



Service at your doorstep

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School students getting overweight

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Market getting ready for V-Day

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Flood-hit real estate still down 'Schools flout RTE norms'

SNEHA GEORGE

Chennai: The unprecedented December floods and rains in have plunged the real estate, which had been facing stagnation in its growth for the past few years, into further loss.

The demand for property has fallen in areas like Tambaram, Urapakkam, Mudichur, Perumbakkam, Kotturpuram and many other areas affected by the floods. In Kotturpuram, an apartment that was selling at Rs 11 crores, now is selling at Rs 6.5 crores.

People are wary and are taking more care before they buy or rent an apartment.

"They ask me to show pictures of the areas and apartment during the floods, so that they can make a clear decision," said N.Narasihma, a private broker.

"There was no way I could get the family to buy the house. They have the money, but say that their safety is not guaranteed," he added.



High rise buildings have sprung near water bodies

PHOTO: TRIP ADVISOR

But at Hanu Reddy Realities, there are two different views.

Raji Varma, an employee of Hanu Reddy, said, "people don't want to buy or rent houses in areas that were badly affected and it is understandable. Prices are falling by 10-15 per cent and many are not even considering buying."

She also said that there were no more takers for the ground and first floor apartments.

But, Uma N, another broker at

the same agency claimed that she had no problems selling houses.

"The people I have dealt with have bought and taken houses on rent at the old rates," she said.

Sellers too are facing problems as they are not getting many buyers. Some of them are selling at a loss.

Ram Jaganathan, who just sold his flat in Neelankarai, said, "I started at quoting Rs 6 crores, and I needed the money, and I finally

sold it for Rs 4 crores, I couldn't wait any longer."

A prospective buyer, Jeny John, who works at HCL, said "I am currently in Kotturpuram, and I was looking out for houses from September, and was ready to relocate anywhere in the city, but now I want to be safe, and keep my family safe too if a flood does come again. I am looking at Aynavaram and Triplicane."

R.Deepa, who stayed in an apartment in Teynampet, had lost a lot of her belongings in the floods.

"We don't know when the next flood will come but we don't want to lose any more of our valuables. So we have moved here to Nungambakkam. This place wasn't badly affected and we know we will be safe here," she said.

Arthur Thomas, a private broker, said that the prices in Nungambakkam, Anna Nagar and Aynavaram remained the same during the floods and even for a week after the floods; but they shot up to two

times the original prices, as the demand increased.

Speaking about OMR, Thomas said, "There are not many takers for this area, and the prices have gone down drastically up to 30 per cent."

A two bedroom flat that was going out on rent for Rs 20,000 is now being rented out for Rs 15,000.

"I advised all my friends and family members against getting a house here on OMR," said Rajeev Jacob, a resident at Et Star apartments on OMR.

"We had no water, and no electricity. We had used the two buckets of water carefully," he said.

Jacob said he had made a mistake in taking this flat, but it was the only flat he could afford and the floods were the last thing on his mind.

But for him, moving to another place is not an option.

"We will just learn to be more equipped for the next flood," he said.

YASHASWANI SEHRAWAT

CHENNAI: While the school admission process has just begun, there are many sought-after schools in the city that have already completed their admissions to LKG, having started the process in November-December last year.

Parents allege that this is, however, in contravention of a government order passed in 2012 under the Right to Education Act which directed the schools affiliated to Matriculation Board and CBSE to start their admission process only in April and mid-February respectively.

Under the RTE Act, these schools have to reserve 25 per cent of their seats for poor children and the expense incurred by the school for the education of these disadvantaged children would be reimbursed by the Government.

While some schools like Chennai Public School, PSBB Millennium School and Everwin Vidyashram conducted online admissions, others like Abacus Montessori School and Don Bosco gave out offline application forms. The admission process is already over in these schools.

Interestingly, in Sishya, a school owned and managed by KIT Thomas Society, registration for LKG for the year 2019 is also closed. Parents usually start preparing for admissions six months in advance, but considering the schedule of schools like Sishya, it seems that parents should start thinking about their child's admission even before the child is born.

R. Priyadarshini's son studies in 5th standard in Sishya. "We tried for three years before our son was given admission here. The registration here starts early compared to other schools."

Another parent, whose daughter got admission in LKG last year, said that even though the registrations were over, he paid some money and secured admission.

"The admission process in many schools is tedious, and complex. But if you can afford to pay a price, most schools will give admissions".

T.R. Saravan, who will be seeking admission for his three year-old son next year, said that he has started to keep an eye on the process from this year itself.

"I have begun checking websites and calling up schools now. I have selected 4-5 schools depending on their reputation, infrastructure and fee. I have to be upto date with schedules of these schools," said the thirty seven year-old.

Matriculation schools and particularly CBSE schools are flouting the norms, asserted the Tamil Nadu Matriculation, Higher Secondary and CBSE Schools Association.

K.R. Nandakumar, General Secretary of the association said "Everybody knows the schools are violating the rules. But it has become a way to make some money."

"The CBSE schools usually refuse to follow many instructions under Right to Education Act, stating that they don't receive reimbursement. Even the government can't do anything about it. That is why when the judgment came that private schools could determine their fee, the schools hailed it and the government too was happy."

Nandakumar added that even if the government received any complaint against a CBSE school, the maximum it could do was to send it to the CBSE office. "And the officials usually take money from the schools or set up an inquiry committee."

An official of the Department of School Education claimed that it was only matriculation schools that came under the department, and none of these were flouting the norms. He, however, added that the CBSE schools might be at fault, but clearly said that it was the CBSE office which was accountable.

CBSE officials refused to comment.

Challenges for smart city plan in T Nagar

SREEDEVI JAYARAJAN

CHENNAI: T Nagar, the commercial hub of Chennai, is all set to go "smart" with a complete facelift after the city Corporation finalises the plan for the area. But this 'smart city' plan is riddled with challenges like dealing with narrow traffic-choked roads, managing the huge population and integrating the poor into the system, say experts.

These challenges need to be addressed at a deeper level, said Karen Coelho, professor, Madras Institute of Development Studies.

The initial proposal for T Nagar chosen as the test site for the smart city project in Chennai includes on-street parking facilities, cycle sharing and elaborate footpath networks. The idea is to reduce the use of private vehicles and encourage people to take public transport.

For this purpose, public transport connectivity would be strengthened and the number of private vehicles would be regulated here, said Shankar Arumugham of Jones Lang LaSalle, the real estate services firm which is drafting the proposal for the corporation.

Although the corporation planned to set aside Rs 878 crores for the entire project, there were multiple implementation challenges in the plan, said Shankar.

"Public acceptance is one of the main challenges during implementation. How do we convince that section of people (upper class and upper middle class mainly) who have been using private vehicles for many years to shift to public transport suddenly? Moreover, how do we enable a smooth transition from private commuting to use of public transport system by these people," said Shankar.

Apart from strengthening of the public transport system, another innovative method proposed to reduce traffic was cycle sharing, which would also encourage use of non-motorised transport in the city, said Arumugham.

Cycle rental stations will be created at all bus stops and MRTS stations, educational institutions and shopping precincts where people can take cycles from any station and return it to any other station in the system.

"T Nagar is one of the busiest areas in Chennai. On any given weekend, the shopping centres and the busy bylanes of T Nagar see at least 200,000 people on an average. Even if the corporation succeeds in providing enough cycles for all the people in the area, maintaining the system and monitoring the prompt return of cycles in good condition would be a big challenge," said Karen Coelho as a counter argument to the proposal.

Street hawkers selling their wares on the pavements of T Nagar need to be moved and reorganised in order to create bigger, pedestrian friendly footpaths and wider roads. Illegal street parking is another issue which needs to be addressed. "Smart city aims to make everything visible, recorded and organized by cleaning up the chaos. But the problem is that it does not work in favour of the huge section of the population engaged in informal jobs," said Coelho.

"Slum dwellers, illegal residents who do not own patta for their land, street hawkers, the homeless and all the other people who do not possess legal documents for anything, will be pushed further into the depths of poverty and made invisible," she added

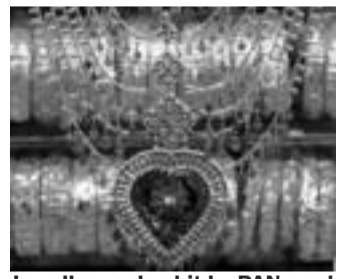
Jewellers go on strike

THOMAS MAMPILLY

CHENNAI: Jewellers in the state downed their shutters for a day on February 11 in protest against the new government rule that makes PAN cards mandatory for purchases of ornaments above Rs 2 lakh. Although a nationwide strike was held just a day ago, the Madras Jewellers and Diamond Merchants' Association (MJDMA) announced that they would postpone it by a day since Wednesday was a muhurtha dinam (auspicious day) for the sale of gold and they did not want to lose on their business.

Jewellers feel that bringing down the limit from the earlier Rs 10 lakhs to Rs 2 lakhs was a bolt out of the blue.

"The government should first make sure people have PAN cards. A lot of our customers, many from villages nearby, are either caught unaware of the new rule or do not



Jewellery sales hit by PAN card rule

PHOTO: INDIA INFOLINE

possess the document," said Sampath Kumar, manager of GRT Jewellers in Adyar.

"One of our customers even refused to give her PAN card just because she was doubtful of our intentions. With so many scams going around, we couldn't blame her for being cautious," said A Ravichandran, manager of Prince Jewellers.

There are laments about a decrease in sales over the last month, when the ruling came into effect.

"Our sales have slid by 15-20 percent," said the cashier at Prince Jewellers.

But a manager at another major jewellery store, based out of Kerala, said "We haven't had a decrease in number of visits, nor in sales. While I do think the government lowered the ceiling in haste, I am sure it wouldn't affect most of the big stores."

While the jewellers have been quick to paint a bad picture, many of the customers didn't share their dismay with the new rule.

For 57-year-old Senthil R, an NRI who has just retired, the government did the right thing.

"This rule will go a long way in curbing black money," he said.

A few other shoppers said that the law would remain a hurdle only for a short time. Once people become aware of the need to present the PAN card, the law would no longer be a hurdle, they said.

Sanitary workers demand pay hike

VISHNU SWAROOP

CHENNAI: The Tamil Nadu Over Head Tank (OHT) operators Union and Tamil Nadu Sanitary Workers Union staged a protest on February 11 demanding permanent jobs and a minimum salary of Rs.15,000.

The protest near Valluvar Kottam in Nungambakkam was organized by Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and United Forum of Trade Unions (UFTU).

The workers alleged that they were being given consolidated pay ranging from Rs 2500 to Rs 3800. The other demands were a pension of Rs 3000 for the retired tank operators and sanitary workers, a gratuity sum of Rs 1 lakh and proper medical insurance.

Representatives of tank workers and sanitary workers from 12,524 panchayats around Tamil Nadu par-



Sanitary workers seek a better deal

PHOTO: VISHNU SWAROOP

ticipated in the protest. They alleged that the rural workers faced a whole range of problems that were being overlooked by the government.

R.Ravi, head of Salem OHT operators union, said, "I have to walk 3 kms to the water tank and at night there are no lights. We have not been provided with a torchlight. There have been instances where we found snakes in the motor room. Ours is an unsafe job."

M.Arirajan from Sivagangai, who

has been working as a tank operator for the past 30 years, said "I'm going to retire in 1 year. But I have not got the amount of Rs.46,150 that has been due from 2009."

The OHT workers alleged that they were being paid a monthly salary of Rs.250. They are asked to clean water tanks twice a month, for which the salary is Rs.300.

"A lot of times we don't get the Rs 300 meant for cleaning the tank. Even if we get the full amount,

what can we do with a meager sum of Rs 550 a month?" said Anandan from Dharmapuri.

N.Balasubramanian, state head of CITU, said "The government thinks that the OHT operator job is just switching the motor on and off. They don't see the risks involved."

The workers said their service was vital in rural areas as both people and livestock depend on proper water supply.

The workers also alleged that the government's medical insurance had not been given to them properly.

"We are not insured properly as dictated by the state. Only when a worker dies in some mishap while working, they pay an amount to his family," says Arirajan.

He also alleged that in the 30 years of work experience he didn't get any receipt for being insured.

Sanitary workers had their own problems. After the December floods, 28,000 sanitary workers from all over the state were called to clean the city. But some workers alleged that the payment of Rs 2000 that they were promised had not been given to them.

The union leaders also made references to the coming elections.

K.R.Ganesan, state level secretary of CITU said, "If our demands are not met we will go on an indefinite strike and the consequences will be unimaginable. Our last resort is to boycott the coming state elections."

N.Balasubramanian said "Both the DMK and AIADMK governments have not been interested in the welfare of sanitary workers and tank operators. The coming election in May is the best time to give them an answer"

Poster war intensifies as elections approach

Parties have started gearing up for assembly elections with city's walls now covered with posters and pictures of leaders

SIDHARTH BHARDWAJ

CHENNAI: The Election Commission is yet to announce the dates for assembly elections likely in May but political parties have started pasting posters, erecting billboards and painting walls with pictures of their leaders.

All major arterial routes like Sardar Patel Road, Anna Salai, Tharamani-Velacherry Road and Rajiv Gandhi Salai have been encroached with hoardings of politicians. This is being done in clear violation of

the City Municipal Act, 1919 and the 2008 ruling of the Madras High Court which banned illegal and hazardous hoardings in Tamil Nadu.

Political parties have even booked advertisement space specified by the Municipal Corporation. Apart from that, they are advertising on tree trunks and public signage which is illegal. Even private properties are not being spared.

"They come every month and put up something new over the walls. We don't say much as we don't want to get into a fight," said

Gayathri, a resident of Buddha Street, Tharamani, whose house wall was painted with slogans of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). She denied having received any money for this.

Printers in the city are seeing a rise in number of orders.

"More orders are coming from political parties now. It will get more intense in the coming weeks. The party cadres put their posters on top of others," Kalaivannam of Rayanz Media Solutions said.

Municipal Corporation Officials

said they were keeping a close watch on encroachment of public space and said that the situation was under control.

"The departments concerned are acting on the complaints. As per guidelines for campaigning, ideally every party candidate should remove hoardings and billboards between the time of announcement of election dates and filing their nominations," said T. Manoharan, Public Relation Officer, Chennai Corporation.

The opposition blamed the

AIADMK Government for causing inconvenience to the people.

"The AIADMK is putting its hoardings everywhere. We've been given strict orders from our Deputy Chief to not put any. A single billboard informing the timings and venue of the event is being put up by us at every party function. We're focussing more on door to door campaigning," said Balasubramanian, a spokesperson of the DMK.

Activist K.R. Ramaswamy, popularly known as Traffic Ramaswamy, has filed a fresh PIL against

Chief Minister J. Jayalalitha for installing billboards in public spaces.

"I filed one petition for the removal of illegal billboards on Feb 9 and Feb 11 after I saw a billboard of the CM attending some wedding. I have faith that these ads will be banned before elections as I'm being adequately supported by the Police and Corporation," he said.

Another report on Page 2

Tap on screen, service at the door

Hyperlocal deliveries growing popular

SWETA AKUNDI

CHENNAI: With doorstep deliveries of all kinds of services becoming the norm, not only does the adage 'consumer is king' stand true, but also, it would appear that he never has to leave his throne. From grocery shopping, healthcare, banking services to beauty services, everything is brought to the consumers' home.

Companies like Grofers and Pep-

partap, that co-ordinate with local vendors and grocery shops to deliver groceries at your door, have grown big, especially in tier 1 cities like Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai and Hyderabad. E-retail giants like Amazon have too taken the hint and followed suit. Amazon's KiranaNow and Flipkart's Nearby, currently operating only in Bangalore, have made deals with kirana stores for local deliveries.

The response from retailers is

varied. While most retailers benefit from third party delivery apps, some insist that since their shops ran on word-of-mouth basis, the majority of their customers were regulars.

Tirath Gambhir, owner of Bombay General Stores in T-Nagar, said, "My regular clients might explore online shopping once in a while but in India, you can't dismiss the touch-feel factor that comes with shopping at the store." Stores that have been around for years have their own deliverymen too. Hence they are reluctant to make deals with companies like Grofers.

"I believe that to deal with third party deliverymen, you need a digital inventory system which shops like mine don't have. Moreover, I would not want to risk the reputation of my shop if there is any problem with the delivery," said Tirath.

This week, Peppertap announced the closure of their operation in six major cities, including Chennai. This comes after Grofers rolled back operations in 12 tier-2 and tier-3 cities last month. Is the hyperlocal delivery market saturating, then?

Pooja Jalan, co-founder of Kwickdel, a startup running door-to-door errands, believes otherwise.

Quirky Deliveries

1. Delivering people too: During the floods, Kwickdel delivered not only goods but also helped transport people stuck in various parts of the city.
2. Spreading love: Genie received an order for a custom-made bouquet of condoms from a couple meeting after six months. It was duly delivered

"That might be true for food-delivery or grocery-delivery companies are set in their patterns. We, on the other hand, do not deal with any particular vendor or any particular items. Anything as inane as delivering documents you forgot from your home to your office can be done by us."

This new generation of errand-runners caters especially to college students, young working-professionals and small-business owners, or as the co-founder of Genie, Rakesh Mani, said, 'for anyone who is too busy or too lazy- which is basically, everyone these days'.

The delivery persons are hired on referral basis to guarantee the security of the customers.

"We keep an original of their id-proofs and also do a basic police-verification," said Rakesh.

The healthcare sector is also seeing an increase in delivery systems as e-pharmacies are becoming popular.

Healthat60 is a Chennai-based company that provides healthcare and delivers medicine to the elderly. Saraswati P, Operations In-charge at Healthat60, said, "If the order is placed before 12.00 pm, then we deliver our services within one working day."

For emergency services however, e-pharma stores wouldn't be of much use. People have to depend on pharmacies like Apollo and Muthu Pharmacy that deliver medicines 24/7 within a radius of 5 kilometres.

Banking services offered door-to-door are also popular among the 'premium class' people, according to a manager of Axis Bank in Adyar, Chennai.

"A bank representative can visit your house to take care of the loan application process. You just need to have the required documents ready and the loan will be transferred digitally to your account. Also, if you have a 'premium' or 'priority' account, you can have the rep collect cash deposits or deliver cash to your house," he said.



Prayers are now online

PHOTO: MIDDAY

God goes digital

SWETA AKUNDI

CHENNAI: For the upcoming Mahamaham festival, the organisers announced that the 'teertham' (holy water from the Mahamaham tank) would be on sale online, along with prasad from 17 temples in Kumbakonam.

Several temples offer the delivery of prasad through online transactions.

"Since I find it difficult to go to a temple every time, I order the prasad online," said Ravichandran, a scientist.

The demand for courier-prasad has led to the popularity of sites such as Eprarthana and Onlineprasad that classify temples according to area and main deity.

"People who don't have the time or the means to attend the temple give us their name, sun sign and donation, and we send an agent to the temple from our side. The agent

gets the pooja done and delivers the prasad to us which we forward to our customers," said Siva Prakash, Operations Incharge at Eprarthana. These sites also offer 'package poojas'.

"People want to worship different deities according to their requirements. Like Goddess Saraswati would be preferred during Vasanth Panchami. So we offer a package deal for performing various poojas in different temples on certain auspicious dates," Siva said.

Regular temple goers seem unfazed by this trend. Dilli Kumari, 52, who visits the Kapaleeshwar Temple in Mylapore daily, said, "I don't even use a computer to believe in online poojas."

Youngsters' take on this isn't much different. "This is the first time that I am hearing of online darshan," said Mithula G, 27. "It can't compare to actually coming to a temple and being close to God."



Hyperlocal delivery is the buzz-word. PHOTO: ONLINE KIRANA

HEALTH INSURANCE SCHEME

Private sector unwilling partner

THOMAS MAMPILLY

CHENNAI: The Chief Minister's Health Insurance Scheme, which provided upto Rs. 4 lakh coverage for each family below the poverty line and which was launched amid much fanfare five years ago, is still popular among the poorer sections.

But some hospitals do not welcome patients seeking treatment with this insurance cover.

"In 2013, when my nephew developed a heart condition just a few years after birth, my brother-in-law brought him to Chennai from Kancheepuram. We got him treated here for free," says P Ravi, who runs a roadside tea shop near Taramani.

The cost of the treatment came to Rs. 3 lakhs and it was covered under the cashless treatment scheme, which proved helpful for families without a fixed source of income.

"It's reassuring to know that you can always rely on such schemes in case of emergencies," says Lakshmi, Ravi's wife.

While the scheme's website proudly proclaims tie ups with 119

single-speciality and 627 multi-speciality hospitals, the same hospitals do not welcome patients under the "Amma" scheme.

At the same private hospital that Ravi's nephew was treated, an enquiry into an appendicitis operation caused the Administration Officer to reply, "No Amma scheme here!"

Even though the website lists multiple departments under the scheme at the hospital, the officer said that only the Cardiology department comes under the scheme.

Cardiac problems often require

expensive treatments, sometimes coming to as much as Rs. 1 crore. But the Chief Minister's insurance scheme has coverage of only Rs. 4 lakh.

Similarly, when a leading eye-care provider was approached for a cataract operation, the officer passed on the buck to another branch of the same hospital as cataract did not come under the scheme.

Vishnu Nath, an Administration Officer at United India Insurance managing the scheme, said "We have spent around Rs. 3500 crore

to Rs. 4000 crore in helping the government go ahead with the scheme."

The scheme only allows for cashless treatment - meaning the hospitals have to deal with the insurance agency directly - to avoid any extra payments that the hospital might try to extract from the patient.

A good number of people have availed themselves of the benefits of health insurance. At the Voluntary Health Services in Taramani, 37 people had sought treatment in January this year.

D Vijayalakshmi, Liaison Officer for the scheme at VHS, said, "Over 1000 people have availed themselves of the scheme here since 2013. Here at VHS, 30 beds are allotted for dialysis patients under the scheme. Although there is demand for more, at this point, this is the number that we can accommodate under the scheme here."

She said that other government hospitals too were hard pressed for space. In such a situation, the private hospitals needed to step up and do the job they signed up for.



A family shows their health card PHOTO: DECCAN CHRONICLE



Political graffiti on city walls is being replaced by posters

PHOTO: SIDHARTH BHARDWAJ

Graffiti art on decline

SIDHARTH BHARDWAJ

CHENNAI: Graffiti art showcasing political leaders and slogans, which dot the walls of the city, are steadily on the decline due to the arrival of digital printing presses.

With the assembly elections around the corner in Tamil Nadu, walls are being covered with political advertisements. While earlier graffiti art was the main medium of reaching out to the voters, its share has been significantly cut due to digital printing which takes less time.

"The business has halved due to digital printing press. A decade ago we used to have 10 to 15 orders per month but now it is becoming dif-

icult to make ends meet as there is no fixed payment," said Murugan, a graffiti artist.

"On an average, we used to earn up to Rs. 20,000 per month; now it is around Rs. 10,000," he said.

Murugan is one of the 30 remaining artists in the city who are hired by political parties to paint life-size caricatures of political leaders. He came into this profession 18 years ago and is the first in his family to do this work.

Now, flex boards and hoardings are produced on mass scale within hours by an offset printing press. While a 10 feet by five feet enamel paint mural costs around Rs. 7000, water color paintings come as

cheap as Rs. 4000. On the other hand, a digital printing press churns out 10,000 flyers which are printed both sides for Rs. 6700 and deliver it the same day.

Murugan said that with no government support, competing with the digital printing press was a near impossible task.

"Earlier people used to join this profession because they were interested in it. Now they're here just here because they don't know any other work. There is no regular payment in our work. The clients delay orders or cancel it midway which is a huge loss of money and time for us. Even payments are delayed most of the time," he said.

The truth behind floods

SNEHA GEORGE

CHENNAI: Urban development experts say the December flood was not a natural disaster and blame the illegal, unrestricted constructions over the years for the catastrophe.

While politicians and officials have blamed it on the unprecedented rain, experts say that constructions on marsh lands and areas that used to be water bodies were the main reason for the crisis.

According to environmental activist Nityanand Jayaraman, the Pallikaranai marshlands were a catchment area whose size has reduced from 250 sq km in size to 50 sq km, over the years, due to the construction there.

The comparison of Chennai map of 2001 and that of 2015 is telling. The western side of MRC Nagar in Santhome was a water body with greenery in 2001.

The 2015 map shows huge constructions in the same area, some of the buildings being MRC Malligai, Leela Palace hotel, and Sun TV offices.

During the floods, many people saw water invade their homes in areas like Teynampet, Kotturpuram and MRC Nagar and many other areas, water had risen till the first floor.

Slums like Jyothimanagar near the Adyar river had been completely washed away. Many engineering colleges in the suburban areas had

been badly affected by the floods.

"If you build on water bodies, someday, like in December, the water will flow where it is meant to. This is no surprise," said Nityanand Jayaraman.

Sold with the tag of "lake view", villas and apartments in areas like Old Mahabalipuram Road, East Coast Road, Neelankarai and Pallikaranai, had almost drowned.

"We first thought of moving to our apartment in Alwarpet, but there was too much water and we didn't want to risk it. But here we thought we would lose our house. We spend so much on building this house last year," said S Vidya who owns a villa in Neelankarai.

Pramod Cherian, a civil engineer working at TCS, said, "The original terrain of Chennai was mostly wet lands and marshes. The now IT colony in Velachery had over 5,000 hectares of wet lands."

Builders require a no objection certificate from the pollution board, neighboring properties and from the municipality.

The Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) regulates physical developments and sanctions building plan and layout.

But the experts alleged that in many cases sanction was given even if the norms were not followed because money was involved. "Many buildings especially in MRC Nagar were built without proper sanctions," Pramod added.

On a dangerous footing

SREEDEVI JAYARAJAN

CHENNAI: Three people die every day on an average in foot-board accidents in Chennai, according to a survey conducted by a city based NGO Thozhan.

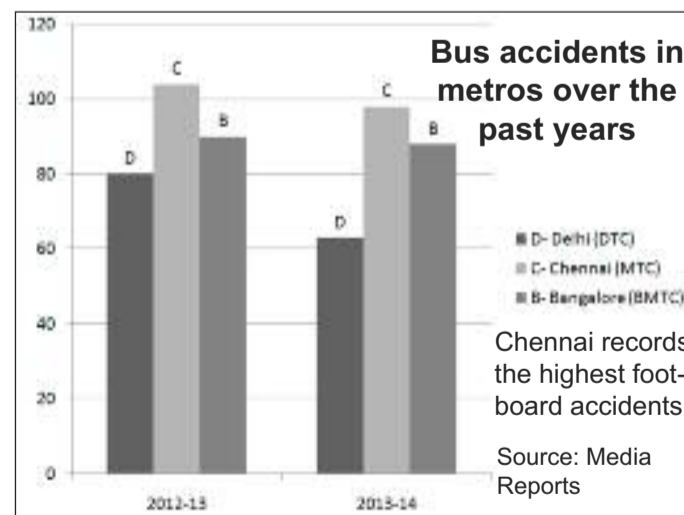
Chennai topped the list of cities in the country involving people travelling on the footboard of state-run buses, according to the survey. The number of accidents involving MTC buses is four.

K Jothimani, deputy manager of the safety department, MTC, said, "Most of these accidents happen during peak hours. We see many students running and boarding moving buses. Even when the buses aren't crowded, these adolescents travel on foot-boards for the adrenaline rush."

Apart from students, senior citizens are also affected as sometimes, due to overcrowding, they wait on the footboards before alighting, he said.

Other victims include new visitors who are unsure of their alighting points. A fall from the front footboard will most likely result in the rear left wheel of the bus running over the passenger, he added.

"MTC transports 50 lakh people



every day in the 3800 buses operating in the city. On an average, every bus transports 1500 people per day. Although the maximum capacity of a bus is 75 (seating capacity of 50 and 25 standees), most buses in the city accommodate close to 100 passengers at a time and these extra persons usually travel on the footboards. Accidents also happen when the footboards break due to the excess weight," said Jothimani.

MTC has commissioned an Accident Prevention Squad, lead by

two assistant engineers (heading two teams for north and south Chennai), which surveys buses from 8 am to 12 noon and 4 pm to 8 pm. They are equipped with a public addressing system to advise foot-board passengers and catch speeding drivers. Drivers caught overshooting signals are sent to a traffic training school for two to three days by the squad officers.

"This month, we had a 10 day program where four assistant commissioners of the Traffic police department advised drivers and

conductors at the four traffic training schools in Chennai, against over-speeding and allowing foot-board travel," said Jothimani

After the 2012 accident in which four students travelling on the footboard were crushed to death by a truck, the state government appointed a Public Transport Committee (PTC) to come up with proposals to prevent recurrence of such accidents.

After PTC's report, the traffic police surveyed the five busiest bus routes in Chennai (covering most number of schools and colleges) by posting a constable at every bus stop.

One of the main points in the report submitted to the High Court was that MTC should have all buses in the city fixed with doors to prevent foot-board travel.

"Currently, MTC has 800 buses with doors and by 2018 all the buses in the city will have doors," said Jothimani.

Vidhyaashree of Thozhan said that the MTC and the traffic police department do not work together and the organisation tried to bridge this gap between the two bodies by advising bus drivers, conductors and traffic cops on how to deal with footboard travellers.

Job fair for transgenders

The city police conducted a job fair that was attended by the community in large numbers

YUVRAJ SAKHARE

Chennai: The Chennai city police along with Bharathi Foundation an NGO working for transgenders have organized the first of its kind job fair exclusively for transgenders at Hotel Ashoka in Egmore.

Senior police officials at the fair credited City Police Commissioner T.K. Rajendran with first envisioning the possibility.

As many as 280 transgenders from across the state participated in the job fair. Government as well as private sector jobs will be given to the participants in accordance with their qualifications.

Shobahna Ramesh, President of Bharathi foundation said, "the HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank and SBI Life Insurance are already on the board to support this initiative." She added that the foundation was



As many as 280 transgenders took part in the job fair organised exclusively for them PHOTO: YUVRAJ SAKHARE

willing to provide training to transgender people in paper-crafting and handmaking of products.

She was satisfied with the response the foundation got from the

transgender community.

C.Shymala Devi, Additional Deputy Commissioner, who played a key role in organizing this job fair said, "The data collected will be

forwarded to organizations like banks, insurance companies, industries and entrepreneurs. Our aim is to integrate transgenders into society and enable them to earn their livelihood in a dignified manner."

A Jaya Subramaniam, Assistant Commissioner of Police, said, "This job fair will give a life changing opportunity to transgenders as many generally indulge in criminal activities or begging because of lack of employment. We thought of giving them a life where they can be a part of mainstream society."

Gnanadinakaran Neil, Manager, SBI Life Insurance, said, "We are willing to offer the job of insurance agent or insurance advisor to them. Basic qualification for this job is 10th pass. After recruiting eligible candidates we will give them three days training. After training they have to appear for the IRDA-conducted exam. If they pass the exam

they will get the opportunity to work as independent insurance agents."

When asked if the transgenders would face problems as they would have to go door to door to sell insurance policies, Gnanadinakaran Neil replied, "This is not the first time that SBI Life Insurance is recruiting transgenders. In 2013 in Madurai we had recruited some transgenders and today they are doing a great job and do not face or create any problems."

M. Regina, a B.A graduate, who aspires to become a teacher, said, "They took our bio-data. They will segregate it according to education and then will call us to let us know what kind opportunities are their available for us. I think it's a very good initiative by the police, I really appreciate the police commissioners initiative in making this happen."



NE beauticians working at a beauty parlour in Chennai PHOTO: THE HINDU

'They have a way with beauty'

REECHA ARYAL

Chennai: People from the north-east are in great demand as beauticians and hair dressers in salons across the city, according to the parlour owners.

A good salary starting from Rs 6,000 and free accommodation are the key factors for their attraction towards the job.

"Once you are trained, you get a minimum salary of Rs 6,000 in your starting days and earn more as you get more experienced," says Sarita, a beautician at Lakme Beauty Parlor.

Sarita came to Chennai with her sister seven years back to visit the Tirupati Balaji temple.

"Although I came here just to explore Chennai, I stayed on since I saw so many job opportunities here," says Sarita. She, then, paid Rs 60,000 for a beautician course. Now, she earns more than Rs 15,000 a month. Unlike Sarita, Sumira Rai from Darjeeling came to Chennai six years ago in search of a job. "I was uneducated and couldn't find a good job. So I came here for a better life," says Sumira, a senior beautician at Green Trends on L.B Road, Adyar Branch.

Sumira also paid more than Rs 40,000 rupees to train as a beautician. Now, around 10 beauticians work under her direct supervision. Among them, more than 70 percent

workers are from North East India. They come from Manipur, Nagaland and Sikkim. A few come from Nepal.

These people dress up nicely, they look good and they pick up the work much faster than locals, say parlour owners, adding that they give a perfect finish.

Medha Raju, CEO of Clippers Styleage at Kotturpuram, says, "So, they are in demand in big parlors."

Most of these people work in big chains such as Lakme, Green Trends and Naturals which offer them an attractive salary besides accommodation. Smaller parlours are at a disadvantage because they cannot match the pay and perks offered by the big businesses.

The north-eastern people are preferred because they have 'a hand with beauty', a better sense of style, good at English and willing to relocate; also they are not demanding.

Veena Kumaravel, Co-founder of Naturals chain, says, "So, we generally provide them good salary to get trained manpower."

According to her, there are more than 7,000 beauticians working in Naturals around the country. Among them, approximately 1500 are from the North East and they work in South India centres including those in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Telangana and Goa.

"Obesity on the rise in city schools"

VARUN CHIRUMAMILLA

CHENNAI: A survey has found that several children attending private schools were overweight and prone to health risks and that this could be addressed by organising structured sports programmes. However, some parents have dismissed the survey saying that academics were a far more important priority than sports.

Edusport, which conducts tailor made sport programs for schools for a fee, surveyed schools across the nation, and concluded that 40 per cent of children attending private schools had an unhealthy Body Mass Index (BMI), 20 per cent had less than desirable endurance capabilities and 25 per cent had inadequate flexibility. It also suggested that at least three structured sport programmes a week were necessary to buck this trend.

A spokesperson for Edusport said "Many schools in India don't have enough space for children to play and neither do they allocate enough time for play. If we have to still ensure that all the children get to play then we need to have some structured activity that makes best use of the space and time. Also a structured program does not imply that there is no 'unstructured' or free play. As part of our program we have adequate time for free and unregulated play as well."

The World Health Organisation has said that obesity is at 22 percent in the 5-19 age group in India and is on the upswing

G. Lokanathan 35, who was seeking admission for his four year-old son to the prestigious Dayanand Anglo Vedic (DAV) School in Gopalapuram said, "I noticed that the only sporting infrastructure available here is a basketball court; the

school also conducts a yoga class once a week and I feel this is inadequate. But they have a solid reputation for academics and given this and their competitive fee structure I think the physical activity component is secondary."

B.Meena, mother of a 10 year old boy studying at the Bala Vidya Mandir in Adyar, said that she was also aware that the school did little to promote physical activity.

"I am aware of the Edusport survey and I feel it is up to us as parents to step in and provide for these needs in a private capacity. I make sure that my son attends skating classes twice a week irrespective of his academic load," she said.

Dr V. Rammohan Rao, a general physician, said "Obesity and juvenile diabetes are serious problems,

that require immediate attention before they severely burden our public health system. It is a combination of sedentary lifestyles, poor eating habits, shrinking open spaces in urban areas, a dependence on technology, and the disappearance of traditional games and pastimes that is damaging the health of youngsters today."

A majority of parents said that academics were a primary consideration, and that 'a little bit of flab' was nothing to worry about. They also said their children spent up to two hours a day on smart phones, I-pads, laptops and gaming consoles, and that they were trying to either reduce or regulate this use.

J. Hari Prasad, Director of Physical Education at St. Michaels Academy, Adyar, said "Physical activity is not only essential to reverse obesity and other physical conditions, but also has a host of

mental benefits. Cognitive ability in children rises substantially after exercise/ play and so does their self esteem and confidence."

"We conduct three physical education classes a week and all students from the fourth standard onwards must compulsorily take up at least one sport which they will be engaged in between 3:30 pm and 5:00 pm Monday to Friday."

The school boasts wide open spaces, football grounds, a cricket academy, tennis court a basketball courts and indoor activities.

However some parents are very particular about sporting infrastructure in schools before admitting their children. T. Saravanan 37 said "this is the primary reason I chose this school over the others, even though the fee is high. My son wants to be a cricketer and he will receive every opportunity to achieve this here".

For the love of NE cuisine

VARUN CHIRUMAMILLA

CHENNAI: Setting up a business can be a daunting prospect. Especially so when you are far from home, belong to a much belittled ethnic minority, and are planning on selling food with dried and fermented meats in some cases.

R. Kesihing originally from Ukhrul in Manipur has been successfully running a restaurant in Egmore here, serving authentic northeastern and Korean food, for one and a half years now.

"When I first came to the city 20 years ago I worked as an accountant with an NGO. The pay was bad but I fell in love with the local food says," Kesihing. He went on to work as a catering manager with Hyundai (an automotive manufacturer) for 12 years before launching this specialty restaurant.

"I first came to Chennai out of a dire need for stable employment. The insurgency in Manipur meant severe salary disturbances for those outside government service. It took me 20 years of scrupulous money management to be able to afford a business venture and I am a happy man now," said Kesihing. He added that his love for the local food was



Kesihing strikes a pose at his restaurant in Egmore. PHOTO: VARUN CHIRUMAMILLA

what motivated him to share his childhood comfort food with the people of Chennai.

Keasihing realized early in his ca-

reer with Hyundai (which is South Korean-owned), that his native cuisine had many commonalities with Korean food.

"We use very few spices, king chilli, ginger and pickling of vegetables is common to both cuisines. I experimented with Korean food for several years during my service and by the time I opened this restaurant I was confident of being able to put authentic Korean food on a customer's plate," he said.

Keasihing is glad that local patrons relish his food, and feels this is a way of sharing his cultural heritage, with the city he has adopted. He only speaks a smattering of Tamil and serves dishes such as beef spleen.

Despite that he says the Chennai has been warm, and receptive to his innovations. "I get the odd customer who will walk in look at the menu and say... 'Oh! You serve pork' and walk out," he said.

"This was better than what we get in the north just because of the way we look and speak Hindi," he said describing how people from the north-east were looked down upon.

South India had a lot more in common with the north-east, he added, "people are more educated and professionally oriented and tend to be less intrusive about other people.



Kids playing inside Chennai High School

PHOTO: YASHASWANI SEHRAWAT

Parents caught in rush for school admissions

YASHASWANI SEHRAWAT

CHENNAI: With many private schools beginning the admission process to LKG and UKG on February 8, parents stood in unending queues, waiting for several hours just to get an application form. Some people had taken leave from their workplaces and didn't want to miss this "last chance" to secure admission for their child.

Many schools had closed admissions in November-December last year itself.

While some schools gave the application form without any hassle, in others, parents had a tough time. The Dayanand Anglo-Vedic School (DAV), for instance, charged Rs 400 for an application form which was given only when parents provided a copy of the birth certificate of their child.

A thirty year-old who had come to get a form for his three and half year-old niece summed up the troubles perfectly in one phrase, "Beggars can't be choosers".

"Some parents didn't know that the birth certificate was required. But they had no choice. There are hundreds of kids and very few good schools. The application forms were sold for two days (February 8 and February 9), so no-

body wanted to be left out," he said.

Most of the parents had come prepared. Ashok Kumar had come for his son's admission.

Being an alumnus of DAV school himself, he was certain that his son would get an admission in LKG here.

"The school has a reputation, plus, it is located nearby my house. I called up the school and asked what documents they required and I brought them."

J. K. Jaiswal had no idea what documents were required to get an application. "I didn't know that even for an application form, birth certificate would be required. However, I had brought it with me to be on the safe side."

Thirty two year-old Jaiswal had taken the day off from his office. "I had zeroed in on five-six schools for my daughter's admission and I'm going to each of these schools today itself to collect the forms. You never know which school asks for which document."

One of the main concerns of the parents was that various schools were giving the application forms on the same day.

Shashikala had bought the form from DAV Gopalapuram, in the morning and went to Bal Vidya Mandir, Adyar, in the afternoon.

Waiting in the queue at Bal Vidya Mandir, she said, "Application forms were given only yesterday (February 8) and had to be submitted today (February 9). DAV is also selling forms only on these two days. Even Chinmaya is accepting application forms on the same days but it's online. We have to rush in to make it in time. It's a matter of my son's future."

On the other hand, the Chennai Corporation schools witness no such rush for admissions.

"Parents are not interested in sending their child to Corporation schools. They feel their standard would be lowered if their kids study in these schools. There is a clear class-difference in place. People actually feel bad because their children study in the school where those kids whose parents are not educated study," said K. Alpana, the headmistress of Chennai High School, Kotturpuram.

Alpana added "This class consciousness is also the reason why people prefer schools affiliated to CBSE than State board."

The admissions to Corporation schools are open all through the year and under the Right to Education Act, Alpana said they were compelled to take students till 8th standard even if they didn't have valid documents.

A Nepali haven in Chennai

REECHA ARYAL

CHENNAI: Marudeeswaranagar off Lattice Bridge Road in Adyar appears to be no different from other similarly crowded localities in Chennai. But there is a difference: the sound of Nepali language is heard more than Tamil.

The place is also known as Nepali Street. But the area is not just home to people from Nepal.

More than 160 families coming from Nepal, North East India, Darjeeling, Sikkim and Bhutan have settled here and one common language unifies them. Although these people belong to different countries they are living as one community in Chennai.

"This street is exactly the same as other streets in Chennai; the only difference you can find here is that there are more Nepali speakers than Tamilians," said Anand Sundas, who is from Bhutan.

Anand came to Chennai almost 15 years back and says he likes living here. When he first came to Chennai, the street was called Marudeeswaranagar but gradually it has become to be known as Nepali Street.

"Once I came here, I started calling people from my friends circle," Anand says.

Soon, many Nepalis set up residence there. A newcomer in search of work finds it a home away from home and settles down.

With people speaking the same language and sharing the same culture and traditions, it is easy for them to communicate and get help.

The residents celebrate Nepali festivals together and organize small gatherings twice a year.

They make traditional Nepali food such as Chatamari made up of rice flour, Gundruk which is fermented vegetable and momos. They also sell home made products such as pickles and bamboo baskets and bags.

They conduct cultural programs where they dance to traditional Nepali songs. Although they have different backgrounds and traditions, the residents of Nepali Street interchange their culture and live harmoniously.

"It was two years back I attended a gathering in T.Nagar where the women celebrated 'Teji' festival along with a cultural show," said P M Menuka who is from Pyuthan in western Nepal. Teji is like Karva Chauth where women pray for the welfare of their husbands.

These migrants have become a part of Chennai and even the locals have accepted them as a community.

Speaking in Nepali, Lata, a Tamil resident of Nepali Street, offers "chia" which is the Nepali word for tea.

Lata said, "You can see how different people from various places lives together and share their cultural heritage, traditions and values, as one big family."

Valentine's Day is here once again

"It's just a marketing stunt"

SHOUNAK MAJUMDER

CHENNAI: Valentine's Day has always left people divided. While the concept of designating a particular day for love sounds appealing to some, the consumerist aspects inextricably linked with the celebratory day brings out the cynic in many people.

"The concept of Valentine's Day is western and one has to express one's undying love by buying gifts for one's partners. At the end of the day the ploy seems capitalistic in nature," said Dr. Sudha Krishnakumar, Assistant Professor of Sociology at MOP Vaishnav College for Women. Amrutha Varshini, a published writer, said, "It is just a

marketing stunt. This concept is extremely narrow and is celebrated for and by heterosexuals. My friend and I weren't let into a restaurant on V-day last year as it was a couple's day special."

Amrutha's sentiments were echoed by Felix Sanganathan and Aayush Sinha, proud members of Chennai's LGBTQ community. Felix said the idea sounded vacuous in a country where you could not openly declare your love.

"We are still waiting to hear about the Supreme Court's ruling on Section 377," he said.

Aayush, working at a World Bank office here, said, "There are no personalised cards at Archie's for gay couples. Even the market is

hetero aligned. Valentine's day is just another day for me." On Valentine's Day, movie channels air romantic comedies the whole day.

Arjun Rao, a medical professional said, "Rom-coms are far from reality."

There are no airport chase scenes in real life. Mostly single people spend their time at home on Valentine's Day. I would watch Christopher Nolan over a movie adaptation of a Nicolas Sparks book, any day." Then there is the moral policing that acts as a damp squib.

"My boyfriend and I were cornered by a police officer last year. He questioned my morality and raised questions about my character.

My boyfriend on the other hand was not ridiculed as severely. Such are the rules of patriarchy," says Manasi Kumar, a student at Loyola College. Manasi also said Valentine's Day competitions held at shopping malls and other retail outlets were targeted at married couples.

"Relationships between unmarried couples are still looked down upon in most places," she added. There are people who have been celebrating the day for years.

Akhilesh and Seema Giri, a couple who celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary this year said, "We are looking forward to Valentine's Day. We have already picked out gifts for each other and celebrating a day to love is not bad."



Archie's stocked up chocolates for sale before Valentine's Day PHOTO: SHOUNAK MAJUMDER

Shops get prepared for the day

SHOUNAK MAJUMDER

CHENNAI: Restaurants to bookshops have geared up for Valentine's Day, celebrated on February 14 every year. With discount offers printed out on bright pink, white and red posters and displayed on every window, most shops expect to bolster their sales on the day.

Archie's, one of the most popular gift shops, has heart shaped cutouts hanging in every corner of the shop.

"The décor makes the shops more inviting. Since our Valentine's Day themed décor went up, we have had more customers visiting the shop. Our most popular gift

item is a musical card that costs Rs 1500. The card lights up and serenades on your behalf," said Kannan, manager of Archie's at Phoenix Mall.

Gopi, in-charge of the French Loaf branch, in Adyar said, "We are expecting a profit of Rs1 lakh on Valentine's Day this year. That is almost double the profit we made last year. We are offering Rs 400 rupees off on our one pound cakes."

Some shops started advertising their offers, weeks before. While some shops preferred sending sms and mails to their regular customers, others distributed pamphlets. K. Sundar, chief executive of

The Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf at Phoenix Mall said, "People like the feel of something they can hold. That is why we are hand distributing pamphlets to customers. There are so many options inside this mall alone. This is the best way to let people know about our deals. Our pamphlets have a picture of the heart shaped strawberry cheesecake that will be served on Valentine's Day only."

At many shops it is like an end of the season clearance sale. Star-mark bookstore in Phoenix Mall has placed a 50 per cent discount on their selection of romantic song CDs and romantic comedy DVD collections. According to a sales-

person at Star-mark, more discounted products are sold on Valentine's Day as compared to the New Year's day.

The common misconception everywhere is that women are the primary Valentine's Day customers.

Selvam V, in-charge of Health and Glow at Besant Nagar said, "Men want to look good on Valentine's Day for their partners. This is a fairly common trend now. We have already made Rs 50,000 profit on men's grooming products this time. The other product that has been selling is perfume bottles."

He said that men come in to buy a few gifts for their partners.



Youngsters selecting greeting cards for Valentine's Day

PHOTO: NEWSINDIA

Public library back in action

VISHNU SWAROOP

CHENNAI: Ashok Nagar public library has started functioning partially with some sections beginning to lend books. The two-storeyed building flanked by trees on 11th Avenue was ravaged by the December floods.

Of the libraries that were damaged in the city - Ashok Nagar library, CIT Nagar library, Raghavan Colony library and Pudhu Theru library - Ashok Nagar Public Library was damaged the most.

"The water was six feet high inside the library. It stayed for two days," says Umadevi, a librarian, pointing to the walls stained by the flood waters.

The floods destroyed around 1,30,000 books from the lending section and the children's section. In addition the periodicals section was also ruined.

"The pages of the books got stuck together. They couldn't be opened. A lot of books also got stuck to each other," said Umadevi.

"Along with the books, computers, a photocopying machine and furniture got damaged. The wiring of the whole building was damaged and the floor was thick with slush and dirt," she added.

Cleaning up of the library was done by the library staff themselves along with the help of PWD workers sent by the government.

Deenadayalan, another librarian, said "We thought that the flood waters would not enter the library as the compound wall was strong. But we were shocked when we saw the whole library flooded. Things were floating inside."

Deenadayalan said the floor of the reading area had cracked along the wall and had caved in.

The compound wall on the left



The Ashok Nagar Library

PHOTO: VISHNU SWAROOP

side had fallen in the floods and now a temporary wall has been made of PVC sheets.

Despite all this damage, the library has resumed functioning, thanks to its members and other NGOs who came to the rescue.

"The director of libraries sent 8000 books at once. Connemara library donated 5000 books. Other organisations and NGOs too donated generously. Tamil publishers gave around 3200 through the book fair. Through 'Save Public Libraries', an initiative started by the public, we got around 2200 books," said Deenadayalan, showing a register with details of all the donors.

"Such a response was overwhelming," he said.

The books thus got have been catalogued and stacked in a room where a few people were reading them.

The library which has 17,350 members lends 300 books daily. On weekends this goes up to 500 books. There are six sections: Lending, Children's, Women's, Reference, Periodicals and a section for civil service aspirants.

Of these the children's section still needed to be put back together and it still needed books, said the library staff.

"This is an important library," said Deenadayalan standing amidst damaged furniture and empty cardboard boxes in which the donated books had come.

"The flood showed how many people were actually associated with this library as members and also emotionally."

A television celebrity once said that it was this library that nurtured him."

"We hope that within six months the library will resume complete normalcy," he said.

PAINTING BY STUDENTS

TN culture on the station walls

SAPTAK GHOSH

CHENNAI: Students of the Indian Institute of Fashion Technology here have painted the compound walls of the Chennai Central Railway Station as part of their contribution to the 'Swachh Bharat' campaign.

The students, divided into 12 groups with eight or nine comprised in a team, worked on the huge wall on platform number 11, which runs along the Buckingham Canal.

The paintings were based on local themes, to help the locals as well as tourists to recognize the essence of Tamil Nadu.

"We were told a week back about the need to paint the wall. After a good deal of planning on the theme for two days, the basic sketching work was done on the morning of the first day. And since then, the work went on without any hindrance and we were successful in completing the work in just 48 hours," said Ronak Jhawar, a first year student at IIFT.

The paintings had a combination of geometrical shapes, circles and rectangular boxes with images of



PHOTO: SAPTAK GHOSH

A vibrant painting on the wall

Thanjavur dolls, traditional music instruments and the Chennai Central Station itself.

"The students used acrylic which is a fast-drying paint. The paint becomes water-resistant when dry. Therefore, a finished acrylic painting looks like a water-colour or an oil-painting. Then they also used enamel sprays and brushes to give a glossy finish to the paintings," said

Prof. V. Karthikeyan, one of the faculty members involved in the project.

Utkarsh Srivastava, another student, said "For us it is a learning process but we did it in a professional manner to make sure that the canvas on the wall is well received by passengers and visitors to the station, in addition to the people who work here."

He was born with the radio

YUVRAJ SAKHARE

CHENNAI: K. Srikanth who likes to call himself a storyteller is India's first blind radio jockey. The 50 year old man works in Food Corporation of India (FCI) as a telephone operator, was a part time employee with All India Radio in the Nineties.

After he lost his vision completely at the age of 20, he went to Bombay in 1984, to learn Braille in English and telephone operating.

The radio was his means of keeping in touch with the world. "I grew up with radio. When I lost my eyesight the only thing which was helping me to communicate with the outer world was sound. I became more passionate about radio after losing my vision."

"I always say that as Karna was born with Kavachkundala, I was born with radio," he said.

When Srikanth was working with All India Radio, he was interviewed on Doordarshan.

"On November 4, 1990 Doordarshan took my interview in Tamil



India's first blind RJ, K Srikanth

PHOTO: NEWSTODAYNET

for Doordarshan Metro channel. Later they broadcast it on prime channel and it was a huge hit. I became a celebrity overnight. That 20 minute interview changed my life. Everywhere I went, people use to enquire about me."

Apart from radio, storytelling is his second love, particularly science fiction. Srikanth is a great fan of British science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke. He has narrated

science stories in Tamil for M.O.P Vaishnav College's community radio. He wanted to become a scientist. But he couldn't study science and so he did his M.A in literature from University of Madras.

Working as a radio jockey was not that easy. But the challenges he faced in his work helped him come up with new ways to deal with them. "I can't see the clock. When I had to hand over the show to the

next presenter at 7.00 pm, the music would fade out at 6.59 PM. This meant I had 40 seconds to wind up. Usually a Tamil radio jockey would be there with me but one day no one was with me in the studio. My brother had come along with me that day and I had to read the schedule for the next day about a quiz competition. But I can't see, so how could I read the list of guests? So after announcing the competition, I switched off the mike and asked my brother to read the first three names. I switched the mike on and announced the three names. I repeated the process till all the names were announced."

For those aspiring to be a radio jockey, Srikanth says "You should have something interesting to tell. If you are interested you will be interesting. Love your job and people will enjoy it."

"If I am enjoying what I am doing others will also enjoy it."

"What makes others happy or what makes me popular, if someone thinks like that and works in the same way certainly he will fail."

Hall of fame for foresters

SAPTAK GHOSH

CHENNAI: The Tamil Nadu Forest Department has opened a Hall of Fame at its headquarters in Saidapet, where photographs and works of its forest officers and conservationists have been displayed.

Inaugurating the Hall of Fame, N. Krishnakumar, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, said a special team of five senior officers had been formed to identify forest officers and naturalists who had dedicated their lives to conservation and work in the forests.

Among the 25 people selected by a panel of five, there were experts in botany, biology, biodiversity protection, tiger conservation, research and social forestry.

The list includes M. Krishnan, a world-renowned naturalist and Indian wildlife photographer. Although he made his living by writing in magazines, Krishnan tirelessly worked for the planting of home grown trees.

The panel also decided to honour Dr. V. Krishnamurthy who was a renowned veterinarian, conservationist and elephant expert known for his pioneering work in elephant care. He was also well known for governing the Mudumalai Thepakadu elephant camp.

There are documented works of E.R.C Davidar, a reputed conservationist and one of the early advocates of wildlife conservation.

Also in the hall are Dr K M Mathew of St Joseph's College, Tiruchi, a world-renowned botanist, who had documented the plants and different trees in lower, middle and upper Palani hills in Kodaikanal and Richard Radcliffe, a hunter-turned-conservationist whose tireless effort led to the creation of Mukurthi National Park in Ooty.

"Although we have read about these conservationists in books and magazines, major chunks of their works are not well documented," said V. Ganesan, a former conservator of forests.

"We decided to create this, as we believe the contributions of these conservationists will encourage and motivate people to do the same. For instance, if we carefully go through the works of E.R.C. Davidar, we will see how hard he worked to study the Nilgiri Tahr, which is an elusive animal these days. This is also the 160th year of the Forest Department, so I believe the timing has been perfect," said Ganesan.