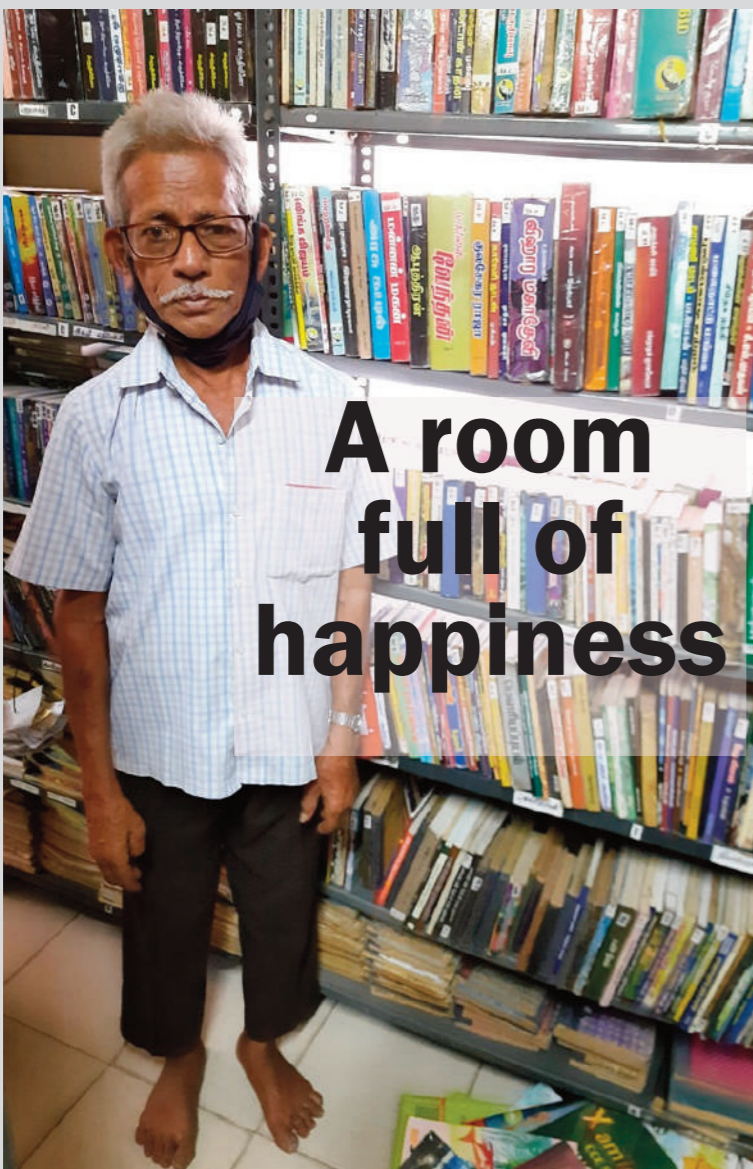
Ridhi Bhutani, who has been part of Delhi's poetry circuit for around three years, has mixed feelings about her presence on Instagram. While it has helped her gain an audience, it has also left her more vulnerable. "Social media is not entirely safe, especially as a woman poet in India. The audience has become very inflammable and hypersensitive. You can get rape, physical violence or cybersecurity threats. The public reaction can be limitless," says Bhutani. However, that political poetry needs the internet because most magazines and media houses do not support political content.

But Ridhi prefers the spoken word over the Instagram caption poetry because when a poet performs, there are organisers to take care of the public reaction and provide you with a safe space. She adds, "Publishing online is easier than doing so in a professional space, but speaking and emoting is

the best form of expression."

There is also the danger of your art being taken for granted, as Bhumika points out. "I don't think art can flourish if it is freely available," she says. Aseem, too, believes that Instagram poetry ends up diluting the art form, "People like scrolling, and to read a poem, you have to stick to a particular place," he says. Too many people scroll past most poems, he adds. "My poems are not just 'content'. They are not just for gratification but to be pondered upon."

Aseem feels that reading is the most unfiltered way to experience poetry because it is devoid of theatrics. And it's true. In the end, the feel of a verse of paper can never be matched. K. Sriyata, an award-winning poet, agrees. She confesses that going through the entire publishing process, though often unnerveing, is often necessary. "It is easier to put [your poetry] up on Instagram rather than go through submission and peer review." "It is important though – if you want to be taken seriously – to go through the latter, as well as at least from time to time.



A room full of happiness

GAUTHAM S

Piles of newspapers, cardboard boxes, old magazines and books near the front door greet the customers who enter the Gopalapuram branch of the Easwari Lending Library. N. Palani, the founder of Easwari Lending Library, sits near the front desk with his eyeslingering over a Tamil novel. "My love for reading made me start this library," says the 85-year-old. Palani once ran a waste paper mart opposite the place where the library is currently situated. "I used to buy old magazines from people," he says. Often, those weekly magazines published novels in serial format. Palani began collecting these and put them together into a single book. When people who used to visit his shop started reading those books, he started lending them to people for a nominal fee. That's how the Easwari Lending Library was born in 1965.

This family-run library, a haven for bibliophiles, has eight branches across the city. Tamil and English language novels, magazines, and essay collections are in abundance. There are separate shelves for Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, and other books popular with teenagers. Easwari lending library has had some high-profile customers, actors like Rajnikanth, Kamal Hassan, former president V.V. Giri and many Tamil Nadu governors, says Palani. He seems reserved initially, but he loosens up and talks more freely when he talks about his favourite authors and books. He proceeds to show the collection of books with which he began the concept of lending books and says, "Those days, books were the only source of entertainment. Now there are a

lot of other things that people are interested in." Easwari Lending Library is currently run by Palani and his two sons, P. Saravanan and P. Sathish. P. Saravanan (52), who joined his father 25 years ago, loves books too. He says the library has been updating itself according to the demands of time. "We try to provide as much as possible to the customers. We have a door-delivery option, and we have a website. We have many membership options," he says.

During the pandemic, says Saravanan, having a website and door-delivery services really helped. He said that when the library was closed for two months during the lockdown, many people used these services to entertain themselves. Running a library in these times, with so many sources of entertainment, continues to be challenging. But Easwari Lending Library has managed to weather it out. When televisions were introduced in the market, there was a huge fall in their number of customers, but people started coming back to the library, says Saravanan. Today, the competition comes from other sources, too: the arrival of Kindle, for instance. "This has reduced the number of people visiting the library, but there are still certain regular customers who visit us often," agrees Saravanan. Clearly, the allure of real books hasn't completely faded. Kareem, who had come to return books to the library, must agree. He said that his brother and niece were members there, and they regularly visit Easwari Lending Library. "Even though I have a Kindle at home, I encourage children to read physical books rather than e-books. Reading on electronic gadgets affects eyesight," he says.

A craft's legacy

BHARAT VASHIST

Jitendra Sharma, who runs "Gangaur Art" with his father in Udaipur's Moti Chohatta bazaar, has a long legacy behind him. His family has been making and selling miniature paintings for seven generations. "The art-work of our forefathers is still preserved in the darbaar."

As the name suggests, miniature paintings are small in size, sometimes so small that they fit into your palm. The diminutiveness means that the craftsman requires a high degree of skill and experience. The art is rendered with extremely fine brushes made of squirrel's tail hair to give the minute detail.

Miniature paintings were traditionally made on sheets of ivory and camel bone. However, since the government has banned the use of animal products, they are now rendered on sumnica, plastic sheets, paper and silk cloth. Few of the highly experienced craftsmen even use marble as a substitute for ivory. Sharma said that the colours made of chemicals fades away after a certain point, whereas natural colours linger on. "Thousand-year-

old paintings are still alive today in mahals because they were made of natural colours. If they were made of chemical colours, they would not have lasted for so long," he said.

Talking about the economics of miniature paintings, the artist said that the tourism sector has been heavily impacted because of the coronavirus. Fewer foreign tourists mean lower demand for the art, said Jitendra Sharma.

Due to the less scope, many artists have even left the profession, and people from the current generation are not interested in learning this art form. Additionally, many artists have to sell their paintings to shop owners cheaply. In various instances, artists don't have their own shops. They make the paintings and sell them at handicrafts shops where they often do not get the appropriate price. Madan Sharma, who runs handicraft shop "Hast Kala Kendra" at Gulab Bagh Road, said, "It's not like we keep huge profit in our pocket. Why would we purchase paintings at a high price and keep it in our shop when there is less demand?" he said, adding, "If there is more demand for paintings in the market, we would obviously share it equally with the artists and order more of them."



A vegan journey

Have you ever wondered why someone decides to stop eating all their favourite ice creams.

Eshan Kalyanikar talks to some people who have

Alina Merin Mathew, a law graduate, turned vegetarian five years ago in her first year of college and transitioned into veganism about two years ago. She took her time with it, doing homework and researching extensively into what she was signing up for. She now lives happily with her choice—except she misses rasmalai.

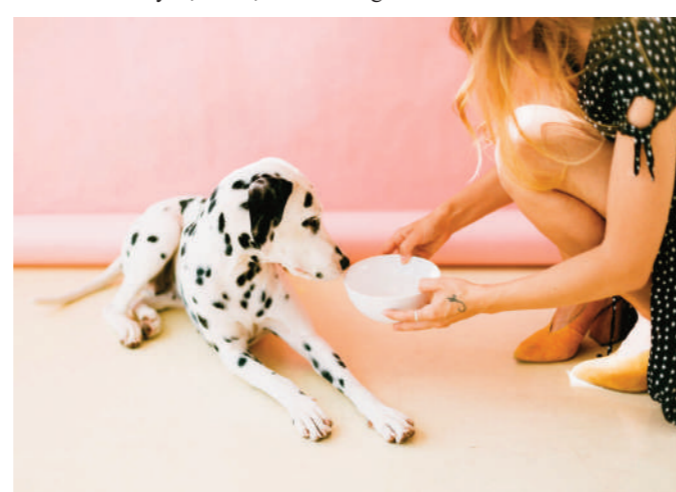
There are many people like Mathew who are embracing veganism, convinced that creating a world where no animal life is harmed is a more compassionate way of living. At one point, you make a connection that a dog that you are patting is the same as the meat on your plate, says the 23-year-old Mathew. "Once you make that connection, there is no going back."

Health matters
Mathew claims that going plant-based helped her handle her depression and anxiety. "Your body has more energy because your body itself is not spending too much energy on dairy," she says.

Nishi Ravi, a queer-affirmative feminist psychotherapist, agrees that a healthy diet positively affects mental health. "When peo-

ple are in control of their diet and have a routine discipline of just eating healthier things, it does translate into having more energy and a healthy body." A paper published on July 1, 2009, in the

Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics says that vegans and some other vegetarians may have lower intakes of vitamin B-12, calcium, vitamin D, zinc, and long-chain n-3 fatty acids.



However, it does indicate that correct nutritional alternatives can compensate for these deficiencies. Bhuvan Kalra, a 23-year-old from Punjab who now works as a nutri-

tionist in Bangalore, is a strong advocate of vegan life. Before turning vegan, Kalra weighed about 90 kgs; now he weighs anywhere between 67 kg to 70 kgs.

"Your diet needs to have a lot of variety to meet its nutritional needs. If you're eating all plant foods, you will be alright," he says. He calls it a "rainbow" diet. The more colours it has in it, the better, he says.

If you do it right, a vegan diet is low in saturated fat, free of cholesterol, and rich in fibre, vita-

mins, minerals and antioxidants.

Mathew, for instance, focuses on daal, sprouts and rajma in large quantities to fulfil her protein needs, while Kalra recommends tofu and besan. Other nutrients, like Omega-3 fatty acids, usually obtained from seafood, can be replaced by ground flaxseeds, he adds. Dairy, often touted as a complete food, can be easily replaced too. A balanced diet with a lot of green leafy vegetables and nuts does the job much better.

For Kalra, it is "the means to an end that matters". He says there are nutritious alternatives to animal products. If the means to reach any food product is through an animal, people like Kalra believe it is animal cruelty.

A meatless world
There was a time when Kalra liked a glass of lassi. No more, however. "Now, even when I look at milk, I see a glass of blood," he says, adding that he turned vegan out of environmental concerns.

According to The Humane Society factsheet titled 'Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Animal Agriculture', animal slaughter and dairy products significantly contribute to greenhouse gas emission. The factsheet states that the greenhouse gases absorb infrared

radiation and cause the greenhouse effect, which warms the Earth.

Animal Equality, an animal protection organisation based in Pune, investigated chicken farms and meat markets across India and released their report in September of 2017. According to their report, day-old chicks are transported to factory farms without food or water. Sometimes the journey lasts for days; many young ones die before they step out of the vehicle.

The report further states that those who reach there alive are given antibiotics to grow their bodies unnaturally fast. "Their legs get crippled because of the unnatural weight gain and, many times, can't walk or reach the food or water," the report reads.

Zohra Abdullah, a 23-year-old law graduate, is an Afghan girl who grew up in Delhi with her family. She grew up eating a lot of meat, she says.

In the 9th grade, it all changed. What she saw as food on the table were dead animals. "I was uneasy about it for a few years. I decided to turn vegan at the beginning of college. I was 18 then, it took me a year to completely go vegan. There was no turning back after

that."

Only for the elite?

A report published by the National Institute for Nutrition, 'Dietary guidelines for Indians', says that animal proteins are of high quality as they provide all the essential amino acids in right proportions. It adds that plant or vegetable proteins are not of the same quality because of the low content of some of the essential amino acids.

However, it concludes, a combination of cereals, millets and pulses provides most of the amino acids, which complement each other to provide better quality proteins.

On this, Mathew says that one needs access to resources to figure out what can be cheap and nutritious alternatives to animal products. In a country like India, she raised the question if people have the resources to afford a nutritionist or even spend long hours on internet searches.

Economic dependence on meat is not the reason to continue using animal products, says Abdullah. "It's a poor and unequal country. There is a caste system here, but you cannot defend those practices by citing either economic or cultural reasons."

The spirit of drama

A Chennai-based scholar and theatre practitioner talks about her experience with the artform

ARPIT PARASHAR

VPadma, aka A Mangai, one of the prominent female voices in Indian theatre today, is a Chennai-based scholar and theatre practitioner associated with the theatre group, Marappachi. An expert on Tamil theatre, theatre history, cultural history and a range of other subjects, she regularly contributes to regional, national and international journals and magazines. She is also the author of *Acting Up: On Gender and Theatre in India* from 1979. As an academic, she taught English literature, theatre, and performing studies at various colleges and universities across India.

What are your early memories of performance and performers? How did you come to the theatre as your means of creative expression?

I don't think I came with any definite interest in theatre. I always knew the power of performance because my childhood was spent on the Kalakshetra campus. I didn't learn dance; I was a school student there.

So I got the opportunity to see regularly dance shows, dance-dramas, everything while Rukmini Devi Arundale was alive. In my early 20s, the heyday of the women's movement, I was a member of All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) CPM's women's wing in Chennai.

And we did various things—we sang, we did oratory, we did posters, and we also did theatre. It took six to seven years to decide that theatre is my form. But then, once I decided there was no going back. And I loved it because of its collectivity. And for me, the women's movement and theatre go hand-in-hand.

You have also done a great deal of research over the years. Tell us about some features unique to Tamil theatre?

I think Tamil theatre is different from general what you call Indian theatre in North-India, and it is also different from other South Indian theatre. I don't want to go far back, but as you know, it is as ancient as Sanskrit. So our literary history goes back to 23 centuries.

The literature that is available from that period already talks about a performing community of Bengal.

We don't have a *Natyashastra*. But then what *Natyashastra* refers to as the stage, the different kinds of curtains, the role of the actor, the various *Rasas* (aesthetics) all of which were already there, in the *Sangam* literature.

The earliest record of performance in Tamil comes from 6th century A.D.—*Silappatikaram*, one of the epics.

As usual, it was the *ganikas* or the *tawais* who kept the tradition alive. But I think we have almost an uninterrupted continuous history of performance, various folk and traditional performances, some of them are only dance forms.

Some of them are a mixture of these two; some of them also tell you stories of what you call as a dramatic or theatrical form.

But in the 20th century, theatre played a very, very important role in the freedom struggle.

Tamil Nadu has always had stage or screen people ruling our politics. We have M. G. Ramachandran and J. Jayalalithaa, who actually ruled.

But by the time we come to the 1920s, we had the Dravidian movements. We had Periyar E. V. Ramasamy as our thinker.

And C. N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi, who followed in the footsteps of Periyar, took theatre and cinema very dear and very seriously.

After the 1950s, the new nation—India—had different cultural policies. But I think Tamilnadu was a bit behind because we did not jump to Sanskrit theatre, like Malayalam, where Kavalam Narayana Panicker really picked up.

We were very slow. Only in the 80s, we became part of the back-to-the-roots movement with a low criticism about the traditional forms.

We have a strong critique of religion and caste in Tamil Nadu. And that is part and parcel of our tradition, just like any other temple art forms.

You have done a lot of work with transgender people and have showcased their struggle through your plays very differently. Can you talk about that experience?

It was part of the queer movement; we started working with them to push the government to issue an ID card. Tamil Nadu was one of the early states to issue ID cards. It was Jayalalithaa—she said you put whether you want, male or female, whatever you want.

Now you have the third gender in your passport when you apply for it. But this struggle started in early 2000 and was closely linked to HIV prevention.

Some of these activists who were part of the trans groups did not want to be this target group. It was referred to by the government as the high-risk category because of HIV. They wanted the rights of a citizen.

It is paradoxical because, as feminists, we know that the question of the nation doesn't help us at all—as Virginia Woolf says, we don't have a nation. But at the same time, we have to fight within the nation.

For me, the entry point was feminism, but for the trans people, it was a question of rights. So that is how we began. Initially, I was very, very hesitant. But the group was very persistent.

You say feminist theatre can be distinguished from other kinds of theatre in terms of content and form. Could you talk a little about it?

In terms of form, I think feminist theatre believes so much more in improvisation and collectivism. One of the major criticisms of the author as an authoritative figure or director as an authoritative figure comes from female directors. I'm not saying male directors don't do it.

But then it was Anuradha Kapoor who began to talk about the authority of the director or the authority of the author.

And also, she talks about the collaborative, collective enterprise. In all of Anuradha Kapoor's work, you'll find that, so consciously or unconsciously, we know that there is something powerful in giving and taking. If at all feminist theatre has something to offer, it is about giving and taking.

So you don't talk about somebody having absolute control; there is no absolute control in feminist theatre. It is reversing the gates of the production process, which is the main thing.

And of course, in terms of representation, I think it is the feminists who have imagined different kinds of spaces, as I have explained in the book. For example, it was Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry who produces *kitchen Katha* (stories). And she brings the kitchen on stage. Now the question to say is, yes, she's an amazing director who brought the kitchen on stage. But my question is, why haven't the other directors imagined the kitchen as a happening place?

So there is something different in the society where your experience as a woman gives you a certain texture. And that texture comes out in the form.

But I don't want to claim that just because you're a woman, you can produce a feminist theatre. Women also have to learn feminist theatre, just like a male director has to learn.

In your book, *Acting Up: Gender and Theatre in India, 1979 Onwards* (Leftword, 2015), you talk of how the mainstream imagination of the "national" kept women's theatre and groups like the IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) out of it, during the freedom movement. Could you tell us about that?

See, it is actually about the policies. As you know, Nehru was the first person who wanted to have a cultural policy. He formed the Sahitya Akademi and National School of Drama, Sangeet Natak Akademi. I think he was trying to talk about India's pre-colonial interests.

In India, every region had a very thriving, rich tradition that didn't die with colonialism.

The only time all the artists came together was to fight the Britishers and IPTA was a nationalist voice of the artists and 1942 is the heyday of IPTA. It was very strong in Bengal and Maharashtra... various other places.

And, I think what the problem that Nehru did was when they discussed the nationalists, national theatre, they did not really discuss IPTA the role and contribution of it, probably because you did not want to think of the struggle and the protests. IPTA is also one of the places

where the discussion about women and theatre begins earlier.

And as usual, it was not easy; women were there—we had Binodini Dasi who wrote her autobiography. So because the government did not talk about IPTA, they also did not talk about women doing theatre and politics seriously. That came only in the 70s when the women's movement took up theatre as a main tool for propagating whatever they wanted to do.

Which play are you working on?

I don't have five-year plans but want to do a lot more readings. So at least for the next two, three months, I just wanted to read. I don't even want to think about another performance. But I mean, I never know when the spirit of theatre will make me do another play. Once you have shaken hands with those spirits, it is very difficult to stay away from the stage.

“Once you have shaken hands with those spirits, it is very difficult to stay away from the stage.”



A. Mangai introducing her play, *Vellai Mozhi*, based on the book *The Truth about Me* written by A. Revathi. Photo: Arpit Parashar

Stages turned to little boxes

Remote learning may not be ideal but zoom classes encourage theatre students to be more nuanced and engaging

MONA PACHAKE

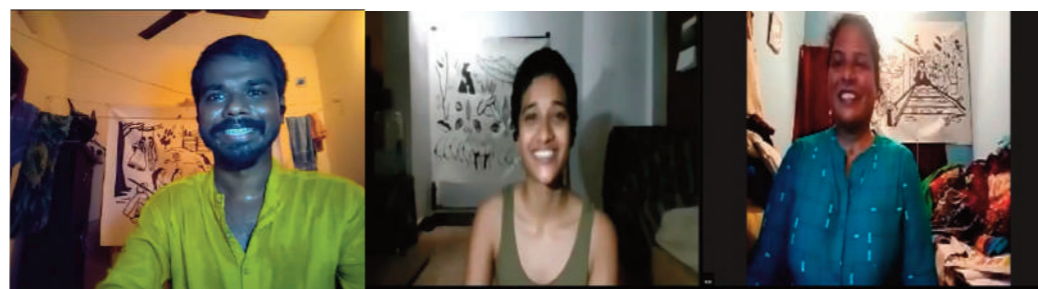
Though nothing can match the live experience of theatre, Regin Rose, the director and the tutor of Chennai Theatre Academy (CTA) here tried to make do when COVID hit.

"When the lockdown was announced initially, we were not able to do any work for six months," said Rose, adding that it led to a financial crisis.

So he decided to move his classes online.

As COVID fanned across the world, sparing nothing and no one, theatre too took a hit. People who loved to watch plays or dramas were worried about not attending and indulging in the magic of theatre. Rose's strategy could help assuage their worries.

"There are two sides of a coin is a popular saying that we hear when we go through something horrible", stated the artist, who has translated plays from stage to Zoom with con-



Marappachi performing "One can only laugh" at the Good Theatre Festival in September 2020.

siderable success.

Currently, the academy, which offers acting and skill development classes, is conducting online classes. These comprise two batches a day, each with 5 or 6 students, the same as before the lockdown.

To make an online class lively is not an easy job. Rose says he did it by making the sessions more interactive and made the students do the talking.

"Even on the stage, we have restrictions to stand at a correct point

where the spotlight falls," grinned Rose.

"So it was a good learning experience for the students and the actors to set the frame for themselves."

The online conundrum

Attending classes online does come with its share of challenges. Preeti Krishnan (26), a model and a student in CTA, for example, says that online classes have their limi-

tations. "During a live class, your director or master can review your performance, but in an online class, it is only you for yourself.

You will have to correct yourself and take up the responsibility to put more effort," she said.

She compared acting to mathematics—the learning is practical, she added: it cannot be learnt only through a book.

Prithvinathan (30), a student at CTA, agreed that correcting the techniques becomes an issue with

online classes. In a regular class, the teacher usually can see their students and correct their posture or technique; online, however, the medium restrains the teacher's support system.

"An actor should always work in his or her imagination completely even with distractions; in front of a laptop it was more challenging," he added.

However, online classes do offer some advantages too. The lockdown also made the world of theatre shrink, pointed out Rose. It helped students who were not able to attend his classes in person earlier enroll for them.

George D'cruze (23), a college student from Kerala, used to come to Chennai every weekend and stay in the city for two days.

The online format made it easier for him, in many ways, he said. "Screen fatigue or Zoom fatigue was something I got used to as I am a student. So this was not that difficult for me."

ABOUT REGIN ROSE



Regin Rose (35), the director and the tutor of Chennai Theatre Academy, graduated from the National School of Drama (NSD), New Delhi, with a specialisation in acting. After graduating from the NSD, he did his postgraduation at the Pondicherry University specializing in Theatre and Performing Arts. Before starting the Chennai Theatre Academy, he has worked at Koothu-p-pattarai and Stone Bench Organization, a film production company.