



Total prohibition deemed unviable

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SC lets schools fix fees, parents voice concern

ANANDI.C

CHENNAI: Parents of children in private CBSE and ICSE schools in the city believe they may have to shell out more money as school fee following the interim order of the Supreme Court passed on January 28, which enables schools to fix their own fees.

The Private Schools Fee Determination Committee headed by Justice Singaravelu constituted under the Tamil Nadu Schools (Regulation of Collection of Fees) Act, 2009 no longer has the power to ensure that private CBSE and ICSE schools place the proposed fee structure before it for approval.

The powers of the committee are now limited to checking if the fees charged by the private CBSE and ICSE schools are commensurate with the facilities provided and, if



CBSE students may have to pay more for their education.

PHOTO: ANANDI.C

needed, to recommending disaffiliation of schools in cases of overcharging.

The ruling has come as a big setback especially for parents such as Kishen Kumar, head of a parents-students welfare association which has been fighting the management of a senior secondary school in Egmore against alleged fleecing for a year now.

"The interim order is bad news for us. In spite of the Singaravelu committee posting a refund order, the school management is yet to pay back the excess fee it charged us. Now because of this ruling by the

court, the school is behaving as if it is not liable to pay us what is owed," he said.

Kishen Kumar said that requests to discuss various instances of overcharging had not yielded any results.

"For Smart Classrooms we are charged Rs 2500 per year, but for the last five years the smart classes have not even taken place. There are 3000 students in the school, so the total comes to Rs 7.5 lakh. When asked, the principal just looks at me with a blank stare."

Kishen Kumar added that many students in the school were from lower middle class families where

parents owned small shops, worked as maids or auto rickshaw drivers but aspired to provide them good education.

Advocate P.Wilson who represented the state of Tamil Nadu against the Association of CBSE Schools was apprehensive of the schools taking advantage of the current situation.

"I am not sure if the schools have the right to re-open the fees fixed by the committee for the years 2013-2016. But, the schools may create confusion by coming to court and saying that the Singaravelu committee had fixed the fees before the present ruling so it has to be set aside. They will also say that they will now fix the fees and let the committee find out if the collection of fees by them is commensurate with the facilities."

Wilson added that a recall petition would be filed against the order. The schools find themselves vindicated in their stance.

Advocate Swaroop Mamidipudi who had represented one of the Vivekananda Educational Society Schools, said "The Act has a very peculiar definition of what a private school is and CBSE schools don't

fulfill that definition."

"It was pointed out to the Supreme Court that when one part of Section 7 of the Act speaks of 'private schools' and another part speaks of 'CBSE schools', obviously CBSE schools can't be a part of private schools. They are two separate entities."

Adding that this was the correct interpretation of the present Act, he said the historical context needed to be taken into perspective. In the Tamil Nadu Private School Regulation and Collection of Fees Act of 1973, CBSE schools were not included under the definition of private schools.

When asked if the fees fixed for the year 2013-2016 by the committee still held good he said "No longer, because the committee did not have the power to fix the fee in the first place."

P.Vijayalakshmi, Principal of Chinmaya Vidyalaya, Virugambakam, said the onus was on the parents to make judicious choices for their children.

"Some parents have a fancy for schools which charge high fees and provide all kinds of extra facilities, most of which could be offered free of cost. It's a consumer market, so when there is a demand naturally schools hike the fees," she said.

Vijayalakshmi believed that fee hikes, apart from those necessitated by the implementation of the 7th Pay Commission, would not be carried out by established schools.

TN prepared to tackle Zika

ANKITA PANDA

CHENNAI: The Tamil Nadu Government has declared that it is prepared to tackle the Zika virus which has been declared as a global threat by the World Health Organisation.

Insisting there was no cause for concern right now, Health Secretary J. Radhakrishnan told reporters that a review meeting had assessed the State's preparedness and the control measures to be taken in case of an outbreak.

There has been no outbreak of the virus in India yet and precautions are being taken at airports by screening people travelling from South America.

"The disease is not present in India, so there is no need to panic. There is no concrete plan yet on the preventive methods to be adopted," said Dr N. A. Senthil Nathan, City Health Officer, Public Health Department.

The Hindu reported that the Union Health Ministry had issued guidelines, urging Tamil Nadu and Kerala to be extra vigilant as "dengue transmission is going on owing to conducive conditions."

Zika virus spreads through bites from mosquitoes from the Aedes genus, mainly Aedes aegypti. This mosquito bites in the morning and is also known to spread dengue and chikungunya according to reports from the Centre for Disease control and Prevention (CDC).

"It is usually found in tropical

countries where the weather forms a conducive environment for them to breed," said Dr P. Sivaraj of Fortis Malar.

"The common symptoms will include fever, rash, joint pain, and conjunctivitis. It is similar to the symptoms present during dengue. So it is best to get tested if the symptoms persist," he added.

According to a report in The Economic Times, a Hyderabad bio-technology firm, Bharat Biotech has come out with two vaccines to treat Zika but they are yet to be tested. It will take some time before it can be administered to humans.

Dr Sivaraj said the treatment for Zika virus was the same as that for dengue. One must get plenty of rest, drink water to keep the body hydrated and take painkillers prescribed by a doctor.

The disease can also spread through sexual intercourse with an infected person. Death is rare and incubation period for the virus is not very long.

According to WHO reports, 80 per cent of infected people never even show symptoms. However, babies born to infected mothers, develop Microcephaly where the head is small as the brain doesn't grow.

Some people have cancelled plans to visit affected countries.

"Because there was virus outbreak, we had to cancel our trip to US. People are being discouraged to travel," said Mrs Madhu Gopalan, a housewife.

Kottur slum tenants without home

ANSHIKA RAVI

CHENNAI: The Chennai Corporation has begun demolishing the slums along the Adyar river in Kotturpuram, and shifting the affected families to their new accommodation in Semmencherry and Perumbakkam.

While some residents are happy at the prospect of moving to a safer abode, people who had been living on rent or had lost their identity proof in the floods, have nowhere to go.

"All our belongings have been thrown out. Also, because we are not registered dwellers and have been living on rent for the past 15 years, we are being denied accommodation. Now, we don't have any roof above our heads," said Srinivasan, who owns a shop in Kotturpuram.

Many slum dwellers broke down as they saw their homes reduced to rubble in no time. Viji, 40, who lost her ration card and PAN card in the floods, said that the Corporation had strictly re-

fused to rehabilitate her family.

"Was it my fault that floods washed away the only proof I had? So what if I don't have my ration card; the government still has the record," she said.

The Chennai Corporation officials verified the families one by one, and handing out tokens for relocation. The displaced lot was then taken in trucks to their new homes in Semmencherry and Perumbakkam.

"This is government property that they are being evicted from. As many as 100 families have been shifted already. Over 10,000 people will be rehabilitated from Kotturpuram and Saidapet. But we can't help people who can not produce any proof," said Jayprakash, a Corporation official.

The residents say that there is a discrepancy in the manner they are displaced by the Chennai Corporation. According to them, only the poor are being targeted, whereas those living in bi-

gger, multi-storied buildings are being spared.

"Only the small, kaccha houses are being demolished. The Corporation is going soft on the bigger buildings. This is not fair," said Gautam, who works at a salon in the nearby market.

Loss of livelihood is another issue plaguing the dwellers. Murugan, who has been living in the slum for 20 years, is scared at the prospect of leaving everything behind.

"I have worked as a painter here for a very long time. Shifting to Perumbakkam, which is 16 km from here, will make commuting very difficult. I will have to look for some other work," he said.

Officials said that over 1,000 families of Surya Nagar were living on government land on the edge of the Adyar river.

The move to rehabilitate them has come two months after the floods hit Chennai. The government had promised the residents housing with better amenities.

Poor faculty blamed for jobless engineers in TN

ANVITA SINGH

CHENNAI: The lack of strong teaching faculty and the absence of basic analytical skills among students are some of the reasons behind Tamil Nadu having the highest number of unemployable engineers, according to a report by Aspiring Minds, an Indian employability evaluation and certification company.

The study covered more than 150,000 engineering students from over 650 institutes across the country.

Dr Kadakada Nagaraj, an Economist and earlier a professor at Madras Institute of Development Studies, said, "These days the educational institutes lack the proper infrastructure which is needed for the all round development of a student."

Dr Nagaraj, who was himself an engineering student at one point, added, "The privatization of engineering colleges is one of the main reasons as to why we are facing this crisis. Most of these colleges are owned by political parties who pander to their own vested interests, and have only jumped into the field of education to churn out money. They are least bothered about improving the quality of education."

According to the study, the Information Technology Business Process Outsourcing (ITBPO) industry adds 45,000 freshers (35,000 on-campus recruits and 10,000 off-campus) in the State on an average. But this represents only around 5 per cent of the total intake in engineering colleges each year. There are about 550 engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu.

Manoj Kumar, an engineering student in Chennai who passed out in 2015, said, "Our institute had meaningless rules. It was basically run by a bunch of goons who had connections in the government. No



A long queue at an engineering college PHOTO: THE HINDU

one really bothered all that much about the level of education in the college."

Manoj, who is currently working as a fitness trainer, said that the college had killed his passion for engineering.

According to a report in The New Indian Express there were over 3.3 lakh engineering graduates, including 1.59 lakh postgraduates, waiting for jobs after registering their names with the State Employment Exchange.

Meenachi VR, a professor at an engineering college in Coimbatore said, "The companies that come for placements only visit the campuses of more popular institutes like Indian Institute of Technology Madras and Anna University. These companies hardly hire from smaller and relatively lesser known colleges."

Apart from the absence of an effective fundamental educational framework, parental pressure and lack of awareness among students are also factors for the poor quality of the students.

Rajini Nandakumar, an indepen-

dent student counsellor said, "Students come to me all the time saying that they cannot cope with the work at their respective colleges. These students do not want to become engineers in the first place. Their passions lie somewhere else. If someone is forced to do something they do not like, they will obviously not be very good at it. Here parental pressure is obviously at work."

A R Venkatachalapathy, a professor at Madras Institute of Development Studies, had a different take on the issue.

"Many students come here from relatively less privileged backgrounds, and they find it difficult to understand the subjects at times because of the language barrier. Many of them might be fluent in Tamil, but they will not be as equally at ease with English. So, there is a gap there," he said.

According to the report, Tamil Nadu is accompanied by Gujarat, Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan in the bottom 25 percentile under the category of employability across states.

LGBT hopes for 377 abolition

APARNA ANIL

CHENNAI: The Supreme Court's decision to refer a curative petition against Section 377 of Indian Penal Code (IPC), which criminalises homosexuality, to a five member constitutional panel has come as a relief to members of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community in the city.

"This is definitely a positive outcome, the best possible result we could expect from the hearing. City based NGOs like Sahodaran and Chennai Dost were celebrating this evening. What makes this decision important is that the Supreme Court has gone against its own previous decision," said Vikram Sundaram of Nirangal, an NGO working to advance justice and rights for sexuality minorities - LGBT and sex worker communities.

According to Section 377, carnal intercourse against the order of nature is considered an unnatural offence.

Reforming such archaic laws was need of the hour, said Vikranth

Prasanna, Director of Chennai Dost, a city based NGO that works to create social space for people from LGBT community.

"We saw strict laws being implemented for crime against women after the 'Nirbhaya' incident. Similarly, accepting people belonging to the LGBT community is a change that the country needs," he said.

"We need a legal procedure. I hope this is the first step towards it. We believe there will be justice this time," he added.

Striking down Section 377 will certainly help in reducing the social stigma, felt Vikram Sundaram.

"If they are accepted by law, it would be easier for people of the community to come out, rather than stay 'invisible', and live a normal life," he said.

"The flip side to it is, if society is more accepting towards them, there will be a favorable atmosphere to have laws acknowledging their right," he added.

Sasha Reddy, LGBT rights activist from the city, said that though the Supreme Court decision gave



A candlelight vigil held on January 31st in support of LGBT community PHOTO: APARNA ANIL

some hope, it alone wouldn't suffice.

"Earlier review petitions were rejected, this time the case has been re-opened. We find that very relieving. However this is just a start. It all ultimately depends on the decision the five judge constitutional panel arrives at," she said.

A judgement by the Delhi High Court in July 2009 on Naz Foundation versus Union of India had changed Section 377 so that it did

not apply to consenting adults. However on December 11, 2013, the Supreme Court set aside the Delhi High Court judgment, ruling that only "a minuscule fraction" was affected by Section 377, that no judicial intervention was required, and that Parliament was free to amend the section.

A review petition filed by the Government of India requesting the judgment to be reconsidered was dismissed by the court.

Liquor ban unviable say common people

ANSHIKA RAVI

CHENNAI: Opposition parties, including DMK, DMDK, PMK and BJP, have been clamouring for a total ban on the sale of liquor, but, despite the various ill-effects associated with indiscriminate liquor consumption, economists and common people believe that prohibition will be highly unviable.

"Over Rs 25,000 crore of the government's revenue comes from liquor sale. Also, as many as 60 lakh people, who account for 10 per cent of the population of Tamil Nadu, consume liquor on a regular basis. It is nearly impossible to stop addicts from consuming alcohol," said Professor L Venkatachalam, professor of Economics at Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS).

"As past experiences have shown, people often resort to illicit ways of consumption, which only creates a menace. One might consider increasing the price, or collecting tax for that matter, but it all depends how the consumer behaves in relation to price," he added.

Dinesh, 29, a construction worker, said, "There is no way that the government can clamp down on liquor. It gets all its profit from this business. The call for prohibition is nothing more than petty vote-bank politics."

The cries for total prohibition have become louder with elections to the Tamil Nadu State Assembly



Over Rs 25,000 crore of the Government's revenue comes from liquor sale PHOTO: LIVEONINDIA.COM

set to take place in May.

Ganesh, another wage labourer, said that the liquor ban was likely to have only women supporters.

"The demand for the ban is in the wake of the upcoming assembly elections. But this is just talk. Nothing like a ban is happening anytime soon," he said.

Disenchanted with the menace that alcoholism has become, many women are in support of total prohibition.

Shanthi, a 37-year-old woman, who works at a tea-stall, said "Of course we want a complete halt on the sale and consumption of alcohol. Which woman wouldn't want that? The last time DMK proposed it, we were really hopeful. But then, everything was brushed aside. Now, they are calling for the ban

again. I don't know what to expect and what not to."

When asked about any incident of domestic violence Shanthi might have faced, she stayed mum.

Lakshmi, a home-maker, whose maid's 15 year old boy has started consuming alcohol, said the government was only promoting the outrageous trend by selling liquor through outlets run by the state-owned Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC).

"I don't have any second thoughts about the ban. People might not realize it, but this is getting out of control," she added.

A lot of women, particularly belonging to the economically weaker section, face domestic violence at the hands of their alcoholic husbands. Small groups have mus-

roomed across the state to force the government to impose prohibition, and also sensitize men not to consume alcohol irresponsibly.

One such group that has been championing for the cause of prohibition is People's Movement against Liquor and Drugs (PMALD) whose co-founder, Inamul Hasan, talked about the hypocrisy of the ruling party at doing nothing to control the situation from spiralling out of control.

"On Diwali, a target of Rs 200 crore was set to be gained from the sale. The government ended up minting Rs 310 crore instead. Similarly, during Pongal, the government earned Rs 380 crore in contrast to its target of Rs 260 crore. If the consumption goes on at this pace, it would become very difficult to control the situation," he said.

At stake in Tamil Nadu is more than Rs 25,000 crore of annual revenue for the state government which has a monopoly over liquor retailing through Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC). A total prohibition would leave the government strapped for revenue.

"It's difficult reversing what has now become a dirty business. Privatization of the liquor industry might help," said Venkatachalam.

"For example, Pondicherry has both private and public liquor shops. An increase in price of alcohol with privatization can work," he added.



AIADMK supporters at an election rally in Virudhunagar.

PHOTO: THE HINDU

No help for women in T. Nadu Politics

ANANDI C

CHENNAI: All talk of their political empowerment is not helping women take up politics as a career, says an activist who trains them to contest elections and take up welfare activities.

However, women who are members of established political parties, insist that women do play a role.

When asked if more female candidates from the ruling AIADMK party would contest the upcoming Assembly elections, S.Gokula Indira, Secretary of the party's women's wing, said "Rather than whether or not more women are fielded for the elections, the kind of public service done by the cadres is what Amma (AIADMK leader and Chief Minister Jayalalithaa) considers important. Plenty of chances are being given in the party for women to prove themselves."

P.Lily, a female DMK cadre from Gopalapuram, said that she believed that the party leader M.Karunanidhi would work towards ensuring a 33 per cent seat share for women as envisaged in the Women's Reservation Bill.

Sheelu Francis, Facilitator of Women's Collective, pointed to the

hurdles faced by female candidates, especially the independent ones.

"For women to contest as independents in elections it is such an expensive process. The 33 per cent women's reservation bill has changed the participation in panchayats but assembly elections are challenging because one has to compete against the established parties who spend so much," she said.

According to the final electoral rolls released on January 20 there are 2.91 crore female voters and 2.88 crore male voters in the state. However, there are only 17 women Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in the current House as compared to 217 male MLAs.

Representatives of the PMK party which hopes to attract women voters with its push for total prohibition of alcohol in the state, did not comment if the party would field more female candidates.

Reflecting on the lack of real power for even prominent women in politics, Sheelu said, "I have conducted training for DMK cadres at the request of DMK MP Kanimozhi, because she really wanted to do something last time when DMK was in power. More than 100

women attended this, but none of them came to power."

Sheelu added, "Even during a recent meeting we questioned her as to why marriage and not education assistance is given for women; Kanimozhi responded saying she was also for it but that the leader didn't consider it."

Out of the total 233 female candidates who contested in the 2011 assembly elections, 61 were independents, but Sheelu does not consider this a positive development.

"These women contest because bigger parties will give them money for withdrawal. Few women show commitment and it is very difficult to contest against these parties. I know women who have borrowed money for the 2011 assembly elections but are in debt now."

None of the 61 candidates won seats in the assembly elections that year; all of them forfeited their deposits, according to Election Commission figures.

Sheelu believes that in the absence of a strong political will and a system designed by the election commission to fund female candidates, it will be very difficult for more female leaders to emerge.



One lakh government teachers protested in the strike by Joint Action Committee of Teachers' Organisation

PHOTO: DECCAN CHRONICLE

Edu Dept silent over strike by school teachers

ABHA GORADIA

CHENNAI: Nothing seems to have come out of the three-day state-wide teachers' protest for hike in salaries amongst other demands which ended on Monday (February 1).

The protest had over one lakh government teachers participating in it; it was called by the Joint Action Committee of Teachers' Organisation (JACTO), an umbrella body of 24 associations.

"I have forwarded the reports to the Government. The process is under way, only the government can decide what is to be done. I can't comment on this issue at the moment," said S.Kannappan, Director of School Education.

While more than 1000 teachers were detained when they tried to stage a road blockade near Chepauk in Chennai, 3,000 government teachers were arrested for staging a protest in front of the district collector's offices in Krishnagiri and Dharmapuri. And more than 30,000 teachers were held across Tamil Nadu for attempts to picket district collectorates.

This was the fifth time a state-wide protest had been organised by the teachers of JACTO. Previous attempts to demand parity in the pay with Central school teachers have proved futile.

"If the department isn't ready to consider our demands, we will take

a decision regarding boycotting exams and elections next week," Samy Sathiamorthy, a committee member from JACTO, was quoted as saying.

However, the Education Department seems unrelenting. Block resource teachers and faculties from neighbouring schools with excess staff-strength were roped in to ensure that the classes went on uninterrupted.

The department sent text messages to all the headmasters informing that one day's salary of teachers who participated in the protests would be deducted, said a teacher of Government Primary School, T. Nagar.

The entry level salary of teachers in state government schools is Rs.4000 and the pay goes up to Rs.33,000 for senior-most teachers. According to the members of JACTO, there is a difference of at least Rs.4000 between the salaries of Central and State school teachers at every level.

JACTO put forth its 15 point-chapter of demands which include scrapping of the Contributory Pension Scheme (CPS) and implementation of old pension scheme, regularisation of 45,000 teachers recruited during the 2004-2005 in the State, six per cent increment on promotion, cancellation of teachers eligibility test and recruitment on seniority basis in employment registration.

"Wind of change needed again"

ANAM AJMAL

CHENNAI: "The willingness to take caste seriously without making a fetish of it has been lost in modern India," said Yogendra Yadav, who was here to deliver the M.S.S Pandian memorial lecture organised by the Madras Institute of Development Studies and the Centre for Studies in Social Transformation this week.

"The strong wave of OBC politics that emerged in India by the 1980s has reached a dead-end now because it has been the victim of its own success," Yadav added, explaining how the changes brought about by socialist parties did not trickle down to the lowest strata.

"Today, caste cannot be studied as an isolated factor responsible for inequality. It is entangled with issues like class, gender and urban/rural divide. Unless we come up with a unified vision to counter all these factors, our policies will fall short," he said.

Yadav has conducted various studies on the state of Indian polity, and concluded that the vision of emerging parties like AAP is no different from the parties they are aiming to overthrow.

"The manifestos of socialist par-

ties are exactly the same as those of the Congress or the BJP. They look at caste problems through the same lens and use the same political instruments to promote development," he explained.

According to him, the regional divide amongst socialist parties has proved to be fatal. "Politics of social justice has remained fragmented for far too long and this has led to stagnation. We need a second wind of change; an upheaval like the one caused by Mandal panel."

Yadav's Swaraj Abhiyan claims that it wants India to achieve Swaraj in all aspects - political, economic, cultural and social.

Referring to the recent suicide of the Hyderabad University scholar, Rohith Vemula, Yadav pointed to the emergence of the collective consciousness of the lower castes, which has started asserting itself.

"Rohith's letter was beautiful," Yadav said. "I say beautiful because it conveyed his refusal to be confined," he said, adding that this incident would not be forgotten by India and could bring in winds of change.

"I think politics has remained shunned by people for too long. We need to recognise its power to change the society," Yadav said.

NGO collective to field young candidates

ARAVINDAKSHAN S.

CHENNAI: A collective of more than 150 groups is preparing to contest the 2016 Tamil Nadu Assembly elections, by fielding young candidates and avoiding the construction of its politics around a single leader.

"In the 60's and 70's the Tamil Nadu parties used student politics to sweep into power, like how today's Aam Admi party is said to represent youth aspirations."
-Poo Ko Saravanan

At a recent press meet, Saravanan Ragavan, a member of the collective Ilaigiar Koottamaippu, said "Neutral journalists, honest officials, first-time 18-year-old voters, and people desiring a change - we are depending on these people to support us."

Speaking to Asian College of Journalism, Ragavan said the potential candidates, who had to be 25 years of age or older to contest the by-elections, were not required to have any academic qualifications or administrative experience, though these criteria will be considered in the interviews.

Ilaigiar Koottamaippu hoped to field candidates in all of the 234 constituencies in Tamil Nadu, Ragavan said. The collective has been putting up candidates in just few constituencies and it has not grabbed people's attention. Ilaigiar Koottamaippu hopes that candidates will do social work in their constituencies following the 2016 election, whether they win or lose, and the people will vote for them in

2020 based on the candidates' efforts in the intervening period.

Columnist Poo Ko Saravanan said that though it was early to comment on the party's prospects, democracy was all about reinventing, emergence of new energies, and being innovative.

"In the 60's and 70's the Tamil Nadu parties used student politics to sweep into power, like how today's Aam Admi party is said to represent youth aspirations."

But today, Saravanan said, if there was no scope for student politics at the grassroots level, the birth of new parties would be difficult. "For instance, the popular engineering colleges today are owned by either corporates like HCL, or ministers, or the granite mafia or the liquor barons." In such a ecosystem, there was no way the owners would allow democracy to enter the colleges, he said.

Writer A. Marx said that for a party hoping to win students votes, it must address issues such as the exorbitant fee for higher education.

Citizen journalism in the hinterlands

ARAVINDAKSHAN S.

CHENNAI: For the last six years, the tribal villages of Central India have made their voices heard and sometimes even their complaints addressed.

This is thanks to a digital media outlet, CGNet Swara, which attempts to succeed where the national media has failed - covering the systemic problems of these remote, deprived communities that live in conflict regions and largely speak languages other Hindi or English.

CGNet Swara's volunteer reporters travel to tribal villages in States such as Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Telangana; they record villagers' complaints on Android smartphones and then upload it to an online server through the organization's mobile app. Alternatively, villagers who own phones can call



Shubhanshu Choudhary, founder of CGNet Swara PHOTO: ARAVINDAKSHAN

CGNet Swara's Raipur office themselves to record their com-

plaints, which are often in tribal languages such as the Gondi.

The office's desk hands translate the complaints into Hindi and put them on CGNet Swara's website along with a short write-up on the problem and the contact numbers of the local administration.

The complaints range from broken handpumps and power transformers to non-payment of pensions and NREGA wages.

"The mainstream media is not democratic," says Shubhanshu Choudhary, founder of CGNet Swara. "The owners of media houses decide what goes on the air. With CGNet Swara what we are trying to do is to develop a model that can work for the communities in the Chhattisgarh region."

Choudhary says CGNet Swara's journalism has seen opposition from the State authorities as well as the Maoist guerrillas in

the region, both of whom accuse it of aiding the other. CGNet Swara's work has, nevertheless, been highlighted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Chief Executive Officer of the world's largest digital networking site Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg.

The idea behind the alternative model is to let everybody have a voice, Choudhary says.

But CGNet Swara has had a rough journey since its conception as just CGNet in 2004 when Choudhary intended it to be primarily a radio platform.

Broadcasting news on radio, however, is illegal throughout the country, except the verbatim airing of bulletins from the state-run All India Radio. The authorities blocked attempts by Choudhary to get permission to set up radio stations.

Moreover, even if they had got permission, Choudhary says, the

venture would have failed, as transmitting on FM channels instead of short and medium wave frequencies requires expensive equipment.

In 2010, CGNet Swara (Swara meaning voice) came into being as the platform it is now with citizen journalists travelling to far flung tribal villages to record voices and uploading text-cum-audio stories on <http://cgnetswara.org/>.

The organization ran out of money in December 2015, Choudhary says, and is now supported by government grants as well as by private charities such as the Gates Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation and the International Center for Journalists.

Choudhary says that editorial independence can be achieved in the CGNet Swara model as long as the sources of funding are diverse.

'No government institution to handle bio-medical wastes'

Private companies collect biomedical waste from hospitals periodically and incinerate it

ANURAG SAUKAT

CHENNAI: Though Chennai was named India's Health Capital in 2012 by National Accreditation Board for Hospitals and Health Care providers, the piling up of medical wastes remains a concern. Hospital administrations feel the need for more government intervention when it comes to treatment and disposal of medical waste.

The concern over the growing pile of biomedical wastes surfaced recently when a deer was found feeding on the medical wastes dumped by Voluntary Health Services (VHS).

Senior Manager for Security and Maintenance of the hospital, R.Ramadoss, a retired DSP, termed the incident as a small lapse on the part of the housekeeping staff.

"It was not a big problem as shown by the media. Some of the housekeeping staff kept biomedical wastes close to the other wastes and no one came to pick it up on the day of Pongal. There were not many medical wastes in it either; just a few bandages and syringes. However, we have become more careful and now we keep medical wastes at least 750 yards away from other wastes which include plastics, paper and food," he said.

However, the practice seemed to be otherwise. A housekeeping staff carrying medical waste identified it as remains from HIV



Biomedical waste dumped near a hospital

PHOTO: ANURAG SAUKAT

AIDS treatment and dumped it close to other waste, which was being collected by corporation workers.

The guidelines set by the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board for disposal of medical wastes require hospitals to tag wastes generated from HIV and AIDS treatment in yellow or red bags and have them sealed in a shed until contractors clear the waste.

Ramadoss explained that a major part of the problem was having to rely on private companies for the disposal and treatment of biomedical waste. Hospitals including VHS are

forced to enlist the services of private companies like G.J.Muliclave, in the absence of a government body that treats medical refuse.

"We are required to pay Rs.25,000 for their services while the hospital generates only about 10 kg of waste every day. Rather than TNPCB (Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board) authorising private companies to treat these remains, they should have a system or body that takes care of it themselves," said Ramadoss.

According to the head of maintenance of Fortis Malar

(Adyar), K.Shrikanth, surgeries and other major operations had to be kept at a minimum during the rains in November and December as the contractors could not collect the waste.

Accumulation of such wastes turns it poisonous and has the potential to spread diseases like Hepatitis C, HIV, AIDS, jaundice and many other infections.

However, Shrikanth was sceptical that a government body could be efficient in the treatment and disposal of medical wastes.

"Private companies are doing a fairly good job by collecting waste from hospitals periodically

and treating them or incinerating them near Chinglepet. Government bodies don't usually work like that, especially if hospitals are forcing them to form a body that does the same," he said.

"What the government can do is to ensure that all the staff-hired on a contract basis from private companies--understand medical waste and the consequence of not handling them properly; the staff should be vaccinated and trained accordingly," he explained.

Shrikanth also suggested the implementation of standard guidelines as opposed to the guidelines being used now, which were different in each state. While Tamil Nadu has segregation system based on four categories, Kerala has one based on three.

A TNPCB official however dismissed the initiative of having a separate body or institution to dispose and treat medical waste as trivial.

"We only set the necessary guidelines, carry inspections and audits and penalise the hospitals if they are found violating the guidelines," said Charles Rodriguez, Joint Chief Environmental Engineer at the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board.

"Private companies have been managing the treatment and disposal on their own so far. We do not have the time to take care of such silly things," he said.

Shortage of psychiatric drugs; patients suffer

ANKUR BHARDWAJ

CHENNAI: The National Institute for Empowerment of Persons with Multiple Disabilities (NIEPMD) at Muttukadu on the East Coast Road is currently going through a shortage of expensive psychiatric drugs.

Patients, who were dependent upon the institution for the medicines, are now either thinking about discontinuing the programme or are buying those drugs from somewhere else.

Established in 2005 under the Department of Disability Affairs, Union Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, the institute had been providing free psychiatric medicines until a month ago when the shortage hit the supply.

The director of the institution Himanshu Das has claimed that the shortage is temporary and will be dealt with.

The director of the institution Himanshu Das has claimed that the shortage is temporary and will be dealt with internally in a week or so.

However, sources close to the institution said on the condition of anonymity that "the shortage is because of a financial crunch, we have been asking the director for more funds but the ministry I think, is not willing to spend."



PHOTO: WWW.PHARMACEUTICALONLINE.COM

Sneha an NGO working in the field of psychiatric treatment has been receiving several patients from NIEPMD. A volunteer working closely with the organization said that "we don't have a problem in dealing with patients from NIEPMD, because that is our job; but the government should look after an institution once they establish it"

Parvati, mother of a 15 year old boy who is suffering from minor schizophrenia and borderline personality disorder, said, "we are coming all the way from Muttukadu to Adyar just to get some medicines because none of the chemists in the area stock those medicines, and NIEPMD is supposed to be a national resource center, yet it is going through shortage."

According to the news report in *The Times Of India* on Feb 2, sources at *The Banyan*, a non-profit organisation that rehabilitates the mentally ill, said in the last one month patients from NIEPMD have been visiting them for medication citing the shortage of drugs.

Stem cell drive in Anna University

ANKITA PANDA

CHENNAI: A drive to collect blood stem cells from people who are identified as donors was conducted at Anna University and Ethiraj College on February 3 and 4 by DATRI, an NGO.

The drive on the occasion of World Cancer Day was to spread awareness about donating blood stem cells to help cancer patients.

DATRI has organised similar campaigns in Trivandrum, Delhi, Kolkata, and Bengaluru to spread awareness about donating blood stem cells and how it can save the lives of people suffering from cancers like leukaemia, lymphoma and blood related disorders like thalassaemia.

Not all people can be donors of blood stem cells. Only about 25 per cent of the members of a family can be donors and the rest have to depend on blood stem cell donors.

Due to the lack of awareness about this issue, many people who are in dire need of blood stem cells suffer because there are inadequate genetic matches, said Shobana Prakashan, DATRI coordinator.

A 10/10 is the perfect genetic match for

blood stem cell donation which is difficult to find as not many people donate. Since 2009 till now DATRI has been able to find 103 perfect donor matches. If more people donated, it would save a lot of lives and that was why

The initiative was undertaken by DATRI on the occasion of World Cancer Day to spread awareness about donating blood stem cells. DATRI has organised similar campaigns in other cities.

awareness about this issue needed to created, she added.

The process used to select the perfect donor is very simple. The donor must be above 18 years of age. The doctors take a cheek swab

test to see if the genetic type matches and if there is 10/10 match or 9/10 match, the selected person proceeds with the donation. The donor is injected with Granulocyte-colony stimulating factor (GCSF) that stimulates the bone marrow to produce more stem cells.

After the stem cells were extracted, the rest of the blood was transferred back to the donor, explained Latha Venkat another DATRI member.

After five days the patient is injected with the blood stem cells through apheresis, a process where the cells are transferred through blood transfusion.

This process is known as Peripheral Blood Stem cell donation which is simpler and less painful than extracting the blood stem cells directly from the bone marrow.

This was one of the reasons why people who were even aware about stem cell donation chose not to donate as the process was very painful, Latha added.

"Hopefully the students would have learnt something from this program, and now that the process has been explained in detail they might even donate someday," said M.Smitha, NSS member Anna University.



Top: A water ATM installed in the village of Orakkadu in Tiruvallur district
Left: A woman holds up her smart card in Orakkadu

PHOTO: ANURAG SAUKAT

Smart cards for water

ANURAG SAUKAT

CHENNAI: With the installation of two reverse osmosis (RO) plants, shortage of clean drinking water has become a problem of the past for the residents of Orakkadu village in Tiruvallur district. The villagers get clean water with the swipe of a smart card.

The RO plants worth Rs.9.7 lakhs each was installed by the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department under the Self Sufficiency Scheme (SSS). Under the SSS, the Government facilitates the implementation of certain basic facilities in various villages.

Two thirds of the expense involved in the installation of RO plants was met by the government while the rest was paid by Canara Bank, which had adopted the village under its Gramodhaya Yojana.

Villagers are required to purchase a smart card for Rs.100, which can be then swiped at a counter at the RO plant to receive water at Rs.2 per 20 litres.

"The residents only have to pay Rs.100 at the panchayat office and a smart card will be

issued to them as soon as possible which they can use to collect water. If the card runs out of money they can recharge it like it's done for mobile phones. The money received is kept aside to maintain the machines and to pay for the electricity used in running it," said Vasanthi Baskaran, panchayat president of Orakkadu.

Villagers are required to purchase a smart card for Rs.100, which can be then swiped at a counter at the RO plant to receive water at Rs.2 per 20 litres.

The RO plant gets water from a bore well and stores it at an overhead tank which treats 2000 litres of water in an hour.

"There are almost 700 families in the village; everyone has applied for a smart card and uses the RO machine on a daily basis. At least 8000 litres of water is supplied through this system everyday," said Ms.Baskar.

Orakkadu, 45km away from Chennai, saw shortage of clean water almost ten years ago when the groundwater turned saline, forcing the residents to purchase drinking water or fetch water either from the Kosasthalaiyar river or from Nerukundram, a neighbouring village.

"Up until now we received saline water in the pipes in our houses. Some common pipes in the village received water from a nearby overhead tank, twice a day, for an hour," said Ravi, a panchayat clerk. Navamani, a resident of Orakkadu, said "In order to not waste good water we still wash our clothes and dishes in the saline water even though it can damage our clothes and plates. But we no longer have to wait in long queues or walk long distance carrying pots of water. Neither do we have to use saline water to drink or cook our food."

SEX DETERMINATION

Maneka's statement creates a stir

ANAM AJMAL

CHENNAI: Union Minister for Women and Child Development Maneka Gandhi stirred a controversy on Monday when she suggested that the way to deal with female feticide was to make sex-determination of the foetus compulsory.

Talking at the All India Regional Editors Conference in Jaipur, Ms. Gandhi said, "In my view, the woman should be compulsorily told whether it is a boy or girl child to whom she is going to give birth. The woman should then be registered and tracked to see if she delivered the baby."

Her view, which is in direct contradiction with the Pre Conception Pre Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act (PCPNDT), 1994, received a huge backlash; despite a statement from her office, which clarified that "Ms. Gandhi had specifically stated that this needs further debate and had asked the media persons to give their suggestions."

The 2011 census reports show that the child sex ratio has fallen from 927 females per 1000 males in 2001 to 919 females per thousand males in 2011. This drastic decline has taken place



The 2011 census report indicates a fall in child sex ratio

PHOTO: ANAM AJMAL

despite the act being in place for the last two decades.

According to M. Jeeva, director of Campaign against Sex Selective Abortion (CASSA), the present act has not failed the public but we have failed the act.

"People find ways to abort female babies because of social factors. More than new legislation, we need to enlighten people so that they believe in the principles of equality and do not prefer a son over daughters," he said.

Pointing to the logistics required to implement Maneka Gandhi's suggestion, Jeeva said that it would be "impossible to record and track every pregnant woman because the government does not have the resources to do so."

"India does not have the infrastructure to provide healthcare services to every pregnant woman. A lot of deliveries take place at home. So, these births can't be recorded unless the woman decides to register herself.

In such a case, there might be pressure from her family not to register and she will be discriminated against," he added.

Dr. Sushma Pandey, a gynaecologist for the last 30 years, echoed his concerns and said that making sex-determination compulsory would prove detrimental to women since they could be subjected to domestic violence if they conceived a girl child. She also felt that lifting the PCPNDT Act would just legalise an illegal activity, resulting in a further fall in the number of girl children.

In the wake of the United Nations declaring abortion as a human right, Dr. Pandey explained the difference between abortion and female feticide.

"In the first twelve weeks of pregnancy, the sex of the foetus cannot be determined because the baby is developing. Only after the structural features are developed, can we conclusively say whether the child is a girl or a boy," she said.

The United Nations, on Wednesday, had called on all member countries to decriminalise abortion, "in all circumstances and ensure that women have access to safe abortion and post-abortion care."

Few takers for Govt fare



Clockwise from top 1) Amusement rides at the fair. 2) Private stalls selling clothes, home decor et al. 3) Main entrance to the Tourism and Trade Fair. PHOTO: AFRAH ALI



AFRAH ALI

CHENNAI: Visitors to the ongoing 42nd Tourism and Trade Fair at Island Grounds here are thronging the entertainment stalls where dancers, mimicry artists and circus troupes flaunt their flair; but very few are showing any interest in the government stalls.

Government stalls at the 70 day-long fair are galleries where photographs and models of various government programmes and schemes such as those from the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board are exhibited.

The stalls are red-carpeted and well maintained, but many don't even have volunteers to explain the exhibits there.

Almost all of the descriptions of the working models and captions of photographs are in Tamil, which makes the exhibition even more uninteresting to the non-Tamil crowd.

"These stalls are primarily to showcase the achievements and activities of the various government departments in the year 2015," said Dr. Kamaraj M, Assistant Geologist of Rural Water Supply Department.

The stalls are funded by government itself and they are manned by the officials, he said.

"Only the stalls with working models and 3D presentations pique the interest of people. That is why we have created 3D satellite images in our stall," said Dr B Gopalakrishnan, Deputy

Hydro Geologist manning the stall.

However, people are flocking the giant wheels and dancing cars and the stalls selling ornaments, textiles, utensils, toys and food items.

Attractive displays of colourful bangles and flashy necklaces, shining toy cars and remote-control helicopters are a magnet for children while cheap prices of daily use items like clothes and crockery and home-decor stuff catch the fancy of adults here.

The crowd shops in these stalls and moves to the eateries peppered across the place; the eateries serve varieties of dosas, biriyanis, bajis and ice creams.

There are Chinese and Arabian food stalls too for those who would like to try out different tastes.

But the glitter of all the merchandise doesn't brighten up the lives of the sellers likewise.

"We cannot be home for months at a stretch. But there is no other option. We have to chase all the fests and exhibitions when they happen. Only during the off-seasons can we go home," A Senthil Kumar, a stall owner said.

Most of the stalls had been set up earlier at a temple festival in Madurai.

"We move from one fest to another in a row, cook and stay near the stalls only. Next we will be going to the Kumbakonam Mahamaham, which is like the best sales season for people like us," C Ramkumar, a toys stall owner said.



SELFIE TIME: A family on the Marina beach

PHOTO: THE HINDU

The dangers of taking a selfie

ANVITA SINGH

CHENNAI: A youth who tried to click a selfie with a train speeding behind him was run over on February 2 here.

This is not the first time such an incident has happened. Recently, a man and a woman were drowned in the Arabian Sea in Mumbai; the woman while attempting to click a selfie fell into the sea. The man jumped in order to save her life but he too drowned.

People's need to get social approval on the internet has put their lives in danger, according to psychiatrists.

However, Nandhini, who is pursuing her M Phil in English literature from Queen Mary's College, said, "Selfie is a form of self expression. It is a new way of expressing our feelings through a visual medium. I know there are many people who think that it is nothing

but narcissism, but there are others who have also called this form of expression an art."

According to a research paper published by Birmingham Business School, people on social networking sites indulge in these acts of self-disclosure in order to develop more intimate relationships with people they know very little about.

Subhashini, who is pursuing her Masters from Ethiraj College, said, "People have become addicted to this whole process of taking selfies. I think one day it will be driven to a point where people will start developing a kind of madness or disorder due to selfies."

Subhashini's statement might seem like a kind of hyperbole right

now, but she is not very far off the mark. In fact, a story of doctors pronouncing a new mental illness called 'Selfitis' has been doing the rounds on the internet. This is apparently a disorder where the patient has an obsessive and compulsive need to take a selfie.

Dr. Mohan Raj, a psychiatrist, said, "Today's younger generation constantly feels the need to please everyone in order to maintain some kind of a hollow and superficial social image in the virtual world, which is why they think of taking selfies at all points of time."

Dr Raj also added that more parents came to him for help as they were naturally concerned for their children's well being.

Nikhil Pahwa, a social media expert and the creative head of the website Medianama, said, "Human beings are always exploring, and they have always found ways to entertain themselves. The concept of a selfie is another such discovery."

Pahwa also added that accidents happened only because people, in order to get a right angle or frame, got too ahead of themselves.

"They should be more careful. Social Media is obviously not responsible for the way people act. Human beings are thinking individuals and they should be held responsible for their own actions."

Selfies have also been used by political leaders for creating awareness about social issues. Not too long ago Prime Minister Narendra Modi had launched the selfie campaign #SelfieWithDaughter on his radio show Mann Ki Baat as a part of Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao movement (Save your daughter, Educate your daughter).

Are selfies just another means of entertainment or a prelude to various personality disorders

Art from heart

APARNA ANIL

CHENNAI: The "By the Hand from the Heart" exhibition being held at Lalit Kala Akademi is luring art lovers with a wide array of works ranging from abstract paintings and Madubani works to glass art and typography exhibit.

Among the 22 artists participating in the event is 19 year old Rupak Munje, who is autistic. Rupak has made paintings his means of communication. He has completed 128 paintings till date, many of which are exhibited at Forum Art Gallery, Dakshin Chitra, and Planet Autism and so on.

"This is his 13th show. He works on abstract paintings mainly," says his father Rajendra Munje who has also exhibited few modern Madubani paintings.

For Kokila Bhattacharya, a freelance designer-illustrator based out of Bhopal and Mumbai, work is her way of activism. Her work, "Eyes wide shut" - a group of illustrations that talks about the journey of the people of Bhopal through the gas tragedy in 1984, puts forward disturbing questions about the tragedy. "All the illustrations pose questions. Can we eliminate the possibility of another Bhopal in the future?" asks Kokila who is currently working with Remember Bhopal museum.

Used glass bottles, a broken mirror and things that are usually discarded turn useful raw material for art work. As unlikely as it may

sound, art works by Mridula Hariharan, a glass artist from Chennai, do just that. A pendant that was once a broken bottle neck, damaged glass transformed in to beautiful flower vases and broken mirror pieces glued on a canvas -forming the image of a tree are among the exhibits.

Another item on exhibit is a refrigerator. What qualifies it as an art exhibit is that it is covered by black marker doodles all over.

"It all started with a refrigerator that was dented in transit. I drew a spade on it with a black marker to cover it up and kept adding more elements to over time," says the artist Brijesh Deva Reddy.

"A considerable portion of my work has been a visual diary of many life incidents," he added.

Excerpts from classic novels of Malayalam language, like 'Agni Sakshi', 'Odavil Ninnu' and 'Kuriyadath Thathri' printed on canvas are displayed along side photographs and other paintings, by the Malayalam Project group. This group is a collaborative forum for experiments in the Malayalam Alphabet, Language and Lettering.

Framed prints inspired by the people of Chennai done by artist Riddhi Desai who is an illustrator and graphic designer are another eye-catching exhibit.

The 'Art group show' is from February 1 to 3 and 'Makers market' exhibition showcasing handicraft products by 24 participants will be held on February 5 and 6.



Getting the nuances right : Visitors at the "By Hand From Heart" exhibition PHOTO: APARNA ANIL

Burnt flag evokes fury

ABHA GORADIA

CHENNAI: Users on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have reacted sharply to the pictures of a burning flag posted by a 25-year-old man from Nagapattinam.

Chennai Police have arrested Dileepan Mahendran and booked him under various sections of IPC, Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act and IT Act. The police also secured the cellphone of the person from which the image of the burning flag was posted on Facebook, based on a complaint from V G Narayanan, member of a Hindu outfit.

After Dileepan's post went viral on social media, he disappeared from a relative's house in Thiruvottiyur where he had been staying. Inquiries revealed that Dileepan had worked to help the flood affected in the city in November-December, especially in North Chennai. He

was part of an outfit promoting Periyar's ideologies and his father is an active member of Periyar Dravida Kazhagam, a rational outfit. Dileepan reportedly took part in a protest held at Valluvarkottam seeking action against the authorities of the SVS Naturopathy and Yoga Sciences College in Villupuram for the death of three students and also against those responsible for the death of Hyderabad based research scholar Rohith Vemula.

Some people wonder whether he posted the pictures only for the purpose of grabbing attention.

"There are personality disorders where a person tries to break norms or indulges in anti-social acts in order to get noticed by his/her peers. However, in the case of this boy, it is crucial to understand what his intention and ideology were. However, I'll term it as a stray case. I don't agree that most youngsters vie for attention on social media,"

says Mohan Raj, a psychiatrist based in Thiruvannmiyur.

Vijayan D, who works with HCL, said "Was this guy ignorant? Did he actually know what he was doing? I believe he needs counselling on what a national flag is. If the young generation only knew the history of pre independence and its true meaning, they would never even think of such ugly acts."

Lakshmi Narayan, an IT professional, said "These traitors are worse than the ISIS and their only aim is to indulge in anti national activities. It is high time that they are deported to Mars."

Vetri Kodaan, a government worker, said "Our Prime Minister didn't respect the flag either when he used it as a towel during his yoga show. He also signed the flag in the US, which is illegal. Everyone who disrespects the flag should be prosecuted. Let the law be uniform to all."

A Vizha to bridge differences

AFRAH ALI

CHENNAI: The second edition of the Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha, a much talked about festival of dance and music, will be held on February 27 and 28, in front of the El-laianman Temple in the Urur Olcott Kuppam fishing village.

In addition to the two-day festival in the Kuppam, the crowd-funded Vizha will also travel to two starkly different flood-affected neighbourhoods - Semmencheri and West Mambalam -- with performances on February 20.

However, the Kuppam residents seem to be unaware of the feast for the eyes and ears that awaits them.

"The Urur-Olcott Kuppam Vizha is a response to the vitiated social conditions and to the isolation of arts, artists and audiences into ghettos of caste and class. The Vizha is an effort to liberate the three and use arts to heal social tensions and serve as a bridge across cultures, communities and genres," Nityanand Jayaraman, a coordinator of the program said. The Kuppam Vizha also highlighted the centrality of the fishing village to Chennai's identity and invited people to reimagine the city as a safe, clean and inclusive space, he added.

Semmencheri is predominantly working class, while West Mambalam which was also as badly affected as Semmencheri, has a large



Democratizing music : A performance at the Besant Nagar beach

PHOTO: THE HINDU

concentration of Carnatic musicians. Despite the differences in demographics, the recent floods highlight the shared fate of Chennai residents, and the Vizha re-emphasises that.

As a special gesture, in West Mambalam, the festival will begin with a ceremony to honour Chennai's fisher folk for their role in flood rescue efforts. In Semmen-

cheri, residents will honour the city's youth who spontaneously jumped into the much-needed relief work by working on the ground and coordinating through social media.

According to Alamu Rathinasabapathy, the fest stands out from the rest of the music and art festivals that happen frequently in Chennai due to various reasons.

"The intent, venue and audience are different. The organisers and the manner in which the festival is organised are different as well," she said.

"The women and youth are co-organisers sharing responsibility with other art enthusiasts, rasikas and art-illiterate volunteers to make this festival real. There are no rich patrons, no corporate sponsors, and

no media partners. The artists are performing for free, but we're offering an honorarium," she added.

The festival will be held in the open, on the Urur Olcott Kuppam beach, in front of the temple.

Many people see the Vizha as an effort to take Carnatic music to the fisher folk - to offer poor deprived fisher folk an opportunity to savour the exquisite.

But this is not the case, says Nivedita Menon, one of the organizers, in her blog. "Rather, this is an opportunity for the exquisite to perform alongside other exquisites - for Villu-paattu to usher Carnatic in, or for Parai-attam to set the beat for Bharatanatyam.

This will only make our already rich art forms, and our obviously talented artists shine brighter. Purity and immutability will kill the arts," she writes.

However, the people of the Kuppam are neither informed about the event named after their village, nor are they intrigued, even after the kickoff held on February 1.

"We don't have time for anything else but to earn our daily wages on which we live," said S Sasi Kumar, an auto driver residing at the Kuppam.

Similar was the response from Tamizhselvi, a flower seller here.

"Moreover, women normally don't venture out much, if not for work," she added.