



## Delay in MRTS extension

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## Railway tickets through app

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## Kalakshetra dance festival

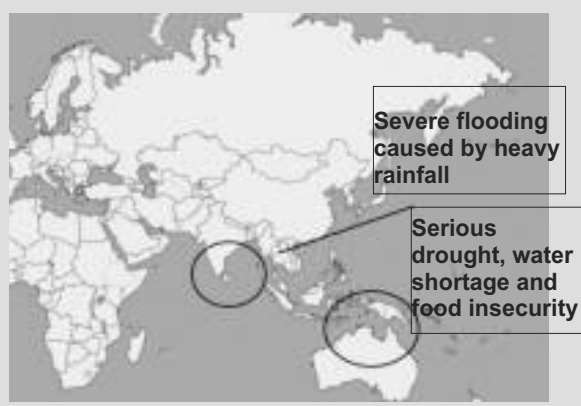
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# Chennai faces hottest summer

## What is El Niño?

El Niño is the abnormal warming of sea surface temperatures in the eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean. The event occurs when winds over the Pacific Ocean near the equator slow down or reverse direction, allowing unusually warm water to accumulate. This warm water interacts with the atmosphere, causing droughts and floods and affecting weather patterns around the world. The 2015-16 El Niño is one of the strongest such events since 1997-98.

## Impact of 2015-16 El Niño



INFOGRAPHIC: PRITHA BANERJEE

PRITHA BANERJEE

**Chennai:** After the heaviest rainfall and floods in 100 years in December 2015, Chennai will now face the hottest summer, as a result of the 2015 El Niño, said S. Stella, Director of Chennai Meteorological Department.

"The temperature is above normal this week in Chennai and is expected to be like this for the rest of the month. The highest recorded temperature in February was 36.7°C in 1927," she said.

According to weather experts, the average temperature for Chennai in February is 26°C. But the temperature is between 32°C and 34°C for the week starting February 25.

According to the latest update from the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), "The powerful 2015-2016 El Niño has passed its peak but still remains strong and will continue to influence the global climate."

"However, Chennai is cooler when compared to cities like Bengaluru and Pune as the easterlies have prevented the temperatures

from shooting up," said Stella.

In Bengaluru the average temperature forecast for this fortnight is between 34°C and 36°C.

Record-high temperatures have been witnessed in other parts of India as well.

Bhubaneswar for the first time recorded a temperature of 40°C in February. Temperatures in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka are already hovering around the 40°C mark. Gulbarga, Nizamabad, and Kumool have recorded 40°C and Anantapur 39°C on February 23.

"We were planning to announce heat wave conditions but heat wave occurs when the daily maximum temperature of more than two days exceeds the average maximum temperature. So, we have to wait for two days to declare that," said Stella.

Weather experts say that 1998, 2003 and 2010 were all El Niño years. So, the leap years that came after that also turned out to be extremely hot during February itself. Weather experts said this phenomenon was part of the climate cycle and it was a normal process.

Other than El Niño the extreme weather condition could also be the result of climate change. The latest WMO report, 2015 is hottest year on record, said, "Climate change will have increasingly negative impacts for at least the next five decades. It increases the risk of weather-related disasters which are an obstacle to sustainable development."

Vishal Sharma, an employee at DLF IT Park said, "As the temperature is shooting up people have started using coolers and ACs and we all know the negative effect of Chlorofluorocarbons (CFC), like ozone layer depletion and global warming."

V. Krishna, a resident from Chetpet, said "We are still in February and it is already so hot. Can you imagine how April and May are going to be?"

Syed Hussain, a student of an engineering college in the city, said "It appears as though summer has begun early. I usually cycle to college every day during January and February. Now, it has turned out to be impossible for me to pedal fast due to the extreme heat."



TAKING A SHORTCUT: A man jumps over the wall in order to reach the station faster PHOTO: Poushali Dasgupta

# The curious case of the broken wall

POUSHALI DASGUPTA

**Chennai:** A concrete wall adjoining the railway track on McNichols Road near the Chetpet Railway Station here is being repeatedly demolished by people seeking a shortcut to the other side of the road.

Residents said the concrete wall was constructed to bar pedestrians from crossing the railway tracks and prevent accidents.

Smitha Athreya, a resident near McNichols Road, said, "The wall has been reconstructed several times but it is destroyed by people for some reason. Railway authorities repair it and people break it."

Police officials at the Chetpet railway station said that regular patrol operations were conducted to identify the troublemakers but "until and unless the wall is repaired, nothing can be done."

"There have been more than 20 accidents so far in 2015. Especially at night, old women and other trespassers cross the station and are hit by speeding trains," said H. Meena, head constable at Chetpet police station.

Another Chetpet resident, S Gayatri said that the wall was initially damaged by an engine that moved past the stop point and rammed into the wall.

"After the accident, the wall was

reconstructed, but since then, it is being continuously broken and people are using it," she said.

Residents said that people were reluctant to climb the steep stairs of the Guruswamy overhead bridge and preferred crossing the tracks by jumping over the concrete wall.

"We frequently hear about accidents on this track. Students from Our Lady's Higher Secondary School located near the wall as well as small kids with their parents take this shortcut daily. This wall has become a gateway for them to cross the tracks instead of taking the bridge," said Dr. Srikanth, a resident of Chetpet for 40 years.

"Before the construction of the bridge, this lane was a busy road. Now, it has become deserted and that's why these people are not afraid to ruin the wall and cross the tracks," he added.

S. Karthikeyan, Divisional Engineer (South) said, "Somebody is purposely breaching the wall because it can't fall on its own continuously. I think the students who cross the tracks are the ones to damage it. There is massive breach of public property in Chennai. This is just one of them."

"How many times will we repair the wall? There is a limit to everything. But, since we have to, we will repair it this time as well," Karthikeyan added.

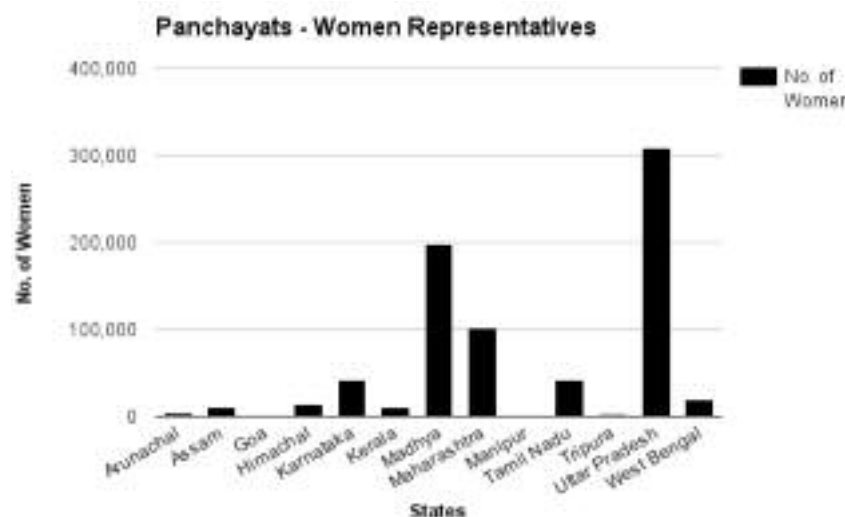
# Concerns about women's reservation bills

RAM SARANGAN

**Chennai:** Opposition parties have questioned the timing of the legislation guaranteeing 50 per cent reservation for women in all local bodies in Tamil Nadu and also point to the challenges in its implementation process.

"This is a move that could have been taken any time over the last few years, but the ruling party chose to do it very close to the elections. This is very telling. We wholeheartedly support the bills themselves, and statutorily, they are welcome. Practically, however, there will definitely be issues that need to be overcome," said Arumuga Nainar, state committee member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The CPI (M) member also pointed out that other parties had also been pressing for the same reform much earlier.

One of the main concerns voiced by different parties was the issue of some women representatives not being allowed to operate independently and their being controlled by male members of their family. Another issue was the need to provide administrative training to women, as lack of experience and knowledge could prevent them from contesting the elections. A reluctance to enter the public sphere was also mentioned, especially in the smaller towns and villages in the state. The All India Democratic Women's Asso-



Women representatives as per 2009 census. INFOGRAPHIC: RAM SARANGAN

ciation (AIDWA), which has conducted camps for female panchayat representatives as well as Dalit women in panchayat administrations, said the initiative would meet with greater success if women were trained at the grassroots level.

According to P Suganthi, a member of AIDWA, caste can also be an issue, with upper caste people refusing to listen to, or trying to coerce a lower caste representative,

more so if the lower caste official was a woman.

"I believe that in some cases at least, women attempting to enter local bodies will face reluctance or even resistance from men. While this is a very real problem now, the initiative will mean that the next generation of women will face much less trouble, and so on. With some basic training about administrative work, this can be a very positive ad-

dition to our society," said Rajathi Salma, a member of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK).

When Rural Development Minister S P Velumani moved the bills in the assembly, members of the DMK, the Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK) and the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) were boycotting the session, protesting against what they termed "a denial of democratic rights to opposition members to express their views in the assembly."

According to a PMK member, who wished to remain unnamed, the fact that the bills were passed when so many key opposition members were absent meant it received little scrutiny, which was not the right way to pass such important bills. However, he too agreed that the bills themselves would be a significant step forward in the state.

According to Nanmanan, a member of the DMDK, training was one area where too much emphasis didn't need to be placed.

"I don't think it's necessary to believe that all women need extensive training before they can be considered for work in public bodies. Training camps will definitely be useful, but they should not be seen as a mandatory requirement to run for any local body in the state, as women are equally capable when it comes to administrative or organizational work," said Nanmanan.

## UNDERDIAGNOSED

# A disease in disguise

PRANAMI TAMULI

**Chennai:** Researchers have found that a rare tropical disease is more prevalent in South India than previously thought. The disease is largely underdiagnosed and underreported and unsubstantiated reports claim a patient can die within 48 hours if untreated.

Melioidosis, a bacterial disease, was believed to be confined to parts of Australia and Brazil. But researchers at the University of Oxford have found that the disease is gaining ground in several tropical countries including India, where it is "hugely underdiagnosed." Most cases that have been detected till now have been in Southern India, particularly the South-Western coastal area.

According to online reports, doctors in India have reported 20 to 30 cases every year but there have been no reports of any deaths because of the disease.

The organism that causes the disease is present in soil and water and can be transferred to the human body through inhala-

tion, skin contact and drinking contaminated water. Poultry, horses, dogs and cats can also be carriers. Human-to-human transfer, however, is rare.

Experts at the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) say that the rural population in South India, especially male agricultural workers, is most susceptible to the infection.

"Diabetes and alcoholism are predisposing factors for the disease. But it can afflict people of any age. The youngest patient I have seen was a four year old boy," says Dr Sathish Kumar, an epidemiologist in Chennai.

The ICMR pegs the number of diabetics in India at 62 million, the second highest number in the world after China. Melioidosis, therefore, is a clear and present danger in the country, say doctors.

"People with open skin wounds should be careful as the bacteria can enter the body through contact with soil and stagnant water. Diabetics are at a greater risk. Agricultural labourers and people who practise gardening should wear gloves and

boots to prevent infection," Dr Kumar says.

The diagnosis of the disease, even if suspected, is hard as the disease causing bacterium - Burkholderia pseudomallei - mutates constantly and escapes easy detection.

According to Dr Kumar, "Melioidosis mimics the symptoms of tuberculosis and pneumonia such as fever, cough, headache and respiratory distress. By the time the disease is diagnosed correctly, the patient would have developed septicemia. At that point, the mortality chances are almost 95%."

The recent floods have seen a spurt in the incidence of Melioidosis cases in Tamil Nadu.

Chennai-based epidemiologist Dr Jasmine Sundar says "Our first case was a 65-year-old male who had been misdiagnosed with tuberculosis by a local hospital. When he didn't recover, he was brought to my clinic. We suspected Melioidosis immediately as he was a diabetic, and we were barely able to treat him in time to prevent the disease from becoming fatal."

# Low key bash for Amma's birthday

NISHITA GUPTA & POORANI BALENDRA

**Chennai:** While the residents of Chennai were expecting extravagance and disruption of normal life on Chief Minister Jayalithaa's 68th birthday celebrations on February 24, it turned out to be a low-key affair.

There were a few posters and banners around Poes Garden where the Chief Minister resides and the traffic flow on Radhakrishnan Salai was smooth.

Ram Prasath, a HCL employee who travels 15 km to work every day, said, "Compared to the banners, posters that disrupted traffic during AIADMK's general body meeting in December, it's nothing."

He added that the celebrations on the OMR that started a week ago concluded on February 22.

Krithika Ravindran, a resident of Kotturpuram, said that the events conducted to mark the Chief Minister's birthday extended till 11 p.m. on Sunday while the roads were free from any disturbances on February 24.

"Over the weekend, two lorries that supplied power to the decoration lights were blocking the roads. After the events concluded, the banners and arches were removed on Sunday itself," she added.



Supporters celebrate near party HQ PHOTO: POORANI BALENDRA

Former ADMK minister C. Ponnaiyan said, "For her birthday, we were directed to conduct only welfare measures for the public. The party members have not spent money on anything else."

As part of the celebrations at the party headquarters in Royapettah, a 68-kg cake was cut and a free medical camp was conducted by a group of 30 doctors and paramedics from the Ramachandra Medical College. The official incharge of the camp said that around 1000 people were diagnosed and treated.

Earlier in the month, 68 couples got married at a ceremony, with most of them wearing headbands with Jayalithaa's face on them.

Ruling party members offered prayers in temples across the State.

Cow worship was organised in the districts, including Chennai, Vilupuram, Madurai and Coimbatore.

The AIADMK women's wing also held "Pal Kudam Vazhipadu" and "Thiruvallaku Pujam" which involved many women carrying milk pots and praying in temple for Amma as well as for Chennai.

An official at the AIADMK office said that these prayers were organized to seek long life for Jayalithaa and the continuation of her good governance.

The Chennai Corporation organised mobile immunization and health camps, which provided free services like screening for breast cancer and diabetes.

Also, for children born in the city on the same day, the Corpora-

tion has promised to open fixed deposit accounts worth Rs.10,000. AIADMK cadres had announced that a gold chain or a gold ring would be given to every new-born in government hospitals.

Free food was provided through the Amma canteens in the city.

AIADMK MLA M V Karuppaiah visited a government swimming pool in Madurai on Wednesday morning and floated in the water for nearly an hour with an AIADMK flag in his mouth. Clad in a T-shirt bearing Amma's face, the Sholavandan MLA emerged from the pool shouting "Long live Amma".

An official at the AIADMK office said that they received at least 6000 online greetings per minute on their network.

However, M S Chandramohan, general secretary of Arappor Iyakam the NGO that removed banners installed by AIADMK during the party's general body meeting on December 31 said that even though the activities were diluted, some of the party members got tattoos and floated on water to compensate.

"They have still not learnt a lesson. She [Jayalithaa] is a megalomaniac and the cadres will do whatever they can to please her," he added.



# MRTS extension on hold

Phase-II extension from Velachery to St. Thomas Mount, that started in 2008, suffered another delay after the Madras High Court issued an interim stay on land acquisition

PRASANNA RS

**Chennai:** The long-pending extension of the Mass Rapid Transit System (MRTS) from Velachery to St. Thomas Mount suffered another delay after the Madras High Court passed an interim injunction on February 15 staying the acquisition of land near Adambakkam.

The Madras High Court, in August 2015, acting on a writ petition filed by S Ekambaram and other affected residents, had ordered that the land be acquired under the 2013 Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act instead of the 1894 Land Acquisition act as was initially announced.

Ekambaram, an 81-year old retired TNEB engineer who is a resident of Jeevan Nagar in Adambakkam (one of the areas to be acquired) said, "Earlier, we would have received only around Rs. 2000 per square feet. Under the 2013 act, we will get twice the market rate — around Rs. 12,000 - Rs. 15,000 per square feet."

However, in a land acquisition notice issued by the Special Tahsildar (MRTS Phase-II Extension) on January 1, 2016, the 1894 act was mentioned.

So, Ekambaram went to the Madras High Court again claiming that the 'notice had been issued in utter



Work in progress at the Puzhuthivakkam MRTS station

PHOTO: PRASANNA RS

disregard to the [earlier] direction issued by the court."

The court has granted an interim stay till March 15, when it will take up the matter for further hearing.

The construction of the five km long MRTS Phase-II extension, which was started in 2008, has now

languished for more than eight years over the acquisition of around 500 metres of land near St. Thomas Mount.

Originally, the MRTS alignment was to pass over poramboke land near St. Thomas Mount. The alignment was then diverted by top poli-

ticians who connived with land grabbers and real estate agents, alleged Ekambaram.

It is alleged that the politicians who grabbed the land converted the poramboke land into real estate and pushed for realignment of the MRTS track so that their projects on

the poramboke land were not affected.

"The new alignment passes through very densely populated residential areas. Around 75 families in Jeevan Nagar, Thillai Ganga Nagar and Thiruvalluvar Nagar will be affected," Ekambaram said.

Ekambaram further said that the government could reduce the compensation amount to be paid by around Rs. 610 crores if an alternative alignment were followed.

"Under the new Land Acquisition Act, the estimated compensation of around Rs. 730 crores would have to be paid for the current alignment. If the deviated alignment suggested by SK Gupta, former Chief Engineer of the Metropolitan Transport Project (Railways) were taken up, only 3-4 families would be affected and the expenditure will be around Rs. 120 crores."

The civil engineering works in the 3.715 km long elevated portion from Velachery to just before the Thillai Nagar Subway along the median of the Inner Ring Road (IRR) have been completed while track linking is in progress, a Southern Railway official said.

The construction of the two intermediate stations between Velachery and St. Thomas Mount — Puzhuthivakkam and Adambakkam — has now commenced.

# "No" to new contraceptives

NIRUPAMA VISWANATHAN

**Chennai:** The Government's decision to introduce injective contraceptives as an alternative to tubectomy, a surgical procedure where a woman's fallopian tubes are blocked as a permanent method of contraception, has been opposed by certain sections of women due to lack of awareness, experts say.

The injections prevent pregnancy for only 12-15 weeks and unlike tubectomy, do not eliminate all chances of pregnancy in future. It mainly prevents the ovaries from releasing an egg every month.

Dr. M Avanthika, an obstetrician in Chennai, said that contraceptive injections were a non-invasive family planning procedure and that the effects were reversible. But some women still opted for tubectomy since it was the traditional procedure done in the country.

"Women are apprehensive about the injections affecting their regular menstrual patterns or leading to weight-gain. Though some of these risks may apply to some women, the benefits far outweigh the risks," she said.

Some women were of the

opinion that it was natural to be wary of new procedures because the risks needed time to be fully understood, she added.

Malathi Prakasam, mother of an eight-year-old boy, said "I would never opt for these injections. I know that there are risks in every procedure but I'd rather go for the traditional family planning method (tubectomy) since it has been done by many women in my family."

However, according to Dr. Avanthika, most women without a history of serious illnesses would be able to use these injections without worrying about complications.

K. Jayanthi, President of Shine Child and Woman Welfare Trust, an NGO that works to uplift economically backward women, said, "If no awareness is being created, how can one expect women to be open to such new procedures? It only raises suspicions about the motive behind the introduction of these injections."

The decision to introduce injective contraceptives as a replacement the traditional tubectomy procedure comes in the wake of the death of 13 women at sterilization camps in Chattisgarh after undergoing tubectomy.

## PRE-BUDGET SURVEY

# Industries eye tax reforms

CII wants the Union Budget to focus on policies that spur private investment

ONKAR SURVE

**Chennai:** The corporate sector expects the government to take bold steps that would spur investments and growth and announce tax reforms in the Union budget to be presented by the Finance Minister Arun Jaitley on February 29.

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) said the 2016-17 Union budget should focus on policies that would spur private investments.

"Considering that broad based revival of private investment is being constrained on account of weak order book situation resulting in capacity overhang, there are hopes and expectations that the forthcoming Budget would increase spending by the Government, the public sector and by quasi-government bodies" said Mr Chandrajit Banerjee, Director General, CII in a press release issued on Tuesday.

The CII recommended speedy implementation of industrial clusters and parks such as the National Investment Manufacturing Zone (NIMZ), the Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC) and the Dedicated Freight Corridor (DFC) projects and the activation

of the National Investment and Infrastructure Fund (NIIF) to provide more avenues for infras-



Finance Minister Arun Jaitley...weighing the options

PHOTO: MID-DAY.COM

structure financing.

"Higher public investment in key projects, especially in infrastructure sectors such as roads, railways, power and waterways would have a cascading effect on growth," the statement said.

In its pre-budget memorandum 2016-17 The Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) said, "all the taxes levied by the Centre and the

States on goods and services must be subsumed in the proposed GST including stamp duty,

from 30 per cent to 22 per cent along with withdrawal of incentives. However, the incentives should be phased out in a calibrated manner, in line with the reduction in tax rate and on a prospective basis so that any investments made on the basis of these incentives are not affected," the CII statement said.

In case of the Tax Deducted at Source (TSD), FICCI recommended that the concessional tax rate of 5 per cent on interest should be made applicable on other debt securities including debentures, trade credit issued/ availed by any Indian company.

"The rate of tax on interest through all kinds of foreign currency borrowings (including issue of bonds and debentures) should be completely eliminated in the long-run to promote foreign exchange inflows," the memorandum added.

The National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) in its pre-budget memorandum 2016-17 said that 10 per cent TDS on software payments were leading to operational difficulties for small companies.

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NASSCOM recommended that the TDS rate for software companies be reduced

to 1-2 per cent.

CII recommended pushing disinvestment and said, "At a time when the tax revenue is stressed, stepping up non-tax revenue through spectrum sales and PSU divestment becomes crucial. To raise revenue, the government should sell all its stake in the Specified Undertaking of the Unit Trust of India (SUUTI) which can yield nearly Rs.50,000 crore to be used for investment."

A study conducted by the ASSOCHAM said that the government might drastically scale down targets for realization of resources from PSUs' stake sale as the markets were expected to stay in subdued mood even in the next fiscal.

"The government has so far raised only Rs. 12700 crore through PSU disinvestments in the current fiscal and may raise another Rs 2000-3000 crore in the remaining months of this fiscal. The government has missed its disinvestment target for fourth consecutive financial years. In 2013-14, the government had raised Rs. 15819 crore against the target of Rs. 40000 crore. In 2014-15 it raised Rs. 24277 crore against the target of Rs. 36925 crore," the ASSOCHAM press-release said.

# 'Bad banks' needed to tackle rising NPAs

ONKAR SURVE

**Chennai:** Bankers have recommended the establishment of a National Asset Management Company (NAMCO) or a "bad bank" which can manage non-performing assets.

In a pre-budget press-release, the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) said, "As of September 2015, NPAs constituted over 5 per cent of banks' total advances. The government should consider the creation of NAMCO which would take NPAs off the banks' balance sheet and also focus on rehabilitation, recapitalisation and refinancing of banks. This would release capital, provide banks with lendable resources and restore their health."

A survey by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce (FICCI) and the Indian Banks Association (IBA) conducted during January-February 2016 covered 17 public, private and foreign banks.

According to the survey, there has been a rise in NPAs and stressed assets during the period July to December 2015. The proportion of respondent banks reporting rise in the level of their

NPAs was 77 per cent against 63 per cent in the previous round of the survey. A majority 53 per cent of the respondent banks have indicated that there has been a rise in the number of cases requesting restructuring of advances.

"The key sectors that have seen a surge in NPA levels in the second half of 2015 include infrastructure, metals, textiles, and chemicals, among others," the study said.

The CII said that low-cost housing had a multiplier effects on the economy as there were over 150 industry segments directly linked to the home construction industry.

The CII recommended that the deduction on interest for housing loans should be set at Rs. 50,000 and the housing loan repayment should be covered separately and out of the purview of exemptions under Section 80C.

The budget expectations of the banking sector include—the ceiling for Tax Deducted at Source (TDS) on interest on deposits to be increased to Rs.50,000 from the current Rs 10,000, reintroduction of tax exemptions for Infra Bonds and rationalization of the interest rate of small savings schemes.

# Jewellers favour GST

PRIYANKA DAS

**Chennai:** Jewellers in the city favour the implementation of the Goods and Services Bill (GST) which would lead to uniform taxation across states.

"The GST is favourable. A single common tax is easy to deal with," said Sumathi Challani of CR Jewellers. The risk factor and communication issues involved when the jewellery parcels are sent to other states can be solved and brokers removed. This will benefit the end consumers as well.

"Currently two to three percent margin of expenditure is borne by the customers," Challani added.

India is one of the largest consumers of gold in the world and the households have tonnes of the metal, which can be monetised to reduce gold imports. The import duty on gold and sil-

ver needs to be reduced from the current 10 per cent to at least 5 per cent, Challani added.

The Union Budget of 2015 had proposed the Gold Monetization Scheme (GMS). Through this, depositors could earn interest and jewellers could obtain loans on their gold accounts.

"People can benefit from the correct use of the GMS, but most people are not aware of it," said Challani. Most people prefer to take loans from banks and private companies.

According to Lalit Jain, a gold and silver shop owner, the formalities and paperwork involved act as a deterrent to the GMS. The paperwork should be reduced and simplified.

Gouttam T, another jeweler, said the requirement for PAN card for purchases over Rs. 2 lakh should be changed to Rs.5 lakh as 80 per cent of his customers do not have a PAN card. This limited transaction opportunities.

# Households call for cap on vegetable, petrol prices

PRIYANKADAS

**Chennai:** Measures to control the price of vegetables, groceries and petrol are among the wish list of people who are awaiting the Union Budget.

V Soumya, who works in the IT sector, wants this year's union budget to have a price control measure so as to contain vegetable costs.

Animal activist and realtor, K Y Prabha

said "a tooth paste and brush alone costs Rs. 125 now, the price of commodities need to match the needs and income of the people."

According to the ASSOCHAM Economic Research Bureau, the difference between the wholesale and retail price of vegetables in Chennai was 33.83 per cent between November and January. was one of the reasons for the increasing cost of vegetables.

S Subramaniam, an auto driver, earns

Rs. 600 per day on an average and spends around Rs. 300 on food items daily for his family of five. The annual school expenditure on his two children who are studying in English medium private institutions amounts to Rs. 50,000. This time he wants a cap on petrol and education prices.

S V Devaraj, an 82-year-old retired LIC employee, says "The cost of basic necessities such as electricity and water should be controlled."

# Avoid cuts in ICDS : experts



PHOTO: POUHALI DASGUPTA

POUSHALI DASGUPTA

**Chennai:** After an unprecedented fall in Union budget fund allocation last year for Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, expectations for the upcoming budget remain low.

Even though last year's budget did not have a significant impact on health-care services in India, a drastic cut in the ICDS scheme by Rs.9863 crore raised several questions about the Government's interest in child healthcare and development.

As per the Ministry of Women and Child Development reports, the budget allocation for ICDS was reduced from Rs.18,108 crore in 2014-15 to Rs.8,245 crore in 2015-16.

Suma Ravi, Regional Director (South) of CRY - Child Rights and You - said that only 50 per cent children in India are covered under the flagship ICDS scheme and the proportion of underweight children under five years is still as high as 30 per cent while the proportion of stunted children being 38 per cent out of which 17.4 per cent are severely stunted.

"It is necessary to bring the age group of 3 to 6 under the fold of constitutional rights and make sure that they enjoy legal entitlements," she said.

She added that budget reduction had hampered the filling of vacant positions of ICDS ground staff thereby impacting the health and nutrition of children from the most marginalized communities.

"The reduction of budgets has further hampered the filling of these vacancies

thereby impacting the health and nutrition of children from the most marginalized communities," she said.

Tamil Nadu Forces (Forum for Crèche and Childcare Services) is a state-based NGO for child rights that recently organized an awareness rally to construct toilets in schools and anganwadis in the city.

M. Shanmugavelayutham, convener of TN Forces, said that after the 14th Finance Commission advised the Union Government to increase the fund flow to states from 32 per cent to 42 per cent, the priority areas for fund allocation within the states haven't been mentioned yet.

"ICDS schemes won't be benefitted and this year, I definitely don't expect an increase as the state's share has already been increased by 10%," he said.

K.Ramachandra, Accounts Superintendent of ICDS, Periyar Nagar, said that there might be some increase in the budget allocation for the flagship scheme after last year's fall. However, there won't be any changes in the scheme for 2015-16.

"If the Union Government reduces the fund allocation, Tamil Nadu Government will contribute."

Dr. Benny Benjamin, a pediatrician said that as Child Malnutrition was the highest in India, the scheme required more funding.

"I am against any more reduction in the ICDS budget because it will lead to poor quality mid-day meals at anganwadis and that will affect a majority of children in India. They are the future. We have to nourish them," he said.

Rajat Bhaduri, visiting faculty at the Institute of Mathematical Sciences, said the emphasis of the government should be on education and generating jobs for the young. Senior citizens of the country constitute 8 per cent of the population. According to him, schemes such as the Atal Pension Yojana launched last year, are needed to provide a safety net for those in the unorganized sector.



# Rly ticket booking easier

## Android/Windows app for booking suburban tickets

PRASANNA SWAMINATHAN

**Chennai:** People travelling by suburban trains can beat the queue and book their tickets using the UTS (Unreserved Ticketing System) app released by the Indian Railways for Android or Windows phone.

Tickets can be booked by putting money in a virtual wallet, either by net banking or by using credit or debit cards, from which the cost of the ticket will be deducted. Using the option "Show Ticket", the passengers can show their tickets on the mobile phone to the ticket examiners.

The app was released on April 22, 2015. Initially, it was functional only between Egmore and Tambaram railway stations. On November 5, 2015, the app was upgraded and now it can be used for booking tickets on all the suburban lines, viz. Beach-Velachery, Beach-Chengalpattu, Central-Gummidipoondi and Central-Tiruvallur.

A. Asokan, Station Superintendent of the Guindy Railway Station, said, "After the recent



UTS app in an android phone PHOTO: POUHALI DASGUPTA

upgrade, passengers can also book their season tickets using the app."

Another feature of the upgrade is "change phone", which helps the passengers to transfer their active tickets to another device.

Not many are aware of this app.

An official at the Southern Railways headquarters said that since the app was introduced to ease the passenger experience, and not for profit, it was difficult to advertise due to lack of funds.

"We issued a standard advertise-

ment in newspaper on the day of the release. We also asked the ticket examiners to hand out pamphlets and put up posters about the app at stations where there are long queues for the tickets," he said.

Pamphlets have also been distributed to Human Resource departments in IT parks like Tidel Park, MEPZ and DLF IT Park to spread information about the app to their employees.

"There are as many as 12 lakh passengers travelling by suburban trains every day, but only 10,000 passengers are using the app," the official added.

Vishal Anil Boedle, a ticket examiner at the Guindy Railway Station, said, "I find only four to five persons showing me their tickets using the app."

The Southern Railways official said that there were plans to install a localized WiFi which could be used only for installation of the app, but it was still under consideration.

Winfred Michael Raj, a resident of Pallavaram, said that the app did not function properly. "I have tried booking tickets multiple times, but

till date I have never been able to book even once. The app stops responding after a while."

The Railways official said that the lack of response might be due to the problem by the service provider and added that the app had several restrictions.

The ticket can be booked only if the passenger is 25 metres away from the railway track. "We don't want the passengers to book a ticket after they find that a ticket examiner is checking tickets," he said.

Another restriction is that the ticket can be booked if the passenger is within the five-kilometre radius from the station.

"The passengers must commence their journey within an hour after booking the ticket. Considering the traffic in the city, we felt that it would be better if we added this restriction," the official said.

### Emergency quota within reach

Tickets booked under emergency quota can now be confirmed if the emergency can be proven, by contacting the emergency cell set up by the Southern Railways.

An official at the Southern Railways headquarters said, "Emergency quota has always been difficult to get because people had to know someone in the Railways to get it. This was introduced so that more people can be benefitted by it."

The official said that the person whose tickets had to be confirmed must be physically present at the headquarters with required documents for confirming emergency.

"Since the time the emergency cell was set up, all the requests were straightforward, and hence there was no difficulty in confirming," he added.

The Railways official said that confirming tickets for the elderly and pregnant women would be done when they reported in person at the headquarters.



Wine shop near Vijayanagar bus depot PHOTO: NISHITA GUPTA

## Bottled trouble in Velachery

NISHITA GUPTA

**Chennai:** The TASMAR shop located on the 100 ft bypass road, near the Vijayanagar bus stand in Velachery, is a constant source of nuisance for pedestrians and especially women.

The outlet that functions from 10 am to 10 pm sees good business. The men crowd around the shop and block the free flow of traffic too.

"Men start gathering outside the shop around 10 every morning," said Paranthaman Srimamulu, a software engineer working at Phillips, highlighting the extent of the problem.

As the day passes, these men, in an inebriated state, litter the area by throwing bottles and plastic glasses in the open. "The moment you are there, it feels like you have been teleported to some shady bar," said Kishore Frederick, a business analyst.

Jai Kumar, owner of a small snack shop nearby, says a many of drunken brawls happen in the area amid high traffic on the congested road.

"It's a daily affair! Someone

stepped on somebody's foot the other day and got beaten up," he added.

Many believe that the TASMAR shop should either be relocated or shut down.

"I have to cross this area daily to get to the bus stand. I walk by as fast as I can without making any eye contact," said Mandapuru Swathi, a 21-year-old student of Madras University.

The trouble does not end outside the shop. The drunken men board buses from the depot and cause inconvenience to the commuters.

"Even if a man is drunk, if he buys a ticket, he is entitled to travel. All I can do then is, give him a corner seat and make sure he does not disturb anyone else," said an MTC conductor.

"However, if they misbehave, they are asked to get off the bus," he added.

Natesan from T. Nagar argues that TASMAR shops shouldn't be located on main roads like this or near schools, places of worship or bus stops.

"We cannot give room to pleasures of some and put others' safety at risk."

## New ticket machines now accept coins

PRASANNA SWAMINATHAN

**Chennai:** Unlike the previous one, the new ticket vending machine, released by the Indian Railways in the final quarter of 2015 for suburban routes, accepts cash in addition to smart cards.

Cash/Smart Card operated Ticket Vending Machine (CoTVM) is an unmanned ticket vending kiosk that accepts currency and coins. With the help of this, the passengers can also reserve season and platform tickets.

This is an upgrade of Automatic Ticket Vending Machine (ATVM), which can be operated only using smart cards for reserving tickets.

A. Asokan, Station Superintendent of the Guindy Railway Station, said, "These machines are currently introduced only in stations where there are long queues for booking tickets. Soon, it will be introduced in other stations too."

The machine gives passengers 60 seconds, within which the passenger must complete the reservation process. If the passenger is unable to

do so, the process would begin again.

Each CoTVMs can hold 3000 coins and 25,000 currency notes. The minimum amount that the machine accepts is Rs. 5 and the maximum denomination that it accepts is Rs. 1000. The CoTVM can also be used for recharging the smart card.

An official at the Southern Railways headquarters said, "There is only one drawback with the machine. The machine will accept the amount which is the exact cost of the ticket, and will not return the change due. Instead, it will return the money that was put in."

Sivasankaran B. R., a student of the Madras Christian College, said, "These machines have been in the Tambaram Railway Station for a month now, but they are yet to begin functioning."

At Guindy Railway Station, though the CoTVM has been introduced, ATVM is being used by the station officials.



A CoTVM in a railway station PHOTO: CRIS.ORG



Representative image

PHOTO: AMRITHA ALLADI

## Is Chennai ready for hot summer?

PRITHA BANERJEE

**Chennai:** Chennai will not face power shortage though 2016 summer is anticipated to be the hottest ever by weather experts, said officials from the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board.

According to The Hindu, the State's energy deficit of over 2,000 megawatt (MW) in the past has been reduced. The North Chennai Thermal Power Station (NCTPS) commissioned in 1994 yields approximately 1,200 MW and the two plants of the Vallur thermal power project have a generating capacity of 1,500 MW approximately.

Officials from the Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation Limited (TANGEDCO) said, "The duration of scheduled power shutdowns will be reduced and minor problems like low voltage fluctuations, faults in substations and transformers can be reduced by our cable fault location, testing and route tracing services."

Chennai faces acute water crisis during summer. However, officials

from the Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board (CMWSSB) said there was enough water for the summer.

The total water storage in the reservoirs which supply water to Chennai -Poondi, Cholavaram, Redhills and Chembarambakkam - has been increased from 2,865.00 to 8,221.00 million cubic feet.

"We have also implemented projects like rain water harvesting. So, after the heavy flood, we are not anticipating a water crisis this year."

CMWSSB has now started constructing 150 recharge wells in 15 zones under the 'Water Security Mission', a project proposed by the state government last year.

According to the Deccan Chronicle, in areas like Puzhal, Parry's Corner, Ambattur (Balaji Nagar), Ayanavaram, Villivakkam, Anna Nagar (West), Koyambedu, West Mambalam, Saidapet and St. Thomas Mount, the groundwater level has risen by five metres on an average. In other areas, the increase in water levels is in the range of two to five metres.

## JNU row: IIT-M students protest; faculty divided

PRASANNA RS

**Chennai:** About 100 out of around 9000 students at IIT-Madras (IIT-M) protested inside the campus on the evening of February 23 to show solidarity with the students of New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and to protest against the "interference of the state in academic spaces."

The students, who chanted slogans such as 'Hum Kya Chahte Azaadi' and 'Inquilab Zindabad', marched from the Central Lecture Theatre to the Himalaya Lawns, where some faculty members and a few students addressed the protesters.

K. Kalpana, Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT-M and an alumnus of JNU, said, "I never thought I would see such slogans coming from IIT students. It makes my heart skip a beat."

Kalpana and 40 other faculty



IIT-M students protest

PHOTO: PRASANNA RS

members of IIT-M have issued a statement expressing serious concern over the recent events at JNU and the incidents in Delhi over the past week.

"Our university spaces have always fostered a space for debate and disagreement. As we view these spaces being criminalized and violently curbed, we are concerned that we are no longer able to foster

spaces for open democracy," the statement said.

Devi Raj Sunkara, a third-year mechanical engineering student, who had obtained permission from the IIT-M Dean of Students to conduct the march, said that the event was not conducted under the banner of any student group.

Some members of the Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle (APSC), an

independent student body at IIT-M who had obtained permission to conduct a similar protest on February 24, participated in the march. However, the group's student coordinators didn't address the gathering.

"They [APSC] probably felt it would result in a dilution of their stance," said Devi Raj.

Some APSC members had earlier alleged that the administration was imposing a number of restrictions on the students including avoiding pamphlets and limiting slogans.

However, a student who was involved in the discussions with the IIT-M administration about the Tuesday protest, while talking about the issue with APSC members in the Himalaya lawns on February 22, said, "The Dean didn't dictate; he only gave suggestions."

The student added that she didn't see this as the administration's act of cutting down the freedom of expression of students.

Many students expressed displeasure over the protest. Abhishankar Kumar, who is pursuing a PhD in Chemical Engineering, said the protesters were raking up controversies to divide the students.

"They want media attention; so they are misusing the IIT tag."

Meanwhile, another group of 56 faculty members from the same institute have sent a petition to the President calling on him to 'save educational institutions from the scholarship of abuse and hate.'

While agreeing with the need to support intellectual freedom and alternative views which are 'a must for democracy and creativity,' the statement said the meaning of academic freedom was distorted leading to a vitiated atmosphere in campuses.

"Calling for dismemberment and ruin of our country in the name of dissent is not acceptable, even in a university."

## Student voices rarely heard in TN

The state has a history of strong student movements which became less vocal after 1991

POORANI BALENDRA

**Chennai:** With the entire country protesting against the events that unfolded at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi; Tamil Nadu, a state with a history of powerful student movements, witnessed only a handful of student protests.

In Tamil Nadu, the only recent example of students mobilizing for a cause was in 2013 when they demanded that the Indian Government vote in favour of an United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolution censuring the Government of Sri Lanka for war crimes.

Marx Anthonisamy, a social activist said, "The 1967 anti-Hindi agitation in Tamil Nadu that ousted the Congress from power was primarily led by students. Today, unfortunately most of the students in the state are not politically sensitive."

Quoting Gandhi, 'Study later, come out now,' Marx said that a student must become politically conscious to become a "complete human being."

He added that students in professional

colleges had become less vociferous than their peers in Arts colleges only after the economic reforms of 1991.

"After our economy opened up, students in technical colleges concentrated only on placements," he said.

He added that students studying humanities would be aware of the political dynamics of a society, thus provoking them to dissent and initiating dialogues.

However, V.Mariappan, Tamil Nadu President of SFI (Students Federation of India) said that the students in professional colleges were not the only ones to be blamed.

"Most of the private engineering colleges charge exorbitant fees, thus the students are obliged to get a degree without any hassle," he said.

Mariappan added that due to lack of government guidelines on college hostels, the management usually threatened to suspend students from hostels if they protested.

"Most of the colleges in Tamil Nadu do not follow the Supreme Court guidelines which states that democratic elections for

student bodies must be held in all varieties," he added.

For example, in the College of Engineering Guindy (CEG), Anna University, the President of the Student Association would be elected only by toppers from the college -- a meagre 80 out of the 5000 students in the college.

Mariappan alleged that college administrations held "dummy elections" just to get funds from the University Grants Commission.

A 1984 batch alumnus of CEG, A. J. Balasubramanian who is currently the CEO of Techruit, recollected the days when he, along with scores of engineering students across the state protested for four to five days against the 1983 riots that killed Tamils in Sri Lanka.

"In those days, being a rebel was part of a student's life," he said.

In Madras Christian College (MCC), one of the prominent arts colleges in the state, Arun, the student body chairman said that the council elections were held in a democratic manner -- with campaigns and manifestos.

He said that in Tamil Nadu, students were not "politicised" from their childhood.

Blaming the education system, he said, "I did not know what the Dravidian movement was until I started studying Political Science. There is nothing about Tamil Nadu history in our text books."

Saravanan Poongavanam, a columnist and a CEG alumnus, said that college administrations were "crushing democracy" out of fear of property being vandalised amidst conflict between students.

He added that politicians in Tamil Nadu "diluted politics" except the ones that encouraged "Tamil Nationalism." For example, the State Government would clamp down on protests that question its functioning and would encourage protests against the Central Government, like the ones against Sri Lanka.

Mariappan also said that as the Dravidian parties (DMK) came to power using student support, they were aware of how powerful student movements could be.

"Naturally, they crush all forms of political activity in the state."



## A cobbler's torn tale

RASHMIKA MAJUMDAR

**Chennai:** Buying new footwear is less cumbersome these days than looking for the neighbourhood cobbler who has become a rare sight. Cobblers are a dying breed of craftsmen who struggle to make a living in a time when use-and-throw seems to be the order of the day.

For more than five generations, Dhanam's family had been engaged in mending shoes under the same tree near the Chembarakkam Lake. She and her husband, be it a scorching day or a rainy one, together used to earn just Rs 500 in a

day by stitching torn shoes, fixing school shoe buckles and gluing soles together.

However tragedy struck the family when Dhanam's husband drowned in the December floods after the boat he was on, collided with another. Dhanam and her four children moved out.

Now she earns her living by repairing shoes on the Sardar Patel road pavement, near the Kasturba Nagar Railway station.

With a dozen shoes strewn by her side, she struggles to repair the shoes. Distressed, she places one hand on her forehead and wipes her tears with the other.

All implements that the family owned were washed away during the floods. They could only salvage a pair of scissors, some thread and hand tools.

"I hardly get two or three customers by the afternoon and another four or five in the evening. But I am unable to repair all the shoes as I don't have all the tools I need. I injured my hand during floods and I can barely manage to get work done," says Dhanam.

"On the first day when it had rained heavily, my husband had gone out with the ration card to buy some food for us. After the boats collided, he fell into the water. He was missing and we

couldn't retrieve his body till the next day," she said.

With four school-going children depending completely on Dhanam, hunger and shelter are the other problems that the family struggles with. Their house, documents including the ration card and other belongings were washed away during the floods.

"We have lost everything. Who cares about belongings when we have lost a living person? Now we have to starve. My children go to school hungry. I beg for food for the children from the hotel nearby. This wouldn't have been the condition if my husband were alive. He made sure we were well fed and happy," she said.

Dhanam said that she has not received any compensation from the government. The teachers of the school where her children go gave some money to buy some food and medicines after the floods.

"We sleep near the security guard here. We are very scared all the time as there is an alcohol shop nearby," she added.

Living off the street, the family uses the toilet at the railway station paying Rs 15 per person every day.

"With four children and limited money, how can I afford to spend so much? When I don't have money to use the toilet in the railway station, I borrow water from a shop nearby, bathe the children and send them off to school. I tried to rent a house at Taramani. But there too, I pay an advance of Rs.5000 and the rent is Rs.3000. Where will I get that much money from?"



Narmadha training her students from St Joseph's School, S S Puram.

PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## Down, but not out

NIRUPAMA VISWANATHAN

**Chennai:** Inching through some of the most crowded streets in the city, braving the afternoon sun and working 15 hours a day to make ends meet are the least of Narmadha's concerns.

Being forced to give up the sport you loved when you had just begun tasting success robbed you of the will to wake up every morning, she said.

But, the 22-year-old daughter of an auto rickshaw driver, found a way. She now uses her job at Magic Bus, a non-governmental organization that uses sports to bring about behavioural changes in children, to take boxing to school children.

"We had to give up boxing as a career due to the lack of opportunities and advanced training facilities. So, six of my friends and I decided to stop brooding and train school kids instead, to help them

learn from our mistakes," she said.

"We selected five kids from our Kannagi Nagar team for the district level championships and they bagged two Golds, one Silver and one Bronze among them."

Riding her black Scooty through the city whose streets she knows like the back of her hand, Narmadha shifts seamlessly from her role as a boxing teacher to that of a personal fitness trainer.

"I studied BSc in Physical Education and I've worked in a gym for almost a year. So, I use the experience as a fitness trainer to earn some extra money in my free time. I have clients in different parts of the city," she said.

When Narmadha first started to box at the age of 12, in the light weight category (45-48 kgs), she helped her team bag the Bronze in the National level Championships that year after only a month's training. She went on to win several

State-level championships after that, despite not having even a pair of gloves for herself.

"In the North, boxers undergo rigorous training before tournaments and they have access to some of the best equipment. Though we were a formidable team back then, the 15 of us in the Chennai team shared three pairs of gloves," Narmadha said.

It was all downhill from there for Narmadha and the others in the Chennai team. She claimed that they were denied the opportunities that were usually given to those who won at the National level.

"Even our own coach let us down because she was scared that we'd leave the club and go off to train in the North. She'd let us participate only in the tournaments she wanted us to because if we left, there wouldn't be anyone to win medals for the club anymore," she said.

Talk about the Madhavan-starrer "Irudhi Suttru" and her face lights up.

"You might think that some parts of the film were made up for dramatic effect but I assure you it's not. Every single thing showed in the film is absolutely true in the life of a female boxer. I was reduced to tears by the end of it," she said.

Narmadha said she was offered a role in the movie but she declined. She added that she wouldn't have turned down the offer to act in the movie had she known it was 'well-meaning'.

Narmadha said that the decision of the SDAT (Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu) to act in a hostel facility for female boxers with state-of-the-art equipment was because the movie brought to light the lack of facilities for women boxers in Chennai.

"It's heartening, nevertheless," she said.



Dhanam's art dying fast

PHOTO: RASHMIKA MAJUMDAR

## Kalakshetra dedicates Ramayana to founder

Six-part series of the epic tale by Rukmini Devi Arundale, took 14 years to choreograph

RASHMIKA MAJUMDAR

**Chennai:** The smoke filled the air from neem leaves being burnt to keep the mosquitoes away. Kolams adorned the entrance to the theatre. Called Rukmini Arangam, the theatre itself, a bamboo structure, is inspired by the Koothambalam, a performance space in the temples of Kerala. On the left side of the stage, two lamps were lit, illuminating an idol of Nataraja and beside it, a garlanded portrait of the late Rukmini Devi Arundale, the founder of Kalakshetra Foundation.

Students dressed in handloom sarees with flowers on their neatly plaited hair welcome the audience into the theatre with folded hands. The organizers as well as the audience are barefoot.

The Arangam, revered like a temple, is the venue for 'Remembering Rukmini Devi Festival' being held at Kalakshetra to mark the 112th birth anniversary of its founder.

Ramayana, a six-part series by Arundale that took 14 years to choreograph, is a part of the 11-day festival. The first part of the Ramayana series, Sita Swayamvaram, performed on February 22 evening, was first conceived in 1955, and the final part, the Maha Pattabishekam will be performed on February 29, Arundale's birth anniversary.

On the third day of the festival, Rama Vanagamanam was performed which saw the Kalakshetra dancers amalgamate the Indian classical dance forms of Bharathanatyam and Kathakali. While Bharathanatyam dominated most of the choreography, the Kathakali moves added fervour and speed to the performance in the scenes which required anger or tension to be portrayed. For instance, when Rama comes to bid farewell to Sita before



A scene from Ramayana underway

PHOTO: WORDPRESS.COM

going to the forest, she tells him that she would walk before him and remove the thorns from the path. Rama then explains the dangers of the forest which has wild animals and Rama, played by Rakesh, uses Kathakali

to show the animals' wrath and power.

A first year student of Visual Communication at Kalakshetra, A Prashanth, said, "The stage lighting, costumes and music have all been preserved to perform Rama Vanagama-

nam the way it was performed first, on December 26, 1960. Warm colours such as red, yellow and orange were used for conveying love, anger, sorrow and agony whereas, shades of blue and green for jealousy and wrath."

Arundale is one of the first Indian choreographers to have used stage lighting during performances, sparking a new trend in dance-drama performances, he said.

Prashanth said that he found the portrayal of Manthara the most resounding one.

The character of Manthara was played by a dance student from Kerala, Sreedevi who said that staying bent on stage while dancing was the most difficult part of her performance.

"Just stay bent! That was my motto. At times I would straighten my back unknowingly. But the entire troupe which is present during the practice sessions, would keep reminding me to crouch," said Sreedevi, smiling.

She added that the preparations started five months back and required four to five hours of rigorous practice with the team, and then individual practice sessions which could go on for a couple of hours at a stretch.

S Sathyendra, a theatre enthusiast said that he has watched many renditions of the Ramayana including the version of Arundale's which is available on video.

"Today's performance has been kept very close to Arundale's version. The Karuna and Shoka rasas have been carefully kept in mind while choreographing. In today's show, the human element was displayed in every scene - be it Dasaratha's agony, Kaikeyi's diffidence, Manthara's jealousy, Lakshmana's anger to Sita's devotion," he added.



Chennai heat is unbearable for Huskies PHOTO: SHREYA SINHA

## No country for exotic dogs

-PRANAMI TAMULI

**Chennai:** Exotic dog breeds exported from cooler climes are having a tough time surviving in the hot and humid conditions here. Often, they are abandoned when their health fails.

Double coated breeds like the Siberian Husky, Saint Bernard and Alaskan Malamute are no longer uncommon in Indian households. People buy these breeds knowing that they are high maintenance and require constant attention.

Siberian Huskies, for example, are comfortable in temperatures as low as -75 degrees Fahrenheit while the Alaskan Malamute thrives in Arctic temperatures. Indian summers are harsh on these breeds and sometimes, even fatal.

According to Dr Barani, a veterinarian who works at The Ark, a clinic in Chennai, "The heat causes lack of appetite and dehy-

dration. They suffer from chronic skin and stomach ailments. These dogs are confined to air-conditioned rooms. They do not get enough exercise and develop bone problems."

Despite vets advising people against buying such breeds, the market for exotic dogs is booming.

"Husky pups sourced internationally can cost anywhere between Rs 45000 and Rs75000. Maintaining them can cost over Rs 10000 a month. But the demand has only grown in recent years," said Sudhakar who runs the Askar Pet Resort.

"Most exotic breeds are flown in from Thailand, the puppy mill of the world," he said. Puppy mills are considered unethical for their rapid breeding of female dogs.

"It is a business and dogs are commodities that generate profit," Sudhakar said.

## First Tamil graphic novel breaks ground for narratives

S. RAM SARANGAN

**Chennai:** In an arena otherwise filled with quiet book stores and softly murmuring crowds at the YMCA grounds in Royapettah between January 13 and 26, one stall drew passers-by with a large, dramatic placard of a warrior perched on a warhorse, poised to strike at the enemy, while a fast-paced epic score played in the background.

This was part of the marketing campaign for Chandrahaasam: A War with No End, the first graphic novel in a 10-volume series, and the first project produced on such a grand scale, with a total expenditure of around Rs. 2 crore.

Ananda Vikadan, the publishing company, also released a mobile/tablet version of the novel for both iOS and Android-based devices, which had both English and Tamil text for the story. A team of professional dubbing artists, including Murali Kumar, was hired to do a

full voiceover of the Tamil version to accompany the panels of the comic - which were also animated - turning the novel into a complete storytelling experience.

"While we faced challenges because of the unique nature of the project, we also saw a scope for a lot of innovation," said Manoj Kumar, Project Coordinator at Ananda Vikadan. "After the English voiceover is completed in about two weeks, we will market the app extensively throughout India and even abroad."

The plot, scripted by Sahitya Akademi award-winning writer S Venkatesan, highlights the tumultuous history of the Pandya Empire, and the trials and tribulations of its rulers. Chandrahaasam lead artist Balashanmugan received praise for his bold inkwork and breathtaking aerial depictions, but received negative feedback for the lack of facial expressions on his characters, and the gaudiness of his colouring in some areas.



Children at Chandrahaasam event

PHOTO: ANANDA VIKADAN

One of the biggest questions from sceptics surrounding the release of Chandrahaasam was whether it would find a market in Tamil Nadu, as it was breaking new ground by publishing a format that

is rarely seen in the Tamil publishing industry. The entire development process, including app development, took around one and a half years, and involved a core team of 17 members. In order to

ensure that the graphic novel project was a success, extensive marketing campaigns started as early as six months before the release of the hardbound novel.

The campaign was a success,

even if advertisements about the graphic novel were frequently mistaken as depicting some kind of movie or theatre. The popularity of the movie Baahubali added to the interest for the historical fantasy genre.

"So far, we have sold around 16,000 units in pre-bookings, which is on the high side even for a normal Tamil book. Any questions about whether there is a market for this kind of publication have been answered, and we felt confident enough to start working on the second volume in the series already," said Kalaiselvan.

The growing culture of holding comic conventions - such as Comic Con - in various cities like Chennai and Delhi has also added to the potential reader base for graphic novels, and act as prime outlets for related merchandise, such as posters, clothing, figurines, mobile cases, and in the case of Chandrahaasam, even jewellery. The conceptualized designs for jewellery

worn by women in that age have since seen interest from jewellers who want to produce some of the designs.

However, while interest in the graphic novel genre might be strong, the distribution network of the novel is not. Many stores in smaller towns and cities have shown a certain amount of reluctance when it came to stocking Chandrahaasam's work. This is partly due to a fear of whether or not buyers in their locality would be interested in the graphic novel, and due to a fear that the novel is too highly priced for the average customer.

"The pricing of the hardbound unit was definitely higher than most books, but I believe that there is a market for it. Bookstore owners have to consider their customers' preferences, which is what makes them reluctant. But I believe that the popularity will encourage them to see what kind of response they will get," said Kalaiselvan.