



Are education loan waivers feasible

Page 2



Drug-resistant TB on the rise

Page 3



Madras Literary Society in ruins

Page 4

Big 'no' to manifestoes

74% respondents feel NEET exam not an important election issue

CHIYA AHUJA
LEAH THOMAS
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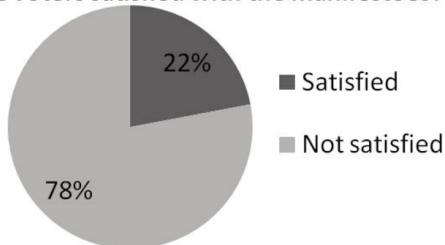
CHENNAI: Seven out of 10 people are unsatisfied with the manifestoes released by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) for the April 18 General Elections, according to a sample survey conducted by The Word.

The major promises made by the parties include abolition of the NEET examination, introduction of reservation in private sector jobs, waiver of educational loans taken from nationalised banks and introduction of Tamil language in the High Court and Central Government offices.

About 78 per cent of the 174 respondents chosen at random from Chennai North, Chennai Central and Chennai South constituencies in the city said that the manifestoes failed to address the civic issues which plagued the city.

"There is no water in the city. Roads are in a bad condition and garbage is all over the place. What

Are voters satisfied with the manifestoes?



is the point of the manifestoes if they don't talk about these issues?" said Rajamani, an auto driver in the Chennai Central constituency.

Incidentally, the ruling AIADMK government has not conducted local body elections since October 2016. Local councillors are usually responsible for civic maintenance in their wards. But now the Greater Chennai Corporation's work is supervised by a Commissioner appointed by the State Government.

Around 128 respondents said that the abolition of NEET is not an

important factor in the election.

"The NEET exam is conducted all over the country and the State Government is now taking efforts to improve the educational standards. So, now it is up to students to prepare for it," said Abhinav Ravendran, a college student from Royapuram in Chennai North.

The rival parties have promised to exempt Tamil Nadu students from the NEET examination, as they feel that the State Board school students will not be able to compete with students from the CBSE and other streams across the

country.

Seventy per cent of the respondents said that the promise to solve the job crisis in the State by introducing reservations in private sector jobs was not feasible.

"The government is not able to implement reservation in private educational institutions. How can they implement reservations in private companies?" asked Marimuthu, a mechanic from Alwarpet.

To attract younger voters in the State, the Dravidian parties have promised to waive educational loans taken by SC, ST and OBC students from nationalised banks. According to the Union Finance Ministry, Non-Performing Assets (NPA) in education loans stood at 17 per cent by the end of 2017-18.

As many as 117 respondents in the survey pointed out that such promises had been kept in the past.

"This is not the first time such a promise has been made. Voters have less confidence because they have failed to implement them in previous attempts," said Sudha Srinivasan, an officegoer from Egmore.

New building rules shrink public spaces

HARSHITA MISHRA

CHENNAI: A new development plan passed by the State Government has relaxed the limit for minimum open space reservation norms which mandates gifting 10 per cent of the land to local bodies.

Under the Combined Development and Building Rules, 2019, only builders with more than 10,000 square metres of land are required to gift 10 per cent of it to the local bodies. Earlier, the limit was 2500 square metres, and the land was given to local bodies by way of gift deeds.

The government order, which was passed recently stresses the need to 'ensure more efficient and sustainable utilization of scarce land, ensuring effective enforcement of regulations relating to development and building construction and to promote ease of doing business in the State.'

Open Space Reservation land is used by the local bodies to build parks, playgrounds, recreational centers for public use and help

maintain open spaces in urban cities. The new norm exempts builders with less than 3000 square metres from following the 10 per cent regulation.

Further, builders with plots between 3000 and 10,000 square metres can either gift the 10 per cent land for public use, or pay an equivalent amount to the registration body based on existing rates.

In addition to that, the rules have also excluded road area from the total land to be calculated for the purpose. K.M. Sadhanand, a town planning expert, says that in a layout of about 10 hectares, 20 to 30 per cent is occupied by roads. This leads to an exemption of almost 40 per cent.

"Altogether, one third of any building area is occupied by roads as a rule of thumb. The new move will lead to crowding of urban spaces all over the State," he says.

In Chennai city, there are only about 150 builders who construct on plots over 10,000 square metres. The rest are small and medium builders who operate on holdings

ranging from 3000 sq. metres to 5000 sq. metres.

M. Andarasan, a Chennai-based builder, says that despite the previous norm the public parks were mostly built by builders themselves and the new order will give builders more control over their land.

However, S. Ramanathan, Deputy Secretary of Municipal Administration and Water Supply Department says that the decision was taken after the concurrence of the government and resident bodies. "It will not lead to concretization of open lands as the deciding committee under the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority took the approval of residents," he said.

The plan brings all the building and construction rules under one umbrella across the state.

Earlier, they were governed by separate bodies. Officials say that about 70 per cent of the regulations which were overseen by the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority have been amalgamated into the Act.

Row over mall in park

JOYDEEP BOSE

CHENNAI: The Chennai Metro Rail Limited (CMRL), indifferent to an RTI and a writ petition filed in protest by Shenoy Nagar residents against it last year, continues the construction of an underground amenities centre and multi-level parking lot in Thiru Vi Ka Park.

The proposed two-storey underground commuter amenities centre, with a shopping mall, restaurants, and parking facilities for two-wheelers and four-wheelers alike, will once again come at the expense of the Park, which was a major lung space.

"The Thiru Vi Ka Park has been unavailable for us for almost over nine years now, after it was taken over for metro rail construction work," said Ashok Vardhan, a resident of Shenoy Nagar. "After the work for the Koyambedu-Nehru Nagar line was completed two years ago, they promised to restore the park but instead of doing that, they have now undertaken a new project."

According to several locals, the Park used to be a paradise for morning walkers. Several public meetings and cultural activities used to be conducted here.

But with the construction work starting in 2011, not only was their leisure space demolished, but they also had to deal with the unwanted noise, dust and construction debris.

Narendra Kumar, a pawn broker and long-time resident of the area, said, "They (CMRL) never consulted us before undertaking



Thiru Vi Park before it was taken up by the CMRL | THE HINDU

any of these projects. Shenoy Nagar was originally built to be a spacious residential area with a 10 to 15-foot gap between the houses, and the Park as a recreational space for the residents. I spent my childhood playing in that Park, and now it has turned into a site for construction projects."

That the current project is being undertaken solely for corporate profit and not for "public benefit" is what resident activist Rangashree Srinivas suspects.

"For the locals, the Park has always been of utmost importance. Who stands to profit from a premium shopping and recreational centre? It is being constructed under the pretext of a "civic amenity" when it is, in fact, not so," says Srinivas.

Mrs. Srinivas said that they had filed an RTI in 2018 demanding

why promises of renovating the Park were not fulfilled and seeking the name of the government body responsible for sanctioning the new project. It also asked if an assessment report was drawn to check the potential damage that the project could have on air quality and groundwater table.

"The RTI has been left unanswered and we filed a writ petition against the CMRL last month," said Mrs. Srinivas. "We are distributing pamphlets, organizing awareness meetings and holding protest walks against police permission. We are determined to take the fight to them to get our Park back."

Last year, the Murasoli Maran Park in Perambur and the Lone Square Park in George Town were taken over by the CMRL for the construction of the metro station.

People pay twice to clear garbage

DEEKSHA SHYAM

CHENNAI: People living in Sembakkam on the southern outskirts of Chennai have been told to pay the municipality a fee for collecting garbage in the area.

The Sembakkam Municipality has added the garbage collection fee to the property tax, with retrospective effect from July of the previous fiscal year.

This fee is in addition to the Rs. 30 a month paid to the garbage collectors in the first week of every month. The Municipality has informed the residents that they have to pay Rs. 90 for the last 3 months of the first half of 2018-19 and Rs. 180 for the second half as outstanding payment, along with the property tax and garbage fee for 2019-20.

R. Rajendran, a house owner, complained that he was being forced to pay the garbage collection fee for July to March 2018 again to the Municipal Corporation, even though he had already paid the monthly Rs.30 to the garbage collectors themselves.

He said that when he went to inform the Corporation, along with a few more residents, they were told that these were the government's orders and they had no choice but to pay the additional fee as well.

"When I told him I wouldn't pay the extra amount, he very curtly told me that I couldn't pay my property tax without the garbage fee, so if I didn't agree to pay that, I'd default on my tax payment as

well," said Rajendran. "He doesn't care if I pay it all or not, the problem later would still be on my head."

A. K. Subramanian, the father of a house owner residing in Canada, said that the cashier of the Corporation told him to take his complaints to the higher-ups, because he was just doing what he had been instructed to do.

"It won't make any difference if I complain to a higher authority," said Subramanian. "The entire matter will keep running in circles for several months till I will eventually have to pay. I might as well do it now itself and save myself the trouble."

The Revenue Inspector of the Sembakkam Municipality, V. Kirubakaran, however, said that the overcharging had happened only for a month or two in between. "The State Government had sent us orders to combine the garbage collection fee and the property tax in 2018, but due to some issues in their level, we were unable to implement it on time," he said. "There has been an overlap of about one or two months, but unfortunately we can't do anything about it."

He refused to comment on the claims of the residents of a 9-month overlap.

M. R. Vasanthi, Municipal Commissioner of the area, said that the Municipality would not be able to return the money that was charged extra from the residents and apologized for the inconvenience.



From left to right: C.P.Chandrasekhar, N.Ram, Sashi Kumar, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Krishna Prasad | HIMALI SINGH

'Social media the new news source'

MANJIRI CHITRE

CHENNAI: As many as 68 per cent of English speaking internet users in India surveyed by Reuters use smart phones as their main device to access news, while 31 per cent used only their mobile phones for accessing news.

The recent annual report by the Reuters Institute on Digital News for 2019 found out that "Facebook and WhatsApp are particularly widely used, with 75 per cent of respondents using Facebook (and 52 per cent saying they get news there), and 82 per cent using WhatsApp (with 52 per cent getting news there)." Other popular social media platforms for news include Instagram (26 per cent), Twitter (18 per cent), and Facebook Messenger (16 per cent).

In his presentation at the Asian College of Journalism, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, said 50 per cent of the respondents shared and commented on online news, with particularly high levels of engagement on Facebook and WhatsApp. But many expressed concerns that they would get into trouble with the authorities by making their political views known openly and that friends and family would think differently of them.

"Mainly the people under 35 years of age depend on social media applications to access news," he said.

Nielsen said there were "very high concerns" over "fake news"

and various forms of disinformation. People said that they were concerned about this, both online and offline.

However, the most widely used online news sources are generally the websites of leading legacy media including broadcasters and newspapers, revealed the survey. A significant number of respondents said that they wish to consume more personalized news alerts and support news organisations.

After Nielsen's presentation, there was a panel discussion with N. Ram, Chairman, The Hindu Publishing Group; C.P. Chandrasekhar, Professor of Economics, Jawaharlal Nehru University; Krishna Prasad, former Editor-in-Chief, Outlook; and Sashi Kumar, Chairman, Asian College of Journalism.

Referring to the finding that 68 per cent of the respondents used smart phones to access news, Krishna Prasad said "It is important to know what kind of journalism the users are responding to. This survey is an interesting way to find out about how Indians perceive the media."

The Reuters Institute said that the report was based on a survey of 1,013 English-speaking, online news users in India. "Our respondents are generally more affluent, have higher levels of formal education, are mostly male, and are more likely to live in cities than the wider Indian population and our findings only concern our sample, and thus cannot be taken to be more broadly representative."

City school bans online food delivery services

DEEKSHA SHYAM

CHENNAI: A Chennai school has banned parents from ordering lunch for their children through apps like Swiggy and Uber Eats.

The principal of Chettinad Hari Shree Vidyalayam in Raja Annamalaipuram, Ms. Gowri Sivashankar, sent a mail to parents of students from class 2 to class 12 on March 15, informing them that food ordered for their wards through the apps would not be allowed in the school.

According to Ms. Sivashankar, this had become a problem only recently. "This wasn't an issue four years ago, when I joined the school as the principal," she said. "These delivery boys became fairly regular only recently."

Ms. Sivashankar's mail read, "It has been brought to our notice that parents order through Swiggy and Uber Eats for food to be delivered in school for their children, for

various reasons, during lunch breaks. This will not be entertained and the ordered food will be sent back. The receptionist has been instructed not to accept these deliveries. Kindly note that the above is with immediate effect. Request compliance."

P. Sharon, an alumnus of St. John's Matriculation Hr. Sec. School, Mandaveli, said that getting their lunch delivered to school was a huge thing even when she was in school. "This used to be an issue as early as 2012," she said.

"Swiggy, of course, didn't exist then, but a lot of students would order from places like Pizza Hut and Subway for lunch. The school didn't do anything much, though. They were mostly indifferent," Sharon added.

She also mentioned that though this was common in her school, most other schools didn't allow this back then.

Ms. Meenakshi Raman, principal of Zion International Public School, Selaiyur, said

that this was an issue that was slowly spreading across the city, and should be nipped in the bud before it became uncontrollable.

The main problem with food delivery in schools is not the nutritional aspect but security, she said.

"How can we allow so many unknown people inside school premises when we have the responsibility to watch over around ten thousand children? Even if students pick up their food outside school premises, it will amount to around 10-15 delivery boys and a hoard of students at the gate. That kind of confusion is the perfect opportunity for something untoward to happen."

Ms. Raman feels that this could also increase the feeling of inequality.

"Everyone cannot afford to order food from outside for their children every day, and this could cause discord among students, or in families."

DMK will bring economic progress: survey

CHIYA AHUJA
JAYAKUMAR MADALA
LEAH THOMAS

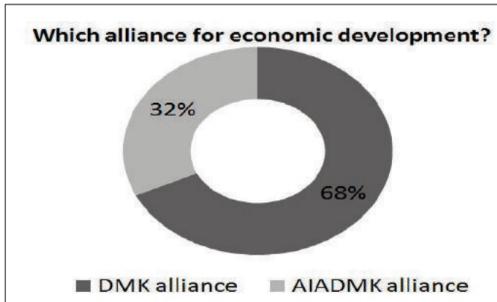
CHENNAI: As many as 112 out of 174 or 68 per cent of the respondents in a sample survey conducted by *The Word* feel that the Secular Progressive Alliance led by the DMK will bring in better economic development in the State.

The election scheduled on April 18 is set to see tough competition between two major alliances—Secular Progressive alliance (DMK and Congress) and AIADMK alliance (AIADMK, BJP, PMK and DMDK).

Over 170 voters were picked at random Chennai North, Chennai Central and Chennai South for the survey and asked for their opinion on the election manifestoes of the two alliances.

“The AIADMK alliance includes the BJP, which brought in GST (Goods and Services Tax) and demonetization. So, I don’t want to vote for such an alliance,” said Sundaram, a shop owner from Mylapore.

Another respondent, businessman Shibu Isaac, said that the last four years had been difficult for his security firm. “Hopefully a change in the government would



mean a change in fortunes,” said the Thiruvanniyur resident.

Apart from proposals like the abolition of the NEET examination and the introduction of reservations in the private sector, both parties have also promised to make Tamil one of the official court languages in the State and an official medium of communication in all central and state government offices.

Similar promises were made during the 2014 elections without any tangible result. Despite this, 74 per cent of the respondents still feel that the recognition of the language remains an important factor in the coming elections.

“Though it may look like a small change, recognition of Tamil will help people seeking services

from government offices. Hopefully, the winning party will try to implement their promises,” said Narayana Murthy, a voter from Triplicane constituency.

Another respondent said the imposition of Hindi by the Centre was unfair when there were so many regional languages in the country.

Moreover, regardless of the promises made in the manifestos, many respondents feel that there have been issues that have not been touched at all.

“Regulating TASMAs (Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation) throughout the State, reduction of stamp duty for home registrations, research and development for the agriculture and electronic

industries—these are among a few important issues that have not been raised,” said a respondent in the survey.

Civic issues, especially, the scarcity of water in the city, had not been addressed at all.

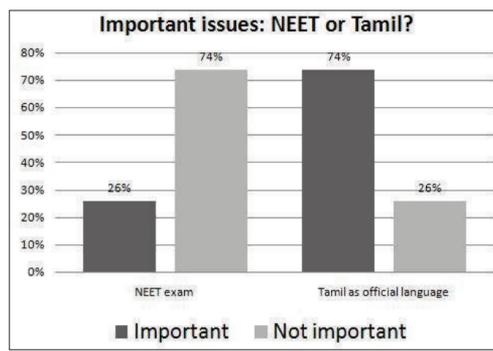
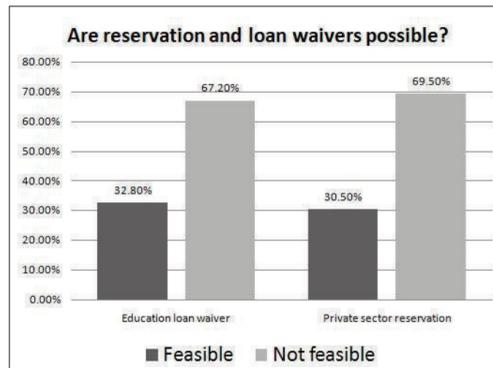
“There is all this talk about the Cauvery-Godavari linkage project but nobody talks about the depletion of groundwater in the city. Manifestos should be addressing problems that affect everyday life,” said Maria Joseph, a student from Adyar.

In fact, in 2018, the NITI Aayog warned that Chennai would be among the many cities that will run out of groundwater by 2020. Chennai’s per capita water supply has already plunged to 60 litres a day, this year. The per capita requirement is around 120 litres.

Interestingly, few respondents also stated their dissatisfaction with the Prime Minister’s announcement changing the name of the Chennai Central railway station to Dr MGR Railway Station.

“Changing names have become the norm under the current regime. It is little use to the people,” added Joseph.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his visit to Chennai earlier this month, had announced the decision to rename the station.



ON THE BATTLEFIELD

Chennai North:
DMK Alliance: Kalanidhi Veerasamy (DMK)
AIADMK Alliance: R. Mohanraj (DMDK)

Chennai Central:
DMK Alliance: Dayanidhi Maran (DMK)
AIADMK Alliance: Sam Paul (PMK)

Chennai South:
DMK Alliance: Thamizhachi Thangapandian (DMK)
AIADMK Alliance: Jayavardhan Jayakumar (AIADMK)

Still a long way to go for transgenders

DEEPIKA AGARWAL

CHENNAI: A part of the transgender community feels that its demands have not been included in the party manifestos ahead of the upcoming general elections. There are no provisions in the manifestos for reservation in educational institutions and for legalization of marriages and adoption of kids. Nila, a transgender and the founder of Pharm Foundation, said that the most affected was the Jamath community comprising the runaway transgender. “They mostly engage in begging and sex work. Their families do not give them their identity cards and educational certificates which prevent them from getting jobs.”

Nila added that the Social Welfare Department took more than six to seven months to provide the third gender identity card.

“Every time we call them, they say there are 100 people in the queue. Mostly the doctors do not



Olga (third from the right) with her teammates at the District Social Welfare Office. | OLGA

turn up for screening the people. This is how the process keeps getting delayed. This has to be dealt with,” Nila added.

Olga, a transwoman and founder of the Bravoh movement said that the demands of the transgenders went unnoticed by the Government because they were a minority group

and a lot of them were uneducated and unaware of their needs.

As part of an all women federation, Olga and her teammates have devised a manifesto for transgenders. “We will send this to the government before the election and we will keep lobbying with it even after the elections. We are

hopeful as we believe that the Tamil Nadu Government is quite friendly,” she said

The manifesto includes childhood policies for transgender where discrimination by the family will be prevented. It includes provisions for public sensitization, trans-friendly workplace and legalization of marriage and adoption. It calls for proper livelihood training, skill building and encouragement for self-employment of transgender. The manifesto also demands proper data on the transgender with a categorization of literates and illiterates.

Delfina, a transgender person, said that since the landmark judgment on transgender rights in NALSA vs. Union of India in 2014, there had been no significant attempt to uplift the community. Although the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill moved by Tiruchi Siva of the DMK to end the discrimination faced by

transgender people in India was unanimously passed by the Rajya Sabha, the provisions of the bill were changed when it was presented in the Lok Sabha and it was still under debate.

The ruling AIADMK does not have any provision for the transgender in its manifesto for the 2019 general elections. C. Ponnaiyan, the party’s spokesperson said, “We are against the transgender group getting married without conversion of sex. It is like homosexuality, unnatural and against nature. We are not supporting it (legalization of marriage for transgender).”

“We live in a technologically developed world. A trans lady with more masculinity can be made into a pakka male or the one with more X chromosomes can be made into a pakka lady,” he said.

“We will support their education if their families do not support them these are social reforms which we encourage.”

“Job reservation not impossible”

JAYAKUMAR MADALA

CHENNAI: The promise of both the Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu to bring in job reservation in the private sector, if voted to power has drawn both applause and scepticism over whether it is feasible to implement such a scheme in the State.

Experts say the scheme requires pan India support and both the Centre and the State Government effort towards it. In their election manifesto released on March 19 for the April 18 election, the ruling AIADMK and the Opposition DMK announced that they would bring in reservations in private sector jobs.

Suhrit Parthasarathy, a lawyer at the Madras High Court said, “In the current constitutional framework it is not possible to bring in such reservations. But to bring in reservation in the private sector an amendment needs to be passed, which can be done only with the support of the Central Government.”

Recently the Central Government announced a 10 percent reservation for economically weaker people in the General Category in government jobs. Parliament passed the Bill and President Ramnath Kovind has given assent to the legislation.

“We never imagined that reservation can be brought on the basis of economic status. But now we have a bill passed for such a move. In the same way, even this decision could be made as a law,” he added.

Meanwhile, Kumana Raja, an advocate at the Madras High Court

said, “In a bid to attract the voters, they may just promise to implement such a reservation. But it will take a long time before implementation.”

Raja added that, “Even the women reservation bill was passed, but at the end of the day it has never come into effect. Such an order will be surely challenged in the court.”

However private sector companies say the election promise will bring in confusion. Bhavani, Manager at Royal Bank of Scotland, says, “We hire employees based on their skills. We need efficient workers, but if candidates are picked based on

reservation, it will not give us the most suitable employee.”

Utsav Chatterjee, Manager at Bank of Paribas, says “The pressure in the private sector is to work with fewer employees in a most efficient manner. If we are forced by the government to hire a certain number and type of employees, it will be difficult for us to reach our targets.”

However, Daniel, a student looking for employment said, “Not all candidates have the skills which are required in the private sector. Only if opportunities are given to learn, the other candidates can also become on par. So, I feel it is a welcome move.”

Recently, Union Human Resource Development minister Prakash Javadekar announced that reservation for SCs, STs, OBCs in higher education will be extended to all private institutions from the new academic year beginning in July.

Feasibility of education loans questioned

HARSHITA MISHRA

CHENNAI: Experts and bankers have questioned the feasibility of waiving educational loans as promised by the DMK and the AIADMK in their manifestos for the upcoming Parliamentary election.

Both the DMK and the AIADMK, releasing their manifestos on Sunday, promised to waive education loans taken by students belonging to the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes and Most Backward Classes.

However, experts in the State have termed the move ‘populist’ and even ‘misleading’. K Srinivasan, convener of the Education Loan Task Force, an organization that assists students for taking loans, says the already high Non Performing Assets of

banks will only rise.

“We get these queries all the time about when the loans will be waived. Such promises were made before the 2014 Lok Sabha election and the 2016 Assembly election too and nothing was done. But many students defaulted on their loans thinking that it will be waived. The default then affects their CIBIL scores and seriously dents their chances to avail themselves of credit in future,” he says.

According to the Finance Ministry data, Tamil Nadu accounts for nearly 20 per cent of all the education loans given in the country and Tamil Nadu and Kerala have about 40 per cent of the total NPAs in the sector in the country.

A report by CARE ratings agency reveals that over 90% of all education loans in the country are financed by Public Sector Banks, and are usually less than Rs. 3

lakhs. Education loans under Rs. 3 lakhs are unsecured and most loans availed in the State range from Rs. 3 lakhs to Rs. 5 lakhs. On the other hand, private sector banks and Non-Banking Finance companies usually fund secured loans of over Rs. 5 lakhs. This also contributes to the rising NPA’S in PSB-financed education loans.

According to Srinivasan, there are a number of reasons that have led to rising NPAs in the State. “Education loans are treated as commercial loans by the RBI, when there is no immediate income supporting it. And the accounting systems are inefficient, if you default for three months, the loan is declared as an NPA automatically,” he explains.

However, bankers also point out the problem of willful defaulters who availed loans before KYC verification was introduced.

“There has been a lot of delinquency in the recent years. For those who took education loans before KYC, 6 or 7 years back, they often get away with unaffected CIBIL scores. Moreover, the promise of such waivers encourages others to default on their loans too. It is misleading,” says Ramnath Diwakar, Assistant General Manager of Corporation Bank, Adyar branch.

Meanwhile, some students see the move, if it is implemented, as a much-needed relief. “It is hard to get well-paying jobs these days, and the fees of private colleges are also very high. Education loans are needed but it often becomes hard to pay them back,” says engineering student Saritha (21).

Srinivasan cites the inefficient implementation of the existing interest subsidy scheme which provides full interest subsidy for

the moratorium period (course duration plus one year) as one of the major causes of rising NPAs and suggests introduction of flexible interest rates.

“What the government can do is introduce more scholarships for needy children and interest-free or low interest loans during the study period and moratorium. Even the interest subsidy scheme is a great initiative but it has not been implemented well,” he says.

QUICK TAKES

1. TN has NPAs totalling Rs.2659 crore across 1,71,744 education loans
2. Highest number of loans are taken for nursing and engineering courses in the State

Catering to kids from cradle to college

HIMANSHI LOHCHAB

CHENNAI: With it’s new initiative called ‘From Cradle to College’, the Pudiayod Charitable Trust is aiming to cater to the needs of underprivileged kids in Besant Nagar and Ramapuram area, right from birth to graduation.

For the mission, which is in pilot stage, the NGO is trying to integrate its current programs called the ‘Children’s Program’ (Grade 1 to 5) and the ‘Teenagers’ Program’ (Grade 6 to 9), which provide part-time educational and life skill training to kids from slums and other backward areas.

“Apart from helping them with homework, we focus on activity based play-way methods to teach

basic etiquettes, for example, table manners, healthy habits etc. Nobody tells these kinds of things in government or Corporation schools,” said, Gauri Bhaskaran (56), a retired Labour Officer, who has been working at the Elliot’s Beach centre for more than seven years. “For teenagers we use project-based methods to teach them about team spirit and leadership qualities. At the onset of puberty, it is important for teenagers to learn how to deal with gender sensitive issues. Poor parents and conservative government school teachers cannot provide environment for this kind of learning,” she added.

“The staff comprises of mostly college students who want to work

part-time. Otherwise we give weekly training to mothers of these children who would like to contribute to the cause,” said Ashwini Chidambaram, Director of the Trust.

Talking about the challenges they face, she said, “Infrastructure is the biggest problem because most of the sessions happen in open community spaces in the area. Others are rented buildings or government schools.”

“For Cradle to College, the major challenge is going to be funding. Currently, we receive funding from the US, which requires hefty paper work and multiple inspections and is time consuming. So, we are eagerly looking for local funding to

become self sufficient.”

The NGO is also organising recreational activities for pregnant women, a concept similar to anganwadis. “We are trying to educate them about the importance of nutrition, exercise and emotional happiness during pregnancy,” Chidambaram added.

The organisation runs four centres in Besant Nagar and three in Ramapuram and also provide evening snacks and dinner to the kids. The food is donated by the Rotary Club of Madras. Approximately 180 children are currently enrolled in the programs across all the centres. The sessions are held from 4:30 P.M. to 8 P.M. on weekdays and from 11:00 A.M. to 7:00 P.M. on Saturdays.

Chennai to see hotter days

MANJIRI CHITRE

CHENNAI: Chennaites will have to brace themselves for hotter days ahead as the temperature is likely to rise in the coming weeks. According to the weather experts, Chennai will experience extreme heat conditions from the second week of April, and is likely to continue till the end of June.

The Regional Meteorological Department of Chennai said that the city will soon experience extreme humid climate.

Currently, the temperature is ranging from 33 to 35 degree Celsius; however, it may go up to 38 to 40 degree Celsius soon. The city is witnessing around 79 percent of humidity, according to a

weather website.

Speaking to people about the heat conditions in the city, Radhika Rathi, a student from SRM University, said, “It is very difficult to keep a sane mind with the increasing heat. Not only there is humidity, but it is very horrible to go out in the afternoon for anything.”

Another person working in the IT field in Chennai, Akshay Shetty, said, “How much ever you try to protect yourself from the heat, it seems impossible to travel during the noon.”

The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) had issued a heat wave warning two weeks ago in Tamil Nadu, when the highest temperature had reached 40 degree

Celsius in Salem.

Generally, a heat wave warning is issued when the maximum temperature goes up to 4.5 degree Celsius to 6 degree above normal temperature.

“The heat wave conditions are prevailing due to the changed wind pattern. In March, the winds are supposed to be Easterly or North Easterly, however, this time, the State is experiencing Westerly winds, which are bringing in the hot air,” said Dr. Puvirasan, Scientist D, Indian Meteorological Department.

The temperatures in some parts of the city may go back to normal soon, however, Chennai’s humidity may not decrease till the next two months.

Pad making as a part of therapy

Institute of Mental Health to set up pad making machine within three months

DEEPIKA AGRAWAL

CHENNAI: The Institute of Mental Health (IMH), home to 547 female patients, is planning to set up a sanitary pad making machine in its premises within three months under its Industrial Therapy Centre (ITC). The initiative is being undertaken in partnership with the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) unit of a private company.

Dr. P. Poorna Chandrika, Director of the IMH, said that the pads made would be distributed among the patients as well as sent for sale.

"Training for operating the machine and the sale orders will both be provided by the partner company," she added.

At IMH's Industrial Therapy Centre, patients engage in art and craft, bakery and dietary food

making for the canteen. Under ITC's occupational therapy schemes, they grow vegetables like



Bakery therapy: breads made by patients | DEEPIKA AGRAWAL

bananas, brinjals and lady's fingers; make notebooks, case files, baskets and clothes.

The bakery and dietary food items are made available in the canteen for the inmates, staff and students. Vegetables, bread, baskets and notebooks are put up for sale in the outpatient department stalls where they can be purchased by people from inside as well as outside the IMH.

According to S. Ambika, Social Welfare Officer at the IMH, the vegetable outlet makes a sale of Rs 4500 to Rs 5000 a month. She added that the bakery outlet made a sale of around Rs 1, 00,000 a month, including the purchase in the canteen, but the profit came down to around Rs 25,000 after paying the salaries of the workers and meeting the machine maintenance cost. Notebooks and case files were mostly bought by the new patients and the students.

Dr. Chandrika said, "The profit

made by the sales of the items goes back to the ITC. The improved patients who help in running the stalls are paid salaries in cash. We are also planning to set up bank accounts for them." She added that other patients received merit tokens for their work which could be used to buy goods from the canteen and stalls.

Dr. Kanmani, a doctor at the institute, said the vocational therapies helped in relocating the patients into the community and made them feel better about themselves.

Another doctor said, "It helps remove stigma of mental illness and proves that the patients can fit into the society. These therapies help enhance motivation. Our agenda is to help them live better livelihoods by making them operational."

Drug resistant TB on the rise

LEAH THOMAS

CHENNAI: There has been an alarming rise in multi-drug resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) cases, and Health authorities have been able to detect early cases and arrest the spread of the disease.

"There is no one reason for the development of MDR-TB in patients. A low immunity system, over-the-counter drugs and improper treatment, are among a few reasons for the mutation of the bacteria. A major reason is the lack of adherence to a prescribed treatment by the patients themselves," said Dr. J. Lavanya, District Programme Officer at the District TB Centre, Pulianthope.

According to NIKSHAY, an online database of tuberculosis cases maintained by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Tamil Nadu stood sixth in the country in detecting new TB cases with over one lakh new cases being reported in 2018. At least, 2.9 per cent of new patients and 7.78 per cent of previously treated patients in the State had MDR-TB. The estimated number of MDR-TB cases in India is 1.47 lakh, as of March 2018, according to the Health Ministry. In fact, the country accounts for one-fourth of the total MDR-TB cases globally.

A disease caused by bacteria called Mycobacterium tuberculosis, tuberculosis is usually treated with a combination of antibiotic drugs. The bacteria usually attack the lungs, but can also damage other parts of the body. However, patients with MDR-TB are resistant to the first line of drugs and need additional lines of toxic drugs.

Doctors, too, do not bother to track the progress of their own patients, said Dr Lavanya.

While treatment for TB can go up to six months, a patient with MDR-TB needs close to two years of continuous treatment to be finally rid of the disease, she said.

According to Dr. Ragini Ranganathan, Pulmonologist and a Technical Coordinator for Project Reach, the success rate for

treatment of the disease is only 40 per cent. "Patients with MDR-TB are resistant to the first line of drugs given to patients, such as rifampicin and isoniazid. Hence, they have to be given a second line of drugs that include injectables, the side effects of which can cause kidney failure, mental health disorders and hearing loss," she said. The drugs are tailor-made according to what the patient is resistant or not resistant to. "Each case that comes has to be monitored carefully throughout the treatment for results."

One of the more effective drugs to treat MDR-TB and or the next stage XDR-TB (Extensively drug-resistant TB) is bedaquiline, which was approved and added to WHO recommendations in 2018.

Patients in India had a hard time getting hold of this drug, said Dr. Ranganathan.

Reasons for this include the bureaucratic delay in getting the drug, the government's control over the accessibility of the drug because of the fear of patients developing resistance and other side-effects, and the availability of the drug mostly to the private sector. "Hopefully, restrictions on the drug will be reduced this year," said Dr. Ranganathan.

Additionally, the Tamil Nadu health department introduced a nine-month anti-biotic regimen to treat drug-resistant TB in the State in April 2018. "Instead of a two-year course, patients will be prescribed to a short nine-month treatment, available free at all government hospitals in the city," said Dr. Lavanya. An effort has been made to even reduce the number of injectable drugs during the treatment, she added.

But, according to Dr. Ranganathan, she has not seen even one such patient undergoing the short regimen, ever since its inception. "Our project works with around 40 hospitals in the city to monitor TB cases and notify the government. Till date, I have not seen a single patient undergoing the treatment," she said.

Police refuse to file FIR at night: students

CHHAVIANSHIKA SINGH

Students in colleges that fall under the jurisdiction of the Kotturpuram and Adyar police stations have alleged that officials at the station refuse to accept a complaint if they approach them late in the night.

Shloak Prabhu, a student at the ACJ, had his phone stolen recently in Adyar around 10 p.m.

He said he immediately approached the J2 Adyar police station, no later than 10:30 p.m., but was told by the constable there that he could not lodge a complaint because it was too late and the person responsible for taking his complaint had already left the station.

Prabhu said he was told to come back at 10 a.m. the next day. However, upon visiting the station the next morning, he was made to wait for about an hour before his FIR (First Information Report) was filed.

The official at the police station refused to give a copy of the FIR on the same day saying that he had to first file a complaint and then go to the court, Prabhu said.

The police gave him a copy of the FIR after four days, he added.

A former M.tech student at IIT-M (Indian Institute of Technology - Madras), Lijith Balakrishnan, said that he had gone to the Kotturpuram station around 11 p.m. at night.

His cousin, who was visiting him in Chennai from Mumbai, lost her wallet, along with her PAN card (Permanent Account Number) just four hours before she was to take her flight back to Mumbai.

But, when they went to the police station to file a complaint, they were told to file a Lost Document Report (LDR) online.

"We had a really tough time convincing the airline authorities to let her board the plane because we did not have a hardcopy of the FIR, and they refused to accept a softcopy of the LDR," Lijith Balakrishnan said.

Sethu Madhavan, a lawyer practicing at the Madras High Court, says that "technically they can't refuse to accept a complaint."

"But in practice, they would say that the inspector is not there and ask you to come tomorrow. But once an FIR is filed, the informant is entitled to a copy," said Sethu Madhavan.

Police Constable Vizhivattan, has been with the Kotturpuram police station for the past three years.

Vizhivattan said that for lost wallets, documents, or stolen mobile phones, people could file a Lost Document Report (LDR) online at the Tamil Nadu Police Citizen's Portal.

"We will have to file an FIR even if it is late night because we cannot refuse, but the FIR copy will be available only next morning since we have to follow certain procedures," said Vizhivattan

However, Vizhivattan said that "if the complainant is a woman, then we ask them to come the next morning because we generally prefer that they don't come to the police station at night, especially if there is no woman police constable or personnel present in the police station at that time."

The Kotturpuram and Adyar Police stations have more than 25 schools and colleges under their jurisdiction, including the Indian Institute of Technology - Madras, Anna University, Central Polytechnic Institute and the Asian College of Journalism.

A 'dramatic' form of therapy

DIVYA SETHU

CHENNAI: The Indian Institute of Psychodrama (IIP) is one of the few places in the country that offers psychodrama as a form of therapy to patients. The five year old institute in Alwarpet is an affiliate member of the International Association of Group Psychotherapy and Group Process (IAGP).

Psychodrama is a form of therapy wherein groups of people act out events of their lives as a way to gain insight into their problems and find solutions. This involves role play and dramatic self-presentation under the guidance of trained professionals. These people assume different roles in their respective life events while recreating a scenario.

"The roles do not necessarily have to be of a person," says Magdalene Jeyarathnam, the director of the institute. "It can be of non-living objects, fictional characters, and anything else that the patient wants to identify as." He adds that it takes only one session to bring to light problems that can

have a major impact on a person, and most people don't realise that.

"In classic therapy, finding solutions to problems can take time," says Jeyarathnam. "In psychodrama, articulation is not always necessary. Even silences say a lot."

Speaking more on the importance of psychodrama, he

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In psychodrama, articulation is not always necessary. Even silences say a lot.

-- Magdalene Jeyarathnam

says that it "offers people an outside perspective to their problems". He adds that it is a well rounded form of therapy which involves the body and mind to treat a wide range of problems.

The institute wishes to establish

a board that recognises and certifies psycho-dramatists in the country.

"Our aim is to create a viable and affordable avenue for psychodrama in South and South East Asia. We want to give proper training to people interested in learning the science of psychodrama."

Patients of all ages seek this form of therapy. For children, these therapists often incorporate the use of water colours, clay, collages and other forms of art to express their emotions. This is an easier way to get children to talk, says Mr. Jeyarathnam. "Many times, issues that might not directly come up in traditional forms of therapy are brought out through psychodrama."

These sessions conducted by the institute are helpful for patients to determine both short-term and long-term goals. "We see many people from the LGBT community who come to seek this form of therapy to solve their internal conflicts."

The IIP plans to launch India's first Post Graduate course in Psychodrama in association with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in the coming year.

Thiruvannamiyur labourers want permanent jobs

JOYDEEP SARKAR

CHENNAI: Getting work regularly isn't an easy task for the labourers who gather in front of the Thiruvannamiyur bus depot around 7 a.m. every day.

Elumalai, a 48-year-old construction worker said, "We usually get work for 4-5 days a week. Our wages vary from Rs 650 to Rs 800. If we don't get work, we have to sit at home. Ten years ago, I got Rs 250 for a day's work. Now I get about Rs 700. Many people here are from Ulundurpet. Lack of economic and agricultural opportunities makes people come here."

The labourers said that the arbitrariness of employment is a major concern for them. They prefer permanent employment. They usually wait till 10 am for work. The wages of non-contract

labourers can vary, whereas the contract labourers earn a fixed wage of Rs 700.

The women workers not only get fewer work days, their wages are also lower than that of their male counterparts. Angamma, a 40-year-old labourer, said, "Typically we get work for 2-3 days, even though many are willing to work for 7 days a week. Moreover, our wages are significantly lower than that of men. So if a man gets Rs 650 for construction work on a day, a woman will get Rs 550 or less. It is difficult to pay a rent of Rs 1000 and Rs 1500-2000 for a child's education with such wages."

Durai, a maistry, said that he often got work for a group by promising a fixed rate, only to see it changed. "For example, I promise a group of ten that they will work for an employer for a fixed number of days for Rs 650 a day. Later the



Labourers waiting for work in the morning | JOYDEEP SARKAR

employer may reduce the amount. This makes the labourers hesitant to work," he said.

N. Balakrishnan, a 59-year-old labourer, said that he came here 15 years ago. His agricultural land in Ulundurpet is barren. He has studied till SSLC. He says that the middleman should not exist. "The

labourer should himself be allowed to negotiate. That is why I give my personal number to employers looking for work," he said.

He said that labourers should have identity cards. "The government should issue them. Through it we should be allowed to access medical insurance. There

should also be fixed wages for masons and labourers," he said.

He has two sons whose ages are 27 and 30. For the younger one's education he had taken a loan eight years ago while for the older one he took a loan ten years ago. Now he is facing problems repaying it. "The loan amounts to Rs 4.5 lakhs. They are the first graduates from our family. But their education has borne no fruit. The older son recently got a job at a private company with a salary of Rs 20,000 a month while the younger one is still jobless. Such a loan can only be repaid by someone doing a government job," he said.

The influx of north Indian labourers has also made work competitive. "They are willing to work for lower wages in the range of Rs 450-500. And they get to stay at the site itself. The language barrier adds to the issue," he said.

MODERN SLAVERY

The ugly reality behind the spinning mills of India's 'Textile Valley'

HIMANSHI LOHCHAB

CHENNAI: Freedom Fund, an international organization based in the UK, says it is fighting against bonded labour in four districts of Tamil Nadu namely, Virudhunagar, Erode, Namakkal and Dindigul.

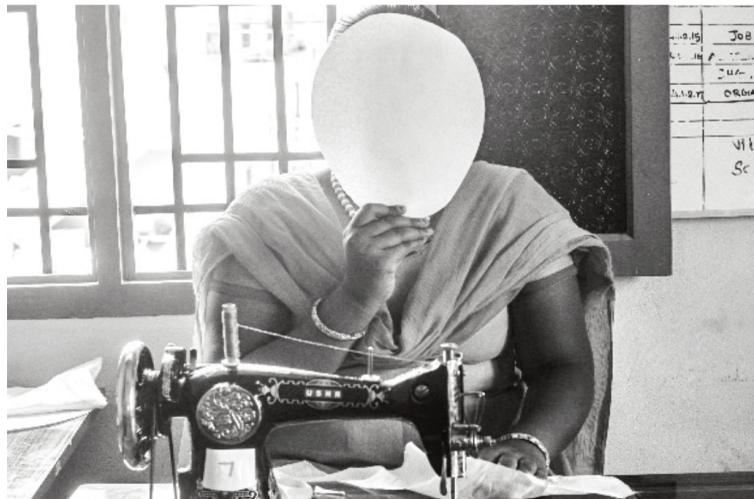
The Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK, wrote a review report on the Freedom Fund campaign which said that women and girls typically earn 180 rupees a day, though some get as little as 12. The most experienced can earn 250 rupees, which is still less than the Indian minimum wage i.e. 322 rupees.

"The major challenge we faced while creating awareness about workers' rights was that there was no alternative source of long term employment in the villages. Most of the labourers are landless who cannot do subsistence farming and the construction contracts from cities are seasonal. Thus, women

and young girls were forced to work in the mills. So we created community self help groups and vocational centres in villages to teach skills such as tailoring and sewing," said P. Bala Murugan, Program Advisor of South India for the campaign.

The IDS report listed out several reasons for proliferation of the practice. It said that workers have to work six days a week and sometimes may even have to do three shifts (i.e. 24 hours) in succession. If a day worker does not come, then a hostel worker has to work day and night. According to their survey, all mill workers said that doing nine shifts a week rather than six is fairly common.

Men used to work in the mills, but in response to the advent of labour unions in the 1990s, the textile industry started to target young women for employment by offering a lump sum for their marriage. This allowed the mills to



Rani, a mill worker, learns tailoring on weekends at a vocational centre | THE NEWS MINUTE

lay off their middle-aged male workers, many of whom took to drinking when they were not working. Thus, women and girls were pushed to the mills to run the family and pay for alcohol for their men.

"There is a lack of transport to most of the villages here and the spinning mills provide free commutation service to labourers. This enhanced the attractiveness of working in the mills despite harsh conditions because when people are in a captive market they have no bargaining power," said M.A. Britto, campaign district coordinator of Namakkal.

Talking about the health issues faced by workers, Mr. Murugan, said, "Due to perpetuation of hard labour their mental health is seriously disturbed. Exhaustion from long work hours, malnutrition and depression are the primary concerns. Women, while working long hours, during their

menstruation period become anaemic."

"Workers are not aware of medical aid provided by the government. For serious medical issues they take up high interest loans. It is a vicious cycle that they are bound to work at a place where they suffer from diseases and pay for it as loans," he added.

According to a report by the Government of India published in 2015, a total of 270,768 people are working in 2,023 spinning mills, weaving mills and Export Oriented Units in the State. In addition, the power loom industry accounts for 1,013,360 workers working in 81,530 power loom units.

With a funding of Rupees 31 crores received from the C&A Foundation, the Freedom Fund claims to have impacted 85,287 lives so far by spreading awareness, providing rehabilitation, and introducing vocational training in several villages.

Rich and ruined

BHAVINI MISHRA

CHENNAI: The Madras Literary Society in Nungambakkam that has a collection of approximately 55,000 books has an initiative called 'Adopt a Book' that lets volunteers take up old books for restoration.



MADRAS LITERARY SOCIETY
| BHAVINI MISHRA

The initiative which was launched in 2015 offers citizens an opportunity to pay towards the restoration of a book which will extend the lifespan of the book by another 50-60 years. The volunteer can contribute a minimum of Rs 1000 to restore a book and his/her contribution will be acknowledged by printing their name on the pages of the restored book. The initiative also allows the person to show this contribution as part of the Corporate CSR and an 80-G certificate for claiming tax exemption. "A volunteer contributed Rs 25000 for the restoration of a book last month," says Uma Maheswari, the librarian.

The library has books on Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Travel, History, Geography, Biography, Art and Fiction. The titles are mostly in English although there are some in classical and modern languages as well. "We have recently started the

Tamil Section and the Children's Section. The editions prior to 1950 are for reference only," says Ms. Thirupurasundari Sevvel, the General Secretary of the Society.

The library also organizes monthly events like book launches, talks, and performances on the second Saturday of each month. "We have also been participating in The Hindu Lit for Life which has helped MLS immensely in terms of creating awareness. Many visitors contributed towards our 'Adopt a Book' programme," says Sevvel. Currently the library has three staffs, and nine members in the managing committee excluding the Chairman and General Secretary out of which four members visit the library frequently.

The heritage library is maintained entirely from small donations, grants and member subscriptions which fall short. The books available to library members are not easy to locate as they are not organized by genre. A number of books have been damaged by dust, age and humidity and need to be restored. The library infrastructure needs upgradation and the place needs better lights and up-to-date computers to digitize the books.

Tragedies and endings

JOYDEEP BOSE

"If it means death, it will not be the worst of deaths – death without honour," Antigone's words resonated across the pervaded chamber of the Alliance Française of Madras, "The daughter of Oedipus would rather die for faith than yield to a tyrant."

If words could truly mark the spirit of the World Theatre Day, they would be from this soliloquy at the stage production of Sophocles' 'Antigone', performed by the Masquerade Performance Group at the Alliance Française of Madras on March 27th.

Masquerade's staging, however, leaves a lot to be desired. The play, broadly set within the ambits of the original tragedy, loses itself among its inspirations, ranging from William Hölderlin to Bertolt Brecht, and misses out on several contemporary inputs that were perhaps expected of the director, Krishna Kumar (K.K.), a veteran of the Chennai theatre scene.

Defiance, of course, is the fuel that this play feeds on. Creon, the ruler of Thebes, decrees an unjust fate for Polyneices, the hero who died fighting for his birthright. Branding him an enemy of the state, Creon condemns his corpse to rot in full public view and be a fodder to carrion and vultures; while Eteocles, the hero preferred by Creon, is given a proper burial, complete with state honours. Antigone, Polyneices' sister,



'Antigone' performed on World Theatre Day | JOYDEEP BOSE

resolute in putting a respectable end to her brother's memory, defies Creon's orders, and in the process, becomes a victim of state cruelty.

Tragedy involves conflict. Melodrama represents a struggle of good against evil, whereas tragedy represents the battle of right against right. Antigone becomes the embodiment of the absolute right, the representative of ethical conscience in opposition to the state. The relationship of the individual to the state, and that of morality to law have been basic questions since humans first formed societies. These issues confront us today, as they have audiences for the past two and a half millennia. However, this audience has also changed significantly over the years. During the fifth-century BC, the Greek city-states were gradually moving towards patrilineal kinship. Civic institutions of the rudimentary

Athenian democracy upheld what are today discarded. An opportunity to note this contrast was lost out on. Mitra Visvesh, as Antigone, stands out in her act, along with Abhishek Ramabhadran, in the robes of Creon, and K.K. himself, as the blind prophet Tiresias. The rest are at one with the chorus, never seeming striking enough.

The production, too, lacks ambitious design. Confused between operating under proscenium theatre and the French chamber's intimate staging, the play ultimately doesn't make use of the space adequately, instead relying on its amateurish set design, props, and lighting. The sound design, however, aided by Pranav Diwakar (Guitar) and Madhav Nair (Flute), manages to drive home somewhat of an emotional impact that otherwise seemed lacking from a period piece so lost in time; a ghost of tragedies past.

No profit for local travel agents

CHHAVIANSHIKA SINGH

CHENNAI: According to global statistics and database company Statista's market forecast, revenues in the Indian online travel booking sector amount to upwards of 8,000 Million US Dollars as of 2019.

As the share of online bookings in the travel and tourism sector increases, that of brick-and-mortar travel agencies continues to plummet, and independent travel agents are among the worst hit.

Allen Samuel, 28, owner of Blessing Tours and Travels Pvt. Ltd. in Perungudi, says that while business has gone down because clients, especially college students and young professionals, have moved towards travel booking websites, "once they experience online travel bookings, most of them never repeat that mistake again, especially for international tours. There is no one to guide them. All online agencies have a toll-free customer care number which they answer immediately if it is for a booking, but if you have to reschedule or cancel, they make you wait for one or two hours."

"Those travelling with family, prefer to make their bookings through us, usually because of bad experience with online bookings in the past, and don't want to repeat that."

According to the Statista report too, in 2017, the majority of Indian travelers making online bookings (74.8 per cent of consumers polled) were between the ages of 18 to 34.

Samuel says that in 2015 business had slumped so much that there were no earnings for six months. It picked up somewhat in 2017, after he hired a marketing team and focused on booking corporate package deals.

Samuel compares the entry of online travel booking in the tourism sector with Jio's entry in the Telecom industry.

"Airtel used to charge such high rates, but with Jio's entry they had to slash their prices by more than half. Our profit margins have reduced drastically too. Earlier we used to keep a margin of 15-20 dollars per person, but now we've had to cut it in half, to 5-10 dollars per person."

Sanjog Gill (19), a college student from Noida, had booked a room at the Holiday Inn hotel in Thiruvanniyur, at the Make My Trip website, last month when she visited the city for a function.

However, when she checked in to her room, it turned out much smaller than the pictures and videos online. "If we had been allotted the room that I saw on the website, it would have been very economical for us, but for this room, I feel I have paid more than it is worth."

Schools don't meet exam needs

JOYDEEP SARKAR

CHENNAI: Over the past decades, coaching institutes have become a thriving industry and have gained priority over schools and colleges as education centres.

M.A. Sadik, Director of the Smart Leaders IAS Academy, said, "Personal guidance and counseling is not available at schools or colleges. Preparing for competitive exams is like preparing for a battle. The school can't orient the student for competitive exam. Their priority is to have the students secure high percentage in exams. The purpose of the school is to provide fundamentals whereas the institute helps in career guidance. The coaching institute knows the nitty-gritty of the exam. In schools and colleges, students only need to pass. For UPSC, they need to excel. In competitive exams, the student has to perform under pressure."

The diverse school syllabus across India is often disconnected with what the exams ask. "Different boards such as CBSE and Tamil Nadu State Board have different syllabus, which will not match the specific needs of an exam. Every institute focuses on a

specific exam, such as SSC, NEET, TNPS, IAS and banking exams. Thus the institute develops study material and prepares tests according to needs of the exam," he

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There is a gap between qualification of students and the requirement for the competitive exams they appear for.
- Faculty of Shankar IAS Academy

said. Regarding student pressure, he said "The parents are to be blamed for it. Students should be allowed autonomy to plan their life."

He criticized schools for their inability to foster creativity in students. "Schools need to give more exposure to students and develop skills innate in them. The fact is that our school system is poor. How many Nobel Laureates have we produced? As of now they are only giving memory-based education," he said.

Since coaching institutes may

not be affordable for everyone, he said that his institute provided scholarships to poor students.

A faculty member of Shankar IAS Academy said, "There is a gap between qualification of students and the requirement for the competitive exams they appear for. The qualification is outdated and theoretical knowledge. And state boards give data oriented education. But competitive exams demand analytical skills."

He said that CBSE's curriculum was more analytical than that of the other boards.

"Coaching institutes teach the students about dos and don'ts for an exam. The students are trained about specific focus areas. Reading is not the only criterion for competing in the exam. The student must also have analytical mind."

About student pressure, he said, "At the first attempt, the family and society is supportive. But after second or third attempt pressure builds. Sometimes the student exhausts all attempts. Thus, there is an opportunity cost. Even if the student hasn't passed the exam, the work he has done and knowledge he has gained will help him to build his character."

Krishnan Parnesh, a student at the Shankar IAS Academy, said "At coaching institutes one gets competitive environment. It is not possible with self-study. Study at school and college is very general, whereas in coaching institute one gets specialized training."

He also alluded to the issue of language. "At the prelims level, the paper is provided in Hindi and English. A Tamil student does not know Hindi, and English is not his mother tongue. Students sometimes get confused. At the interview stage, even though translators are provided, communication gap can still exist. Even the government schemes such as Jan Dhan Yojana are named with the Hindi people in mind."

Karthick Ram, a faculty member at Jai Hind IAS Academy, linked the growth of coaching centres with the appeal of government jobs. "Parents and students want to play safe. Thus, they prefer government jobs. The opinion is that it gives good salary, and has good office hours. Even after doing engineering, many are jobless. An IAS officer has power and social status. That is why they come to the coaching centres."

21,000 cases disposed

BHAVINI MISHRA

CHENNAI: The National Lok Adalat organized by the Tamil Nadu State Legal Services Authority (TNSLSA) on March 9 across Tamil Nadu disposed off as many as 500 pre-litigation cases and as many as 21,000 pending cases in Chennai alone.

Lok Adalat (People's Court), one of the Alternative dispute resolution mechanisms in India, is a forum where cases, pending or at pre litigation stage are settled in a court of law. According to Section 19 of Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, every Lok Adalat shall be presided by a serving or retired judge and two other members as specified by the Legal Services Authority in the State.

The National Lok Adalat, conducted once in every three months had 17 benches across Chennai this month. B. Padma, 55 year-old panel advocate in the Tamil Nadu State Legal Services Authority says that the matters that are being dealt with are usually credits (debt mediation), bank loans, insurance claims and family matters. "Alternate bodies like these help to ease up the

overburdened judiciary," she says. The settlement awards granted during the resolution of such cases are not appealable in a court of law.

The Lok Adalats in the coming year are to be held on July 13,



Madras High Court
| WIKIPEDIA

September 14 and December 14.

The State Legal Services Authority also provides free legal aid to women, children, people belonging to the SC/ST communities and people whose incomes are below 3 lakh per annum (earlier the limit was 1 lakh per annum). Anuradha Ravichandran, a 53 year-old Panel Advocate that counsels people on family matters says that the State Legal Services Authority has conducted a lot of programmes for

the awareness of free legal aid. However, she says that the awareness programmes should go beyond the 'judicial circle' and reach out more to the common people.

"We provide legal counseling over phone, via applications by affected parties and in person. When the judge feels like a person needs legal representation he/she also refers the affected person to us and sometimes even the State Bar Association may refer an aggrieved party to us," she adds.

Ravichandran says that the process of legal counseling goes up to six months sometimes. "We talk to the aggrieved parties and try to reach a settlement. If a settlement is not reached we advise them about a remedy and if they qualify for legal aid, provide them with one," she says.

TNSLSA also publishes notifications via regional public channels, regional newspapers and even private channels to inform people to approach the Authority for free legal aid. "We only provide counseling on civil matters and most of the time a settlement can be reached between the parties in family matters. The process is quasi-judicial but legally binding."

Curfews: gender specific

CHIYA AHUJA

CHENNAI: Female students say they face unchecked moral policing and biased rules in college hostels here. Even their mundane and everyday activities come under the scrutiny of the authorities and tend to define their character, they claim.

While there are no curfew restrictions in IIT-Madras, the girls need to show their ID cards and sign the register for entry if they come back after 9 p.m. at night. The boy's hostel has no such rule.

"Getting caught hanging out with a boy is the worst. Anytime a girl and boy are seen together, the girl will have to face added restrictions," said Avantika Singh, who is studying Integrated Masters in Development Studies.

While the girls have fought over the futility of maintaining a register when they have a biometric system installed, they have only faced added reprimanding by the warden, professors and the administration staff. "Since the ratio of girls to boys is 1:8 and the number of boys is too many to deal with, they end up not following any protocol. I don't know if it is intentional, but this is the case," Avantika added.

A foreign exchange student faced harassment at the same

college while she was "chilling" with her male friend in the hostel even after 6 p.m. "The vigilance team, the Hostel Disciplinary Committee invaded the room as they found my actions to be suspicious," she said. She was charged with possession of alcohol and "immoral behavior by westernizing Chennai's culture."

"There is no room to breathe for girls here," Avantika added. Boys are not allowed to stand and loiter around the women's hostel after 9 p.m. "The campus is not a safe space at all. If we wear shorts, we are treated differently by our own professors who teach us liberal arts and women's emancipation."

The students allege that vigilance officers barge into their rooms, insult them and click pictures without consent violating the students' right to privacy.

Johanna Afra, who graduated last year from the Women's Christian College "Our college had day outs till six in the evening for weekdays and the third year students could stay out from 9 p.m. to 12 a.m. on Wednesdays. We were not allowed to go out on weekdays."

In cases of emergency, the students had to get a letter signed by the warden who asked a lot of questions and when the entry

register was not maintained, they were barred from going out for a week or a month, depending on what the warden would decide. "The warden told us to start acting like an adult woman," she added.

Shruthi Suresh M.O.P. Vaishnav College for Women, said "We had to follow a dress code and we were not allowed to use mobile phones on campus. In a lot of engineering colleges, men and women have different entrances and exits."

S Anandhi, a Women's Studies professor at the Madras Institute of Development Studies, said "One needs to understand the missionary type of morals and values that guide the campuses. There is close linkage between what was learnt in the classrooms and the existence of the college hostels as an extension of those teachings. These spaces then become breeding grounds for ideal modern femininity."

Joan Sony Cherian, an activist, said "Curfews and other rules are imposed on women students in the name of 'safety and security'. This logic is often a farce which is used to restrict women's mobility."

"How long will women be policed in the name of safety? It's only when woman come out collectively in large numbers and reconfigure spaces that we achieve emancipation sense of the term,"

DIVYA SETHU

CHENNAI: Laughter emanates from the wards of the Government Hospital for Children, as five 'clowns' showcase their magic skills to patients.

Hospital clowning is a form of healthcare which involves visits from professionally trained clowns. Introduced in India by the Little Theatre Group in 2015, this method focuses on the psychological wellbeing of patients, especially children. The idea behind this concept is to create a happier, more trusting environment in the drab setting of a hospital. Trained professionals, and sometimes doctors, dress as clowns and put up shows for children admitted to the theatre group was started by Dr. Aysha Rau, who discovered this method of healthcare while doing a course online where she mentored people.

She met professional actors who wanted to diversify, and conjoin art with healthcare. And so, along with her daughter Dr. Rohini Rau introduced the idea to the group in 2015. Dr. Rohini is also India's first hospital clown.

B. Krishakumar, also known as KK, the artistic director of the group, provides the training. Speaking about the process, he says, "The training process is

complex. We're dealing with patients, not just a general audience. Patients are highly sensitive, especially children."

"The first step in training is improvisation, which is extremely important. Since most of the shows we put up are totally dependent on



The Little Theatre Group as hospital clowns | LITTLE THEATRE

the kids, actors have to be able to improvise to suit their moods and needs at that time. Most elements of our shows are created on the spot."

"There is also a very specific physical protocol to be followed in hospital clowning. The children need to feel safe and comfortable. This method isn't just about laughter—that's a by-product. The whole principle revolves around the concept of control. We want to give control back to the children. When they're patients, they feel like they have no control over their bodies; they are forcefully fed,

made to take injections—which scares them—and pretty much are at the mercy of the doctors and nurses. With hospital clowning, the control is given back to the children. Clowns seek their permission to conduct whatever show they have put up. We

of agreed medicine."

The biggest challenge they face, however, is the lack of support of doctors. "There are so many patients for the doctors to treat every day that they don't often look at the psychological welfare of the ones they are treating. We want to tell the doctors that psychological welfare is an integral part of recovery. We want to break the status quo. Patients should not be intimidated by their doctors. So we let the doctors and nurses guide us. All the games and shows we put up revolved around the treatment process of these kids."

While 'hospital clowning' is not yet a nationwide concept, the Little Theatre Group hopes that eventually it will be. "We want to extend and expand the fraternity of hospital clowning. As of now, our reach in Chennai is only of one hospital, and our demographic does not include rural areas. But rural areas need this concept even more. So we eventually want to reach them as well."

KK adds that the idea of this theatre group is to involve people with empathy and passion.

We need professional actors with experience to be involved with us. Since this program is so sensitive, we need these people to be highly trained."