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AWBI not challenging Jallikattu law

ANINDITA BANERJEE

The Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI) has said that it has no intention of challenging the Tamil Nadu Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance 2017 and the subsequent Bill and that any petition already filed in its name will be withdrawn.

Two days after the Tamil Nadu Assembly approved an amendment in law to allow bull-taming sports in the state, reports said the Animal Welfare Board of India and other animal rights organisations on

Wednesday had challenged its constitutional validity before the Supreme Court.

But later, the AWBI stated, "The board has received news reports and electronic media reports stating that the AWBI moved the Supreme Court. If at all any petition has been filed challenging the ordinance on behalf of the AWBI, the same may be withdrawn immediately."

Board's member and advocate Anjali Sharma however said she had filed the petition only after full consent and approval from AWBI. The Justice Dipak Misra-headed

bench agreed to hear the pleas which were listed.

Meanwhile the Centre has also filed a plea for withdrawing the January 6, 2016 notification banning Jallikattu will be taken up.

In the midst of continuing protests over jallikattu across the State, the Tamil Nadu Assembly had unanimously passed an amendment bill for conducting jallikattu on the ground that it was very important to preserve the cultural and traditional practices of the state.

The amendment was brought to

resolve the violent protests across the state, especially on the Marina Beach, by students and others, demanding that the ban be lifted.

The Bill, which was passed on January 23, defines jallikattu as an event involving bulls conducted for traditional and cultural reasons on days from January to May in certain places as notified by the State Government.

"It amends Sections 2, 3, 11, 22, 27 and 28 of the Act and explains variants such as 'manjuvirattu', 'erudhu vidum vizha' and 'vadamadu', all to do with

jallikattu," explained Mr. A.R. Satkthivel, a senior advocate at the Madras High Court.

This Bill was hurriedly tabled by the Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam as Chennai was rocked by violence after police moved to evict nearly 10,000 Jallikattu protesters from the Marina Beach.

Over a hundred people were reportedly injured and at least 20 police stations and several vehicles were burnt.

The Marina beach, which had started resembling a battlefield

with fire, smoke and shrieks everywhere, was in chaos even after the passage of the Bill.

Shortly before 6 pm, the protest was called off, though around 500 students continued to be on the beach.

While most of the protestors refused to speak about the sudden violence, some were of the opinion that it happened because of the secrecy regarding the ordinance.

"Had details of the ordinance been released and explained in time, most of the Marina crowd would have gone away celebrating"

said, Nitin S., an IIT Madras student, who was also an active part of the Marina protests.

On the very first day of the protests, the Government promised an ordinance to allow jallikattu. The lack of proper communication made the protestors aggressive.

The Government's reluctance to release the text of the ordinance, fearing a legal challenge from the animal rights activists, added to the confusion. Now with the Court verdict awaited, it remains to be seen if jallikattu will survive the legal challenge.



The Nadukuppam fish market was a shambles with gutted vehicles and rotting fish. PHOTOS BY AKHIL V. AND ANKITA B.

Residents face 'police wrath'

ANKITA BOSE

Residents of Nadukuppam claim that 450 fish vendors have lost their livelihood after their market was burnt down during the violence that took place on January 23 following police action to control the Jallikattu protests.

The residents alleged that some powder-like substance was used to burn the fish market and some of the expensive fish were looted.

On January 23, the police started evicting those who had gathered on the Marina Beach to protest against the ban on jallikattu.

The protestors in an attempt to escape the police entered Nadukuppam where the residents gave them refuge and attended to their wounds.

According to the kuppam dwellers, the police entered the place between 2 pm and 5 pm with batons, tear gas, bottles and petrol bombs; they damaged property and vehicles on the road before finally

setting the fish market in flames.

The residents alleged that men and women were dragged into the street and thrashed. The police groped women and tugged and pulled at their sarees, hurling abuses at everyone, they alleged.

"They (police) lathi-charged' without asking any questions! It seemed like they didn't care who was in front of them. They even beat the children. A policeman pulled my saree and tore my blouse," said Samundeshwari, a resident.

Another dweller, Balaji had a black eye and said, "They punched me on the face and left me bleeding. They started throwing bottles and used tear gas."

A lot of the young people were arrested while many were admitted to the Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital.

The fish vendors complained how they could not reach out for help from the Fishermen Association at Royapuram due to

restricted access to the beach road. A police barricade continued to block Kamarajar Salai and all other roads leading to the beach.

"Individually, I have incurred a loss of about Rs. 50,000. Our families are devastated and we have nowhere to go," said Thangam, a fish vendor.

Additionally, the villagers also confirmed that the police promised compensation if the residents signed a testimony blaming the protestors for the damage. But the villagers refused.

"If the protestors ask for shelter again, we'll still provide it. Because we are humans and these college students are of our children's age," said Bhaskar, another fish vendor.

A number of videos have been uploaded in Facebook and other social media sites claiming evidence of police brutality in Nadukuppam. The videos showed police breaking doors, entering homes and beating men and women.

According to news reports, the videos are to be investigated by the cyber cell of the Central Crime Branch. Inspector K. Yuvaraj, who was patrolling the Marina, said that he did not have the authority to respond to the residents' charges.

Meanwhile, the National Human Rights Commission has taken suo motu cognisance of the alleged police excesses on Jallikattu protestors. It has also issued notices to the Chief Secretary of State, the DGP, the Chennai Police Commissioner and the Tamil Nadu Government, asking them to submit their reports within a two week span.

Responding to allegations of violence, a senior police official told The Hindu: "We have plenty of evidence to prove that a section of agitators started the violence. Just because some policemen indulged in such illegal activities, it doesn't mean that they started the violence. We will investigate the matter and take action."

Bail for 29 students; violence under probe

AIHIK SUR ANINDITA BANERJEE

A day after the city police arrested students in connection with the jallikattu violence, the Principal Sessions Court here has granted them bail with the condition that they stay in Chengalpattu till further orders.

As many as 29 persons who said they were victims of police assault during the Jallikattu protests were ordered by the Chief Magisterial Court to undergo treatment for injuries before being remanded into custody.

The accused have been booked on charges of assembling unlawfully, damaging public property, rioting, intimidating authorities and also attempting murder.

"During the police crackdown on the protestors my son was spotted in the middle of the chaos. His bike was destroyed by the police and he had to save his life by fleeing into the fishing village of Nadukuppam from where he was later arrested," said Perumal, father of P. Tamil Mani alias Ajay, one of the 29 who were arrested.

Ajay, 22, is a student of New College, Chennai.

Prathaban, an advocate representing the arrested said, "Most of the 29 who were nabbed are students and it was their democratic right they were exercising by protesting. The police instigated the violence as you saw in the TV reports and therefore they falsely created the cases."

"These students, particularly, are from Nadukuppam and MGR Nagar. They are mostly from poor and oppressed communities. They are not educated and they don't know the difference between an ordinance and a judgement", said Prathaban

According to the police the ac-

cused pelted stones at them first and did not disperse when they were ordered to and hence they had to lathicharge the crowd.

"We are going to file a petition before the Human Rights Commission," he added.

Pointing at the dried blood on the pants of one of the arrested, advocate R. Thirumorthy said, "We noticed the external injuries on the victims and we requested the judge to admit them in hospital".

The 29 arrested were taken to the Royapettah General Hospital after the judge ordered that they should be treated first.

The 'victims' had to wait for an hour before the treatment finally started.

An argument broke out between the police and the advocates when the police allegedly tried to convince the medical officers to issue a fit-certificate for those arrested without examining them.

"Even after the court issued the judgement the police tried to bypass it illegally. Upon our objection the medical officer agreed to the inspection," said Prathaban.

Wheelchairs were not provided for those who had obvious trouble walking from the injuries suffered. They had to limp from the police van to the Casualty ward of the hospital.

"After the inspection we found out that nine of them were grievously injured. Two or three of them are having problems using their hands and legs," added Prathaban.

Vasuki U., National Vice-President of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) and a Central Committee Member of the CPI(M), said, "There is an obvious large scale human rights violation."

"We have already taken up with the state human rights commission

who said they will inquire into the matter. The intervention of the advocates secured a medical inspection for the accused."

Chennai was rocked by violence after police were asked to evict nearly 10,000 Jallikattu protesters from the Marina Beach.

Over a hundred people were reportedly injured and at least two police stations and several vehicles were burnt.

A senior police officer said "Things went out of control when a group started running towards the sea, threatening suicide. Several hundred followed them."

"While a section of protestors were removed successfully, over 2,000 formed a human chain along the shore line to stop us," the officer said.

He also mentioned that the protestors were later joined by fishermen and women.

At the end of the protest, there were several injured in the battle on both sides.

The Ice House police station was set on fire while a few people including women were trapped inside. This spurred the police to take tough steps against the protestors.

On Friday Tamil Nadu Chief Minister O.Panneerselvam, during the assembly session, said "anti-nationals" had intruded in the peaceful protests.

"Some protestors carried pictures of Osama bin Laden during Jallikattu protests," he claimed.

Panneerselvam said: "142 cops and 138 protestors were injured during the violence in Chennai."

So far 66 cases have been filed and 215 arrested in Chennai. Panneerselvam also said that as opposition parties and media have raised complaints that police indulged in violence, "an enquiry will be set up and proper action will be taken."

Thin attendance on Marina for Republic Day parade

AKHIL VISHWANATH

The crowd at the 68th Republic Day celebrations on Kamarajar Salai was sparse with people deciding to stay away from the parade following a week-long Jallikattu agitation on the Marina Beach.

"The crowd was not even 5 per cent of what it was in the previous years. Last time, lakhs of people had come to celebrate the Republic Day, but this time, as you can see, there is no one here," said Raja, a flag and tri-colour merchandise seller. Raja who had managed to make record sales each succeeding year was sitting with hundreds of unsold lapel-pin flags this time.

On the eve of Republic Day, Marina Beach had become a desert after the Police evicted thousands of protesters.

The police had made several announcements at the beach asking the protestors to vacate the area for Republic Day preparations. "The crowd was evacuated just in time.

After what happened, many youngsters I know didn't want to return. Many youngsters were denied entry," said Deenadayal, an engineer from Mylapore.

For two days, the police maintained strict vigil and enforced blockades at entry points to the Beach. Although security arrangements were tight for the celebrations, the task for the Police was made simple because the traffic was thinner than what they had expected, according to a policeman.

"Even though I was a protester yesterday, I am here to show my patriotism today," said Ashwin Iru-dayarajan, who was one of the few protestors who chose to participate in the celebrations. "I could've watched the event on TV but I am here," he added.

Ashwin Iru-dayarajan said that he was detained at a police station for wearing a black T-shirt while protesting on the Marina Beach. On the Republic Day, he was asked to keep his dark coloured handker-

chief with the police and collect it after the event.

Ashwin sports a man-bun – long hair tied into a bun at the back of his head. "The policeman at the checkpoint literally touched it and accused me of being a rogue. He assumed that a young man having a man-bun is a rogue and that he would wave his dark coloured handkerchief in the air in protest," said Ashwin. "Why will people attend Republic Day celebrations when the police do this?"

On asked if people's non-attendance at the celebrations was a form of protest, another spectator Vignesh Ramanan said, "Republic Day is unrelated to Jallikattu. Most people are still patriotic. People forget protests easily but celebrate Republic Day every year. Many are here. Shows patriotism, right?"

The celebrations had received a loud cheer the previous year despite Jayalalitha's absence at the parade. A tableau assembled at the premises of Tamil Nadu State

Council for Higher Education on Kamarajar Salai, was seen carrying huge posters and a life-size model of Jayalalitha.

This time Tamil Nadu Chief Minister O.Panneerselvam hoisted the Indian flag in front of the Mahatma Gandhi statue amidst petals showered by an Indian Air Force Chetak helicopter to mark the start of Republic Day celebrations.

Panneerselvam took the salute in the absence of a full-time Governor for Tamil Nadu. Governor C.Vidyasagar Rao, who holds additional charge of Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra.

The Chief Minister presented the Anna Medal for Gallantry to W.Durgadevi from Vellore for rescuing her friend from drowning.

The Agriculture Department presented its special award to Sankara Narayanan, a paddy farmer, for achieving the highest yield. Gandhi Adigal Police Medal, Kottai Ameer Communal Harmony were the other awards given away.



Empty chairs in the spectators' section on the Marina Beach PHOTO COURTESY THE HINDU

'Protests should not affect law'

AATHIRA PERINCHERY

Though large public protests are not very frequent in India, there have been several over the years that forced governments to change legislations. However, the recent public-backed protests to retract the ban on *jallikattu* across Tamil Nadu have set a completely new precedent, say some.

"We are at a cusp of seeing something new," says Akhila R. S., an advocate practising in the Madras High Court. "Though the sport was banned a few years ago, we've never had such a huge protest till now."

The eight-day protest - in which a large number of youth also participated - resulted in the state government amending the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1960) on January 23 to legalise *jallikattu* and bullock-cart racing in Tamil Nadu under the rationale that it is part of the culture and tradition of its people.

Tamil Nadu, however, is not new to public protests that have changed legislations. In 1965, leaders including E. V. Ramasamy and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's C. N. Annadurai revived anti-Hindi protests across the state when, according to the Official Languages Act of 1963, Hindi was declared the mandatory official and national language for all states in India. Caving in to the protests, the Centre brought in the Official Language Resolution of 1968 which permitted English to be used for administrative purposes in all states along with its respective official

languages. "The anti-Hindi agitations were a milestone," says Akhila. "It is the same nationalist, identity politics at play. Similarly, the Right to Information Act came from the people themselves. But this (pro-*jallikattu* protests) is at a different level. This is definitely a success story."

So what does this mean for the judiciary? "We need to understand how emotive an issue this has become," says Akhila. "The Supreme Court (SC) will have to look at this for their ruling."

However, others disagree. "The judiciary cannot be affected in any manner, by any protests," says senior advocate and People Union for Civil Liberties activist Sudha Ramalingam. "The job of the judiciary is to interpret the law, and not be swayed by emotions."

Whether the rationale is that

jallikattu is an integral part of Tamil culture and tradition or not, it must still not influence the ruling in anyway, she adds.

Court rulings like the one dismissing the plea for a ban on Tamil writer Perumal Murugan's book *Madhorubhagan* reflect that process. However, while that is the ideal scenario, there have been several cases where judicial rulings have been influenced by public pressure. Moreover, the present amendment to accommodate *jallikattu* in the PCA is a stop-gap arrangement, say a few others.

"It (this legislation) does not speak much," says Ravichandran N., an advocate in the Madras High Court. "It is an executive order only. Only after the SC judgment comes will it be final. Until it does, however, *jallikattu* is legal. The ball is now in the SC's court."



The *jallikattu* protests of January 2017. PHOTO: UTSAV TIWARI



Kangayam cattle are native to the districts of Coimabto, Erode and Namakkal. PHOTO: AATHIRA P.

Are indigenous breeds vanishing?

ADITHYA KUMAR

Jallikattu, which has been in the spotlight recently, uses breeds of cattle which some say might go extinct if the sport is banned. This breed is raised and trained for the sport alone and so there are concerns that the breed which is indigenous to the region will not survive if the sport is banned. But experts say that banning *jallikattu* will not affect native breeds. The cattle used are usually the Kangayam (native to the Coimbatore, Erode and Namakkal districts) or the Pulikulam breeds. The latter, native to Madurai, is highly prized for the game. Both these are just two among the eight indigenous breeds in Tamil Nadu. As per the cattle census which is conducted every five years, Tamil Nadu had 11,18,8709 cattle and 88,14,042 buffaloes as of 2012.

The offspring of the winning bull is usually well taken care of until it is old enough to fight. The calf is tagged and monitored by the

Animal Welfare Board of India. Every year its progress is mapped prior to putting it in the ring. When ready it has to be approved before it is let loose in the ring.

According to Dawn Williams, Managing Director of Blue Cross India, bulls reared in Tamil Nadu's villages are mostly for slaughter. Due to the better quality of meat of most Indian cattle, these cattle are prized not for their milk or virility but for their flesh. These cattle after the games usually end up being slaughtered. According to reports by The Economic Times and The Hindu, India had been the top exporter of beef, surpassing Brazil, prior to the political backlash against such slaughter.

Secondly, native cattle yield lesser milk when compared to those cross-bred with a Jersey cow. "An indigenous breed can give up to 2 litres of milk a day which the calf needs, whereas a cross breed gives 15 - 20 litres," says Williams. The yield being higher and

more lucrative has caused more farmers to interbreed their cows.

The quantity varies also due to the fact that most of the indigenous breeds are draught breeds. The draught breeds are meant to carry heavy loads and do heavy work. They do not require as much water as the cross bred variety do. "To rear a Kangayam you need Rs. 200 a day," says Williams.

Also, milk of cross-bred cows is much better and provides better milk products as compared to the indigenous breeds. In cross breeds too, if the calf is female, farmers retain it; otherwise, it is sent for slaughter.

So will the ban on *jallikattu* really make any difference to these species? It won't. As long as there is a beef industry, the numbers might dwindle but they won't completely go extinct. "*Jallikattu* will have no impact on native breeds. The demand for the export of native breed is very high and so the chances of it going extinct are very slim," says Williams.

The game and its tradition

ARITRY DAS

The *jallikattu* protests in Tamil Nadu have set an example in the contemporary history of Indian polity. With the pro-*jallikattu* movement seeing support of eminent personalities like musician A. R. Rahman, actors Rajinikanth, Kamal Hassan and chess champion Viswanathan Anand, a huge debate has emerged across India.

"It can be called as a defining tradition of Tamil Nadu. Even though there is increasing urbanization now, *jallikattu* still has a prominent regional existence," said Sathish Kumar, a leftist political activist. "It is being perceived as part of Tamil identity as Tamil nationalism is taking shape."

"The earliest references of *jallikattu* is in Sangam Literature. Back then it was used by men to impress women and get their hand in marriage," said Sampath Kumar,

a senior journalist and enthusiast in Tamil literature and culture.

The name '*jallikattu*' originated from Tamil terms '*salli kaasu*' meaning coins and '*kattu*' meaning a parcel. It indicates the old tradition of tying gold coins as prize money to the horns of the bull. Later cloth strips and flowers replaced the coins.

The participants would wrestle with the bull to snatch the prize and either they would succeed or get thrown around by the virile bull. But in the process, not just the bull but also participants get severely injured, occasionally resulting in deaths.

It was the death of a *jallikattu* participant that led to the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI) to file a case in the Supreme Court (SC) based on cruelty to animals and public safety. According to AWBI, 43 people have lost their lives in *jallikattu* between 2008 and 2014. But protesters argue that

jallikattu is intrinsic to Tamil culture and agricultural economics; people far removed from it fail to understand its significance.

"Every community's culture is based on their production mode. *Jallikattu* is a part of the harvest celebration, Pongal. With modernization of agriculture, tractors have replaced bulls for ploughing. "Now the bull is only used for breeding," Sathish said.

"*Jallikattu* is an old tradition. We have written records of it till 2000 years back," claimed native bull breeder S. Manikandan from Silukanaikempatti village in Salem district. According to him, the *jallikattu* bulls are native breeds of Tamil Nadu which include the Kangayam, Pulikulam, Alambadi, Umlacherry and Malaimadu.

"For these native breeds we want to pass the strongest gene pool to the next generation. For that we need to identify an alpha bull that is the 'stud bull' which will be used for breeding," said Manikandan. The bull that wins is mated with other cows.

Manikandan denied that the animal was subjected to cruelty. "We spend months and years rearing these bulls. So we cannot use them in a fight or damage them. We are risking ourselves to provide bulls a ground to play and identify the alpha among them. That is *jallikattu*. It is a science-based tradition."

The SC has noted that often, before the game, people twist the bull's tail or force-feed alcohol to

get them agitated. They are also hurt during the game when people jump on them and traumatize them.

According to the bull breeder the cruelty shown to the bulls is not the norm but exception.

"When few thousand people participate, there are always foul players," Manikandan said. But there are monitoring bodies to disqualify them. Not more than one person is supposed to touch the bull at a time and it does not last more than a minute. The law should have made the monitoring system better than ban the game, said Manikandan.

According to him, if *jallikattu* is banned, farmers would not have any incentive to rear these bulls and the native breed will go extinct. It would also be a huge blow to the agricultural economy.

Jallikattu is not a black and white case and arguments for and against it are as strong. The sport has been accused of being casteist and macho as well.

"It has to be democratized to ensure the participation of Dalits, women and everyone. This struggle may have given an opening for that as people from all caste and class participated in the protest for right to *jallikattu*," says Sathish Kumar.

But the Dalit activist and convener of the Republican Party of India's TN wing said, "It's a protest of the rich people. We don't support the police violence against the protesters. But nor do we support the game and the protest as *jallikattu* excludes Dalits."

Jallikattu agitation blocks traffic in city

AIHIK SUR

The city came to a standstill as the week long and initially peaceful *Jallikattu* protests took a violent turn on January 23. Southern Railways cancelled MRTS train services and MTC buses citing security reasons putting students, office-goers and travellers in a jam. People taking the bus also faced difficulty in reaching the Chennai Mofussil Bus Terminus in Koyambedu.

"I took a train from Thiruvanniyur to Thiruvallikeni on Monday. It took 15 minutes to reach the station. There were probably around 100 people crammed into a bogie. It was very chaotic and it took 45 minutes exit the station," said Sumith, 21, a student at the National Institute of

Fashion Technology.

Various areas of South Chennai, including the East Coast Road, Velachery, Kamarajar Salai and parts of Anna Salai were closed to traffic. Prominent personalities such as Tamil Nadu Chief Minister O Panneerselvam's car to the secretariat got delayed and cricketer Ravichandra Ashwin had to use the metro because of the chaos on the streets.

"Young men on motorcycles created chaos on the roads nearby. Everything came to a standstill," said a shopkeeper on the Santhome High Road. Students from Thiyagarajar Government Arts College in Washermenpet, Dr. Ambedkar Government Arts College in Vyasarpadi, Kandasamy Naidu College for Men, Anna Nagar, Vivekananda College and

Loyola College joined the agitation which led to the closure of these colleges.

Schools in the city like Chettinad Vidyalayam, Sishya and DAV sent out messages to parents asking them to pick up their children from the school.

"On Monday, my son reached home very late. We were following the news on the television and were worried," said 35-year-old Aadarshini, a homemaker.

Employees from Tidel Park along the Rajiv Gandhi IT Expressway gathered on the pavement beside Thiruvanniyur MRTS to express solidarity with the protest. This resulted in traffic slowing down to a crawl. Some protesters volunteered to control traffic but found the task as hard as the policemen did.



Machines have replaced native bulls. PHOTO: AATHIRA P.

Reservations for women at IITs

ANANYA SRIVASTAVA

A panel set up by the Joint Admission Board in Delhi recommended that 20 per cent of the seats at the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) be reserved for girls till the problem of skewed sex ratio in the enrollments is rectified. Led by Professor Timothy Gonsalves, Director of IIT-Mandi, it was decided for the students who will appear in the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) for the admission into various engineering colleges.

In 2016-17 alone, only 8 per cent students at the institutes were female. Bhargavi Suryanarayan, an Integrated M.A. student in Humanities at IIT-Madras said, "The idea behind the move is good but reser-

ervations are not the way to go. It also depends on how they implement it, what with the existing reservation."

Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Other Backward Class candidates get 15, 7.5 and 27 per cent reservation.

Rahul Nath, a Humanities student at IIT-M said "I think it's a good move, mostly because the engineering departments in the IITs have a skewed sex ratio. But I don't know how students coming in through merit will feel about this as there are enough reservations in place already. I'm hoping this move will improve the enrolment rates by the targeted year (2020)."

Suryanarayan said that the Humanities department still had a bet-

ter ratio at 60:40 (3:2).

"But the main campus has only five women out of 100 students."

With such a skewed ratio, it becomes difficult for normal interactions, she says.

"Men don't know how to talk to women. There have been instances of stalking, inappropriate contact and harassment," she added.

But despite the issues Suryanarayan did not think reservation was the way to go.

"With reservation, only privileged women will get admissions. The move should instead expand the opportunities for women from underprivileged backgrounds. It doesn't guarantee such type of an inclusion."

There are also concerns that

women are getting a better deal.

"Already women don't pay fee for most government examinations like the Staff Selection Commission (SSC). Even in jobs, men think a woman has flirted with the interviewer to get the position. With reservation, men will think women are getting in only because of the crutch that this is," Suryanarayan explained.

"Reservation in coaching centers instead of the institutes would help more. That way in clearing JEE itself they would be deemed qualified for the IITs without inviting flak from the other sex," she added. Each IIT can choose the percentage of reservation up to 20% to increase the female enrolment, depending on its need.

Unexpected holidays hit school schedules

ANNU KAUSHIK

The closure of schools and colleges because of the protests in support of *jallikattu* has further added to a list of unexpected holidays in December and January. Schools were earlier shut down due to then Chief Minister Jayalalithaa's death and cyclone Vardah last December. City schools conduct final examinations in March and April and preparatory tests are conducted in the preceding months.

Abhijit Krishna, a student of Class 11 of DAV Gopalapuram said, "Due to holidays because of cyclone Vardah and Jayalalithaa's death, a lot of our practical exams were cancelled."

Both private and government schools were shut down for three days due to Jayalalithaa's death while Cyclone Vardah forced them to close for two to five days. Some schools closed for a day because of the *Jallikattu* protests. But schools around the city declared a half day on January 23 when the protests turned violent.

Shiva Ganesh, a student of Class 8 at the Gopalapuram Secondary School said that his Tamil exam was rescheduled when schools were closed because of

Jayalalithaa's death. He was unable to write his paper since the new schedule clashed with Sabarimala pilgrimage. While some schools maintained that the holidays didn't disrupt the schedule many had to cancel exams and arrange for extra classes to make up for the holidays.

An office staff at National Public School (NPS) said that the school had to reschedule exams but everything was managed.

However, the Principal of Savitriammal Oriental Higher Secondary School (SOHSS), Mylapore, N. Sudarshana admitted that the rescheduling of exams put pressure on students as their study leave was cut down. Unexpected holidays especially during the *jallikattu* protests created a panic like situation among parents.

Joseph Renneish, a student of Class 8 at St. Patrick's Higher Secondary School, Adyar, said that his parents came to pick him up from school on Monday in the third period even though his school had not declared a half day.

But some parents said that the situation was normal on January 23 and so they allowed their children to attend school.

Some principals said that due to such holidays many students took

'extended leave'. B Solomon, Principal, Kumaraiah Higher Secondary School said that the school witnessed a fall in attendance both on January 24 and in December after Vardah.

Some parents too felt that students got an excuse not to study because of the holidays. Ramalakshmi, whose son studies in Class 7 in SOHSS said that her son rarely did anything fruitful at home while his school was closed.

But not all parents were of the same view. Aarti S whose son studies in Class 4 at NPS said that she did not have any problem with the holidays as her son was in a junior class.

However, for higher secondary students especially those who were in standard 12, such unexpected holidays not only led to cancellation of their school exams but also their coaching classes.

Many of them are preparing for engineering and medical entrances as well as their board exams.

S. Santhiya, a student of Class 12 at DAV Gopalapuram said that her pre-boards and practice tests were rescheduled.

She said she had to miss her coaching classes to study for her school examinations.

Forced nationalism in the movie halls

ARADHANA KALIA

The Union Home Ministry's guidelines on how people with disabilities should show respect when the National Anthem is being played has come under fire.

The Ministry said, "Persons with locomotor disabilities and other wheel chair users, shall position themselves to the extent of maximum attentiveness and alertness... for example a wheelchair-bound person with disability shall make the wheelchair static, and position themselves maintaining the maximum possible alertness, physically... if the person with disability is on crutch, he/she shall become stable [non-mobile] to the extent of maximum alertness."

Many disability activists said that they were offended by the kind of language used in the guidelines. "Are we going to have something to measure the alertness of the people. For many disabled people, body movements are beyond their control. Who are you to say they should be absolutely still," said Vaidyanathan who works for Spinal India Foundation and is starting his NGO called The Ganga Trust.

"All these years whenever the

national anthem is played, I have tried to be as vertical as possible.

Everybody has his or her way of responding. How do you expect an 80 year old person who may not be disabled but is not able to stand to show respect to the anthem. Just because someone is not on a wheel chair, will he be attacked? If people have a prosthetic leg what about them? You take any disability and people will have issues. We as a country are going backwards. I would very strongly protest every aspect of this decision," he added.

In November, the Supreme Court had ordered that "all the cinema halls in India shall play the national anthem before the feature film starts and all present in the hall are obliged to stand up to show respect to the national anthem" as a part of their "sacred obligation".

While many applauded the SC's move, this decision also raised many eyebrows.

"I don't think there is any harm in standing for the national anthem in theatres. We used to sing in schools too so why not now? I think people have overreacted quite a bit on this decision," says Riya Mittal a student of SRM university.

Others said the order was a violation of civil liberties. "This respect is coerced," said Sidharth S



Cinema halls play the national anthem before the films start. | LIVEBHARATH.COM

Kumar (25) an IT professional.

"My patriotism for the country cannot and should not be decided by whether I stand for the National anthem in a movie hall or not."

Many cases of harassment and assault have been reported against those who didn't stand while the National Anthem played in movie halls. Within a month of this decision 12 people were arrested in Kerala at an International Film Festival for failing to follow the order. They were released on bail.

A case was registered against seven persons for disrespecting the National anthem at Kasi theatre in Chennai last month. This month three people were heckled by a mob at the Chennai International Film Festival.

Shreela Manohar, a student of Dr. Ambedkar Government Law College, her 60 year old mother and Bijon K, a graduate student were held for dishonoring the national anthem.

Shreela is a member of CPI(ML) RESIST and she was among the seven arrested in Chennai.

Says the 27 year old, "I did not stand up because it goes against my principles. I believe that you can't impose it on people. Whether or not we choose to stand is a matter of individual choice and it has to be respected."

People asked why this display of patriotism was only in the movie halls; the national anthem should also be played in offices, parliaments and courts too.

Koyambedu traders plan to go on strike

ANANAYA BANERJEE

The traders of the wholesale vegetable market at Koyambedu have threatened to go on an indefinite strike against the plan to allocate public space within their premises for setting up more shops, citing congestion as the primary reason.

Several members of the Koyambedu Vegetables, Fruits and Flowers Merchants Association have demanded that the plan to set up 29 more shops should be dropped.

A member of the association, P. Sukumar, said that this move could cause chaos because of the increase in footfall in the market.

"We have been urging the Market Management Committee to come up with measures to regulate traffic during peak hours. The encroachments cause hold ups on the road and make it difficult for us to operate out of this market," he said.

The market in Koyambedu was set up in 1996 after being relocated from Kothawalchavadi.

It was granted 3000 acres of land to accommodate 3000 shops and no more.

Two decades later, 600 more shops have cropped up outside the market, adding to the disarray of the vegetable market.

Dilip Ganeshan, who has been trading out of Koyambedu for the



The Koyambedu market...getting crowded.

THE HINDU

past ten years, denounces the proposal for more shops. "We are already struggling because of the space crunch. If more shops are allocated in the open space, we won't have a clean place to unload our goods," he says.

According to S. Chandran, a member of the Koyambedu Licensed Wholesale Merchants Association, "The actual problem here is the large number of vendors who don't have designated shops or licenses."

"They should be moved to the wholesale food grain market which is comparatively empty," he added.

Chandran feels these vendors could be provided with both licences and shops on relocation, putting an end to the problems to an extent.

Only last year, the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) had started a drive to evict unauthorised vendors from the wholesale market as they had occupied the area meant for dumping waste.

Yet, the woes of the traders kept piling up as the garbage in the market and the streets was not picked up as frequently as it should have been due to the encroaching structures in their midst.

"Our sales will drop if we don't keep the market clean. Our goods are perishable, we have no way to preserve them. We will be at a huge loss if our problems are not addressed immediately," says K. Raman, another wholesale trader in Koyambedu who seemed quite agitated with the scenario.

DEMONETIZATION AFTERMATH

Not ready yet for cashless transactions

ANANYA SRIVASTAVA

The demonetization drive has led to an increase in digital payments with people going online to pay for groceries and other needs.

The middle income group is adapting to a cashless society by going digital for paying Uber or Ola taxis (through e-wallets like PayTM and Ola Money), online movie tickets and restaurants. It is the transactions with street vendors and daily wage workers that involve cash.

Data provided by the Reserve Bank of India shows a sharp increase in the use of digital payments through National Electronics Funds Transfer (NEFT), Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD), and Unified Payment Interface (UPI) based electronic wallets that enable users to transfer money from their smartphones through multiple bank accounts.

But digital payments work only if the bank accounts are

operational.

As per a Pew survey, only 17 percent of the Indian population has a smartphone and 27 per cent have access to the internet.

So there are still people who deal in cash and are finding it difficult.

About the inconvenience caused to her elderly mother, Kaveri, a resident of Saidapet said, "Earlier when the limit was imposed on cash withdrawal, I couldn't send her the staple amount that I would every month through a friend's bank account. She has never used her own account and neither does she know how to withdraw money from an ATM." Cash here plays a major role for many like Kaveri's mother.

The decreasing cash transactions have devoured Vinay Lal's (35) ice cream business.

Lal who migrated to Chennai five years ago saved Rs 50,000, mostly in denominations of Rs 1000 and 500 to buy a new ice cream tricycle this year.

But those notes have become invalid now.

"I have worked too hard for this day, but now I have to beg for my own money."

"I have three children, two of whom go to school and if I don't start the business, it will be very hard for me to educate them," he added.

Many shops on Pantheon Road had operational Point of Sale (POS) machines to keep the business going. Mani Ratnam at Galaxy Manor Hotel in Saidapet said, "The POS machine gives me some amount as commission and I never found a need for PayTM. Even in my personal transactions I do not use it." Launched by National Payments Corporation of India, the UPI based BHIM app with a large backing of Prime Minister Narendra Modi was another push for digitization.

The app asks for the Aadhaar card number for payments but it is laden with security issues that expose users to fraud and misuse.

Loss for vendors

ADITHYA KUMAR

Even 50 days after demonetisation small vendors complain that their business is still sluggish and that it is a struggle for them.

"Even though I get change mostly I still am not able to do as much business as before," says Pandian who sells tender coconuts in Indira Nagar.

Even though he gets new stock of coconuts every three days, a lot of them go unsold.

Most of these small vendors say that they don't have the change when a customer has a Rs.2000 note.

"In my business I earn about Rs.2000 a month. I have never seen a Rs.2000 note but then when people come with even a Rs.100 or Rs.150, I am still short of change as the business has been bad lately," says Kattavarayan who runs a flower shop in Besant Nagar on 7th Avenue.

A lot of people prefer not to spend too much as they fear that they would have to stand in long queues to get cash. This has deterred a lot of people from going to smaller shops that only transact

in cash. Sixty-nine year old Babu who sells snacks near the Vailankanni Church in Besant Nagar points to the Murugan Idli Shop across the road.

"Earlier every morning the place was so crowded; now there are fewer people than before. Business is not what it was," he says.

A lot of these vendors go to the banks when they require change and at times they are turned away as banks too don't have the cash.

The 500 rupee note is still rare and Rs 100 notes are even more rare. A lot of shops have turned to digital payments but then small vendors don't have a proper bank account and so all their transactions are in cash which makes it even more difficult for them to conduct day to day business.

However, those with bank accounts, or a close relative who may have a bank account, are able to get through with a moderate amount of business.

"I go to the banks twice a month. The queue is short and I get the notes I need," says 26 year old Kumar who sells palm jaggery in Kasturba Nagar.

No more tracks for cycles on OMR



The cycle track opposite Kasturba Nagar MRTS. | APARNA D

APARNA DHANASEKHAR

Chennai's sultry weather is as discouraging as its tracks for cyclists in the city to hop onto their bikes every morning.

The 4 km cycle track that starts near Kasturba Gandhi Nagar MRTS station and runs till the Thorapakkam Panchayat is replete with pits.

The only indication that it is a cycle track is the embossed cycle mark on the manhole covers. Such is the condition that it is hardly recognized as a cycle track.

The IT Expressway, home to a number of technology offices has over 2000 cycle enthusiasts. The number of exclusive cycle stores on this route is another indicator.

We are Chennai Cycling Group (WCCG) is an active club of IT professionals with regular ride chapters that alone boasts around 1500 members.

A WCCG member, K.Senthil explains, "The surface is rough and uneven. It slows me down so I take the road for its smooth surface".

The tracks with a separate cycleway and footway are demarcated by dual colored tiles. With no signs of cycling boards or poles, most do not identify this as a track. The way frequently used by motorists and cab drivers is known as "service road".

The way is most often used to park vehicles taking up half the space or sometimes the entire footpath.

The track is used as a two-way lane by vehicles whereas it is a one-way lane for cyclists.

"I prefer the road. I don't have to stop every time a vehicle comes in the opposite direction. The road is a better option," says Gnanavel, a security guard at a hospital in Adyar.

The track is neglected by cyclists because the stretch is either encroached by construction workers dumping the waste or vendors with push carts.

"Nobody is aware that this is a cycle track. Even so, how do you stop them?," asks Thangavel a police officer at the Taramani Police Booth that monitors the Tidel Park area.

Vehicles are parked under the foot-over bridges throughout the day, another officer explains. There are seven foot over bridges between these points.

Private institutes like National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) have blocked the stretch with large cement blocks preventing the public from using the path outside its building.

The tracks along the Old Mahabalipuram Road (OMR) have no signs indicating that it is a cycle track. They are used by small shops and auto drivers to park their vehicles. It has turned out to be parking space for customers visiting the shops.

"It is not possible to stop them (motorists or shop owners). Strict implementation of regulation is necessary," the police officer adds.

Parking on the tracks is a major problem for the small vendors. "There is no space to park. Where else do we park our vehicles?," asks Ramesh owner of a small tea shop on OMR.

"There is lack of awareness. People are not even aware that the track is meant for cyclists," Senthil explains.

Besides making the track unsafe, trees, construction waste and vehicles parked make the track narrower.

"After the construction, the maintenance of the tracks is the need of the hour," he adds.

Chennai may face a thirsty summer

ARITRY DAS

After a delay of at least five days, water from the Krishna River finally reached Chennai on January 20 from Andhra Pradesh, said a senior PWD official in charge of Krishna Water Supply project.

Andhra Pradesh first released the water on January 9. Later the PWD had noted the water released by AP from Kandaleru reservoir noticeably decreased and did not reach the Poondi reservoir within the usual time.

"The Krishna water supply was interrupted for a while last week due to Andhra Pradesh farmers illegally using it on the way.

Generally it takes five days for the water to reach Poondi. But because of the disruption it is taking longer now," said the PWD official.

Because of the failure of North-East Monsoon, which contributes to more than half of Chennai's total rainfall, the water levels are low in the reservoirs that feed the city. "As against the total storage capacity of 198, 384 Thousand Million Cubic feet in 15 major irrigation reservoirs in the state, the water available as on 31.12.2016 is only

25,742 TMC ft," Chief Minister O Panneerselvam told PTI on January 16th.

Panneerselvam has also said all districts of Tamil Nadu were drought-hit due to the crisis created by the failure of both North-East and South-West monsoons. He requested the Central Government to give the state a grant of Rs. 39,565 crore for relief measures.

The Krishna water would provide some relief to Chennai. Panneerselvam had written to AP chief minister Chandrababu Naidu to personally intervene in the matter. Chennai's water supply depended on the Krishna to a large extent till July.

According to the PWD official, "Till now the Krishna project has given us around 1TMC of water. We are supposed to get 12 TMC in one month." Given that they can only give a reliable data on the water received after a certain period, PWD still does not have full confidence on the continuation of this water supply.

"If water supply is interrupted from Andhra Pradesh again, we'll have to cut the supply on our end," said the official.

Another cause behind the city's sole dependency on rain and the



A man drinking water from the Poondi reservoir, 60 kms away from Chennai. | THE HINDU

Krishna River is the receding water bodies as a result of encroachment and pollution.

"Many lakes and wetlands in Chennai have been the victims of rapid development. Buildings are being built on marshlands and lake beds destroying their ecology. The residents also suffer as these encroached lands were the worst affected during last year's floods,"

said Arun Subramaniam, founder of the environmental conservation group EFI (Environmental Foundation of India).

He also said that the rivers such as the Couom or the Adyar run through Chennai, but are too polluted to be used by the city dwellers.

Rama Venugopal, a resident of Mogappair said, "Even being in the

heart of the city, water supply is not fine. Moreover since January the supply has been inconsistent. The water is also not good and hence cannot be used for drinking purposes. We have to get ours from private tankers."

It was hard for the poorer people in this situation and they had to make do with MetroWater supply, she further added.

Songs at the rly station

Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha curtain-raiser piques interest of travellers

AATHIRA PERINCHERY

Chennai: On an unlikely stage - Platform Nine at the Central Railway Station - the melodious rendering of Indian songs by more than 60 students piqued the interest of travellers, as the event spread the word about the upcoming Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha at Besant Nagar.

The curtain-raiser for the Vizha (which was born in 2015 when Carnatic musician T. M. Krishna and environmental activist Nityanand Jayaraman felt the need to make art more inclusive and take it to underprivileged sections of the city) included performances by Nalanda Way's Chennai Children's Choir (CCC) and Dr. Sudha Raja's Sargam Choir.

With only the humble dhapali (a local tambourine) for accompaniment, the 23-member CCC sang haunting fishing folksongs and of the beauty of the colourful world.

Singing of the rustic countryside and flocks of goats, their music came alive with goat bleats and the almost-forgotten tongue clicks of herders calling to their animals, all rhythmically interspersed in the songs by the children themselves.

The Sargam Choir's young singers stuck to more familiar patriotic and cultural songs, as the beats of a tabla accompanied their music.

How did it feel performing at the railway station? "It was very different, but I enjoyed it," says Harsini, a second year engineering



The Chennai Children's Choir singing at the Central Railway Station AATHIRA P

student who is part of the Sargam Choir.

The audience of surprised motley travellers, many pausing with their suitcases to listen to the students sing, was an unusual sight. "I've never seen this before," says Beena M. of Perambur, who was at the station to travel to her hometown in Kerala.

"This is great, we need more initiatives like these."

Chennaiite Karthik Gowrishankaran is not too sure though. "It could be a slight hindrance to the public because they cannot hear the train announcements. Maybe that is something that could be sorted. But it is a good concept."

"This time the Vizha is hoping to take music to public spaces, and this event is part of that," says Veronica Angel, a volunteer and representative of the Vizha.

"These children are the future of

India. We thought we should encourage them and also help musician T. M. Krishna in his work," says Mr. U. Umashankar, the Station Master at Chennai Central Railway Station.

Saying that it was an 'excellent rendition of songs', Divisional Railway Manager Anupam Sharma announced that they hope to "continue with this in some way or the other", as the curtains closed on the event.

As word spreads about the Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha, its out-of-the-box ideas are not just taking music to the public, but also helping students perform on novel and unusual stages.

The Chennai Children's Choir: Auto driver N. Annamalai proudly watches his 12-year-old son Praveen singing as part of the Chennai Children's Choir at the Central Railway Station.

"I am very happy to see my son perform," he says. "He enjoys this a

great deal."

For parents like Annamalai - who cannot afford to give their children such opportunities - the Chennai Children's Choir which teaches music to children for free, is a dream come true. And the children enjoy it immensely too.

"The songs are tough, but easy because of the way they teach us," says Praveen, who has been singing with the Choir for a year now and says he loves it. "We also like it because we get to learn songs of different languages - there's Hindi, Rajasthani, Bengali, Telugu, Gujarati. We love all the songs."

"Our dream was to start a choir by picking students from disadvantaged sections, and make them perform on big stages," says Sriram V. Ayer, founder of NalandaWay Foundation, a charitable trust which aims to engage with children from underprivileged sections of society.

Where have the Tibetans all gone?

APARNA DHANASEKAR

"It's been 20 years since, I met them last in 1996," Rinchen Tashin talks about his parents.

A Tibetan, Tashin came to India when he was 14 years old. "My parents told me then that they may not see me in this life time."

Tashin is one of the many Tibetans who fled the country in search of a "better life".

"I walked for a month, to cross the Himalayas. I had to come through Nepal to reach India."

The UN Refugee camp in Nepal would give the required papers to reach India, he explained. Every Tibetan here has a Registration Certificate, which should be renewed every five years.

The 35 year old completed his Bachelors and Masters in English Literature in Loyola College here after his schooling in Dharamshala.

"There was a place in Choolaimedu filled with Tibetans, it was called a Tibetan village. They have all moved."

According to the Demographic Survey of Tibetans in Exile 2009 by the Planning Commission of Central Tibetan Administration there are approximately 94,203 Tibetans in India, while compared to 1,01,242 in the early 20th century. A number of Tibetan students come down from Dharamshala to

Chennai for their under graduation. This number has decreased over the time.

"The Tibetan government recently changed its policies on scholarship. The scholarship is given only for the top ten colleges, for which certain percentage of marks is required," Tashin explains. When asked if there is any support from the government Tashin says, "We need to ask for support to get. There is no organisation big enough to take up such things".

There is only one organisation for Tibetans in Chennai, Tibetan Students' Association of Madras. The association was formally founded in 1993. The organisation has no official residence and meets in public spaces. The last survey showing the population of Tibetans in India is the 2009 survey.

"There maybe around 250 Tibetans in Chennai today."

Most often Tibetans cannot contact their relatives or family back in their country.

"Last year my friend's parents were taken into custody by the Chinese Government as they traced her calls during the New Year", Tashin adds. "We keep in touch through the messenger chat." The Chinese government also traces messages from other applications.

A paradise for them

AMBIKA RAJA

Republic Day celebrations at Paradise Home is not a mere occasion for hoisting the flag or having a sumptuous meal. It's a chance for the students to meet their parents after several months of separation, and a day to showcase their talents.

As for Mallika Gopal, founder of the school, these are the moments that she looks forward to. The 4kg calliper splint bound to her left leg does not seem to bother her she walks among her students, distributing the sweets. The 57 year-old is concerned only about their happiness.

"I have been handicapped since 1977. But my experience taught me that I was luckier than a lot of people. This was what urged me to start a place dedicated to the service of mentally challenged people."

'Paradise Home', a school for mentally challenged students, was built in the early 1990s by Mallika Gopal and her husband R.V. Gopal. The institute today houses 47 students of all age groups. There is a team of physiotherapists, special education teachers and speech therapists, who cater to the daily needs of the students and provide them with basic education. However, Mallika's journey as a child from a humble beginnings to the founder of an institute, has not been a cakewalk.

"At the age of 16 I fell ill with high fever. My parents refused to take me to the doctor and insisted that I could be cured at home. The fever however shot up. After 10 days, I was taken to the Government hospital in Royapettah. By then my body was completely



Mallika Gopal with her students AMBIKA R

weak. I couldn't even stand up and soon I fell unconscious."

After being continuously treated in the hospital for four months, her family decided to discharge her without heeding the suggestions of the doctor. Mallika, who was still unable to walk, was carried all the way back to her village in Arakkonam. Subsequently she was taken to herbal doctors, astrologers and local physicians.

However her condition aggravated and on the 15th day, as she tried to stand up with assistance, her left thigh bone broke.

"My life was a nightmare after that. For four years I was admitted in the Government General Hospital Chennai. I couldn't stand up, I was mentally weak and I had lost all my strength. I had to undergo several operations. I must have a

seen an operation theatre a lot more than a movie theatre."

Recollecting the worst days of her childhood, Mallika's eyes began to well up. Subramaniam, one of her students, rushed towards her and said "Amma, why are you crying? We don't want you to cry."

For them, she was not just a saviour, she was a mother.

In the following years she slowly gained strength and was able to walk with the support of a calliper splint. Determined to get a job of her own, she joined the Life Help Centre for physically challenged people.

"After my marriage, I decided that I wanted to do something different. I realised that although I lacked education, I was cut out to do something greater. In those days mentally challenged people were not accepted in the society. There were only a few schools for them and these took care of children under 15 years only. I decided that I would start a place of my own that looks after of people of all ages."

With the help of her husband and family, she bought a place in Madippakam and opened 'Paradise Home' The school soon gained recognition and shifted to the present building in Kovalam.

Currently she stays close to the school with her husband, two children and parents.

So what else do you like to do apart from spending time with your students? "I love travelling. My husband has taken me to several places in the North, including Kasi. There was a time I couldn't even dream of going beyond Chennai. I'm glad that stage is over"

Photo exhibition for wildlife enthusiasts

AMBIKA RAJA

The Shola forests in the Western Ghats, the Velar river that originates in the Shevaroy Hills in Tamil Nadu, the Chilika lake in Odisha and the Zangskar river in Ladakh are among the natural landmarks featured in a photo exhibition titled 'The Planet and You' here.

Organised by the American Center of the US consulate from January 23 to February 03, the exhibition features images taken by the award winning photographer and film maker K. Ramnath Chandrasekhar.

Captured during his journey to various parts of India, these 17 photographs are presented with the background history and a description of the distinctiveness of the place.

"Photography has always been my passion. As a child, I used to go to scrub jungles, ponds and lakes to catch snakes and birds. This imbibed in me a close connection with the nature," says Chandrasekhar, who is working as a mentor at the Headstart International School.

Through the picture titled 'Spider at the backyard', the photographer illustrates that the best way "to retain connection with the nature is to see the wildlife in the backyard".

Chandrasekhar, who has worked as an assistant producer and editor, runs an initiative called Youth for Conservation that creates informal spaces for students to engage with nature.

The photographs are lifelike and astounding. Feels as if I'm being transported to these places" says M.S. Sushmita, a visitor.

According to Sujata Srinivasan, media advisor at the US Consulate, the exhibition would be accompanied by Chandrasekhar's documentary which will showcase success stories relating to wildlife conservation.

Chandrasekhar, a winner of the South Asia Sanctuary Wildlife Award (2011), believes that children must be coached to interact with the nature during their formative years.

"Daily conservation practices like composting and terrace farming should be taught. Only then can we, as a society, contribute towards nature conservation."



Fulfilling the children's dreams...

ANKITA B

Murals for morals

ANKITA BOSE

A group of volunteers at Chemmenchery concluded their two month long programme named 'Murals for Morals', an initiative to paint the walls of schools and crèches for the enhanced learning of children.

The programme was an enterprise of a small group named AWARE, founded by Sandhiyan Thilagavathy. The group deals with women and child rights and broadly seeks to promote positive thinking among deprived masses.

"Murals for Morals" included lessons in painting on the walls in bright colours. The programme which gathered volunteers through Facebook and other platforms aimed to cover the walls with alphabets, numbers, comic characters, anecdotes and pictures.

It started in November 2016 and slowly gathered pace until all the 6 crèches and 2 schools had their walls filled with colours.

As a part of the same project, children in the crèches were asked to paint their dreams and ambitions on a sheet. Later, the volunteers transferred these sheets to their parents.

"We want the parents to realize their children's dreams. Most parents here seem to ignore their children's dreams or are averse to the idea of it. We want them to know that their children possess dreams and it is their duty to fulfil them," said Sandhiyan.

A group of 18-20 volunteers were present on

the concluding day of the programme.

"We are transforming our crèche and school walls into walls of dreams that give hope to the entire community to support their children's dreams in all possible ways," he added.

AWARE mainly campaigns via social media networks through hashtags and is currently under the process of registering itself as an official NGO. It is an enterprise that works in Chemmenchery extensively.

Sandhiyan started AWARE as an individual endeavour in 2013. He initially worked as an engineer in Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) but left the position to shift to a Corporate Social Responsibility Consultant in 2015 to dedicate himself to his dream-AWARE. His fellow colleagues joined him to make AWARE a success.

"I am very happy to be a part of such an initiative which is so simple yet innovative and effective," said Aishwarya, a Cognizant employee who volunteered for the project.

"Children are the future of our society. They are fresh minds that are uncorrupted and hence change could be initiated only through children," said Kannamai, a TCS employee who has been actively associated with AWARE.

A group of children from the area were brought in to show the newly painted walls

"I never imagined my crèche could look like this," said Parmasivam, a 12 year old boy who is a regular in the crèche.

Helping burn survivors start afresh

ARADHANA KALIA

Burn victims are being given a second chance at life by working in Chennai's Writer's café which opened last month. The café has collaborated with International Foundation for Crime Prevention and Victim Care (PCVC) a Chennai based NGO to train and employ several burn survivors in their café.

Thirty-year-old Asma had reached a point in her life wherein her suffering became so unbearable that she decided to end her life by self-immolation.

"I was trapped in a bad marriage and faced abuse from my husband who used to come home drunk," she says.

Having survived the burns Asma was

helped by the PCVC to start her life afresh and now she is a proud part of the staff at Writer's café.

Currently seven women are a part of the first batch. Before they were hired as permanent employees of the café, they had to undergo five months of training at Winners Bakery in Alwarpet. The bakery is another CSR project of restaurateur M. Mahadevan who also owns the Writer's Café.

Since the café's menu is inspired by cuisine from Switzerland, the women were trained for three months by a Swiss chef Silke Stadler in skills required for making authentic dishes.

Karan Manavalan, the chef and manager says, "The working environment here is very friendly and I have seen the posi-

tive change the women have gone through. Working here and interacting with the customers have made them more confident."

The women work in all departments be it hot kitchen, bakery and confectionary and they also have cross training.

PCVC has played a major role in the lives of the burn survivors. They have been associated with about 150 women who survived their injuries and these women mostly belong to the economically weaker section of society, says Prasanna Gettu, CEO of PCVC.

"A majority of the survivors are victims of domestic violence. If they survive the burns we take them to the healing centre in Anna Nagar where they receive physiotherapy," she says.

The NGO helps the women start their life afresh but it is quite difficult for them as the victims are very conscious about their scars and burns and the way society looks at them.

"Working in this café has made them self sufficient; it has also helped to boost their self esteem and I am sure it will help to sensitize people", says Prasanna.

They still keep in contact with all the women and the women can stop working if they don't like the job or it doesn't suit their interest.

"Working here has provided me with a new lease of life. It is helped me to forget the old problems and I have learnt how to make dishes which I had never known about," says Komala another survivor who works at the café.



One of the survivors working at Writers cafe

ARADHANA K