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Promises pour in ahead of TN poll

AIADMK offers gas stove, cash for women heading families

SHERUB WANGMO

CHENNAI: 'Washing machine for all' and other 162 promises of the ruling party, the state, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra-Kazhagam (AIADMK) does not seem to have attracted many because the party is allied with Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for this upcoming election on April 6.

A government official, on grounds of anonymity, says, "Washing machine for all? We know what is the motive behind that."

Raghu, an IT student here says, "The promise of giving washing machines for all is just for those uneducated voters, who do not see the future but the immediate gain. This is the strategy of the party to gain the immediate vote. I am sure that even if they win hardly anyone will get one."

Raja Ram, a shopkeeper, says "Those are all fake promises. They will rarely fulfill any. They are now controlled by the BJP. The party was good when Jayalalitha was the Chief Minister."

People supporting Dravidian

parties such as the opposition DMK fear that their Tamilian identity will be lost if the BJP gains influence in the state. On the other hand there is some respect for "Amma" Jayalalitha, under whom the AIADMK



has ruled the state for decades. However, opponents point out that the DMK used to be in alliance with the BJP at the Centre.

Kamal, an auto driver, says "During the lockdown we middle class people faced lots of problems. The current government failed to help us. Domestic violence in the households was common. It was because the man of the family used to drink alcohol and create problems.

A ban on liquor which the current government did not implement due to huge collection of money would have solved the problem.

However regarding the alliance with the BJP, Abishek Ranganathan, an entrepreneur, thinks that the AIADMK does not have much choice because the state may not get much funding if it is not on good terms with the Centre.

Aiming at a third consecutive term, the AIADMK has come forward with a slew of promises for the people: 'Amma washing machine and gas stove for all', 'waiver of education loans,' 'Amma banking card' and, MGR green auto scheme.' Targeting the female voters the manifesto also 'offers Rs 1500 cash assistance to women heading families with ration cards', 50 percent bus fare subsidy for women in city buses and 'extension of maternity leave from nine months to a year.' 'Doorstep delivery of ration supplies and', nutritious meal scheme to be expanded to students of classes 9, 10, 11 and 12 were among the other promises.

SANSKRITI FALOR

CHENNAI: The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) released its manifesto on March 13 — promising 75% of jobs in industries for Tamils, year-long maternity leave and free bus passes for women — for the Tamil Nadu State Assembly elections scheduled on April 6.

M. K. Stalin, opposition leader and president of DMK, called the party's manifesto a 'second hero' and the candidates the 'first hero'.

The manifesto made a total of 500 promises including a subsidy of Rs. 100 on LPG gas cylinders, waiver on education loans and one-time financial assistance of Rs. 4000 to ration cardholders.

Stalin accused the ruling party All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) of stealing his party's manifesto.

The DMK committed itself to renovating Hindu temples and has promised financial aid to people visiting Hindu pilgrimage centres.

The party promises to reduce the petrol prices by Rs. 4-5. Karupuswamy (53), a fruit seller in Vela-

chery, said "All my produce has become expensive because of the rise in prices. Although, it doesn't matter anymore because there are no good leaders in both parties."



The DMK also promised to speed up the probe in the death of Jayalalitha. The Arumugaswamy Commission had been set up to investigate the death of ex-CM J Jayalalitha. Stalin has accused the ruling party of dodging the investigation.

"AIADMK was good when Jayalalitha was in power but now she isn't there. The current Chief Minister [Edappadi K. Palaniswami] did not come to power the way other leaders did. His party is

getting wealth from a lot of unknown sources. There is a chance that the AIADMK will win. But I believe that Stalin will come to power because the BJP is in the Centre and Stalin is the answer to BJP's control over the country," said Thirumala, the 62-year-old owner of a juice shop.

Stalin, son of the former Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, has formed an alliance with Indian National Congress (INC).

"Now that the AIADMK is in alliance with the BJP, I am definitely going to vote for the DMK-Congress alliance. The AIADMK cannot even rule properly," said Kumar Rao, a food stall owner in Vela-

chery. J. Jayalalitha was the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu for more than 14 years from 1991 to 2016. She had mass support and respect of all parties in the state as well as among the public.

"Women felt secure when Amma [Jayalalitha] was there. It's not the same with the AIADMK anymore," said Selvi (25), a florist in Vela-

Youth voters want free education

A. SRILEKHA

CHENNAI: A free and better education system, improved health care and well-educated political leaders are among the expectations of the 1.37 crore young voters who hold the key in Tamil Nadu Assembly polls scheduled to be held on April 6.

The 1.37 crore voters include fresh graduates, first-time voters and young employees who have high expectations.

Anupriya, a software engineer, said "I want the next government to provide free and better education rather than free washing machines" Abinaya, a TCS employee, said "I hope the promises in the parties' manifesto come true."

Suvalekha, a 19-year-old dental student said "The younger generation is not like the adults who vote for a party based on the symbol or their false manifestoes."

Yuvanshankar, a 23-year-old employee at Indian Political Action Commission, said a party that protected state autonomy should come to power.

Seetharam, a 21-year-old medical student, said the government should create more job opportunities.

Garbage troubles locals

UJWALA POTHARAZU

CHENNAI: Garbage thrown by people on the footpath near the Madipakkam Sabari Salai main road is creating inconvenience to the residents of the area who say that the Greater Chennai Corporation is not taking proper care of it.

The residents complain that there is a lot of foul smell from the garbage.

"There is a lot of smell which is



Roadside garbage at Madipakkam Sabari Salai main road

creating inconvenience for our children while going to school", said Lavanya, a resident, adding that this garbage was being thrown here since 20 years and no permanent solution had been found till now.

"Due to the waste being thrown there, we have a problem of mosquitoes and other deadly insects", said another resident.

Not only the residents but also small shops and training centers in the street are being affected. "Many people avoid stopping by due to the smell, even if they need anything," said Ramdas, the shopkeeper.

Vijaya Lakshmi, owner of a typewriting training centre, said "Many students hesitate to come here because of the bad smell. During lockdown, the place was not cleaned before the lockdown was implemented and it was stinking for three months."

She added, "We even tried to stop people from throwing the waste but the situation is the same". Sumathi Rajan, a resident of Madipakkam, said "We have complained to the Municipal Corporation through online, and there is no response from them yet."

Thiris, an official of the Great Chennai Corporation, said "We are also finding solutions for this problem, but we are helpless if people keep throwing their waste repeatedly."

Kamal Hassan-led MNM wants pay for housewives

RIYA

CHENNAI: Barely three years old, Kamal Hassan's party Makkal NeechiMaaim (MNM) has promised salaries for housewives in its manifesto for the April 6 State Assembly elections. This may be well-intended on papers, but without a roadmap, it is impractical in its application, feel observers.

The actor-turned politician's party was the first to release a seven-point governance and economic agenda. Eyeing 154 seats according to NDTV, the party leader will be contesting from the Coimbatore South seat in the Assembly elections. MNM has primarily focused on women and youth welfare that was essentially a response to the challenges faced by people during the pandemic.

Focusing on women, the party

pointed out that their participation has reduced over the years due to their time spent helping their families. Often given a subordinate status in the family structure, they are at the receiving end and are left with no value to their hours of domestic work. Women's rights campaigners state that Indian women perform low-paid labour in the informal sector and unpaid work in family businesses.

Rahul, who works at DLF, an IT firm, said that the idea of providing wages to housewives seems progressive, but there is no clarity on how it will be done.

"Is it the husband who will give some of his salary to his wife or will the government take each of their bank accounts for this purpose? Even if women do get their money, how does it guarantee that

the husband will not use it for himself?"

The funding of salaries cannot quantify the unpaid domestic work done by women in several households. "There is no specification as to which women will be getting paid: will it include single mothers or unmarried women? What about the domestic workers if housewives get paid for the same work? There is neither clarity nor guarantee if the party will stick to its words," Rahul added.

Most women face issues with their husband's drinking habits that tend to drain the household income. At the mercy of their spouse's control over money, they may not be

able to benefit the scheme.

Karthik R., an auto driver, said that several alcoholic men he knew, stole their wives' jewelry during the lockdown and sold them off to buy alcohol. "One can only imagine what will be the consequences once these women earn. The party has not yet addressed these problems," he said.

In a bid to catch up on each other, the main parties, the AIADMK and the DMK also offered wages to housewives and households with equal ambiguity.

Guganeshwaran, a B.Sc. student, said, "Recently the AIADMK cancelled exams for us, hoping to get some support from the youth. But

canceling of exams will only cut down on our chances of getting jobs. This isn't helping either."

Besides wages for housewives, the MNM has also promised 50 lakhs jobs for youth. Karthik R. said, "We were promised jobs by the ruling AIADMK too. I am a B.A. graduate and I drive rickshaws. I have a friend who is a mechanical engineer but works as a delivery guy. We are not getting the jobs we worked for. We do not expect MNM to do much either."

As a fledgling party, MNM led by a film star is often not taken seriously by the common people. Kamraj, a street vendor, said that he cannot support the party. "Kamal Hassan comes from a rich background, he wouldn't know our hardships," he said.

Brijesh, who handles the sales



Schools struggle to allot streams for 11th Std students

SAYANI DAS

CHENNAI: State government schools are awaiting guidelines to draft marksheets, promote students and allot academic streams to the new class 11 batch after the State government cancelled the class 10 public exams this year.

Responding to the government decision, N. Kalaiselvam, headmistress of Chennai Higher Secondary School, Taramani, said, "While this decision does not affect promotion of class 9 and 11 students, we will have to adjust the assessment system for class 10 students who want to choose streams for class 11."

In previous years, allotment of arts, science or commerce streams depended on the class 10 marks and students' personal choice.

M. Sivagami, headmistress of Chennai Higher Secondary School, Thiruvanniyur, said, "Whenever there was too much competition for any stream or subject, class 10 marks were the final criteria to decide who gets what subjects."

Last year, however, the class 10 public exams had been cancelled because they were scheduled during the first week of national Covid-19 lockdown.

Kalaiselvam said that the draft-

ing of marksheets and the promotion was then based on internal assessment marks given by individual schools. Streams were allotted accordingly.

However, following the same trend this year would cause problems as most of the year-round assessment happened through online classes during the lockdown.

Kalaiselvam said, "Such an assessment is not prudent. Only a few students pay attention during online classes and the vast majority Google their answers during online tests."

Also, a few students, she noted, had to struggle due to lack of smartphones or internet connections throughout the academic session.

Kalaiselvam said, due to cancellation of the public exam, distribution of subjects also depended on teachers' reviews of a student's academic abilities.

"Teachers usually know their students from class 8. They can gauge and decide what streams are best for them even if the marks are inconsistent," she said.

Meanwhile, when allotting streams to new students joining from other schools, they would have to rely on the assessment done by the teachers there.

Currently, schools are awaiting further instructions from the School Education Department to draft official marksheets.

S. Sankardas, a teacher at Arignar Anna Government Higher Secondary School, Besant Nagar, said, "The current session might continue till May and the marksheets and stream allotment will have to be completed before June, when the new session begins." He hoped the guidelines would be emailed to them before that.

Regarding cancellation of exams, Kalaiselvam said that most students were relieved about it.

But, K. S. Anjali, a class 10 student from Presidency Girls Higher Secondary School, said "I wanted to prove my merit in the year-end exam but now there is no way to do that."

She worries that the stream distribution this time might not be very smooth.

P. Rangaraj, Anjali's parent and an auto-rickshaw driver, said that he wasn't too worried about the stream his daughter chose.

"For us, basic food, shelter and education are enough. We are content that our child's education is continuing even through this difficult year."

COVID-19 affects JEE examinees

TANSHIQ VADDI

HYDERABAD: College students have appeared for the second of the four rounds of the Joint Entrance Exam (JEE) Main in the city. The second of the exams was held between March 15 and 18.

JEE mains is an entrance exam for engineering colleges conducted by the National Test Agency (NTA). Due to the covid-19 pandemic, NTA decided to organise the exams four times in the months of February, March, April and May.

Sri Narayana Junior College principal Abhishek Reddy (47) said "As different state boards conduct their board exams at different times NTA has allowed the students to choose the month of the exam accordingly. In Telangana, the board exams will start from the first week of April and end in May."

"We encourage our students to attempt the JEE Main exam four times as that will give the students more chances of qualifying and getting into the next round," he added.

When asked about the pressure while preparing for both board exams and JEE Main he said the syllabus overlapped for both the exams JEE Main was more about the application whereas board exams were more theory-based. "Not every year students would get a chance to write the exam four times!"

Vaikunta Krishna (17) who has



given the exam twice said that the preparation got disturbed because of the pandemic. "We had online classes from 7 AM to 1 PM and we had sessions in the afternoon to clear our doubts. More often time used to run out as there are 250 students in a session."

When asked about having the option of the online exam only he said "We practice in our institute and give mock tests on the computers so we are used to it and moreover bubbling in the OMR (Optical Mark Recognition) sheets has led to a few mistakes in the past in marking."

Abhishek Reddy (17) who studies in Gurukulam, said, "I had a severe headache by the last hour of the exam because of staring at the screen for so long. We don't have enough systems to practice exams online; so we do it on paper."

Abhishek further said "The preparation hasn't been great. Despite having a smartphone I always had internet issues and we did not have any sessions for clarifying doubts."

According to a report in The Fi-

nanacial Express, around 70 per cent of rural India does not have a proper internet connection. In rural Telangana, according to The Times of India, the number is 69 per cent.

The principal of the Gurukulam, M. Yadagiri said "The education for these children is free and the government pays exam fee for the students. The government used to pay for the students for the first attempt and depending on the score would pay for the second time."

However the government this time has decided to pay only once irrespective of how a student does. Many students have decided to give the exam only twice as they have to give other competitive engineering exams which the government won't sponsor. The application fee for Mains 2021 for ST candidates is Rs 325.

Yadagiri said, "With the students who have written the exam twice what I have observed is the results of attempt one was out a week before the second attempt which changed the mood of preparation for a few students."

The JEE Main exam has 90 questions 30 each in physics, chemistry and maths out of which students have to attempt 25 from each subject.

The exam is conducted in 13 languages which include 11 regional languages. Students qualifying for the exam will have a chance to appear in JEE Advanced.

Is democracy dying in India?

The Modi-Shah duo has transformed the rules of governance by bringing in several changes over the last seven years, more so since 2019. From the abrogation of Article 370, which granted a special constitutional status to Kashmir, to the widely contested farm bills and the CAA-NRC cocktail, the Bharatiya Janata Party government's moves have sparked widespread protests and fear.

The latest consequence of the government's actions is the V-Dem Institute's report that has relegated India from "the world's largest democracy" to "electoral autocracy." The report states that the diminishing freedom of expression and stifling of media and civil society have led to the downgrading. It is shocking to note that India is now on a par with Pakistan and ranked behind Bangladesh and Nepal. This comes just two weeks after Freedom House, an independent democracy research institute, downgraded India from "free" to "partly free," for similar reasons. Adding to this, last month, India's Democracy Index fell by 2 places to the 53rd position according to a global ranking by The Economist, which called India a "flawed democracy."

Rather than allaying the fears sparked by such reports and addressing the concerns raised in them, the government has chosen to attack the organisations releasing them. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar went on to call out the "hypocrisy" of such organisations for acting like "self-appointed custodians of the world who find it very difficult to stomach that somebody in India is not looking for their approval." This hypocrisy seems to have been lost in the pat on the back the Prime Minister gave himself for India's rising position in the 'Ease of Doing Business' ranking and its position among the Top-50 in the Global Innovation Index. Global spotlight, when full of praise, elicits a particular response. But when it turns to criticism from Rihanna and Greta Thunberg's tweets to Justin Trudeau's comments supporting the farmers' protests, the government plays the cynic. One didn't hear complaints of "foreign interference" when the United Nations conferred on India the Champion of the Earth Award or the Global Goalkeeper Award for the Swachh Bharat Mission.

Though the V-Dem reports are subjective, they address an exhaustive list of questions and weigh several factors like free and fair elections, autonomy of the opposition, share of population with suffrage, freedom of discussion for men and women and media self-censorship, to name a few. The Swiss report also refers to the countless sedition, defamation, and counter terrorism cases filed by the Modi government to silence dissent, and goes on to say that over 7000 people have been charged with sedition since the BJP assumed power. The infamous "11 lakh pages of data" the Delhi Police claimed to have, to tie political activist Umar Khalid to the anti-CAA violence, gives one a disturbing, Orwellian image of a "Big Brother" watching your every move. The new rules controlling content on digital platforms set a new low in a country that has, by and large, believed in self-regulation and free speech.

Authoritarian establishments mostly arise from "populist outsiders." These figures often claim to be the "voice of the people" and denigrate their opponents as "corrupt" and "elite." Recounting Modi's antics and jibes against the opposition for what he calls "spreading lies," the populist regime's aim to sideline the opposition and subvert democratic institutions is clear, claiming that this is done for the "greater good."

Women's cricket remains stepchild

The Indian women's cricket team played its first international game in 364 days on March 7 at a crowd-less Bharat Ratna Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee Ekana Cricket Stadium, Lucknow. The first of the five One-Day Internationals, which South Africa won comfortably by 8 wickets, was in complete contrast to India's previous match, the World T20 final against Australia a year ago in front of a record 86,174 spectators at the iconic Melbourne Cricket Ground.

According to *ESPNCricinfo*, the squads, as well as the tour itinerary, for the five ODIs and three T20Is against South Africa were publicly announced only after the team assembled in Lucknow in late February to go into quarantine. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent travel restrictions made cricket take a back seat, the fact that the BCCI could not arrange even a stadium for the women's series against the Proteas, while the men's team played two Tests against England at the brand-new Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad, shows where the board's priorities lie. Also, former Indian captain Mithali Raj last week became only the second-ever women's cricketer to score 10,000 international runs. While she was congratulated by various journalists, politicians and cricket legends such as Sachin Tendulkar on Twitter, the kind of adulation she deserved was missing from the mainstream TV channels.

The action of the Kerala Cricket Association, which planned to host the five-match ODI series but later withdrew since it did not know that the authorities had already allocated the ground for an army recruitment rally, was irresponsible. KCA Secretary Sreejith Nair told PTI: "IL & FS [Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services] did not even inform us while booking the stadium that the dates clashed with the women's cricket series. It is a violation of our MoU with them. We have written to the BCCI expressing our inability to host the games."

The othering was clearly visible when the schedule for the Women's T20 Challenge last year was announced on October 11, three weeks after the 2020 Indian Premier League had begun in the UAE. Despite the pandemic last year, international women's cricket resumed in September, when New Zealand toured Australia. While female players across the world were back to playing the game they loved, Indian women's team was stuck at home as its England tour in September was cancelled. The women were finally allowed to play in a four-match T20 tournament which cannot be called even a mini-IPL. Being a part of the squads playing the Women's T20 Challenge took away the opportunity from players Harmanpreet Kaur and Smriti Mandhana to compete in the Women's Big Bash League in Australia which would have allowed them to get the much required match practice. While the Indian men's team was being hailed for its historic consecutive Test series wins Down Under, no thought was given to the women's team which was also supposed to tour Australia in January. The tour was postponed to 2022.

On the International Women's Day, BCCI Secretary Jay Shah announced on Twitter that the Indian women's cricket team would be playing a one-off Test match against England later this year. This will be the first Test match for the women's team in seven years. With less than a year to go for the 2022 ICC Women's Cricket World Cup in New Zealand, the preparation is far from ideal. However, opener Smriti Mandhana told *ESPNCricinfo* that the team was "proactively working" with the BCCI on its schedule, keeping in mind the World Cup next year.

Decoding Indo-Pak. ceasefire

New Delhi's larger concern of engaging on two fronts seems to be the driving force behind the Feb 25 agreement

MAYANK KUMAR

Ever since the Directors-General of Military Operations in India and Pakistan issued a joint statement, reiterating the two countries' commitment to the 2003 ceasefire, there has been a growing sense of optimism within the strategic and diplomatic community. Many experts have called the agreement path-breaking and highly significant. Undoubtedly, as of now, it is a breakthrough, especially after the Pulwama attack in 2019 (followed by the Balakot strikes) and the abrogation of Article 370, which granted Jammu and Kashmir a special status under the Constitution, by the Indian government.

But the February 25 agreement needs to be seen in the context of what was agreed upon in 2003. It is interesting to note that no official in Pakistan wants to take credit for the agreement, which many believe is path-breaking. Optimists rejoicing over the deal fail to mention that when the two nations were parleying behind the scenes, they were sparring with each other at the UNHRC in Geneva on February 24 – only a few hours before the "ceasefire agreement" was announced.

The history of international relations tells us that realism often triumphs over optimism. In our selective reading of history, we forget that on two occasions, in January 2013 and May 2018, the Indian and Pakistani armies issued a similar statement. But everything went into a tailspin soon.

No development between the two nuclear neighbours can be seen in isolation. In the geo-political scene, the strategic triangle of India-China-Pakistan needs to be clubbed with the latest development to decode the larger picture. For a brooding skeptic, the thaw on the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan will mean nothing much, given the fragile history of the sub-continent. Therefore, it is important to understand what the ceasefire



PHOTO CREDIT: FILE PHOTO (PTI)

The ceasefire reinforcement between the two countries should, at best, be seen as the start of an engagement.

means, under what geostrategic circumstances it came about and the way ahead.

Surely, the ceasefire will lower the tensions along the LoC and the International Border, which have been on the boil for some time. In 2020 alone, the LoC witnessed 5,133 ceasefire violations in which more than 95 people were killed. The February 25 reiteration will help India initiate a dialogue with Pakistan sometime in future, if both sides adhere to the ceasefire.

Tactical move

After assuming office as Prime Minister in 2014, Narendra Modi and his BJP government took a clear line *vis-a-vis* Pakistan – talks and terror cannot go together. The abrogation of Article 370 meant that Kashmir was practically out of the negotiating table. This stance held till April 2020, before the Galwan Valley skirmishes and China's aggression on the Line of Actual Control (LoAC). Significantly, India did not have to engage in a two-front conflict as Pakistan did not make any aggressive military maneuver, along with China. After pushing back the powerful Chinese army on the Sino-Indian front and

restoring the *status quo ante*, it seems the decision-makers in South Block revisited the India-Pakistan-China strategic triangle.

While it is easy for political leaders to make the jingoistic claim that India can win a two-front war, in order to please the masses, the ground reality is different. It is very difficult for any country in the world to win a two-front war with competitive enemies. Even preparing for such a war would mean converting a welfare state into a national security state with an investment of 15 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) in the military ecosystem.

Thus it can be reasonably assumed that the lowering of tensions on the LoC with Pakistan is a tactical move by India. It will help New Delhi keep a close watch on the Chinese actions on the LoAC. For Pakistan, too, it is a win-win situation as it has been going through multiple domestic and international crises. The Pakistan economy is in the proverbial intensive care unit with rising debts. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) sanctions, of which India was the prime mover, make it difficult for the country to get loans from global

lenders. The Biden administration, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have time and again called upon Islamabad to negotiate with New Delhi. Thus, an active engagement with its neighbour is in the interest of Pakistan too.

The way forward

As for the February 25 joint military statement, the devil is in the details.

It says "the two DGMOs agreed to address each other's core issues and concerns which have the propensity to disturb peace and lead to violence." Since Partition, Kashmir has remained the most contentious issue for Pakistan. Is India ready to address it? What would be the domestic repercussions of changing the position on Kashmir for the Modi government? From the days of the Jana Sangh, Kashmir has been at the core of the BJP's nationalist plank. The revocation of Article 370 on August 5, 2019, was seen as a fait accompli by the Modi government as Pakistan was not able to generate world-wide opinion in its favour due to India's much larger economic and global standing. It is, therefore, highly unlikely that India will show any willingness to discuss Kashmir, the "core issue" for Pakistan.

As the two countries move towards a thaw on the LoC, it is in their interest to put the contentious issues on the back burner and resume the people-to-people contacts as they did in 2003-04; resolve the Kulbhushan Jadhav issue; activate the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation; and engage in trade.

At the same time, it is important for India to understand that in international relations, such peace gestures are used to distract the enemy - the Kargil betrayal by the Pakistani army and its state policy of terror are real. The ceasefire reinforcement should, at best, be seen as the start of an engagement. Drawing optimistic conclusions

may be misplaced as history tells us that long-lasting peace is difficult to achieve.

THE PEACE PROCESS

• **December 31, 1947:** A United Nations sponsored "ceasefire" ends the war in Kashmir and brings hostilities to a halt.

• **July 27, 1949:** The Karachi agreement creates a boundary in Jammu and Kashmir called the "ceasefire line," to be monitored by the UN observer group.

• **January 10, 1965:** The Tashkent agreement restores the "ceasefire line" of 1949, after a war between the two countries, to be monitored by the U.N. group.

• **December 17, 1971:** Pakistan President Yahya Khan accepts India's proposal for a "ceasefire," ending the war which results in Pakistan losing more than half of its territory and population.

• **July 2, 1972:** India and Pakistan agree to solve the Kashmir dispute bilaterally in the Shimla agreement.

• **December 11, 1972:** The Sutchgarh Agreement renames the "ceasefire line" as "Line of Control," practically making the U.N. group in Kashmir irrelevant.

• **November 25, 2003:** India and Pakistan agree to a formal ceasefire from midnight along the LoC and Actual Ground Position line in Jammu and Kashmir.

• **2003 Ceasefire Agreement:** Ceasefire agreement reached in November 2003, four years after the Kargil War (1999).

• **Between 2003 and 2006,** not a single bullet is fired by India and Pakistan. LoC is demarcated up to the Siachen Glacier (Point NJ9842), the world's highest battlefield. LoC is delineated on a map signed by the Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) of both the armies (Excerpted from published sources)

'Disrespect & contempt, not comedy'

No fundamental right can be exercised in absolute terms, argues Skand Bajpai, an activist and student of law

Skand Bajpai, a fourth year student of law at Bhartiya Vidyapeeth University, Pune, has been in the news for filing a contempt petition against comedian Kunal Kamra who, he has alleged, posted contemptuous tweets against the Supreme Court and shared cartoons which were harmful to the judiciary's reputation, in the name of satire.

In a telephonic conversation with Juhí Seernani, he talks about the importance of contempt law and how there is a fine line between contempt and criticism.

As a law student, how do you look at the law versus the freedom of expression? Do you think a law which curbs the fundamental rights must be upheld at all costs?

I don't say that the law is flawless. Nor do I argue that every Article in the Constitution or Section in the Indian Penal Code is foolproof. But it is the duty of every citizen to abide by the law in letter and in spirit. If a law does not serve its purpose, there are ways to challenge it. There is scope to make amendments and there are specific procedures through which changes can be made. Freedom of expression is a vague fundamental right. Even though it is absolute, we need to understand that no fundamental right can be exercised in absolute terms because without restrictions, there will be chaos.

What made you file a contempt case against comedian Kunal Kamra?

I have been asked this question by many journalists many times. I agree that the judiciary should not be exempt from criticism, but I also believe that any criticism that is not "constructive" and is made in bad faith amounts to contempt as it strikes at the very root of the judiciary. Section 2(c) of the Contempt of Court Act, 1971, defines criminal contempt "as any publication that scandalises, lowers or tends to

lower the authority of the court", or "which obstructs the due course of any judicial proceedings or administration of justice." And Section 15 allows anyone to initiate contempt proceedings after receiving the Attorney General's consent. I wrote to the Attorney General of India, K.K. Venugopal, on November 13, 2020, alleging that Kamra's tweets were aimed at shaking the public's trust in the apex court. Kamra's tweet after the Supreme Court granted bail to Arnab Goswami was an attempt to scandalise the court and lower its authority.

What is the line that divides criticism and contempt?

The threshold is "substantive damage" and "imminent danger." I thought he [Kamra] crossed the line. I filed a case based on my understanding. My reasoning was influenced by the way I felt at that time. It was a momentary decision, taken from the heart.

Did your contempt plea distract the Supreme Court from other important issues?

I did not think that my petition would divert the attention of the court from issues, such as Parliament's abrogation of Article 370, which the court has been hearing since December 2019; and hundreds of pending habeas corpus petitions of Kashmiris incarcerated without trial for more than a year - since August 5, 2019, when Article 370 was removed. I thought the Supreme Court would reject my petition. But that didn't happen.

Do you think that Prashant Bhusan's trial was an example of the Supreme Court's intolerance of criticism?

Yes! I agree that the court is becoming intolerant of criticism and Prashant Bhusan's case was the prime example. But I still feel that my decision to file a contempt case against Kamra wasn't wrong.

Don't you think the contempt law violates Article 14 (right to equality) of the Constitution?

No. Nobody has the right to de-



PHOTO CREDIT: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Skand Bajpai, a fourth year law student, who filed a contempt petition against comedian Kunal Kamra.

mean the sanctity of the judiciary after it passes a judgment. If we encourage a society that is not accountable and no action is taken against such behavior, we will have lawlessness that won't, in any way, benefit the people and the state. The contempt law guards the majesty of the institution and the judicial organ of the state.

Besides the much talked about Kamra case, you have also filed a public interest litigation plea seeking control over minors' access to social media and the need for a mechanism to criminalize morphing and revenge porn, which is still pending. What inspired you to do that?

Well, it started from Instagram. I came across many accounts that

earn money by selling illicit and obscene content. The administrators of these accounts deliver rape videos, child porn. One can access these accounts conveniently by typing some keywords in the search bar. We don't know if this content is being sold with the consent of the said person and that makes it all the more dangerous. A lot of women become victims of this mortifying trade. Minors who can access social media are more vulnerable as there is no proper age verification mechanism that can prevent them from creating an account on these social media applications.

What do you have to say to those who argue that the judiciary has ceased to be an independent body?

The judiciary can never not be an independent body. But it is not infallible. For instance, one can question the order of the proceedings and how the cases are brought to court. But to question a judgment without looking at it closely is reckless and irresponsible. One can't disrespect an institution like the judiciary in the name of comedy. This, however, doesn't mean that we shouldn't speak against what's wrong. There are a lot of other things that are wrong with governance but I would like to refrain from discussing my personal opinion.

What are your thoughts on the present day government at the Centre?

I used to be enthusiastic about the politics of former Bharatiya Janata Party leader and Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. But I have serious reservations over the functioning of the current BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government is authoritarian, manipulates facts and practises appeasement politics. His government's politics revolves around communalism and shows all signs of a fascist government.

Have you been practising law actively throughout your student life?

Yes, I try to apply law wherever I can. It started with Indigo Airlines. When a friend and I spotted a cockroach on a flight, we filed a case and got compensation. Since then, I started gaining confidence. I started filing PIL pleas to help people. Sometimes, I understood what aspect of law I was working on and sometimes I didn't. So, it was hectic to catch up with the reading but it was also thrilling. The one thing that is important for the judiciary is a good judge. Judges who treat the profession not as a job but service are the need of the hour. Once we find them, the country will have a much better judicial system.

Democracy in peril

Corporate-backed Kerala party Twenty-Twenty has bought people's allegiance in the name of welfare politics

MANEESH T

In a recent interview with *Reporter TV*, veteran Malayalam actor Sreenivasan made a statement while taking a dig at corruption. It caused a furore on social media. "It won't help, if poor people get hold of power [political] and money together," he said.

He made the remark after joining 'Twenty-Twenty'—a non-profit, charitable organization-turned-political party in Kerala—as one of its advisors ahead of the upcoming Kerala Assembly elections. Even though the comment was called out for its undemocratic thought, it seemed well in line with the ideology of the party he had joined.

'Twenty-Twenty', formed by Sabu M. Jacob, Managing Director of KiteX Garments Limited - a corporate textile company in Kerala - is no poor man's party. Sabu has an annual turnover of Rs.1500 crores, as *Forbes India* reported last year. Besides, he is the *de facto* head of operations in four panchayats of Ernakulam district, where the party won in the recent local body elections. This corporate giant-backed party, thus, controls a part of Kerala and its people, and is in pursuit of more power.

The beginning

In 2013, there were popular protests against the alleged pollution caused by Sabu's textile company, situated in the Kizhakkambalam panchayat of Ernakulam. Under pressure, he responded in a somewhat unexpected manner. Within months, he rolled out a mass, long-term plan. He set up 'Twenty-Twenty', a non-profit organization, to appease the people with welfare schemes, which included subsidised groceries and free medical care.

After two years of trial run, the movement garnered huge support from the people. Twenty-Twenty

decided to contest the 2015 local body elections. To the surprise of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the United Democratic Front (UDF) - which won the panchayats alternately - the people of Kizhakkambalam chose Twenty-Twenty. For the first time, a corporate-backed party won an election in Kerala - the State where the first elected communist government came to power in 1957.

With infrastructure development that included free housing and wi-

life standards in their neighbourhood. The party now hopes to get an MLA, and has fielded candidates in eight Assembly constituencies of Ernakulam.

The year 2013, when Twenty-Twenty was established, was significant for the corporate companies in the country. The CSR or the Corporate Social Responsibility guidelines under the Companies Act got legal sanctity that year.

Under the guidelines, every corporate company that had a net

development. With the company and the party being the same entity, people would have thought that the money flowed from the party's agenda of welfare politics.

According to a case study conducted in the panchayat in 2017, 63 per cent of the people were unaware of what CSR was. For them, the party was doing an act of charity, which it clearly wasn't.

Traits of an autocracy

The party even created a public

representatives thus work for a corporate company, unheard of in any democracy.

In January 2020, though, K.V. Jacob, panchayat president, resigned and came out publicly against Sabu Jacob, saying that he was using public policies to his advantage and interfering in the local body's policymaking.

"The governance here is in violation of all established practices of administration in a democratic system because of which around Rs 5 crore of government funds lapsed over the past three years. Mr. Sabu Jacob meddles in all matters related to governance and it is impossible to put up with his autocratic ways," *The Hindu* quoted K.V. Jacob as saying.

But since the company has controlled the region for six years with the people in its pocket, it now has the absolute power to establish its business prospects without any opposition. Any opposition means denial of freebies or isolating of the individuals.

Notwithstanding accusations, the majority in Kizhakkambalam and surrounding areas still see Twenty-Twenty as their saviour. Their rationale: when someone gives them everything they need, what's the problem in supporting him?

This thinking is a clarion call to democracy. While there is no denying that political parties are corrupt, corporate entities cannot be given direct control over our democratic institutions. Their corporate interests alone will be their ideology. They would only want a society to become as apolitical as it can get, so that dissenting voices are not heard.

And, above all, they will transform the electoral power of citizens to allegiance and enslavement, much like what existed before Independence. We were under a company rule then too.



The Twenty-20 supermarket in Kizhakkambalam, Kerala

PHOTO CREDIT: ASHWIN

dening of roads, and the setting up of a 'Bhaskhya Suraksha supermarket,' where the essentials are sold in significantly lower prices, the Twenty-Twenty revolution hit Kizhakkambalam. People from surrounding villages started to witness the changes that the party brought in and how Kizhakkambalam was becoming a "model panchayat."

After five years, in the 2020 local body elections, three more panchayats chose the party, clearly impressed by the ever-improving

worth of Rs.500 crore or more, a turnover of Rs.1,000 crore or more, or a net profit of Rs.5 crore or more during any financial year, was asked to spend 2 per cent of its profits on social welfare activities.

For Sabu, this was an opportunity to mask an obligation with philanthropy and win popularity, admiration and power. According to his company's CSR report for 2019-20, it spent Rs. 6.75 crore on the Kizhakkambalam panchayat, mainly towards infrastructure de-

distribution system of its own, whereby the residents were categorised and given ration cards according to their financial status.

However, there were allegations that people were denied cards if the company learnt of their allegiance to another political party. In a video in Kerala News 60 TV, a resident says: "They cut my card because I went to hear the MLA's speech."

The party's ward members in the panchayat are given additional salaries by the company. The elected

A take on Indian family dynamics



The film reinforces invisible violence against women

MEDHA NIDHI S

The Great Indian Kitchen, written and directed by Jeo Baby, is a Malayalam movie about a newly married woman (she remains unnamed), who has to navigate through her life of domestic work. The film is perhaps the most satisfying one I have watched in a while.

It is almost like a documentation of women's domestic work - the camera is constantly capturing women cutting vegetables or stirring a pot of rice. It perfectly presents the mundanity and repetition of tasks in a homemaker's life by showing us the same activity over and over again. We get to see different frames from various corners of the kitchen - a long shot of the protagonist washing dishes, an over-the-head shot that shows her overwhelmed by a huge pile of dirty vessels and so on.

The film also portrays the repetitive nature of work through different women. Sometimes it is the mother-in-law, sometimes the daughter-in-law, the domestic help, a relative. The portrayal of this cycle, in which one woman replaces another, seems to be a deliberate choice by the filmmaker to mirror what happens in women's lives. The film moves seamlessly from one kitchen to another, one house to another. It presents a variety of family dynamics - a family where the daughter-in-law is the only domestic worker, a household where the husband shares work and a family where the women of the house cook together.

The protagonist and her husband (Nimisha Sajayan and Suraj Venjaramoodu) have an awkward relationship. The woman does not speak her mind initially and when she does muster the courage, it leads to unpleasantness. The movie presents an interesting contrast bet-

ween the activities of men and women. While the women bustle around the kitchen performing task after task, the men lounge around watching whatsapp videos or performing yoga. Throughout the film, the protagonist is seen working in the house. The only instance when we see her rest is when she is menstruating and a domestic help - another woman - takes her place. While it first seems like the protagonist finally gets a few days of respite because of her period, it eventually turns into a dehumanising exercise when she is imprisoned in a dingy room, forbidden from touching anything or anyone and forced to sleep on the floor.

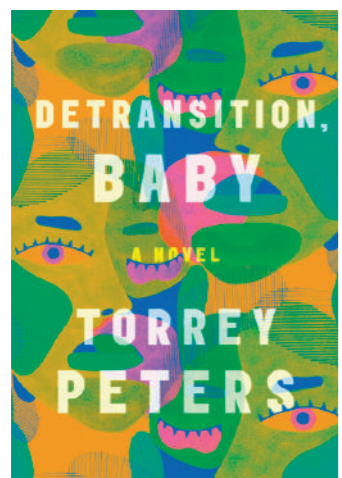
An extremely important sequence of shots towards the end shows family photos of many generations hanging on the wall - husbands and wives smiling pleasantly while the sputtering, steaming sounds of someone cooking is heard in the background. The sequence ends with a picture of the protagonist and her husband at their wedding.

This sequence, to me, sums up perfectly what the central idea of the story is. It is a story about the invisible violence that the family system perpetuates, and about breaking those patterns of oppression.

As I watched this film, I found myself getting angrier with every second that the protagonist stayed silent, much like the simmering pot of sambar that she stirs.

That anger dissipated during the climax, when the protagonist finally finds a cathartic release and manages to avenge herself in her own way. Overall, *The Great Indian Kitchen* is a movie that forces people to think and engage in conversations that go beyond the screen. In many ways, it is more than just a film.

Of gender, family and belonging



MEENATCHI PRABHU

Torrey Peters' *Detransition, Baby* has been long listed for the Women's Prize for Fiction, along with Indian author Avni Joshi's *Burnt Sugar*. What makes the inclusion of Peters' work significant is that she is the first trans woman nominated for the prize.

Detransition, Baby revolves around a detransitioned man and two women, one belonging to cis-gender and another, a trans person. Through the underlying plot of an unexpected pregnancy, forcing the three to become an unlikely family, Peters lays bare the societal insecurities, prejudices and patterns that mark the lives of trans women. The title of the book refers to Ames, previously Amy, detransitioned into a man, struggling to be accepted in society. The reason for his detransitioning is weaved into the story and takes a dig at society which has failed to accept trans women. Ames' character shows the extent to which he is pushed to live in eternal confusion of gender rather than suffer the curse of being himself in a world that cannot accept him.

After detransitioning into a man, it comes as a shock when his girlfriend, a cis woman Katrina, becomes pregnant. Ames' messy and indecisive character and his disorientation with transitioning and detransitioning make him flinch at the gender roles around the word "father," and he finds it hard to accept the new reality. He reaches out to an ex, Reese, a charming, unapologetic trans woman, who had always

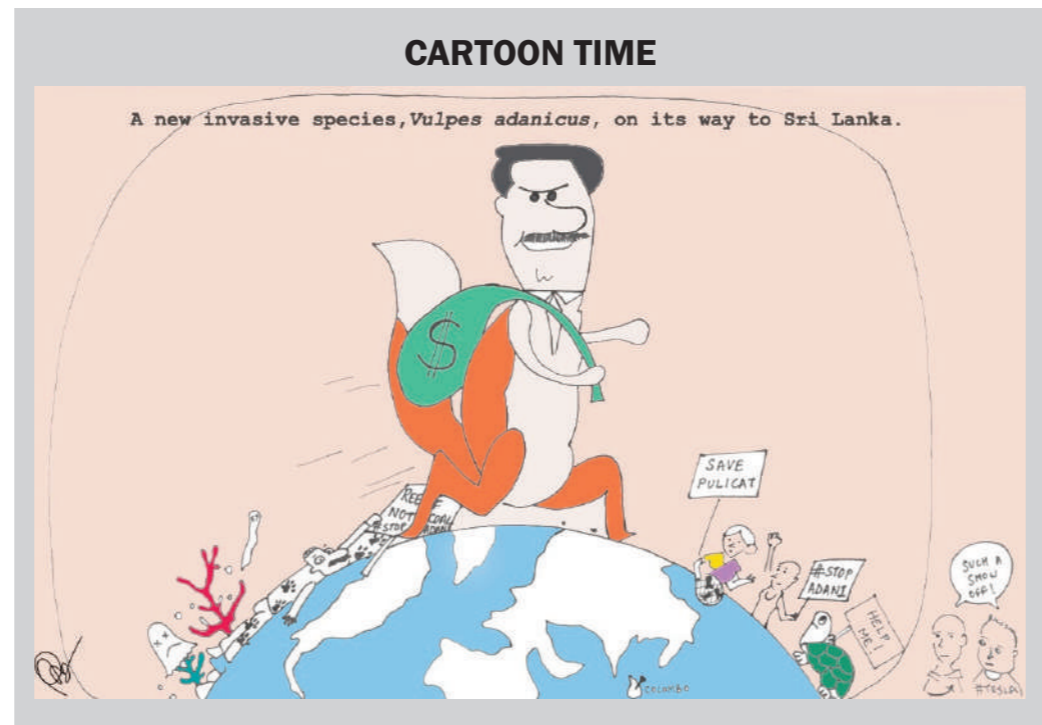
wanted a baby but lacked the biological means to have one of her own and the financial means to adopt one. Reese and Ames are the strongest characters in the book. The author reveals their internal workings, so much so that, at times, it feels suffocating. For a cis woman reading the book, it hits you with the most intimate, vulnerable thoughts and emotional disasters that trans women go through, and you're not quite sure you can handle it. "An outlook in which a state of failure confirmed one's transsexuality, and one's transsexuality confirmed a state of failure."

Peters doesn't try to make her characters likeable; she portrays the mess they are in, their conundrums, their daily battles and their dysfunctional natures. Through Ames and Reese, Peters brings out the innermost horrors and reservations that trans women have. Reese's character, her satirical dialogues and messed-up sexuality bring out the ways in which insecurities play on women's lives. Her desire to be protected and be dependent leads her to violent men in whose hurt and possessiveness she feels at home — desired as a woman. "A veteran of the horrific social gore that results when individuals fight personal battles with unnecessarily political weaponry on a queer battlefield mined with hypersensitive explosives," Peters writes.

Katrina is ridden with her own confusions of this "unlikely family." As the product of a divorce who has had a previous miscarriage, she is faced with the uncertain future of raising her child with Ames and Reese, hardly tenets of stability. Laced with humour, Peters uses some vibrant metaphors to understand trans women. She calls them "juvenile elephants" who, due to the lack of a patriarchal character to give them direction, are traumatised, a "lost generation."

She says "many people think a trans woman's deepest desire is to live in her true gender, but actually it is to always stand in good lighting."

If you're a cis woman looking for an unapologetic glimpse into the lives of trans women and detransitioning, Peters' book would be a good start.



India's biggest mural with a strong message

The 280-metre long facade in Chennai seeks to destigmatise people with HIV

NITIKA GANDHI

We Are: says a life size, black-and-white portrait of half faces, with a red ribbon cross - the symbol of HIV and AIDS awareness - forming the backdrop. The faces smile at you from the wall of the Indira Nagar railway station, Chennai. The vivid red hue of the cross represents the idea of love and affection and runs across the mural on the wall.

The mural is a pictorial display of how people living with HIV deserve their share of equality and dignity.

The coronavirus has also been depicted well with the message that until we acquire herd immunity - that is, until everyone gets vaccinated and is safe - no one is actually safe.

The portraits are a mix of those living and not living with HIV, and drive home the point that we all are human and equal.

All faces in the graffiti sport a serene and youthful smile across the 280-metre long facade. The expressway, which was known only for its peak hour traffic till a few months ago, now carries an art which aims at de-stigmatising

those living with HIV & AIDS by raising awareness.

India ranks the third among the countries with HIV. In 2017, HIV among adults (aged 15-49) was an estimated 0.22 per cent (ANI). Though the figure is relatively small compared to many other middle income countries, it accounts for about 2.1 million people living and battling with HIV because of the huge population of 1.3 billion. Though the condition has slowed down in the last decade, the stigma attached to HIV stays. HIV was first detected in India in 1986 among the female sex workers of Chennai.

Despite the increase in medical facilities, they remain underused due to the stigma that comes with the infection.

According to Deepak Jacob, Project Director, Tamil Nadu State Aids Control Society, "the idea of painting 10 individual faces was to create awareness on HIV and AIDS, how it spreads, how it can be prevented." The railway station was chosen because it was a popular landmark, he said.

Moreover, "the faces are of the common people, the actual survivors, along with non-infected peo-

ple, not models. You can find them on the streets across the city".

The graffiti is the largest panoramic mural of India. It is the result of a combined effort by St+art India Foundation, TANSACS, Tidel Park and the Southern Railway. The art work began in De-

cember 2020, with the support of Asian Paints.

The graffiti is designed by Chennai-based graffiti writer and street artist A-Kill, along with Delhi-based Khatra.

The mural serves the purpose of empowering those living with

HIV and AIDS by sharing their happy faces and diehard spirit.

Abandoning the less fortunate to battle alone is not an option.

Acknowledging the mindset, the mural reflects the theme of this year's World AIDS Day: "Global solidarity, shared responsibility."



The mural on the wall of Indira Nagar Railway Station, Chennai

PHOTO CREDIT: NITIKA GANDHI

Breaking out of opinions

Anti Sterlite protest deaths are waiting to haunt the elections in Thoothukudi

MONA PACHAKE

Lourdammal Vaz(58) from Thoothukudi says that she lost her daughter just because she shouted slogans during the protest which happened three years back on May 22, 2018.

It was against the Sterlite Copper plant run by Vedanta Limited that turned into a blood-bath when the police opened fire killing 13.

Snowlin, the 18-year-old daughter of Vaz, was in the crowd.

This year's state elections will be the first after the incident. As the wheels of democracy grind slowly but inexorably toward election day on 6 April, some people in Thoothukudi remember that day.

"We are not supporting anybody because everybody is the same", said Vincent Miranda (67) who says he injured a leg in the protest. That leg had to be amputated after suffering an injury at work.

He also said that the government as well as the public cared only about the people who died and not about the injured and now he does not care about the elections. He added that the ruling party did not care about them and the other parties were just taking advantage of the incident and making fake promises.

Maria Sophia (27), lost her husband in the protest.

"When we were dying here, the whole media were covering both the leading people in the ruling



The Anti-Sterlite protests had thousands of people taking part in it. PHOTO: Rayner Pachake

party having fun in a function and they themselves did not come and meet or console us but just sent us some money as compensation which we didn't want.", she said. She also added that the politicians have no right to ask them to vote as they did nothing for the protesters, she said.

"Why didn't they think of these votes and elections when they allowed firing?", she added.

But, as with most stories, this story too has two sides as 31-year-old Manoharan, a man who worked in the Sterlite plant and who lost that job when the plant shut down, could well be called the face of the other side.

"I worked there for about five

years and got a very good salary with which I made my family live in their own house," the man, originally from Tirunelveli district, said.

After the incident and sealing the company, neither the company administration nor the government gave them their compensation or support, he said.

"I had to sell my house as we were not able to maintain the family and I got married just one month before the incident," he added.

"Why do the politicians give fake promises assuring government jobs for every family when they don't really care about us and our family? They just like that sealed

the company to justify themselves and forgot us and now why should we think about them and their party?", asks Manoharan. He also said that even the compensation money reached only the families of the people who died and not the others.

The local spokesperson of the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam or the AIADMK, Karunanidhi (46) said that the members from the party helped a lot of people who were affected in the incident but finding and helping every single person would be difficult.

His counterpart in the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) M. Radhakrishnan (60) said, "The government just needed to defend themselves and not accept their fault. From our party we have helped a lot of people and given some of them jobs and paid for their children's education."

DMK is the other pole of Tamil Nadu politics. These two parties have alternated power, with a few exceptions.

Only two years after the protest on Aug 18, 2020, the Madras High Court dismissed Vedanta Limited's plea to reopen Sterlite Copper and the plant was banned in Thoothukudi. We the people here do not want to be treated with discrimination in communities, caste or even political parties but only as the people from the same soil fighting for a cause.

Giveaways & TN elections

"Political parties should focus on providing long-term solutions."

GAUTHAM S

On March 14 2021, the ruling AIADMK alliance said it would give free washing machines to each household with a ration card.

The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) party's main competitor, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam said it would give mobile phones, with free data connection, to government school and college students.

So, how did what started as a social justice measure devolve into competitive handouts?

Former bureaucrat S. Narayan, says in, 'The Dravidian Years', that electoral politics is no longer a matter of social justice, equity, or welfare but, tempting giveaways to attract the voters.

Narayan says that to maintain voter interest, the government of 2011 [AIADMK] onwards appeared to have given up all concerns. This is completely different from the early years when both parties structured initiatives to resolve social imbalances.

In the election manifesto of 2006, the former Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi announced free color TV to every cardholder.

Sathish T K, a Policy Research Assistant at The Peninsula Foundation, said, "Common people benefit from these freebies. If they need a household item, they will start using it when they get it from the government, if they do not need it,

they can sell it and get money for it. It's a win-win situation."

He said that even the government believes that giving freebies does not affect their governance, because Tamil Nadu was adjudged the second best-governed State in India as per the Public Affairs Index-2020 released by the Public Affairs Centre in Bengaluru.

C K Kumaravel, General Secretary (Communications), Makkal Needhi Maiam (MNM), said, "We at the MNM are teaching people how to fish but the other political parties are giving away fish to the people. It will not help them in the long run." He added that charity will not bring a person out of poverty, only education will.

Dr. C Subramanian, a political science professor at Annamalai University, Chidambaram, said, "With all these free schemes, only the taxpayers' money is being wasted. If they want to give people things free of cost, the political parties should pay for them out of their own pockets. Moreover, free giveaways will not help in the development of the State and the country."

Spokespeople for either party could not be reached for comment. Instead, The Word spoke to other party functionaries.

C Bala Manikandan, the DMK youth wing deputy organizer (R.K. Nagar), said that the schemes announced by the DMK this time had long-term benefits such as giving mobile phones to government



DMK and AIADMK released election manifesto. File Photo: The Hindu/ The Times of India

school and college students will help them in staying up-to-date on the studies and current events.

R. Periyannayagam, 162nd Ward Secretary (AIADMK), said that the free schemes help the weaker sections of the society.

He said, "These free schemes are promises of what we will deliver when we are elected again, similar to the welfare schemes that were delivered while we were in power."

R. Varadarajan, a priest at a local temple at Alandur, said that the government should first address the basic problems such as water shortage in the city during summer.

He said, "What will people do with washing machines when there is no water to drink?"

Border tensions descalate

ESHAN KALYANIKAR

KOLHAPUR: Bus services between Kolhapur in Maharashtra to Belgaum in Karnataka resumed Thursday after a brief pause.

Services between the two towns on either side of a hotly contested border were stopped Saturday after a local politician's car was vandalized allegedly by pro-Kannada outfit, Kannada Rakshan Vedike.

Belgaum in Karnataka is claimed by Maharashtra because of its sizable Marathi population.

Since the division of states on linguistic lines in 1956, elements in the two states have periodically argued over Belgaum and 814 surrounding villages. The issue has periodically cropped up because of incidents in the two states and even been the focus of a 2004 Supreme Court lawsuit between the two states.

Saturday's event was one such. It all started following the attack on the car. Ten stones were pelted on state transport buses belonging to both sides.

Then came the pause. Bus drivers in Maharashtra started dropping passengers at the Nipani bypass, a border village in Karnataka, from where passengers had to board a Karnataka state bus.

The dispute between Maharashtra and Karnataka is territorial. But, villagers on both sides say it is not as if this is India and Pakistan and the issues shouldn't escalate.

The Shiv Sena Kolhapur district chief, Vijay Devne, said he and his fellow party workers wrote "jai Maharashtra" on Karnataka buses after the Belgaum incident. He alleged that Marathi speakers get dis-

criminated against in Karnataka.

As one reaches the border of Maharashtra and Karnataka, a visible sign of tension between the two states is on display; a cloth covers the Marathi signboard of a popular restaurant chain.

The restaurant was shut at the time and the management was unavailable for comment.

However, a paanshop owner near the establishment said that the board was covered on orders of local police.

This sentiment is not echoed in immediate border villages. Nobody thinks twice before putting up a Marathi signboard as most of the villagers cannot read Kannada in the first place. However, there are variations in the board every few hundred meters as one moves from a Karnataka village into a Maharashtra village or vice-versa.

Vinod Dhoble is a 34-year-old Marathi-speaking grape seller in Kognoli village of Belgaum district. He says he has never been sidelined because of his linguistic identity, however, he says that he cannot read or write Kannada and it becomes a problem while dealing with government documents.

"It is different with our children now. They can read and write in Kannada," he says.

Noted Kannada activist and senior journalist, Ashok Chandargi, said that the current tension is a result of Shiv Sena's political ambitions to fan the border issues. "There are maximum Marathi boards in Belgaum."

There is no discrimination at large," he said.

He said that common people in both the States should not suffer

due to political issues.

"Officials of both States need to have a meeting to resolve the issue. There should not be any political parties involved," he said.

Maharashtra's claim over Belgaum in Karnataka is based on the idea that there is a relative linguistic majority in Belgaum and surrounding areas was based on Marathi-speaking. Karnataka has maintained that the question of State boundaries was resolved in the States Reorganisation Act which divided states on linguistic and administrative lines.

In 1966, a one-man commission was set up under former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India, Meher Chand Mahajan. The commission had rejected Maharashtra's claim to Belgaum and recommended the transfer of about 260 villages in the border to Maharashtra and about 250 villages in Maharashtra to Karnataka.

The Shiv Sena mouthpiece, Samna, published an editorial on the 16th of March where it demanded Belgaum to turn into a Union Territory till the top court comes out with a decision.

The Centre clarified on the following day in the Lok Sabha that there is no proposal to name Belgaum as a Union Territory.

Ram Gadekar is a Kolhapuri Chappal maker who lives in Kognoli village of Karnataka.

Gadekar says that a lot of chappal makers live in the villages of Karnataka and sell their work in Belgaum or Kolhapur.

"We are fine living in Karnataka. We get cheaper electricity and free electricity for farmers. The water is also cheaper," Gadekar says.

Udaipur ready for destination weddings

BHARAT SHARMA

UDAIPUR: After a year of unpredictable advent of coronavirus, the city of lakes is now prepared to mark an up-tick in its destination weddings.

Organizers of Akshiti Ranaut's (brother of actress Kangana Ranaut) wedding here, 'Axle Tree Events' said destination weddings were on boom previously and then it started declining due to the pandemic. However it again started rising after Isha Ambani, daughter of Mukesh Ambani got married in December in a five-star luxury hotel Oberoi Udaivilas.

Tollywood star Hansika Motwani reached Udaipur on March, 18 for her brother Prashant's wedding with TV actress Muskan Nancy Arora. Other celebrities like Punjabi singer Gurdas Maan, Sukhwinder Singh and Rupali Jaggia also visited the town recently to perform in a marriage event.

Wedding business sector was badly affected due to the pandemic as Udaipur that is known for classic Indian destination weddings was not even able to pull the number of usual marriages last year.

"Recession ho yah inflation ... shadiyaan toh honi hai." (Whether it is recession or inflation ... marriages will happen) dialogue from well known Yash Raj's production film 'Band Baaja Baaraat' turned out to be wrong during rampant spread of coronavirus.

Wedding planner Veneet Nalvaya from Spring Diaries Events said there has been around 60 per cent reduction in his wedding business still. "The fees which we used to charge previously, people are not



Wedding decoration at Hotel Chunda Palace. Photo: Amit Datwani

even ready to pay half of that," he said.

Dinesh Ameta, pundit who performs rituals at local weddings said people who wanted to save their expenses got married during the lockdown however he did not get anyone married during the period.

Significant number of the marriages that will be conducted in the upcoming season (April, May, and June) will be of those that were due to be conducted during the pandemic. Ameta said, "In the month of January (2021), I got daughter of an Assistant Judge of Rajasamand married. She was 25-year-old who belonged to Yadav community and did court marriage during the lockdown."

He further says he has not been booked for any marriages falling in the upcoming season yet. He complains people spend in crores in their weddings but when it comes to pundits, they start bargaining.

Ameta, whose wedding charge ranges from Rs. 11,000 to Rs.

25,000 adds most of the marriage service charges that were less during the previous season (November, December, and January) would climb in the forthcoming season.

Gulab Singh who has been running catering business for 20 years agrees that costing would go up now. "Our labour cost remains the same whether you call 200 people or thousand," he said.

Singh complains he went into loss when he provided the catering services for weddings last season. He describes per plate food price will now be more costly.

The only significant difference that customers will enjoy would be in the costing of raw material because of less number of guests.

Ramesh Sharma who has been running 'Sajawat' tent house for 20 years disagrees with Ameta. He says his prices are still comparatively low and has come down to 30 per cent.

"Previously people used to invite thousands of guests. Since the cap

has been set to invite number of guests, the wedding families are willing to pay accordingly," he said.

Sharma agrees there would be more weddings in the upcoming season than the usual as he tightly booked for months of April and May.

He adds hotels and resorts are affecting the business as they provide all the facilities from rooms till decoration under the one roof.

In terms of precautions that are required to be laid-down in the marriages, Chandraveer Singh, owner at Axle Tree Events said he would place sanitizers with stands at different points.

After the decoration, the whole venue would be sanitized by machine and later the guests would be invited. They will also provide pocket size hand sanitizers and masks in room hampers for the guests.

On arrival COVID testing, virtual streaming of events for guests who cannot attend, and social distancing have become new norms in marriages these days.

Wedding planner Chandraveer says several agencies who offer COVID testing have approached them for screening the guests but they are yet to respond them.

Authorities have set the upper cap of 200 people allowed in a wedding. It is another trick that some families invite more guests and split the number in different functions.

However this is only possible in the local weddings.

The basic difference between destination wedding and local wedding is number of guests in former one is limited.

Migrant labourers paid less wages than TN labourers

GARIMA SADHWANI
ARPIT PARASHAR

Even though Bhola Mehto has just migrated from one part of his country to another, he feels that he is in a different world.

"Chennai nahi China aa gayehai (It's as if we are in China, not Chennai)," he said.

Mehto, who hails from Jharkhand's Hazaribagh district, has been a daily wage labourer for the past twenty years. Before the pandemic, he used to drive a tourist motor-boat in Mumbai. But after the lockdown, he had to leave.

A high school graduate and an Industrial Training Institute Certificate holder, he earns Rs. 850 a day, whereas his local Tamil Nadu counterparts earn at least Rs. 1200.

More than 1.95 lakh migrant labourers work here, according to the

2011 Census report.

He adds that they are not given the employee provident fund, even though the contractor subtracts money from their wages.

Birju Rai (40), who hails from Giridih in Jharkhand, says, "There's just one coal mine back home, how many people can earn by working there?"

He says that they have no choice. He earns Rs. 800 here, and the local labourers earn Rs. 1200. But back home, he would earn only Rs. 300.

Upendra Kushwaha (39), a welder from Chainwa, Bihar, who doubles up as a man-power supplier, wasn't able to manage the expenses of his children's education and his parents' medicine, which is why he had to take up this job.

Ramesh Kumar, of Ranchi, Jharkhand, hides his identity as a blue-collar worker from his family



Migrant workers take a break. Photo: Arpit Parashar

because they think it is below him—a postgraduate—to work in a construction site. "Even here I am earning (only) Rs. 10,000 per month. But it's enough to maintain my dignity in front of my family," he said.

But how do migrant labourers come to these cities? Pankaj

Kumar, a contractor in Dhanbad, Jharkhand, says that most contractors have a network with junior engineers working in construction companies. Whenever there is a man-power requirement, the contractors scout for people in their villages and send them out.

Satish Kumar (33), the contrac-

tor and in-charge of the site, confesses that they have stopped hiring local labourers. They have a fixed schedule, and require wages to be paid daily. But the migrant labourers work for long hours, do overtime and night-shifts and can be paid on a monthly basis.

The labourers say they have not been provided any safety equipment or Covid insurance. They had to pay for boots and safety-vests. Even if they work overtime, they get only Rs. 50 an hour, they said.

"The migrant labourers do not have any political inclinations, which makes working with them a lot easier," he said.

Sharanya Anand, a human rights activist, said, "Whatever solutions are churned out seem to be short term and short sighted. A vision for resolving an issue this grave is key, yet lacking."

"EXPERIENCE IS A BIG THING"

Sitting on the parapet of a wall in Chennai, Sanjay Singh (25), smiles, talking about his future wife. His wedding was supposed to be last year, but it got postponed due to Covid.

This is his first time in Chennai, and working as a labourer. He hails from Jarkunda, Jharkhand, but has spent most of the last 10 years in Mumbai.

He worked as a waiter in a hotel for six months. Then, he worked for four years as a domestic-help, where his employer taught him driving.

After this, he moved to Surat, and worked as a diamond cutter for six months.

He moved back home for a few months, before going to Mumbai again, and worked as a helper on a ship for 1.5 years.

After that he worked as a driver in Dadar, Mumbai, but he left because of the growing anti-Bihari sentiment.

He stayed in his group for 1.5 years. He came back to Mumbai and started working at a Chinese eatery. But was fired when the pandemic struck.

In January 2021, his brother-in-law, a contractor, asked him to go to Chennai. While he would earn an average of Rs 15000 in Mumbai, he hasn't received his wages for the past two months. He works overtime and nightstays on most days.

He wants to work in Nainital someday. And if nothing, he'll find a job as a driver.

After the wedding, he might stay home for a few months and then try to get a job near home.

A brother-sister duo turning the rustic into aesthetic

A brother-sister duo from the lanes of Chandni Chowk nurtures their love for food, travel and photography into something bigger.

RAGHAVI GARG



The year was 2017. Jatin Sharma remembers sitting on a beach in Vishakhapatnam on a sultry evening after being rejected in a Navy interview. He took out his camera and started taking pictures of the horizon with a coconut in the foreground. He walked a little ahead, sat down again and took a few more shots. At that very moment, he realised his passion for photography—food photography, in particular.

In the same year, he collaborated with a friend to start Dawatehind, an Instagram page that channelled their inner passion for food, photography and travel. The page, which now boasts of an 80,000 strong following, is today run by him and his sister Kanika Sharma a.k.a "jeeji" (elder sister). Kanika says that working with family comes with both pros and cons. "However, the best part about working with Jatin is that there is no gender discrimination when it comes to working," she adds.

Dawatehind, what Jatin and Kanika describe as an attempt to bring



forth a nuanced culinary journey, is a well-balanced package displaying street food, homemade food, exotic food with a tint of travel and a Chandni Chowk aesthetic. Their Instagram page is an absolute treat to the eyes because of the colourful and mouth-watering food they post. Going in sync with the changing seasons in the capital city Delhi, their posts range from -fruity popsicles for the fiery summer to hot cappuccino for the freezing winter. Hailing from the busy, old streets of Chandni Chowk, where every house has a different food tale to tell, the brother-sister duo never ex-

pected their desire and way of living to become a means of their livelihood. Jatin and Kanika say that they were not as confident about the place they come from during their childhood but gradually started to embrace the old and raw life of their town.

"It was after I started taking foreigners for heritage walks around the city that I started looking at the most basic of things from a different perspective," says Kanika. We try to adorn our work with an authentic touch of this small place and give our audience a glimpse of this moonlit square, adds Jatin. Most

importantly, however, Dawatehind is about creating an authentic experience. "We believe in unfolding the history and culture of a particular place through their food and eating habits," says Kanika.

Social media may catapult one to fame overnight. But it is also a competitive space. Talking about the social media pressure and the rat-race for gaining followers, Jatin states his mantra, "If the content throughout social media is the same, then the competition is for the number of followers of a creator. But, if the content is something unique, then the competition becomes about who provides better content."

Along with creating content, Jatin and Kanika take food styling and photography workshops, do brand promotions and take tuition classes to manage their expenses. "Doing only brand promotions is a very uncertain task as the payments are not given on time by clients. So we came up with the entire idea of taking workshops and teaching school kids," says the duo. But, erratic payment is not the only stumbling block. Sometimes, weird demands of clients make us turn down their requests, says Kanika. "We were once asked by a pizza brand to do a bizarre shoot; we were asked to dance in our undergarments while holding pizzas!" Jatin adds.

Speaking about their career decisions, Kanika says, "After a lot of reconsideration, we have finally come to terms with taking up Da-

watehind as a job. But our parents are always a little more concerned." For a conventional middle-class Indian family, seeing the world of social media and content creation as a field of expertise and profession is hard, they admit.

However, Shashi Sharma, the duo's mother, has always been very supportive in cooking new recipes and plating the same for a shoot. "She scolds us for not taking certain things seriously but still helps us with all the work. You will often see her hands modelling in many of our Instagram posts!" says Jatin. Not only this, she pitched in the idea of making a studio and contentise our passion.

So, they recently built a studio for shooting at their home. The story goes back to the day of Janmashtami when Kanika had to run

back and forth, wearing a saree, from her mom's room to the kitchen and then to the shooting area in their old Chandni Chowk haveli. The shoot was somehow completed but left everyone really tired. "That is when our mother suggested us to make a professional studio on the ground floor with appropriate lights and ventilation," says Kanika. It has added a sense of seriousness to our work front, and it is much easier to shoot now, she adds.

So how they now define themselves? Both Jatin and Kanika are of the opinion that there is a lot of difference between the terms— influencer and food blogger. "We are neither of the two. We don't consider ourselves so great to be called that. We are just content creators who believe in adding value to honest work," says Jatin.

Recipe

Dawatehind's Mojito Popsicles.

Follow the steps to give yourself a sweet treat!

1. Take a bottle of soda, pour it in a jar.
2. Add sugar syrup (according to taste).
3. Squeeze in some lemon juice and add mint leaves.
4. Stir it all well and transfer in glasses or moulds (whatever is readily available).
5. Add sliced lemon in each



mould (just to enhance the aesthetics).
6. Freeze it till it is solid. Enjoy the delectable popsicles, perfect for scorching summers.

Scrolling through pages

Kamala Menon takes us through lows and highs of inhabiting the world of Bookstagram

A 2018 weekend. Curled under the blanket and completely ignoring my assignments, I scrolled lazily through Instagram, liking dog videos, friends' posts and random TikTok videos.

Then, I spotted something interesting, so I scrolled back. I found a picture of a book that has been on my to-be-read list for a while now, nestling amidst a pile of vibrant books, a cappuccino frothing beside it. The author? Someone called Sumaiyya with the handle @sumaiyya.books.

I read the caption—a detailed, beautifully-written review of the book and a sneak-peek into her current read. It started from there, for me. That post was the key to the door of the vast online community known as Bookstagram, a world that I didn't know existed before this moment.

Discovery of hidden gems

'Bookstagram', as the name suggests, is a small niche of Instagram where bibliophiles come together to discuss and appreciate their never-ending love for books. They do this through a series of eye-catching posts and captions. Bookstagram introduced me to a wide range of genres, encouraging me to read out of my comfort zone.

And I'm not the only one. Kajree Gautom (@paperbacksendpen) from Assam, who has 6,619 followers, has been bookstagramming for four years. For her, Bookstagram has changed her reading preferences and reading habits. "I've started annotating books. A shocker, considering I was one of those readers who wouldn't even let a pencil mark on book pages," said Gautom, who also started reading more books out of her comfort zone due to this online community. "I've also started reading more diverse books and became more conscious of what I'm reading."

Bookstagram has helped bibliophiles discover more genres and hidden gems, which often get missed out due to the domination of much-hyped books. Saimon—who goes by only one name and whose Instagram handle is @zanyanomaly—is one of them. The Chennai-based bibliophile started his Bookstagram account in 2016 when he was in his first year of college. "I didn't really know what Bookstagram was. I just happened to post pictures of the books I was reading at that time. It definitely changed my reading habits and preferences," he said.

A pointless debate

Book blogging has been around for a while on the internet. But Bookstagram, with its hashtags and aesthetic posts, doesn't just encourage a love of reading; the platform also gives bookstagrammers a voice. The danger, of course, is a lowering of boundaries and barriers. Bookstagram, for instance, may make the book reviews found in journals and newspapers less critical. Which, in turn, could change how we—as a society—views literature.

Saimon is dismissive of this discussion and thinks of it as a waste of time and energy. "The internet is a beautiful thing that gives platforms to all of us to talk about the things we love," he said, adding that traditional reviewers were going to have to get used to this trend.

Dr Ashwin Rajeev (@brownboywithabook) from Kerala added that when Internet users spend an average of 2 hours and 22 minutes per day on social networking, then it's only logical to build your audience there. "Social media is per-

meating every aspect of our lives – advertising, marketplace, and also how we consume media," he said.

Unfortunately, however, bookstagrammers are also not given much seriousness; they are also neglected in the sphere of blogging. "I don't understand why some people think bookstagrammers are mediocre reviewers and that we only read fickle books, not serious ones," says Gautom. In her opinion, Bookstagrammers, who are great promoters of books and literature, have changed the publishing and reviewing game. "I think they should be treated with as much importance and acknowledge as any traditional reviewer," she said.

meating every aspect of our lives – advertising, marketplace, and also how we consume media," he said.

Bookstagram does support other bibliophiles and encourage them to read and express more. But it also has its downsides. Saimon recalls the earlier days of Bookstagram with nostalgia. "It was truly glorious earlier," he says. It was simply about posting pretty pictures of books back then; there was no pressure for likes and numbers, no toxic dramas, no engagement groups and excessive follow trains. "It is too weird and saturated now," he said. Rajeev's grouse with the medium is this: pu-

The world of Bookstagramming



Monetising Bookstagram

Another sad reality is that bookstagrammers are not getting paid for their reviews, which is not the case when it comes to 'designated reviewers'. "Publishers often give books in exchange for reviews, no monetary benefit," said Gautom, adding that authors, too, often did not pay. Rohit Dawesar is one of them. "I don't follow such practice as it may hamper credibility in the eyes of genuine readers," he said.

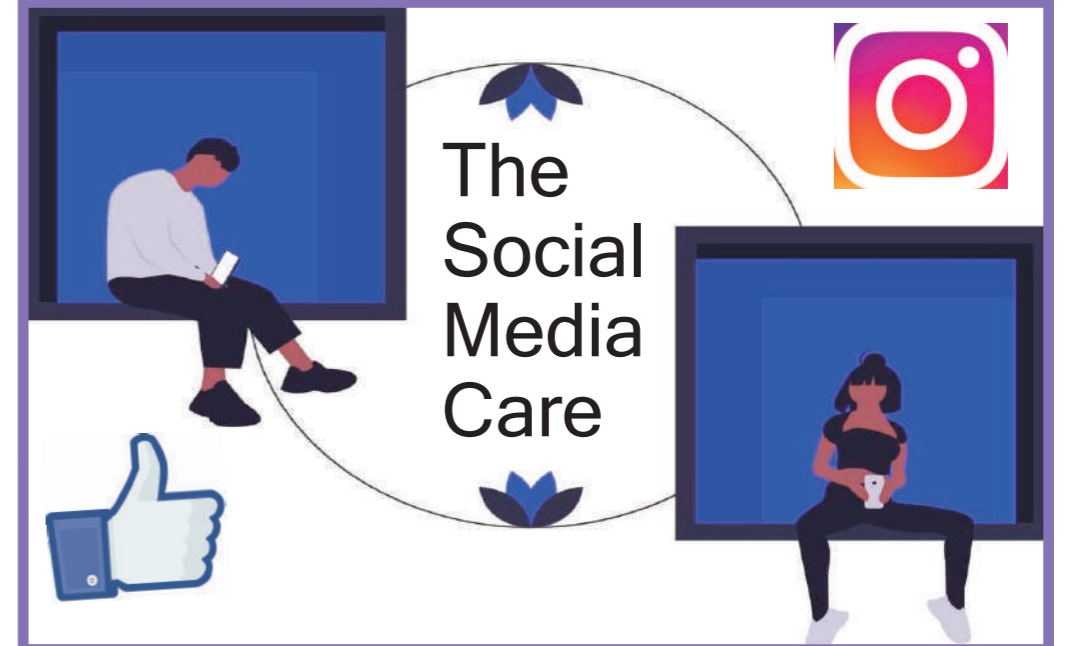
It's seemed that the problem lies in how Bookstagram is viewed from an outsider. Bookstagrammers, even though not considered as the 'normative bloggers', carefully read books to critique and review them. They plan the layouts so that they could give an aesthetic post and promote the book through different other platforms such as Goodreads and Amazon. But sadly, bookstagrammers have to do all this for free, all in exchange for a book. "I think it's high time people realise that bookstagrammers are real bloggers, content creators and give them the same credits that is given to other forms of blogging," added Gautom.

Meanwhile, on the other hand, some bookstagrammers are not interested in getting paid. "I do feel it's not a viable option yet," said Rajeev. He added that his intention behind his Booksta-

gram account was never about monetising his page, anyway. His biggest perk? Review copies from the publisher.

And I agree with Saimon when he said that old Bookstagram, which was all about bibliophiles worldwide expressing how much they love their current reads, was a better place. But in the end, I have to say that I got to meet some beautiful souls and got to discover more books because of this community.

So, I'm not complaining just yet.



PALLAVI KESWANI

As a 21-year-old, social media has crept into almost all aspects of my life. It is, in equal parts, able to provide me with news (albeit misreported at times) and entertainment, as I doomscroll. Last year, the anxiousness of graduation, coupled with the heavy feeling of dread that the pandemic brought, made me explore a topic that had remained on the periphery of my social media feed—mental health. Unsurprisingly, the same platform, which has such a significant effect on my mental health, has also helped me understand its complexities. With a plethora of pages, all seeking to simplify psychological jargon and some even connecting you to professionals, one doesn't need to look too far to get help.

The stigma around mental health is equally deep-rooted in the country, which drove the founders of LonePack, a digital NGO working to "normalise conversations around mental health", as described by Suhas Vaidya, head of social media marketing. The NGO, which exists virtually, without a physical office, is driven not by mental health professionals but by people who are simply passionate about the cause, as Vaidya describes it. "We do have people on our team who have a degree in Psychology or are pursuing the same. We also regularly team up with professional mental health organizations to design our course layout," says Vaidya.

LonePack has also extended its expertise of digital space to their flagship service—LonePack Buddy—a free, anonymous online chat service. "It's a peer to peer support system," explains Vaidya, in which anyone can be a listener after completing a course designed by LonePack. A key feature of LonePack Buddy is the anonymity it provides. Users can

choose to interact with their listener with any desired username. This comfort of secrecy first motivated Kritika (name changed) to try out the service. "I can just speak my mind without the mental baggage of whether the person is going to judge me," she says.

Beyond the online chat service, LonePack also redirects people to professionals when they need to. "Our listeners are trained to gauge whether a person requires professional help, and when a conversation starts heading in a particular direction, they redirect them to the required resources," says Vaidya.

YourDOST is another such platform bridging the gap between their audience and mental health practitioners. With an on-board panel of more than 900 psychologists and life coaches, Suyash Kumar, Marketing in-charge, explains that one of the leading motivators behind the organisation was the "shortage of quality and qualified professionals, and the lack of accessibility in terms of affordability". Like LonePack, YourDOST also provides an online anonymous chat service.

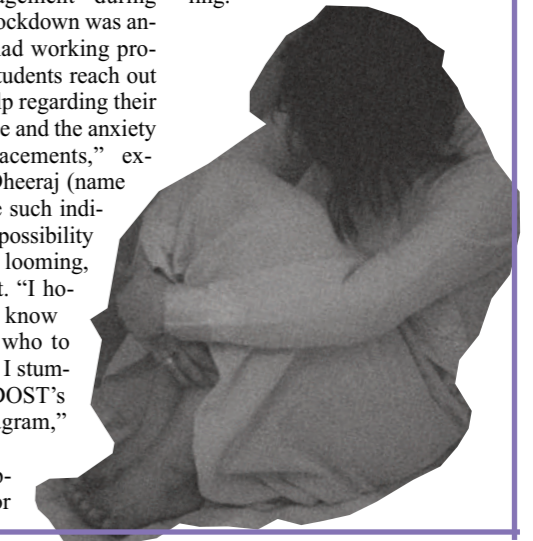
According to Kumar, YourDOST's platform saw a rise of 120% in engagement during 2020, once the lockdown was announced. "We had working professionals and students reach out to us seeking help regarding their work-life balance and the anxiety surrounding placements," explains Kumar. Dheeraj (name changed), is one such individual. With the possibility of retrenchment looming, Dheeraj felt lost. "I honestly didn't know where to go or who to approach before I stumbled upon YourDOST's profile on Instagram," he says.

Besides approaching for

help directly, social media and online platforms have become a way for people to seek help for their kin, explains Shreya, growth leader at MindPeers. MindPeers, an organisation that connects individuals to mental health experts, also provides online tools and modules for self-care. "For example, we have many women approach us for help regarding their mother going through menopause," Shreya continues.

On the other hand, mental health practitioners are united in their view that such online platforms can help start conversations.

However, the process of receiving sustained mental healthcare is a completely different ballgame. "Overall, in the long run, it (online platforms) is beneficial in removing a lot of the stigma in talking about mental health because it normalises this entire experience," says Mahananda Bohidar, a therapist. Actual change, however, is not going to happen by reading stuff online, she adds. "It's going to get you to get started, but coming close to any therapeutic goal? Then that inner work needs to happen in therapy or other forms of inner work like meditation or journaling."



SEEING BEYOND RED AND WHITE LETTERS

How the new artwork on Marina beach has united Chennaiites

R SAI VENKATESH

A two-minute walk from the Lighthouse signal, on the pavement adjacent to the perfectly tarred 13 km long Chennai's Marina Beach Road, one can see the 11-letter-long typography artwork. The distinctive colours—scarlet and white—and the catchiness of the phrase, Namma Chennai, make it a perfect selfie point for Chennaiites.

Teenagers and IT workers usually flock here on weekdays while couples visit on weekends. Some of them climb up the three steps on which the art structure is placed, devoid of glass or chain protection and hand their smartphones to their partners to get their photos clicked. Some just click a selfie. All photos will mandatorily show these two words in their background.

Diving deeper

Namma Chennai, as the name

suggests, means "Our Chennai". The Tamil word nammais written in the Dravidian script, while Chennai is written in English, a red-white fusion of the ancient and the ubiquitous. The artwork is the brainchild of St+art India, a non-profit organisation that aims to fill Indian streets and walls with art, art that speaks.

Like many of their other artworks across Indian cities, the Namma Chennai is also designed with a motto of inclusiveness. As Vikas, a member of the organisation points out, imparting free art to all has always been a motive. As a part of their 'I Love Chennai' typographic series installed across different cities in the country, akin to New York city's "I Love New York", St+art India decided to try their hands on indige-

nous options.

Vikas jokingly recalls how their initial plan was to install the typo, 'Love Chennai' instead of Namma Chennai, with the word 'love' in Tamil script. They have already erected an installation in Mumbai that says "Love Mumbai", the word 'love' in Devanagari. "We had to change it later as the idea of love in Chennai did not receive the welcome we expected", Vikas states.

This was what led to these metallic (blended-steel) letters, finally settling for 'Namma', supported by Chennai at the bottom, finding a home on a raised pavement surrounded by stalls and crowd and filled with the soothing Marina breeze.

A wave of emotions

Those who click selfies here have their reasons. Harish from Jaipur, who has been a resident of Chennai for the past eight years, clicks a selfie with his friend to show people that they are in Chennai. For a local sprinter, who takes a momentary break by detouring for a selfie here, the structure is nothing more than a mere medium for that day's Instagram or Whatsapp status. Stall owners smile when people—after clicking selfies—stop for a quick bite at their stalls

The artwork also attracts opinions from many. For Prajwal, a typography art specialist, the overlap of Namma's 'Na' and Chennai's 'H' denotes a waving flag. But for an artist and designer like Reshma Madhu, a graduate from the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), there is nothing much to infer. "However, it still holds art, enough to attract crowd", she says.

Another group—college students who resemble pullingo, a slang for typical teenagers from North Chennai who sport spiky hair, wear skinny jeans and street race on their Dio bikes—aren't very impressed. "Brother, the sea that you see behind (Marina), is more attractive than this", said one of them.

Kids, who visit Marina, treat this artwork as an extension of a playground. Encouraged by parents, they climb on it to pose for pictu-



A family getting their photo clicked at the Namma Chennai selfie spot. Photo: R Sai Venkatesh

res. This irks Murali—the only security guard posted here for day duty. He relentlessly tries to chase them away. And it isn't just the children who stress him out. He also has to deal with gyrating pullingo and other over-enthusiastic sightseers, whose stunts come dangerously close to damaging the structure. Thus, for Murali, the artwork is just chaotic.

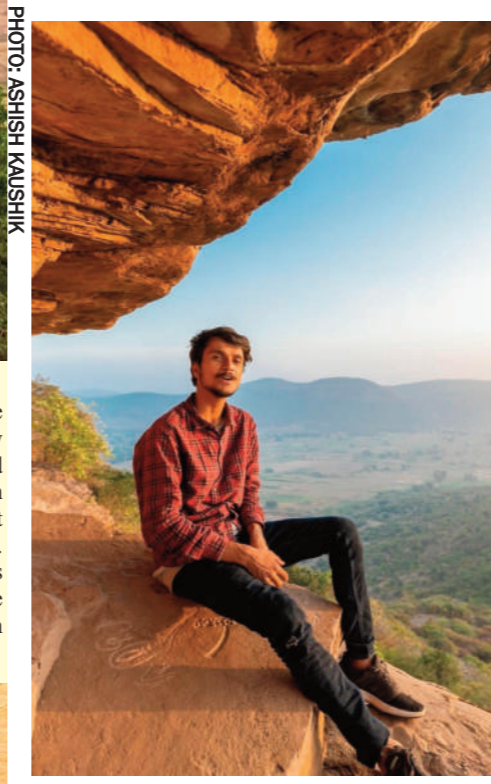
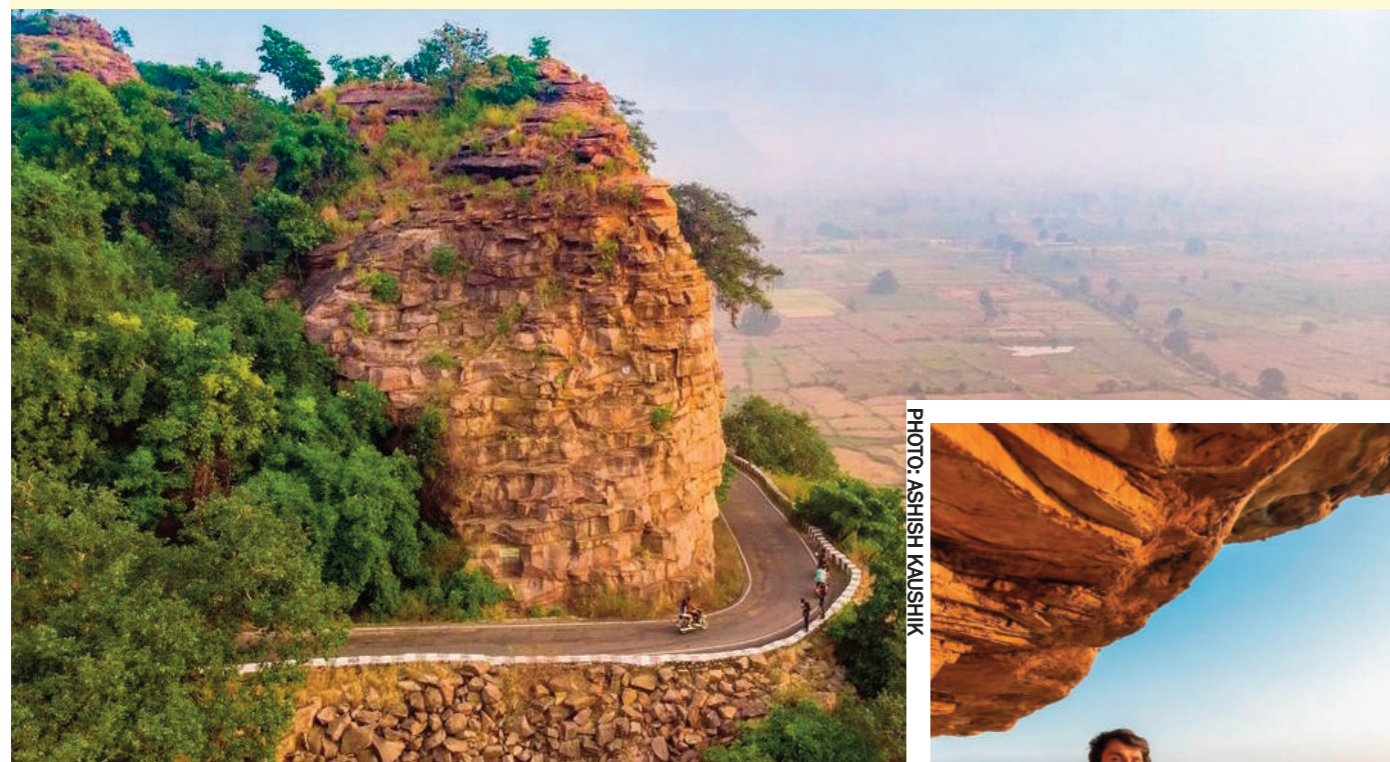
Despite differing thoughts, the typo art does instil in some visitors what Chennaiites call the Chennai gethu, a proud feeling of being a resident of Chennai for long, similar to Anirudh Ravichander's Chennai City Gangsta song that resonates the same feeling.

Amid a downpour of emotions, the Namma Chennai structure, illu-

minated by neon street lights, unite people who otherwise hurriedly move about, minding their own businesses. Be it through a selfie or by instilling a momentary Chennai gethufel, the artwork serves beyond its purpose. Maybe this is why Honest, a teenager from a nearby Kuppam in the area, states, "They have one in Kovai (Coimbatore's 'I Love Kovai'). We (Chennaiites) wanted one too, and now we have got it."

Rediscovering Bihar through pictures

Ashish Kaushik, a travel filmmaker, helps bring Bihar to the forefront



RIMJHIM SINGH

"Raw photo is always respected in the photography society; likewise, Bihar, a raw state, has an unimaginable potential," says travel filmmaker Ashish Kaushik. It was with this idea that Ashish Kaushik began his journey as a photographer, breaking many stereotypes in the process. Kaushik, under the Instagram handle, 'The Undiscovered', is awakening Bihar by exploring forgotten cultures and places of the state through his pictures. He has finished around 100 projects, ranging from Bihar's unseen waterfalls to Bihar's contribution in Second World War.

Kaushik, a leading cinematographer and tourism researcher of Bihar, was born and brought up in the state. "While studying in Loyola, I failed in class 12th. This result shattered my family and me, and I somehow lost interest in life". After discussing the idea with his family, he finally got into the Asian Academy of Film and Television, Noida. There was no looking back from there. "The main reason to opt for this course was to make people realise that there is so much in Bihar, which is still undiscovered and hidden from the public. I knew I have to make people acknowledge the culturally-rich state that Bihar is."

Photography had always been a passion, ever since school. So, in the initial days of the course, cramming in camera basics and technical terms was all he was interested in. A gift from his friend—a D5200 Nikon camera, his first—changed everything for him.

The idea of rediscovering Bihar through photographs struck him on his first day of college. "I introduced myself as a boy from Bihar,

and people glanced at me. The looks on their faces conveyed much more than they said through words", he remembers. But there were questions, many of them, all deeply unflattering.

"These questions made me realise that something must be done to project Bihar in a way that people have not seen or heard of," he says. He then took to social media to reach youngsters in his quest to help project his state. In 2017, he collaborated with many youngsters and social media influencers to remove the notion of Bihar being a backward state with no cultural charm.

In 2018, he started 'Bihar Undiscovered'. He travelled through the state, camera in hand, covering many of its remote and rural sections. "I have visited almost 60 per cent of the cities and towns of Bihar, and I plan to cover the rest in the next four years."

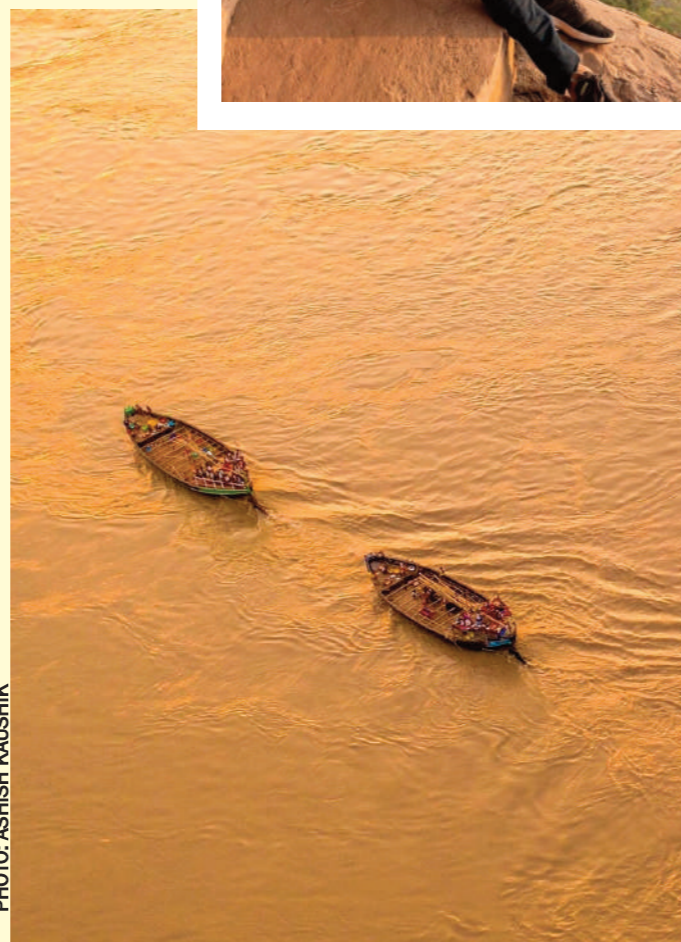
Talking about his experience of visiting a new place, he said, "I always visit a place multiple times as you often tend to miss details in the first visit. Every visit makes me see a new angle, new features." He has visited Gaya 13 times, for instance, he says, and has always returned home with new pictures and experiences.

Every picture speaks a million words and Kaushik lives by these words.

"The history of my state has never been documented by anyone and I want to do that," he says.

With around 20k followers on Instagram, Ashish Kaushik plans to expand his reach in the next two years by collaborating with other social media celebrities. He also wants to establish a substantial production company in Bihar as he

feels that his state has abundant raw talent and if shaped properly, it can yield many great artists, he believes. "My current focus is to help grow the tourism sector in Bihar," he says.



From top to bottom: Kaimur Hills, Bihar; Ashish Kaushik; Commuters crossing Ganga

PEOPLE WITHOUT BORDERS



Once a fledgling community of traders in India, now a microscopic-minority, the Indian-Armenians take pride in their heritage.

S. N. THYAGARAJAN

On January 7th the Armenian church in Chennai was decorated with Christmas lights and a Christmas tree that looked rather. As I walked towards the sanctum sanatorium of the church, I saw a small garden, that was surprisingly peaceful for a monument located in the middle of a busy market place. Before entering I noticed a few Roman and Armenian inscriptions, a few paces down, I realised they were tombstones of Armenians, who built the church in 1792.

A church service was in session, and I could hear the cheerful trill of Christmas carols, though I could not understand the language they were singing in, I instantly realised this was different.

Christmas comes late for the Armenian community—they celebrate the festival 12 days after the rest of the world and have done so, world over, for over 1800 years. However, I realised that all that might be left of this historically relevant community will just be the tombstones I saw as I was entering the church.

How Armenians come to India?

Legend has it that when Sarmad Khasani, an Armenian Jew turned Sufi saint, was beheaded on the orders of Aurangzeb, he picked up his severed head and started to climb the stairs of the Jama Masjid. Even though Aurangzeb ordered the execution of Sarmad, he would permit the Armenians to settle down at Saidabad in Bengal.

His great grandfather, Akbar, was the first Indian emperor to invite Armenians to settle down in India. It was in the court of Akbar, that Armenians gained great positions. One of Akbar's wives Mariam Zamani Begum, his chief justice Abdul Hai and

his friend Hakobjan were all Armenians. This culminated in Akbar granting lands to Armenians to build a church in Agra in the year 1562, however the church is now lost to time.

Saudamini Jain in her article in the *Hindustan Times* writes that by the time the news of the riches of the Mughal empire spread to Armenians in other parts of the world, the empire was already in decline. They found new trading partners in the British East India Company and would eventually shift base to cities like Surat, Kolkata and Chennai. Armenians would go on to settle in parts of

cause other micro-minorities like Parsis, Anglo-Indians and Jews had deeper ties with country's heritage. As the nation started looking inwards, the demand for the goods that the Armenians traditionally traded in had waned, and they had to look for other sources of income.

Today, only a few people of Armenian origin remain in India—less than 500. There are just 6 Armenians living in Chennai now and less than 100 living in Kolkata, where the members of the community are still active. "My great grandmother came to India in the 1940s. Her children married Anglo-Indians and Indians, so I am more Indian than Armenian. Same is the case with most traditional Armenians here in India," said Stephan, a member of the community.



Middle: Rev. Fr. Movses Sargsyan, Pastor of the Armenian Church in India and Rev. Fr. Artsrun, with worshippers at the Annual religious service at the Armenian Church of Chennai.

India almost till the end of the Second World War.

The Armenians of Chennai
The Armenian connection with Madras dates back to the 1600s, when merchants arrived by sea to trade in jute and silk, spices and precious stones writes Vinita Govindarajan. The only remnant of the Armenian community in Chennai is the church and the street where it is located. The Armenian street now goes by the name "Aranmanaiakaran theru," which translates to the street of the palace man.

The first Armenian leader was the magnetic Kojah Petrus Woskan, who was responsible for the strong relationship the community had with the British. Woskan was also known for building the first bridge across the Adyar river and the flight of 160 steps up the St Thomas Mount.

However, once the British left India in 1947, the Armenians found themselves isolated be-

Many Armenians migrated to India after the first and second world wars, many of them married Anglo-Indians, Hindus and Parsis, so they find it difficult to trace their lineage back to the Armenians who settled in India during the medieval age.

However, the Armenian legacy in India is kept alive by the institutions they established and the places of worship they built in Chennai and Kolkata.

These institutions started running short of students in the 1980s, when many members of the community started migrating abroad. "These premier institutions were running short of students, so they invited students from outside to study," said Stephan. Though worried about the future of the institutions, he also knows this. "Only a third of Armenians live in Armenia, the rest of us live all across the world. So I guess one nation does not bind us."