



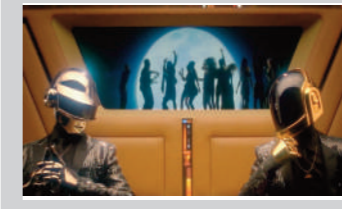
Decision in the right 'Disha'

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Despite ban, scavengers die

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Robot duo band ends with a bang

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'Third Front will have no impact in TN'

R SAI VENKATESH

CHENNAI: No third front can split the votes of Dravidian parties in the April 6 State Assembly elections and shake the Dravidian dominance in Tamil Nadu, say political observers.

Kamal Haasan's Makkal Needhi Maiam (MNM) is looking to lead other parties like the Indhiya Jananayaga Katchi (IJK) and the All India Samathuva Makkal Katchi (AISMK) under a third front to victory, without any alliance with the Dravidian parties, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the DMK.

The DMK and the AIADMK secured 70 percent of the votes in the 2016 assembly elections (30 and 40 percent respectively). The two parties have alternately ruled Tamil Nadu for several decades from the time the DMK-led coalition ousted the Congress in 1967. In 1972, the DMK split and the AIADMK was formed.

However, with the demise of AIADMK leader J. Jayalalitha, it is doubtful if her party which has been ruling the state for two consecutive terms since 2011, will win again, say observers.

Srinivasan, a senior journalist from the Madras Union of Journalists (MUJ), said that an anti-incumbency factor would go against the AIADMK government. "People frustrated with ten years of the AIADMK government shall look to vote for the DMK-Congress-Left party alliance this time", he said.

"The vote share of the DMK alliance, arising from anti-incumbency is what the third front shall cut into," said Durai Karuna, senior journalist and political commentator.

However, Srinivasan insisted that third fronts had always lacked strong foundation to steal Dravidian votes. "Third fronts fail because they are announced months before the poll. This election, the third front might win close to 15 percent votes, even if Vijaykanth's Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK) joins them. In the next elections, they can win, provided they continue doing good work without splitting," he added.

Senior journalist Lakshmi Subramanian also seconds Srinivasan's argument and recalls the failure of third fronts in TN. She stated that while Vijaykanth's



Candidates filing nomination at the AMMK office

DMDK was able to grab about 9 percent of votes in 2006, its popularity declined after 2011 and the party never won a single seat after forming the Makkal Nala Kootani, another third front, in 2016 elections.

According to her, to form the majority in TN, a party has to bag rural votes. "While Kamal is popular among urban masses, in South Chennai predominantly, the DMK

infrastructure is so strong in rural areas where Kamal can never penetrate," she added.

Thus, even as statements from leaders like P Chidambaram, claiming that the third front would favour the AIADMK- BJP alliance float around, senior BJP leader and East Division secretary Sree Sai Sathyan, has dismissed such claims. He said the third front would leave an equal dent on both

the Dravidian parties but it could not form the government. "Even I was under the assumption that MNM would eat all DMK-Congress votes in 2019 general elections. Instead, they consumed about 1,50,000 of our votes in South Chennai," he said.

While the major competition is still between the AIADMK and the DMK, other parties like the Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (AMMK) consider DMK to be the common enemy.

After V.K. Sasikala's decision to resign from politics, there is speculation that the AMMK may join the AIADMK alliance to fight the DMK. Also, the AISMK founder R. Sarathkumar's visit to Sasikala's residence raised eyebrows.

AMMK's Union Secretary, Madhusudhan, stated, "Our leader (Dinakaran) has plans to make the AMMK contest independently in all 234 constituencies." However an ex-MLA from the party, M Komanji Maniyan, before Sasikala announced her resignation, hinted at a possibility of forming an alliance with anyone fighting the DMK. "We do not have a problem with a coalition as long as DMK remains the enemy," he said.

Delhi struggles as LPG cost increases

PALLAVI KESWANI

DELHI: Burdened, for over a month, by the consistent hike in prices of domestic and commercial LPG (cooking gas) cylinders, citizens of Delhi are adopting ingenious methods to conserve cooking gas.

By making adjustments in the monthly budget, changes in daily diet, and using domestic cylinders for commercial purposes, people

are attempting to cope with the LPG cylinder prices that went up thrice in February, in Delhi. From March 1, the price of a 14.2 kg domestic LPG cylinder was hiked by Rs. 25, and that of commercial LPG cylinder by Rs. 95, bringing the prices to Rs. 819 and Rs. 1,614 respectively.

Sameer Kumar (39), a bank clerk, has had to cut back on daily travel expenditure to accommodate the price rise. "We can't just stop eating food. Gas will be consumed, so I have stopped taking my car to the office and instead travel by bus," he says. "I cannot afford to spend on expensive petrol as well as expensive cooking gas," Kumar explains.

Raj Bala (48), a housewife, has resorted to using electrical stoves to conserve gas. "For heating up food items or making tea, I use the induction stove," she says.

The situation is worse for those domestic users, who were only able to afford LPG cylinders at government subsidised prices. Since last year, the government had stopped providing subsidies to beneficiaries, forcing them to pay the full market price for LPG cylinders. In the Union Budget 2021, allocation towards subsidy for petroleum products, including LPG, was reduced from Rs. 40,915 crore in 2020-21, to Rs. 12,995 crore in 2021-22.

Pawan (42), a florist, claims that he was unaware that he had stopped receiving subsidy until he checked his bank statements. "I was getting messages about subsidy being deposited in my bank account, and it suddenly stopped one day," says Pawan. In absence of the subsidy, which amounted to approximately Rs. 200, Pawan's family has been forced to spend less on foodgrains

and vegetables. "We either eat daal (lentils), or one vegetable dish with chapati. Can't afford to spend on both at the same time," he explains.

Sourish Das (37), a vegetable vendor, is facing a similar situation, after he stopped receiving subsidy. "We are already living hand to mouth. I just tell my wife to use gas as minimally as possible," says Das. "In winters we were in a bad situation because everything takes time to heat up so we were running

out of cooking gas fast, I hope the situation gets better in the coming months," adds Das.

The effect of price rise has also been felt severely by small scale commercial consumers of LPG cylinders. Pawinder Kaur (26), a street food vendor, says that a 14.2 kg cylinder lasts for only

about 3 to 4 days. However, at steep prices, Kaur cannot afford to get it refilled so frequently. "I use one of the domestic cylinders that get delivered to my grandmother's house each month, that way I don't have to pay the commercial rate," says Kaur. To avoid suspicion over the fact that a domestic LPG cylinder is getting consumed so fast, Kaur gets it refilled illegally. "I have to pay Rs. 150 more than the market price to the boy who delivers the cylinder to me," explains Kaur. Ravi Dubey (38), another street vendor, explains that there is no scope for saving gas. "The utensil I use to fry, takes a long time to heat up, so I can't switch off the gas in between." Like Kaur, Dubey also relies on getting the cylinder at domestic prices. "I get it delivered to my friend's house, whom I pay," he says.

To earn back their input cost of the LPG cylinder, shop owners also make operational changes. "I initially tried to increase the price of food items I was selling, but that turned away customers. Now I have tried to reduce the quantity of food I am offering per plate," explains Prem Jain (52), who runs a confectionery shop. "It's a double whammy for us, because earlier customers were not coming because of COVID-19, and now when they are here we can't afford to feed them," says Jain.

PHOTO CREDITS: PALLAVI KESWANI



LPG cylinders are becoming unaffordable for people

Kerala health workers wary of vaccine shots

R KAMALA MENON

MALAPPURAM: Several people have not registered to get vaccinated because of reluctance, health issues, rumours about the vaccine's efficacy and technical difficulties with the app used for registration, according to medical experts.

"With the efficacy of the vaccine not being ensured and side-effects being reported, I am not ready to get vaccinated," said a frontline worker of the Government District hospital who was not ready to enclose her identity.

Dr. Gopikumar, IMA State Secretary said that such comments would affect the vaccination drive. "Some health care workers and frontline worker do blindly believe whatever they read it on social media. They don't even care to verify it."

"Health workers and frontline workers are the ones who should show common people that the vaccine is effective, but here, some of them are backing out and that has actually affected the vaccination drive." Medical experts insist that the percentage of healthcare workers (among those infected has seen a decline from 1.2 per cent to

0.6 per cent. According to the experts, this is due to the Covid 19 vaccination drive that started on January 16.

"It is a bit early to make official statements but it is definite that the percentage of Covid cases in Kerala among the health workers has gone down to 40 per cent after they were vaccinated," said Dr. Arun N M, an infectious disease expert. As much as 93.84 per cent of the health workers received the first dose, according to official reports.

"Pregnant women, people with health issues, those who tested positive and those who are reluctant to get vaccinated have been excluded from getting vaccinated," said Dr. Biju Thayyil, Senior doctor, Government District Hospital, Perinthalmanna, which is one of the vaccination centers in the district.

Reluctance to get the second dose is another major problem pointed out by the health experts.

"We don't have smart phones to register so we have to stand in a long queue at hospital to register and it takes half of our day, so till now I've been postponing it for another day," said a staff from the Government District Hospital. It would get worse when it comes to common people, said Dr. Biju.

Covid clusters in Bengaluru

S.N.THYAGARAJAN

BENGALURU: The residents of apartment complexes here feel that cluster outbreaks of COVID-19 can be avoided only if the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagar Palike (BBMP) and Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) work in tandem.

While some RWAs have banned gatherings in their apartment complex, many of them organise such events and actively encourage the residents to participate in them.

Saraswati Kannappa, resident of an apartment complex in JP Nagar, said "Many apartment complexes in this locality discourage the residents to have guests let alone social gatherings, however the complex I live in has no such rules."

It is felt that BBMP, being the civic authority, should come out with regulations. Srividya Srinivas, a resident of Natasha Golf View Apartments, said "The RWAs should not be allowed to decide by themselves under these circumstances. Without a proper rule book, they (the RWAs) can permit anything."

R.Suresh, Public Relations Of-

ficer, BBMP, said "We don't plan to introduce fresh regulations in apartment complexes, the guidelines of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in this respect are exhaustive." Some RWAs have become complacent in enforcing these rules in the last few months.

BBMP officials have said that the cluster outbreak should only be attributed to persons who organised the gatherings and not the RWAs. Dr. Bhaskar Rajkumar, Officer on Special Duty at BBMP COVID-19 war room, said "Neither the BBMP nor the RWAs can be blamed for these cluster outbreaks. These happened in apartment complexes where people chose to go to a gathering despite being aware that they were violating the COVID-19 guidelines."

After the cluster outbreak in February, where 105 people from an apartment complex were infected after attending a party, the Karnataka Government introduced new rules. According to these rules an area will be classified a containment zone if 5 people get infected in a 100 meter radius. Previously an area will be called a containment zone only when 20 people get infected.

"People in apartment comple-

xes tend to assume that all the residents are from their bio-bubble, however this is usually not the case. Many residents go to offices, many of them even have guests from outside of the State. In both the cluster outbreaks it has been established that the virus spread from a person who traveled to Karnataka from outside," said Dr.Rajkumar, while referring to the second cluster outbreak in February where 26 people were infected.

While the residents feel that BBMP and RWAs have to play a more active role, organisations such as Bangalore Apartments Federation (BAF) say that such regulations may amount to the authorities micro-managing the activities of the apartment complexes.

Sriram Narasimhan, a member of BAF said "Even though BBMP's outreach during the pandemic has been excellent, there have been circumstances where the outreach has become overreaching. The RWAs have been doing their job well." He added that when the residents make a personal choice to invite people home, there was little that the BBMP or RWA could do.

No Covid protocols for Chennai book fair crowd

RIMJHIM SINGH

CHENNAI: The 44th edition of the Chennai Book Fair opened at the Nandanam YMCA grounds, with the crowd throwing COVID-19 protocols to the wind.

Madhan M (35), a regular visitor at the book fair, walked in holding an extra mask and a bottle of sanitizer. "This year's book fair is different on many levels. The pandemic has made it hard for us to visit the fair frequently," Madhan said that earlier, he used to visit the fair four times. "This year, this will be my first and last visit."

Madhan, like many other bibliophiles, feels that the facilities available at the book fair are not enough. "There are no sanitizer dispensers inside the grounds. People do maintain social distancing while entering the main gate, but inside, it's just a crowd walking together with no social distancing."

Shakthivel Gopal (29), a shopkeeper and a regular visitor, ente-

red the compound without a mask but was denied entry.

Visitors and stall owners said that the hot and humid weather caused suffocation.

P Madhavi, a student of class 12th, said, "The entire arrangement is done under tents and so it gets really hot during the day. The suffocation forces most people to take off their masks."

Nothing apart from two small notice boards, displaying Covid norms, can be seen at the entrance of the fair.

Devaraj (25), a shop stall owner, said that the public coming for the fair have been taking the pandemic lightly. "Some people remove masks as soon as they cross the entry point and roam around in groups. But, we don't complain as we want to earn money as the number of buyers has gone down this year as compared to last year."

Though the shop owners said that they were asked by the organisers to follow Covid protocols at all

times but it gets difficult to maintain all these protocols with a huge number turning in. "The public walks around freely and there are no announcements or officials to keep a check inside the fair," Devaraj added.

With over 700 stalls set up this year, the place gets really crowded by evening. Narendran N (41), a security guard at the fair, said that the place turns into a picnic spot by evening every day. "A small tent, with around 50 chairs, was set up outside the main tent for people to sit and beat the heat. But, now people tend to form groups and they sit and eat food they get from home."

He added that the guards tried to tell the people to follow all protocols for the first three days, but later stopped saying anything as people never listened.

The Booksellers and Publishers Association of South India which organised the fair said this time there were eight lakh visitors compared to the 12 lakh last year.

Multi-level parking, multiple hurdles

While some people are unaware of the new facility, some do not want to use it

RAGHAVI GARG

CHENNAI: The Greater Chennai Corporation's (GCC) seven-storey multi-level parking in T. Nagar saw few takers despite being free for the first five days after it was opened on February 23. People are still reluctant to park their vehicles there and prefer to leave their vehicles on the roadside, saying they have to walk some distance to the market.

Located on the Theagaraya Road- Thanikachalam Road junction, the parking lot which can accommodate over 200 cars and 500 two-wheelers had only received about 30 vehicles in the first three days after being opened for public, said Balaji, an official.

The parking area is closer to Pondy Bazaar but it is at least a 20-minute walk away from complexes like Pothys, Nalli and Saravana Store. V. Raja, who came to visit the market with his family, said, "The main market is far away from the parking area. It is difficult to



The GCC's seven-storey multi-level parking in T. Nagar

walk for so long with a mask on in this Chennai heat which is why I prefer parking somewhere near the shopping area."

V. Sundararajulu, Manager of the Technology Department of the parking area, said, "It just takes one minute to leave the car for parking and get the token and another minute to retrieve the car."

Contrary to the belief that the GCC application is mandatory for

visitors who wish to park their vehicle, Sundararajulu said that this application was only used by the personnel to generate tokens for the car being parked.

After the token generation, the customer is given a receipt and a staff member drives the car inside the parking lot. To retrieve the car, the customer needs to produce the receipt and pay the parking fee in cash or digitally.

A vehicle user, E. Dhanasekar said, "I planned to go and park the car in the new parking area but I drove away because they did not let me park the car myself."

However, female vehicle users expressed relief as they could shop freely without worrying about their vehicle. Sangeetha Krishna, who came along with her friend to shop, said that it felt very convenient and safe to drop the car and later take it back. "It was hassle free as we did not have to hunt for a place to park and there was no fear of another vehicle ramming into ours," she said.

Talking about the parking charges, N. Suresh, an employee at a shop in the Pondy Bazaar, said that if he parked his two-wheeler in the newly built parking area, his weekly expenditure would increase by Rs. 300. "I work for 10 hours a day and parking my bike would cost me Rs. 50 per day," he said.

Employers at the Pondy Bazaar said that they would request the corporation authorities to provide a cheap pass for the employees.

PHOTO CREDITS: RAGHAVI GARG

Decision in the right disha

Twenty-two-year-old environment activist Disha Ravi, arrested by the Delhi Police for editing a toolkit on the farmers' protest, is out on bail. In the current political climate, even such small victories are a strong cause for celebration. This is what the Delhi Sessions Court judge said while granting her bail: "I do not find any palpable reason to breach the rule of bail for a 22-year-old girl who has absolutely no criminal antecedent... the perusal of the said 'toolkit' reveals that any call for any kind of violence is conspicuously absent." The court also said that "citizens cannot be put behind bars because they choose to disagree with the state policies... and sedition cannot be invoked to minister to the wounded vanity of the governments". With sedition cases slapped frequently on dissenters, Justice Dharmender Rana's verdict is a giant leap forward. Invoking sedition is almost always accompanied by the "anti-national" rhetoric of the government and its allies, which not only leads to the social ostracization of the person in question but also puts his/her life (and the dear ones) in danger. The doctrine of 'innocent until proven guilty' becomes a joke. It was almost as if the court held the law enforcement by its ear as it reinforced that a case is proved on the basis of evidence, not inference. It said the evidence in connection with a toolkit on the farmers' protest, tweeted by Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, did not amount to sedition under Section 124 A or Section 153 A (promoting hatred amongst communities on social/religious grounds). It also ruled that there was no evidence against Disha or the Poetic Justice Foundation of conspiracy with secessionist forces.

How much Justice Rana's verdict will influence the Narendra Modi government is, however, a moot question. There are many journalists and activists who are currently facing charges under the law of sedition. This includes prominent anchor of the India Today group, Rajdeep Sardesai, and Vinod Jose, executive editor of *The Caravan* magazine. It is naive to assume that the government will never misuse the law of sedition again. Even though sedition is an archaic law - it was introduced by the British in 1870 - the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) started collecting separate data on sedition cases only in 2014. The conviction rate under the law has been low, with only four convicted since 2015. In February, a little before Disha was arrested, The Economist Intelligence Unit, research and analysis division of the England-based *The Economist* Group, ranked India 53rd in the 2020 Democracy Index report. India ranked 51st in the 2019 Index and 27th in 2014.

The BJP has tried everything to connect the farmers' protests to pro-Khalistani elements. Disha Ravi's arrest was one such desperate attempt. Many members of the BJP and its supporters were on a mission to prove that Disha's full name was Disha Ravi Joseph, implying that she was a Christian and there was a Christian conspiracy to break India. *The News Minute* fact checked the allegation and found that it was untrue. The friends of the BJP in the media attempted to push the Khalistani rhetoric. But, unlike the blatant Islamophobia that people bought into during the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests, people are not buying bigotry towards Sikhs, who form a huge chunk of farm protesters.

Watching over the watchdog

The media is the fourth pillar of democracy, questioning those in power and pointing out their mistakes. But by putting the new Information Technology (Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 in place, the Modi government has decided to become the watchdog of the watchdog. The rules, drafted since 2018, came into effect on February 25, 2021. They impose a three-tier regulation system on digital media websites to deal with audience grievances. The first tier is about appointing a grievance officer, who will acknowledge complaints within 24 hours and resolve the issue within 15 days. The second tier is a self-regulating association of digital media websites which will be headed by a retired judge or an independent "eminent" media personality. The third tier is the "oversight-mechanism", consisting of an inter-departmental government committee, which will be the last resort for complainants.

The Internet Freedom Foundation has pointed out in an IGTV video that the rules will directly bring the media under government control. A more democratic way of resolving grievances would have been to make the digital media liable to courts, not politicians. At a time when news portals like *The Quint* and *NewsLaundry* are requesting the users to "pay to keep news free", how will they manage the monetary expenses involved in these issues? Besides, most digital media organizations do not have an elaborate staff, which means that the editors will have to keep running behind such complaints. How can we expect them to do quality journalism in such a scenario?

If there is a complaint against an online news portal that it has published content that questions the integrity of the country, not only can its content be taken down; the "oversight mechanism" committee can take down the entire website for some time. If news organizations do not agree to take down the story in question, they can be blocked. When the line between 'anti-national' and 'anti-government' is blurring every day, is there a guarantee that this rule won't be misused to curb dissent? In 'Cut the Clutter', *The Print's* editor Shekhar Gupta said that even during the Emergency, the government did not have such sweeping powers.

The government has asked the digital media to self-regulate and label their content, and publish only in accordance with the Norms of Journalistic Conduct of the Press Council of India under the Press Council Act, 1978 and the Programme Code under Section 5 of the Cable Television Networks (regulation) Act, 1995. It has also asked the organizations to get registered. While this is a basic and necessary step, the move may curb citizen journalism. Instagrammers like Vibhu Grover, Sukhmidh Kaur and Andre Borges, who post news updates on their social media handles and have a massive following, may be blocked from sharing news in future. An editorial in *The Hindu* rightly pointed out: "That the new rules pertain only to digital news media, and not to the whole of the news media, hardly provides comfort, as the former is increasingly becoming a prime source of news and views."

The rules should not be seen in isolation. They come after a heated standoff between the government and social media networking site Twitter, which refused to permanently delete accounts of people supporting the ongoing farmers' protest. Besides creating hurdles for free journalism, the rules are meant to restrict the reader's access and right to independent news.

Reading the tea leaves in T.N.

Absence of Karunanidhi & Jayalalithaa, entry of MNM, and hectic bargains have made the polls interesting

"People have got used to AIADMK governance"

R. Periyannayagam, secretary of the AIADMK Ward 162, Chennai, talks to Gautham S about the political climate in the State and his party's poll prospects.

Are you hopeful of the AIADMK creating history by winning for the third consecutive time?

The chances are bright. Our government has addressed all sections with numerous welfare schemes. True to the adage, 'if you can't do good, do not do anything bad,' the AIADMK has done nothing bad in five years.

Chief Minister Palaniswami announced loan waivers, exam cancellations and other schemes in quick succession. Were they done with an eye on the elections?

Do not politicise things that were done with good intentions. Look at what the government has done, not at why it was done.

As the ruling party, do you think the AIADMK has an advantage?

Definitely. The party has been in power for 10 years. People have got used to our way of governance. If the DMK comes to power, rowdiness will increase all over the State.

What do you think is your party's strength?

Our party believes in only the power of party cadres, unlike others who use money and muscle power. We think about people's welfare but other parties have only political power in mind.

Do you think tensions between Mr. Palaniswami and Deputy Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam can affect the AIADMK?

There are no problems [between them]. The CM and the Deputy CM are like brothers; they know how to



R. Periyannayagam is confident of winning the elections.

sort out their differences, if any. Every family is bound to have differences but it does not allow outsiders to interfere.

With former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran becoming almost every other political party's badge, do you think the AIADMK has lost its uniqueness?

The AIADMK was founded by MGR. He is part of our legacy. All other political parties are using his image and power to strengthen their vote bank.

Will Kamal Haassan and his Makkal Needhi Maaim affect the AIADMK's prospects?

Tamil Nadu has been ruled for almost half a century by Dravidian parties. All other parties are like passing clouds.

Will Jayalalithaa's absence affect AIADMK's prospects?

We have already faced the by-elections and the Lok Sabha elections after Amma's death. So, we have planned accordingly.

The Bharatiya Janata Party has never been a big force in Tamil Nadu. Won't the AIADMK's alliance with the

party affect its prospects?

Some Tamil people are against the BJP because other political parties have created a bad image of the party. The anti-Hindi issue, for instance, was whipped up [by the DMK] last year just to make the people hate the BJP. Nobody is forcing Hindi in Tamil Nadu. People should understand the truth and expose the deception.

What are your thoughts on V.K. Sasikala bowing out of politics?

It is good for the AIADMK. The party cadres will work in unity and we will get more votes.

People will no longer take the Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (AMMK) seriously. We will go to the people on the strength of what the government has done for them. We are not worried about other things.

Is the AIADMK the BJP's 'B' team in Tamil Nadu?

Not at all! As the ruling party, the AIADMK had to ensure that the State enjoyed a cordial relationship with the Centre. To say that we are its slaves or the Centre is making the decisions for us is rubbish.

"DMK's chances are bright"

M. Radhakrishnan (60), active member and spokesperson of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Thoothukudi, is certain that his party will win the elections. Excerpts from an interview with Mona Pachake:



M. Radhakrishnan

Why did you join the DMK?

I entered politics at the age of 23. I was inspired by the work of DMK leader N. Periyasamy in Thoothukudi.

What do you think about DMK chief M.K. Stalin's 100 days' promise (of solving people's grievances in the first 100 days of coming to power)?

I believe that his promises are genuine. He has seen politics from his childhood and was an active participant when his father [M. Karunanidhi] was Chief Minister and DMK party chief. He is serious and has done a good job of pointing out the AIADMK government's shortcomings. He has not made any promise that is impossible to fulfil.

Your views on the ruling AIADMK's prospects?

The party was serious about people's welfare when Chief Minister Jayalalithaa was alive. She was an efficient leader. But those who are leading the party today are not serious about governance. Unlike Jayalalithaa and MGR, Chief Minister Palaniswami has not been able to take independent decisions.

Do you think the government has handled the pandemic well?

The pandemic could have been handled much better. Education has suffered the most. The government should have reopened the schools at least for the secondary school students and ensured that the social distancing norms were followed.

This is the DMK's first Assembly election after Karunanidhi's

death. Do you think his absence will affect your performance?

His death is definitely a big factor. But we are confident of winning. Many people have lost faith in the AIADMK.

Is your fight only with the AIADMK?

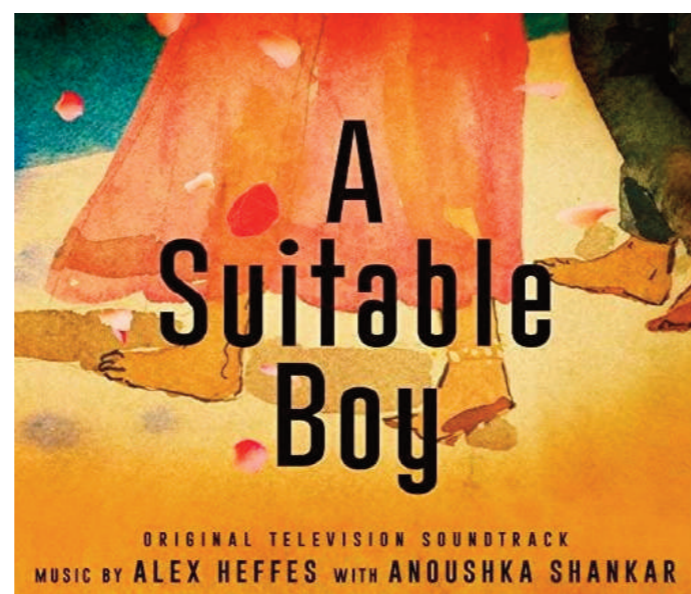
Yes. The only reason the BJP and the AIADMK joined hands for the 2019 Lok Sabha election was to just bring the DMK down. But the strategy did not work. The lone MP seat that the alliance won was that of the AIADMK, not the BJP.

What do you think of [M.K. Stalin's son] Udhayanidhi Stalin's role?

I think Udhayanidhi could have come into politics after some years. I feel he doesn't have the attitude and experience required of a leader.

Should actors join politics?

MGR and Jayalalithaa were also actors. But when they entered politics, they understood the people's pulse and gave good governance. Actors Sarath Kumar and Vijayakanth, on the other hand, did not get popular support and could not make a big impact. There is nothing wrong in actors entering politics but they should understand politics and people.



An interesting series

BHARAT SHARMA

Over The Top (OTT) platforms offer a range of opportunities to artists to showcase their talent. But, of late, such platforms have faced the wrath of some group or the other. With demands for regulating content on OTT platforms growing louder, the Modi government recently brought in a new set of rules under which they need to exercise "due caution" when airing content on beliefs, practices and views of racial and religious groups.

The BBC's adaptation of Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy* into a web series is the latest in the list of works that allegedly hurt the religious sentiments of Hindus. The objection was to a kissing scene of Lata (Hindu woman) and her lover Kabir Durrani (Muslim) on the premises of a temple. Ali Abbas Zafar's *Tandav* courted controversy for allegedly portraying Hindu gods in a bad light. The Allahabad High Court, in fact, had to stay the arrest of Amazon Prime video's chief in the case. Web series *Pataal Lok* produced by actor Anushka Sharma found itself in trouble when it was accused of hurting Sikh sentiments. "Shame on @AnushkaSharma @AmazonPrime for showing Sikhs as Rapists I request @PrakashJavdekar Ji to take strong action against #patalok,

tweeted Manjinder Singh Sirsa, president of the Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee.

A Suitable Boy portrays how an Indian mother is bent on getting her daughter married to a man of her choice. The story is set in a fictional town called Bhrampur, North India, soon after Independence. Newcomer Tanya Maniktala plays the role of Lata who has men lining up to marry her. Her hunt for a suitable boy revolves around three men - colleague Kabir Durrani (Danesh Razvi), writer Haresh Khanna (Nimit Das) and Amit Chatterji (Mikhail Sen). Lata's mother is inclined towards Chatterji as he is a self-made man working in a shoe company. Tabu magnificently plays the seductive courtesan, Saeedha Bai. She shares most of her scenes with the much younger Mann Kapoor (Ishan Khattar) who is smitten by her. Some of the big names like Vinay Pathak, Ranvir Shorey, and Vijay Raj make a rare appearance and Randeep Hooda is used to add macho.

The series by Mira Nair addresses the issue of communalism which is relevant in present India. In one scene, for instance, actor Manoj Pahwa, who plays the role of Raja of Marh, builds a Hindu temple right in front of a mosque which leads to communal riots.

A watchable series, notwithstanding the flaws and controversy.

Can Tejashwi Yadav recreate the Lalu magic?

What the future holds for the son of two Bihar Chief Ministers

ARPIT PARASHAR

The 2020 Bihar Assembly election result burst the bubble surrounding Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Tejashwi Yadav. Although the party argued that it lost due to electoral malpractices and by slim margins in many seats, the truth was the election lacked a pro-Tejashwi sentiment even though the Nitish Kumar-led National Democratic Alliance was weak. In simple words, Tejashwi failed to exploit the massive anti-incumbency factor. What does the future hold for the cricketer-turned-politician son of two Bihar Chief Ministers?

Although the ruling NDA secured a majority in the recent election, Nitish Kumar's JD (U) was considerably weakened at 43 seats. The BJP, which won 74 seats, asked Nitish to continue as Chief Minister. He knows it will not be easy for him to win the State again. But for the RJD, it is Tejashwi all the way. His biggest challenge is to come out of his father Lalu Prasad Yadav's shadow. During the last election, even as Tejashwi campaigned for his party, the public chanted Lalu's name. At a rally in the Patna Gandhi Maidan, for instance, a woman said: "hum Lalu ko vote denge (I will vote for Lalu)". Asked how she would do that when Lalu was in jail, she said "jail mein hain to kya; unka beta to hai na (So what? His son is in the fray, no?)" This is the Lalu magic in Bihar.

Strategic move
Lalu and his wife Rabri Devi, who governed Bihar as successive Chief Ministers for 15 years, were missing from the RJD's campaign banner. The rumour was that Tejashwi, chief ministerial face of the RJD-Left mahaghatbandhan, removed his father's photo for strategic reasons. Lalu was a symbol of lower caste empowerment - at the expense of upper castes. But Lalu's charm holds sway even though he has been in jail for three years. He is still seen as the leader by the



Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Tejashwi Yadav (right) needs to become more than just his father Lalu Prasad's son

marginalised sections. Lalu not only freed them from the hegemony of upper castes but politically empowered them to fight oppression. Again, by allotting 70 seats to the Congress - much more than what the RJD gave the party in the previous elections - Tejashwi made his alliance weak. The Congress won only 19 seats. The result created the image of Tejashwi as an inexperienced youth leader who didn't follow in his father's footsteps. The other thing which made Lalu popular was his way of connecting with people. The down to earth leader was easy going and had a good sense of humour. Tejashwi, on the other hand, is a serious leader trying to put down Nitish Kumar, his one-time mentor, all the time.

On the positive side, the Bihar election saw the emergence of a young leader in Tejashwi Yadav. He

proved not only that he could lead the RJD without his father but also that he could shed the baggage of Yadav politics. In his campaigns, Tejashwi had a spontaneous way of interacting with the crowd. He asked: "naukri chahiye? (do you want jobs)" and explained how he would provide 10 lakh government jobs. Even the NDA copied his style by saying it would create 20 lakh jobs.

There is no denying that Tejashwi is a formidable force. But as the former Bihar Congress president, Ram Jatan Sinha, once a Lalu ally, said: "Tejashwi is trying to be the class monitor who wants to do whatever he thinks is right. But in politics, people don't need a class monitor. They need a leader who is fearless and has a stronghold in the party. Tejashwi needs to learn this; otherwise he will be seen as only Lalu's son."

Despite law, scavengers still die Ritchie street...

A law banning manual scavenging has been in force for 28 years

It's nationalism Vs hunger

AISWARYA RAJ

CHENNAI, March 2: The men are thought to have died at some point between 11.15 a.m. and 12.15 p.m. on February 26 in Chennai's Fort St. George area.

The police first information report, or FIR, says Raja and Santhosh, who work for Sristal Systems Pvt. Ltd., the company that had the tender for maintaining the area's sewage system entered the sewage tank to clean it.

Manivannan, a third employee, upon seeing Raja and Santhosh in distress, called the police for help because he couldn't handle the noxious air.

In all, five men who entered the tank were taken first to the military hospital just 200 metres away and then to the Rajiv Gandhi General Hospital. Two of them died. The others are still in hospital.

"Sitting in the army control room, I called the fire brigade after I heard the news of men suffocating inside the septic tank. Initially, they were taken to a military hospital 200 metres away. Later, they were moved to Rajiv Gandhi General Hospital, where two men were declared dead and three with minor injuries," Havildar Sarath Kumar said.

Four days after the death of Santhosh (35) and Raja of Annai Sathya Nagar, Lakshmi recounted her husband's occupation. "It was a dry spell for a long time due to COVID-19 and they were hired by the contractor on a daily wage basis," Lakshmi said. There are at least five people in this colony employed by contractors on daily wages like the deceased Raja and Santhosh.

It wasn't immediately clear how a banned profession came to be practised in a military campus. The

officers did not comment.

"The workers were ready for the job," said another officer at the Control room. Many officers in the military offices and the Public Relations Unit said they were unaware of the incident.

However, according to the FIR, Manivannan said they asked for protective suits and safety equipment, which the Project Manager and the Supervisor of Sristal Systems Pvt Ltd., denied. Company officials were arrested on the charges under Section 9 of Prohibition of employment as manual scavengers and their rehabilitation 2013 Act, The Schedule caste and the Sche-

dule Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities Act 2015) and Culpable homicide not amounting to murder, the First Information Report said.

Insanitary latrines which require manual cleaning is touted to be why manual scavenging happens, according to a Lok Sabha Question & Answer forum. It also said that under the Swachh Bharat Mission done by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs and the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation, "the insanitary latrines have been identified and converted into sanitary napkins to eliminate the need for manual cleaning of toilets".

This incident comes after the death of a manual scavenger in Chennai on February 17 and that of three people at a single site in Thanjavur on February 14.

The Manual Scavenging Act 2013 prohibits the practice and the employment of such workers in all the States and Union Territories and if found to be done by any person/agency who is involved in it, they will face an imprisonment of 2 years or fine upto Rs. 1 lakh, sometimes both.

Despite the enactment of various legislation in 1993, 2013 and 2019 to ban, provide rehabilitation and compensation for those in the pro-

fection, the number of deaths of workers engaged in cleaning sewers in Tamil Nadu foregrounds the loopholes in the legal system and the persisting rigid caste-based hierarchies.

Even though the government only recognises latrine cleaners, railway cleaners, sewer cleaners and faecal sludge handlers as manual scavengers, there is a huge underrepresentation in the data as many people are in unsafe sanitation work.

Calling it a form of slavery, Krishna Veni, a member of Tamil Nadu Untouchability

Eradication Front said how apathetic the system was towards sanitation workers. "You cannot call this practice a profession. It is a casteist and inhuman practice. Even the Southern

Railways engages Dalit woman in this," she said about the direct involvement of the apparatus of the state.

Veni was sceptical of the way the media reported the incident. "The media reported that the deaths happened due to asphyxiation and consumption of toxic fumes.

Why do they not talk about the physical and mental conditions of people entering a septic tank?" she said. "In urban areas, people entering sewage and septic tanks are not considered as manual scavengers. These practices are as heinous as any," Veni added.

Satyendra Kumar, a Dalit activist based in Delhi said how the practice of manual scavenging exists primarily because the society is based on caste.

Kumar said that the system forced Dalits into the profession, irrespective of their level of education. "It is nonsensical to claim that people do it on their own volition," he said.

CHENNAI, March 3: For the street vendors of Ritchie Street, any argument on boycotting Chinese products always stops at the same choices: nationalism or hunger.

In June last year, India and China were involved in a violent border clash. As a result, the Indian government banned 59 Chinese apps. The Ritchie street market Chennai's source of cheap,



Shanthi sitting in her corner on wallace street

electronic goods, many of them made in China faced a scare.

Shanthi, 59, sits on the pavement in a corner of the narrow Wallace street every day. She sells cheap earphones, TV remotes and phone chargers that she buys from a wholesaler nearby and on-sells on the street.

Shanthi's house is just 400m away from her corner. It is a small makeshift affair with a roof made of aluminium. Old cardboard lines the outer wall while plastic buckets and containers are kept outside for a lack of space inside the house. Her husband, a daughter and two grandnieces live in the house with her, the roof of which is so low that even people of average height have to stoop once inside.

Shanthi's younger son has an outfit much like his mothers. Her eldest son works as a daily wage labourer in the market like his father Nagaraj, 67. The entire family depends on Ritchie street to survive.

Ritchie street, known as the second biggest unorganized electronic parts market in India after Nehru place in Delhi, has over 2000 shops employing around 8000

people. A wide array of computer, television, laptops are available here. The market started blooming in 1970, when the first electronic stores opened.

Last year was grim for the small sellers in the market. The lockdown forced

the market to be closed and Shanthi's family was left struggling to survive. "We didn't get anything from the government because we don't have ration cards. One of my employer supported us throughout the lockdown," Nagaraj said.

He has been working for 35 years as a daily wage worker in the area. But the nature of his work is uncertain. "There is work on some days, other days there aren't any," he said.

A report from Business Standard suggested that the total trade between India and China in 2020 declined from \$85.5 billion of the previous year to \$77.7 billion. But the decline was marginal and the exports from India to China grew in the same period.

However, Shanthi remains oblivious to all this. "I don't know anything about the fight with China. My business was more affected because of the lockdown," she said.

Sample Survey states there are 62,904 manual scavengers

ABIRAMI RAMESH

CHENNAI, March 03: A Lok Sabha 2018 report on manual scavenging reported a total of 48,251 cases with Uttar Pradesh (23,070) and Maharashtra (7,378) ranking the highest and the current update on its website is that no cases were found in all the Union Territories except Delhi and Daman & Diu.

It also mentioned (in the decreasing order) that Uttarakhand has 6033 cases, Assam (2988), Rajasthan (2534), Andhra Pradesh (1982), Karnataka (1912), West Bengal (637), Kerala (600), Madhya Pradesh (524), Jharkhand (281), Punjab (142), Gujarat (108) and Tamil Nadu (62) as of 2018.

Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jammu and Kashmir and Odisha had nil cases in the same report but the website no longer has these three names in its current list except Odisha which has its status intact.

The revised update has 0 cases in the northeastern states and Jharkhand.

But the National Crimes Records Bureau (NCRB) contradicts this data as its official said that from 2017-2021, there has been no mention of any manual scavenging cases since manual scavenging cases have started getting collected since 2014 till 2016 under the Manual Scavenging Act. In 2014, there were 0 cases reported. In 2015 and 2016, two were reported each year from Karnataka and Tamil Nadu respectively.

The NCRB report on its website does not mention asphyxiation deaths due to manual scavenging. But statistics on accidental suffocation may be a good proxy.

The NCRB recorded 31467 deaths in the ten years between 2008 and 2018. In 2019, the latest year for which the data is out, has 1584 cases.

The National Survey conducted between 2013 and 2020 under the Manual Scavenging Act 2013, has identified 62,904 manual scavengers. The National Safai Karmachari Corporation (NSFC) stated that there have been reports of manual scavengers found dead while cleaning the sewers and septic tanks even though the national survey denies any such deaths reported so far.

Christopher, a Thuvakkam member which is an environmental based NGO said, "There are no proper equipment and it is not available too since the Government doesn't pay for it. No procedure or structure is followed properly. Government should invest in the scavenging/ waste sector and the private sector has to enter this sector at a nominal rate".

Franklin Prince, an environmentalist said, "We need proper machines, infrastructure and humanity".

Turtles caught between fishermen and state

India's south-eastern coast is a major area for the Olive Ridley turtles

ADARSH B. PRADEEP AND AMRIN NAAZ

Chennai, March 3: The fishermen, for their part, say there is no ban on trawling during the nesting period of the Olive Ridley turtles. They also say that there are no checks to see if the Turtle Excluder Device (TED), is fitted. The so-called TED is fitted to the end of a trawling net allowing turtles to escape.

The government says that it has mandated the TEDs and put limits on trawling in nesting season. Yet, dead turtles continue to wash up in Odisha and Tamil Nadu and the reason may be the TED device.

Categorised as 'Vulnerable' in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), these turtles have significant nesting sites on the coasts of Odisha and Tamil Nadu.

With the growing number of trawlers and increased deaths of the Olive Ridley's, the Madras High Court in 2015 had filed a lawsuit to protect the turtles. Following this, the Tamil Nadu fisheries depart-

ment had amended the Marine Fishing Regulation Rules, 1983 and made it mandatory to include a TED to every trawl net.

Julius Edward, Deputy Director of Fisheries at the Department of Fisheries, Tamil Nadu, explained why the TEDs were unsuccessful with the fishermen in Indian coasts. He was of the opinion that TEDs are effective mostly in temperate countries that practice targeted fishing whereas, in tropical countries like India where multi-species fishing is practiced, commercially important big fishes would escape along with the turtles.

In a TED experimental workshop conducted in Odisha in 2002, it was shown that more than 20% of fish catch losses could be unviable for the Indian fishermen who do fishing for livelihood as opposed to the commercial fishing practised in the west.

Mr. Edward said, "Using TED is not practically feasible. It is not welcomed by fishermen as it ends up spoiling their livelihood."

He further said that the fisheries have a good rapport with the large-scale fishermen at Kasimedu and



Trawler docked at Kasimedu harbour in Chennai

that they conduct regular awareness

Small fishermen Vs trawlers

Vimal Nathan, a fisherman who had just returned from deep-sea trawling said, "There is no such thing as a trawling ban or TEDs for Olive Ridley's. And no government official ever comes to check on us."

However, at the Forest Range Office in Velachery, A. Clement Edison, the Forest Range Officer said that they ban trawling beyond five nautical miles of the coast during January to May, which is nes-

ting season for the turtles.

Several studies have highlighted that the major causes for turtle deaths are strangling in fishermen nets, boat propeller strikes, usage of ray finnetts that chop off the heads and flippers of the turtles and lastly, plastic ingestion.

S. Palayam, a small scale fisherman at Urur Kupppam at Besant Nagar in Chennai, explained the ritual they associate with turtles. "We consider the turtle as our god - Kuttu Amma. Whenever we trap a turtle by mistake, we cut our nets

and return home and perform a puja before we venture out into the sea the next day."

The small-scale fishermen also say their nets are too small to harm the turtles and it is the trawlers that do. Saravanan Kasi, a river fisherman said "the trawl nets are made of a tougher material that kills the turtles."

However, the large-scale fishermen at Kasimedu harbour who employ trawling vessels reject this. "The turtles never die in our nets. We just release them back to the sea. We do not consume its meat and there is no commercial value for the turtle," said S. Vighnesh, cleaning the trawler deck of fish remains.

At the harbour, trawlers, tied to poles, are docked so close they almost meld into each other. Some 996 trawlers are registered in Kasimedu harbour.

"Whatever the government records suggest, the number is its exact double," said Ravi Das, another trawler boat owner at Kasimedu harbour. "Half are registered and the other half are unregistered," he added. However, at Kasimedu har-

bour, the fishermen are a confused lot when it comes to what needs to be done if an accidental death of the turtle occurs. K. Balakrishnan, a trawler boat owner, climbing onto the dock from the deck of his green and white trawling vessel, said that they just discard the carcass back to the ocean whereas Vimal says that he would try contacting the police.

Speaking about the number of trawlers at the Kasimedu harbour, Mr. Edison of the Forest Office said, "The Fisheries department should try to reduce the number of trawlers which are way beyond the capacity of the Kasimedu coast."

In this game of passing the buck, till March 1 this year, 53 turtle deaths have been recorded by the Forest Office. Last year the total number of deaths was around 80 to 90 and in 2018, 110 deaths took place. However, many media reports suggest that even these numbers are underestimated.

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What Mumbai's Vada Pav says about India

How did Mumbai's Vada Pav become so many other things to so many other people so far away from its roots?

ANUSHKA JAIN

New Delhi, March 4: In August 2020, the Chennai's Park Hyatt introduced a food it called the Croissant Vada. It was the umpteenth version of Mumbai's famous Vada Pav, the ultimate common man's food in India's biggest city.

So how did the humble vada pav --essentially a batter fried potato-chickpea ball placed in a bun--make its way so far down south, and how did it escape the Pav and be instead placed inside french bread?

And with the food making its way into the homes--and the stomachs--of people far away from Mumbai, what does this say about

India.

In the 50 years since the Vada Pav was first made by a snack vendor or refugee, depending on who you ask, it has gone through a plethora of changes.

It was first popularised by the Shiv Sena, the back to the roots Maharashtra political party that is still a formidable political power and rules Maharashtra today, writes cultural anthropologist Harris Solomon's paper "The Taste No Chef Can Give".

The ingredients it--such as garlic and onion were essential to Maharashtra cooking and commonly used.

"Garlic, onion and salt were always popular among the common

people of Maharashtra. (The vada pav) was cheap, sustainable and tasty," says anthropologist and food historian Dr Kurush Dalal.

Over the years, what was essentially a quick and cheap eat for those who didn't have the luxury of time or money, evolved.

It was minimalized, like by the Irani chain of cafes who removed its Pav bun altogether. It was fused with cottage cheese or Paneer, the popular Indian noodles 'Maggi', schezwan sauce and even Manchurian.

Chef and food and beverages consultant Amit Puri says the fine dining dishes were experiments. "Chefs have started trusting in presenting nostalgia in a completely



different way by inducing surprise through an element familiar or a previously tried food," he says.

Originally started for the mill workers of Mumbai, the Vada Pav has now gotten corporatized. Far

from its home in Maharashtra, it is popular in far flung parts of the country. With nearly 500 hundred outlets between them, franchise chains like Goli Vada Pao, Jumboking, and Wow Vada Pao have taken the dish to cities like Surat, Bangalore and Delhi.

Neither company responded to requests for comment.

Harris Solomon, an Associate Professor at the US' Duke University said the fortunes of the Vada Pav is tied to that of the labourers it was first made for. "Certainly, a change could signal something transforming among vendors, in terms of social class," he said.

According to Solomon, the Vada

Pav was long a family business, which has increasingly been corporatized like many other forms of street food, around the world.

"The Vada Pav is associated Mumbai, you see it in movies, you talk about it- have the Vada Pav when you visit Mumbai, people travel and that is how food travels," he says. "However you can't pinpoint to why exactly it spread, it happens without a reason. Sure, it is also convenience food and life everywhere has gotten busy," he adds.

The original, no-frills Vada Pav is still sold, opposite Dadar station platform no. 1 where vendor Ashok Vaidya is credited with making the first Vada Pav. But since then, it has since migrated to cafes in New

York, Sydney and London where Mumbai's Vada Pav is sold as the Bombay Burger or sandwich, according to food writer Dipanjan Sinha.

However Solomon says perhaps a return to the original Pav could be in the works. "I've been fascinated to see the growth of 'traditional'-style mithai shops across India, made popular on Instagram and other forms of social media, and drawing younger audiences into generations-old craft practices of sweet-making. So while we do see things like Westernization, and the importation of foreign components like the croissant, we could certainly see an embrace of originality too," he says.

BEYOND BTS: The Sheer Joy of K-Entertainment

The Korean entertainment revolution has taken over the world, and India is not far behind

MEDHA NIDHI S

I spent all day last weekend curled in my blanket watching a Korean drama about a high-school girl who got bullied for being "ugly" and started wearing make-up to school. Needless to say, my favourite thing about this drama are the two insanely beautiful male leads, both of whom fall in love with the female protagonist. While this sounds like every other cliched story that has been told, nothing special, I still spent more than 12 hours watching it - every second full of pure joy. I am not the only one.

The "Hallyu" or Korean Culture wave took over the world with the South Korean band BTS, which debuted in 2013. However, K-pop has existed ever since the 1990s.

The entry of K-pop into India happened first in the North East, specifically Manipur, where Hindi films were banned for a while, says Dr Rathi Jafer, Director of the InKo Centre, an Indo-Korean culture centre in Chennai. "There was a dearth of Hindi entertainment, and at that time, Arirang TV was a channel where Korean content was streamed regularly," she adds. Now, however, K-pop has exploded into other parts of the country as well.

Nina Karun, a former RJ at Radio Indigo in Bangalore, has been engaging with Korean art - K-pop, K-dramas, and Korean cinema - for more than 12 years. "I got into it when I was ten years old," says Karun, adding that she enjoyed Korean culture even though it was so different from her own. The thing that makes K-pop so interesting, Karun says, is the work that goes into every aspect of it. "K-pop is not just a genre. It's a phenomenon. It's not just music. K-pop isn't complete without all of these other

things." The music video, the choreography, the set, the costumes, the make-up, the albums - all of these follow distinct concepts that come together to form a package.

A k-pop package

As a thirteen-year-old, I saved up all my money to buy a One Direction album consisting of a CD and a poster - enough to light-up my teenage heart for the next seven years. K-pop fans, however, get much more. I remember unpacking an EXO (a popular K-pop boy group, slightly older than BTS) album along with my friend and feeling like I had unearthed treasure. The album had a unique comic strip featuring the band members and several cards with descriptions of each member and the character they were playing. There were also exclusive surprise selfies of two members. The music CD itself was the least important element. K-pop albums are often released as "repackages," giving fans access to different versions of the same album, with various goodies in each version. While not all K-pop stans buy the album, most of them watch their idols on variety shows, lives and vlogs or follow them on Instagram. The K-pop fan has constant access to the idols in these intimate places, like their rooms or their studios. I have spent many hours watching my favourites play games, cook food, make music in their studios and even get ready for bed. In one of my favourite lives, Chanyeol (a member of boy group EXO) recorded a lullaby for his fans and p u t t h e m t o sleep.

In a New Yorker video interview about the explosion of K-pop in America, Stephanie Choi, an expert in Ethnomusicology, talks about the intimacy created between fans and idols through these vlog shows. She called it "fan service," which refers to the idols doing things to make their fans happy.

The idea of beauty

Liana Gomes is one recent fan who got into K-pop in December 2020 through their shows. "I fell in love with the boys even before I fell in love with the music," s h e s a y s , r e f e r r i n g t o

BTS. "I would sit and just watch their videos on Youtube and Instagram and lose hours of my day." Gomes says that she enjoyed watching the idols' real personalities come through in their live shows when they interacted with each other and responded to fan comments. Eventually, Gomes found herself exploring other K-pop groups and branching out into

different facets of Korean culture - K-dramas, K-beauty and even Korean food.

Asna KM is a K-pop stan and independent researcher interested in fan studies. She got into K-pop a few years ago after she saw Jimin from BTS in a music video. "The main thing about K-pop that sells is beauty. They're very beautiful people," she says.

The South Korean beauty in-

dustry or K-beauty has become popular too, with E-commerce sites like Maccaron, Korikart and Beauty Barn giving Indians more access to Korean products. The 10 step Korean skincare routine was all the rage a few years ago. This idea of beauty trickles into every aspect of Korean entertainment, including the way K-dramas are shot or edited, and needless to say, the way the actors look. Even the quality of Korean made games and webcomics are better than that of Chinese made games, says Raina Varghese, a 23-year old student who has been playing Korean mobile games since 2016.

Getting into Korean entertainment

Varghese says that she stumbled upon K-pop (though she did not know that word) in 2010 when she watched a K-pop concert on the TV channel Animax. Many older fans say they got into K-pop through cable channels like KBS and Animax, which would air K-pop concerts and variety shows.

The advent of the internet and online streaming platforms like Netflix have made K-dramas much more accessible. Nina Karun believes that it has become much easier to get into Korean entertainment in recent times than when she got into it. "It was much trickier six or seven years ago when Korean entertainment wasn't really 'out' there." Back then, she could only access Korean dramas or K-pop shows by downloading them illegally or using websites like Drama Nice or Kiss Asian. Not anymore, though. K-pop today is a global phenomenon.

One of the reasons K-pop has gotten so big

around the world, according to independent researcher Asna, is the advent of social media and the popularity of K-pop in America. "Western fans got into K-pop at a huge level, and that trickled to India too. Also, the recognition that groups like BTS and BLACKPINK have received at international awards like the American Music Awards and the Billboard Awards has helped make Korean entertainment much more popular," she says. InKo Centre's Dr. Rathi Jafer says that more and more people are signing up to learn Korean now. "Earlier, people wanted to learn Korean for job opportunities. Now they do it because of an interest in K-pop or K-dramas. They want to know what their idols are saying," she says.

"They make me happy"
"I'm in it for the romance," says graphic designer and illustrator Adhyata Bhat, who loves watching K-ramas. For Liana Gomes, too, who loves cheesy rom-coms, the storytelling is a big draw. So is the food. "Everything is centred around food. They're always eating and drinking, which feels very relatable, and I love the way they eat," says Gomes. More importantly, K-dramas make her happy. "Everyone has a happy ending, and we move on to the next story," says Gomes.

As a K-pop stan and K-drama watcher myself, I can relate. Everything about Korean entertainment is designed to make you happy. I love watching K-pop idols dance and sing to entertain me. There is very little that compares to the sheer joy of watching two beautiful characters fall in love while a third character pines in vain. The painfully long wait as the first kiss scene is dragged on for the duration of two background scores is totally worth it, because it makes me happy.



A still from 'Blooming Day' by K-pop subgroup EXO-CBX

PHOTO CREDITS: SM ENTERTAINMENT

The Shadows of Survival

MANEESH T

When the frenzied beats emanating from the Chenda and Ezhupara (percussion instruments) merges with the verses from 'Kamba Ramayana', it is time for the shadow characters to appear on the Koothumadam. They steadily emerge on a white screen in the theatre, the aura of 21 lamps lit in oiled coconut-halves behind them. Shadows of leather puppets representing Rama, Ravana and Sita, among others, fall on this screen. The puppeteers manipulate the puppets across while Tamil verses linger in the background. They introduce the characters in the story. However, no one seems to be listening to them. In front of the stage, there is an absolute emptiness—not a spectator in the vicinity.

This is a usual sight in 'Tholpavakoothu'—Kerala's temple art of shadow puppetry, a continuing tradition in the Bhadrakali temples (mother goddess as the deity) of Palakkad, Thrissur and Malappuram districts.

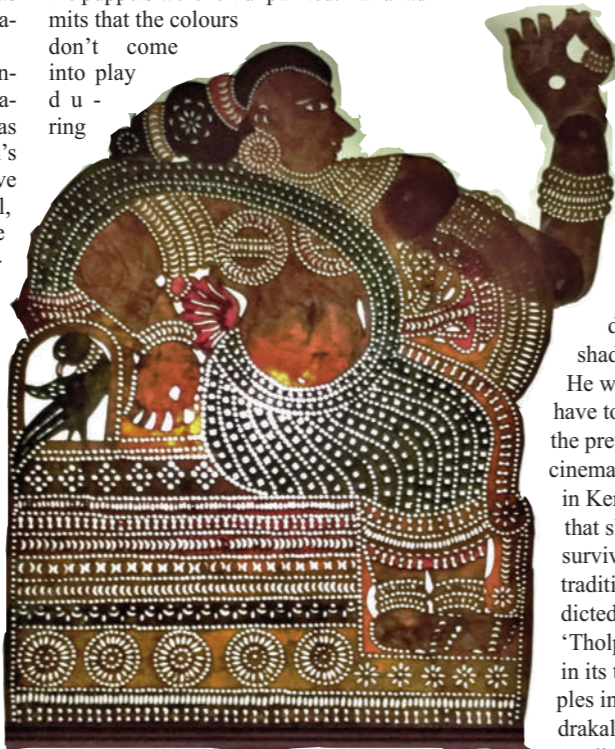
Recently, the art garnered a lot of attention due to one of its proponents, Ramachandra Pulavar (60), a pioneer of it, was bestowed with Padma Shri, the nation's fourth-highest civilian honour, to revive the art from its status as a mere ritual, sans spectators. While popularising the art outside its confines of a Koothumadam in temples and above its only purpose as a religious custom, Ramachandra Pulavar believed in a particular dictum: "The dharm of art is to communicate. Artists communicate with their audiences through their performances. Apart from that, it is also in the dharm of an artist to introduce art to the people." These are the words from his book 'Tholpavakoothu', which looks at the history and aesthetics of the art. Ramachandra, along with his father, late Krishnan Kutty Pulavar, tried out different things to make the art much popular. One of the first things they did was to give the art a contemporary relevance by telling stories from outside the 'Kamba Ramayana'. From narrating the life of Mahatma Gandhi through the puppets, as what they called the "Gandhikoothu", to using the art for HIV and Covid awareness campaigns and election campaigns, Ramachandra has taken the thought forward from where his father left.

A connection of souls

After his father's death in 2000, Ramachandra turned the puppet centre at his house into a centre for puppetry studies. Here, anyone is welcome to learn

everything that goes behind the art.

"We teach people storytelling, puppet making and its manipulation," says Rahul Pulavar, the younger son of Ramachandra and 13th in the generation of puppeteers in the family. Rajeev Pulavar, the eldest son, adds that the teaching of storytelling comes first, followed by technique lessons and, finally, puppet making. This ensures that the puppet and the artist have a connection of their souls when he finally makes it. The puppets, which were made of deerskin (thol means skin) originally, and now of bull or goatskin, are also sold at the Kalakendram. The skin, which is bought from the market, is dried under the sun for four days, after which the hair is removed. The puppets are then designed on them using age-old chisels. Then comes the painting part, where they use natural colours of green, yellow, red, white and black. Traditionally, however, the puppets were left unpainted. Rahul admits that the colours don't come into play d u - r i n g



the shadow performances but says that this transition has happened for a reason. "This way, the puppets have got an individuality. It helps in their sales too."

A Revolutionary art

When asked about how 'Tholpavakoothu' was different from Kerala's popular arts like Kathakali, Ramachandra says: "This is a revolutionary art and not a hegemonical one." Even as a temple art, being performed outside the temple premises makes it accessible to people

across religions, he adds. For instance, he has come up with a Bible-based play called 'Yesukoothu' that tells the story of Jesus Christ. During an Israel tour, Ramachandra came up with the idea of the play—he wanted to transcend religious barriers. The immensely popular play has been presented in over 200 stages, says Rahul, adding, "Many churches here invite us to perform it." One of the other beauties of this artform is that even the name 'Pulavar'—the title a puppeteer holds—is not associated with any particular caste. However, in an interview with Sahapedia, Ramachandra points out that his family of Pulavars once used to hire people from lower castes like 'Karuvan' and 'Aasari' to make the puppets; they would not touch the animal skin. This tradition was later discontinued, he adds.

"Pulavar means scholar. Anyone can become a Pulavar if they learn the whole of puppetry," says Rahul.

"Give us stages"
In 1986, Friedrich Seltmann, a German researcher, in his book 'Schattenspiel in Kerala' had noted the widespread decline of shadow puppetry in India. He wrote that the art might have to make concessions to the prevailing influence of the cinema. However, he added that in Kerala, there was a chance that shadow puppetry might survive in something like its traditional form. What he predicted has partly come true. 'Tholpavakoothu' has survived in its traditional form in temples in Kerala. About 80 Bhadrakali temples in the three districts still invite the Pula-

vars during the January-May season to perform at their permanent theatres—the Koothumadam. However, the question here is whether the art would have really survived in people's minds with such spectator-less performances if not for Pulavars like Ramachandra taking it to the outside? The answer is clear when Ramachandra says: "The only thing that I ask anyone who comes here to learn the art is to give us stages. Give us stages wherever you are."

Gopinath's memoirs out soon

V Ramnarayan, a well-known cricket writer, is writing the biography of the only living member of India's first-ever Test victory

NIHIT SACHDEVA

As Vinoo Mankad's slow left-arm spin deceived the last English batsman, Malcolm Hilton, in the air and wicket-keeper Prabin Sen duly whipped the bats off on the sunny afternoon of February 10, 1952, here at the Chepauk Stadium, Vijay Hazare's men became heroes. India's first-ever test victory was sealed after 20 years of becoming a test nation and that playing eleven etched its name in Indian cricket's history in golden letters.

Sixty-nine years later, Coimbatara-Doraikannu Gopinath, aged 91 years, is the only surviving member of that famous side. Local star Gopinath's contribution in the match, which India won by an innings and eight eightruns against their colonial masters, was a quickfire 35 runs batting at number eight and taking two catches. But not many know much about his life and why he played only eight tests for the country despite the talent and ability.

Well, till now.

V Ramnarayan, 73, an ace cricket writer, is penning down Gopinath's memoirs which might be released in May this year. "He [Gopinath] should have been a fixture in the Indian team [as] he was such a good player," says Ramnarayan at his home in central Chennai.

Ramnarayan is a former cricketer himself, who bowled off-spin for the Hyderabad Ranji side of the 1970s and came very close to being included in the national squad for the 1977-78 tour of Australia.

At that time, he got to see Gopinath as he was Chairman of the national selection committee but he also knew him in many other ways.

"His father was my father's boss in the Indian Overseas Bank," says Ramnarayan. Kamini Sundaram, Gopinath's daughter, had started Abacus Montessori School, a now well-known school

here, in 1987 with a handful of students and Ramnarayan's son was one of her first students. Ramnarayan had also played cricket with Arvind Gopinath, Kamini's brother.

But after all these years, how did Ramnarayan get the opportunity to be the writer of Gopinath's biography? "The chance to write this book happened by the rarest of rare coincidences," he says, trying to remember the entire incident.

One day, Ramnarayan got a phone call from Col Shankar, one of his friends, who had asked about Gopinath's Chennai address. However, he had lost contact with the Gopinaths but his sister-in-law was a friend of Kamini's daughter, who was running the school. From there, Ramnarayan reconnected with the Gopinath family. At that time, Gopinath was in town to stay with Kamini. Two days later, the family called Ramnarayan and informed him that they had liked an article written by him in *Madras Musings* for Gopinath's 90th birthday and wanted him to write his memoirs.

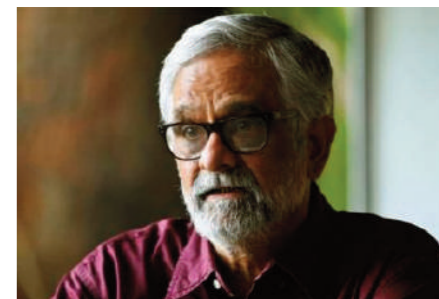
"I went and met them and really got to know him," says Ramnarayan when asked about his experience of interacting with the legend. He tells how Gopinath's father, a bank officer, used to take young Gopinath with him while going out on inspections. Those car rides made Gopinath a nature lover. They also went to the jungle a lot, and Gopinath also took an interest in hunting.

Ramnarayan narrates how once Gopinath, captaining the South Zone team against the touring New Zealand side, took three or four Kiwi players out for hunting to some nearby forest after the end of day's play in Bengaluru and got

in trouble. "They waste their time in the forest and find nothing to shoot. [While] Coming back, the car breaks down, and they don't know how to get back," he says. Thankfully, Gopinath's brother-in-law, who was with them, somehow found a mechanic, and they dropped the Kiwis back at four or five in the morning. Gopinath, who was batting overnight, reached the ground at nine-thirty in the morning and scored 175*. "He said I don't know what came over me [as] I did everything right," says Ramnarayan while mentioning there are many such lovely stories in the book.

Gopinath's entry into cricket happened by chance.

While at Madras Christian College, he used to play multiple sports, but his friend, captain of the college's cricket team, insisted that he came for some trials. Gopinath went and was made the wicket-keeper since the team had none. They also made him the opening batsman. "He was a natural. Nobody in the family had played cricket. His square-cut was his favourite shot," says Ramnarayan, who has authored two cricket books - *Mosquitos* and *Other Jolly Crickets: The Story of Tamil Nadu Cricketers(2002)* and his autobiography, *'Third Man: Recollections From A Life In Cricket'* (2015).



V Ramnarayan

Ramnarayan's last meeting with the Gopinaths was a very emotional affair. Now, just imagine a 73-year-old touching a 91-year-old's feet. This is exactly what happened. "I touched their feet. I have never done that to any cricketer in my life. Somehow it came from my heart. We became so attached. I had tears in my eyes, and they had tears in their eyes," he says.

Robot-duo band ends with a bang...literally



Top: A still from Daft Punk's Get Lucky. Bottom: A still from the eight minute long retirement video, Epilogue. (Source: YouTube)

MEENATCHI PRABHU

On February 22, the Parisian band Daft Punk released a video titled *Epilogue* on their Facebook page. In the clip, the band's musicians, Thomas Bangalter and Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo are walking in a desert, wearing their iconic robot helmets. It ends with one of the two pushing the other's self-destruct button and then walking away while the first blows up.

In a perhaps befitting way, the video, titled *Epilogue*, was their way of saying their 28-year musical journey had come to an end. Berty Ashley, a molecular geneticist, thought the video was a teaser to a new album. Given that the duo's previous album, *Random Access Memories*, was released more than eight years ago, he was excited for what his favourite band had in store next. However, as he watched the video further, he was moved to tears.

Millions of fans like Ashley all over the world share the same emotion. "After a week, my followers are still in the depression stage of mourning," says Luke Perez, who goes by the name 'The Daft Punk

Historian.' Luke runs a Twitter page, Daft Punk Fandom.

Social media was flooded with posts and comments mourning the band's retirement. Even a French government organisation tweeted, "Thank you for being such amazing ambassadors for France! #Daft-PunkForever."

The band's longtime publicist Kathryn Frazier calls them "creators, thinkers and feelers of the highest order" and that "there is and will never be a group like Daft Punk."

But, what made "the most influential pop musicians of the 21st century" so influential? Why did their music matter so much to so many across the world?

Daft Punk first started getting attention for their 1997 album, *Homework*. Their album, *Random Access Memories*, won the album of the year award in the 2014 Grammys—the first time that an electronic band was winning the title.

In 1997, the duo, along with a friend, released their music under the name *Darlin'* but after a review called their songs "Daft Punk Trash," they were amused and made that their identity, says Razzaq Saheel, a filmmaker/screenwriter in

the Tamil film industry.

Talk about a cool origin story.

The duo, more than anything, wanted their work to be all about the music.

In stark contrast to say Miley Cyrus' *Wrecking Ball* or Robin Thicke's *Blurred Lines*, the two mostly occupied the back of the stage, away from the limelight. Be it nodding their heads in the background with Pharrell Williams and a disco ball taking the spotlight in *Get Lucky* or walking around the streets of a city at night dressed in a dog costume in their first song, *Da Funk*, or their helmet-clad white costumes at the Grammys, they tried hard to hide their identities behind their music.

When the millennium set in, they had switched from masks to metallic helmets, signalling the dawn of the digital era, redefining and hiding their identity, says Anurag Tagat, a music journalist who writes for *Rolling Stones India*.

Daft Punk's anti-celebrity stand paradoxically made them more famous. But, they got their point across. "I think it's fantastic that they don't seek to be celebrities because often-times... Everyone who talks about meeting Daft Punk always says that they are just normal guys, and you'd never even know that they were two of the most influential artists in the world," says Luke Perez. Their obscurity and enigmatic nature were deliberate.

Their honesty and "certain aesthetic" made them even more popular among fans who perhaps saw something genuine—a rarity in an industry flooded with publicity stunts, glam and fame.

"Their mysterious persona was not really mysterious because music is such a thing; it speaks out your mind and soul. I liked that I knew

their mind, but not their faces," says Nithya Chidam, a working professional in the construction industry.

Though classified as EDM (Electronic Dance Music), Daft Punk was making songs way before EDM even existed as a movement, says Anurag. The early '90s saw the birth of French electronic music, 'French Touch.' Like David Guetta, M83, Justice and Air and before them Jean-Michel Jarre, Daft Punk jumped on the electronic music bandwagon.

From being the front runners of this movement, they would go on to "set a cultural milestone," with music that, unlike other EDM artists, had a "sense of romance and human warmth."

They reinvented electronic music, bringing funk music into it, says Anurag. The cohesive way in which they combined the two made them ever-relevant all the time.

"Their songs create this sense of a retro sci-fi future in my head, and I am a huge fan of that kind of vibe. It feels like you're in this open-air discotheque floating in interstellar space. They convey a sense of past and future at the same time," says Razzaq.

Luke describes their favourite song, *Touch*, as "some mysterious experience or knowledge that is just out of reach and cannot be obtained or known. It almost gives you a child-like wonder about the world. *Touch* is the sort of song that cannot be placed in a box. It's futuristic and old-school at the same time. I cry every time I listen to it."

The band puts a lot of thought, effort, and money into making their songs sound the way they do. "They used a lot of their own money to source obscure synthesizers and instruments to compose *Random Access Memories* which turned out to be a very expensive production, but then the sounds they achieved were unforgettable," says Razzaq.

And true to Razzaq's words, fans of the band, though depressed, hold on to the unforgettable music they found solace in.

"They're immortal. It does not matter that they're not together," says Nithya, as she nostalgically sings the lyrics to one of their songs, *Something Between Us*.

"Maybe they said all that they wanted to say, and that's why they're not going to make any more music," says Anurag.

Perhaps the video *Epilogue* is a symbolic way to say that one of them wasn't interested any longer and wanted to walk away, and the other one agreed.



A glimpse of Madhubani Art.

Madhubani art: India's forgotten heritage

MAYANK KUMAR

Godawari Dutta lost her father at the age of 8. By nine, instead of going to school, she was married. Five years later, she was deserted by the same husband who robbed her of her childhood.

The tragedy, however, furthered her resolve to survive. She turned to the ancient art she had learnt from her mother—Madhubani/Mithila art. In 1957, she started making Madhubani paintings, going on to found the Mithila Hastashilp Kalkar Audyogiki Sahyog Samiti, a cooperative to support the growth and development of artists. Over the next 61 years, she trained more than 50,000 women, striving to make them self-dependent. In 2019, the government of India gave her Padma Shri—India's fourth-highest award—for her contribution to Madhubani art.

The story of Dutta, now aged 94, is one of many such ladies who are successful by showcasing the colourful geometrical patterns of Madhubani or Mithila art, which magnetically attracts art lovers from small streets in Bihar to the Paris art festival.

The traditional and ancient art form, which is practised in the Mithila region of Bihar, depicts people association with nature and scenes and deities from the ancient epics. Despite the beauty and legacy of the art form, however, the people behind it—mostly women—continue to struggle to sustain it. Badly-organised marketing systems, insufficient earning, the plethora of middlemen and inadequate go-

vernment support do not help. There is a genuine danger that the art, which shaped 94-year-old Dutta's life and career, may disappear.

Until 1934, Madhubani was just a folk art in the villages. During a major earthquake that year, a British officer, William Archer, a passionate artist himself, spotted the paintings on the broken walls lying in the debris. He said that the paintings were at par with Picasso's works and wrote an article in a British art magazine.

"After independence, the art got immense recognition mostly because foreign artists and art centres affiliated with many reputed foreign universities started researching the origins and different forms of this art," said Sumit Jha, an art historian who teaches at the University of Delhi. He added, "One of the greatest ironies of India is that the foreigners had to educate us about the greatness of our art."

During the Covid pandemic, skilled artists in Bihar began making face masks with Madhubani paintings designs. This move garnered their attention worldwide, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi praising the artists for their innovation. It has been estimated that more than five million Mithila masks were sold online during the pandemic.

However, all is not rosy in this art world. "I have been cheated by internationally reputed online websites which take away my masks at a much lower price," said Remant Kumar Mishra, who runs a Mithila art training institute in Madhubani.

Despite multiple government announcements and claims, most artists are struggling. And the next generation seems loath to continue this legacy. Mishra agrees. "The irony is that most of the artists have to struggle in their entire life to get recognition and earn a handsome amount to sustain or help their family."

While the situation in India continues to be grim, there is some respite. The art form found an oasis in Japan when the country dedicated the whole museum to its preservation in 2008.

The 'Mithila Museum', situated in Tokamachi hills, now houses more than 25,000 Madhubani paintings; the government of Japan has even added it to their school curriculum. "What could be a better soft-power for India than this art? Japan, Canada and the United States have asked India to provide artists to teach in their schools about this art," said Bhupendra Narayan, a journalist based in Patna, who covers the Madhubani/Mithila art.

As per reports, Japan has asked India to send a contingent of artists who can engrave Madhubani paintings on Japanese trains.

"The real challenge is this—can India brand it like European art?" said Rakesh Kumar, a noted social scientist, pointing out that India needs to have a policy for this, lest the art vanishes. He added, "The prime minister gives Madhubani/Mithila painting to foreign dignitaries all the time, from symbolism he needs to move towards substance."

Health & Fitness

Fitness now serves you at your home

NITIKA GANDHI

Aishwarya Lakshmi, a Hyderabad based fitness enthusiast, was disappointed when her gym closed down due to the pandemic-induced lockdown. However, she soon decided to make the best of a situation: she joined online fitness classes. "Digital training has definitely been a saviour," says Lakshmi, adding that it allowed her to work out at her own comfort level in the convenience of her home.

The Covid epidemic and the extended lockdown led to a growth in digital fitness worldwide. While fitness clubs across the world were forced to pull down their gates, they made sure that their services reached people within the safety of their homes. The health and fitness community had to go through a makeover which included restructuring their mode of service. Surbhi Gandhi, a Delhi-based certified nutritionist and fitness coach who has been an active participant in the wellness industry for about six years, believes it is a good thing. "Fitness has transformed its regime and made itself more accessible," she says. Monica Garg, a Haryana based nutritionist and dietician, must agree. Online con-

sultation has opened and expanded business opportunities, she says, adding that the online trend has fuelled the appetite to stay healthy "that too conveniently, at home."

So it is not surprising that online fitness is here to stay. According to a report released by the American Journal of Sports Medicine, more than 4,000 health and fitness pros surveyed by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) identified online training as the new top trend in fitness for 2021. ACSM Past President Walter R. Thompson, PhD, FACSM, ACSM-CEP, the lead author of the survey, points out that since the pandemic caused fitness facilities to close down, trainers needed to engage clients at a distance resulting in the use of very strategic delivery systems. "As we deal with the lasting effects of the pandemic, new systems like online and virtual training are critical to ensure the continued physical and mental well-being of people around the world," he says in a December 2020 piece published on the association's website.

Gandhi agrees. Fitness, she says, has always been a vital part of our life—whether it is people walking miles to fetch water or those who walk on a treadmill.

Moreover, online training has democratised the space, empowering fitness trainers to reach out to an international audience. It has also impacted the gender dynamics of the space since there are both more female participants and trainers inhabiting it. "Online platforms have given space to women for making their space in the industry," says Gandhi, pointing out that she was not taken seriously in a male-dominated fitness centre when she first joined the space in 2015.

However, the long-term effect of the same is still highly debatable. On one side, the engagement seems to have increased—people seem to be less intimidated with working out online than in a gym. However, sticking to it seems to be a challenge.

When training programs are rolled out without customisation, dropout rates increase, says Rajni Gandhi, a Delhi-based yoga trainer.

Also, there is an increased risk of injury. As Lakshmi points out, one is continuously watched and corrected when one works out in a gym. "But in digital training despite paying equal, nobody is there to guide you about the same; it's nearly impossible to keep a check on a group of about 20 via a screen," she says.

"I love the way I am now"- Surbhi



Healthy eating is the key to good health

JUHI SEERNANI

In January 2020, Surbhi Bhardwaj's life changed drastically. She got diagnosed with lupus; an autoimmune disorder where the patient's immune system attacks its body tissues. The condition was triggered by a herpes infection, which led to meningitis, which further led to optic nerve atrophy. Her illness made her almost lose her eyesight, she says and forced her to spend a month in the ICU. This was when she realized how much her body had deteriorated.

The illness was her wakeup call. She had already gained 30 kgs in two years before she got infected with lupus, going through a lot of insecurity because of the gain.

Food became her coping mechanism—every time she felt insecure, she ate. "As a 21-year-old young woman weighing 96 Kgs, I was desperately looking to lose all the extra kilos of fat", she said.

And it wasn't just about the weight. It was about thoughts, behaviour, even personality.

She was a popular girl, known for getting into trouble; she loved the thrill of it. Bhardwaj remembers her teachers taunting her all through college. The reason? She wore kajal and styled her hair so well that it made them think she had five boyfriends. "I was the black sheep. I remember being bullied by teachers just because I didn't tolerate them moral policing me," explains the 21-year-old law student and social media influencer.

Then she began overhauling her life. She began listening to her body and eating consciously, concentrating on how the food made her feel. This simple step made her understand what's good for her body, she said. "Losing weight, which was once a nightmare, became a cakewalk for me. I lost about 35 kgs in 6-7 months, starting my journey from 96.5kg to 61 kgs, without starving myself, without calorie counting, without becoming a health fanatic and eating delicious food."

She also gained a lot. She gained back the power and ability to choose what is best for her without

giving into popular and transient health trends. She credits all this to learning about Ayurveda. It not only impacted her physical health but her overall well-being, she added. It also helped her understand herself better, her strengths and weaknesses, she said.

"When I first saw these changes in Surbhi, I won't lie, but I was a little annoyed," said Ayaz Sorakia, Surbhi's friend in college, adding that she thought, at first, this was a temporary phase in her friend's life. "The one thing that shocked me the most was that she left smoking in one day." Surbhi's sudden change of routine and her weight-loss journey has inspired a lot of people on the internet. She manages every particle of food that she eats and religiously practices yoga.

"We are what we eat. I am so pissed at myself for not knowing about Ayurveda before and voluntarily degrading my body and blaming my college, my teachers and my parents for my own short-comings," Surbhi said on the Zoom call, her glowing skin and sparkling eyes very apparent.

And it wasn't just about her behaviour but her personality.

Nishtha Kansal, a school friend of Surbhi who has known her for fourteen years, remembered her as a rebel. "To see her so calm and content astonishes me," said Kansal, adding that it made her happy that her friend was taking care of

herself. It also changed her relationship with her family; it used to be a contentious one, she said.

"I was greedy, and I always wanted more. More love, more attention, and that led me to get depressed," she said, adding that the lockdown had brought her closer to them. "I stopped making a fuss about everything."

Spirituality played a huge part in her weight loss journey. "People try to lose weight or eat healthy for looking good, which is okay," she said. "However, once their purpose is fulfilled, they go back to the evils they had left behind," said Bhardwaj, adding that introspection is the key. She firmly believes that she has changed for the better. "I would never go to the way I used to live. I love the way I am now, and I wish to inspire everyone to take care of their body and soul."

Surbhi's typical diet in winter
6:00 am-Drinking warm water after waking up
10:00 am- breaks her fast with stewed apple or 6 almonds and figs
10:30 am- first major meal: Dal, Sabji, roti, different grains and Millets.
3:00 pm- A fruit or homemade laad-oes
6:00 pm- Dinner (usually a full meal like lunch)
She also practices abhyangam, oil pulling, nasya followed by yoga, pranayama and meditation