



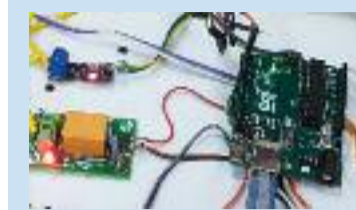
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Experts differ on Neduvasal Strike disrupts bank operations

SOHINI GHOSH
SHILAJIT MITRA

Experts have questioned the commonly held fears that the Neduvasal hydrocarbons project in Pudukkottai district will damage the environment, lead to loss of fertile agricultural land and cause groundwater contamination.

Many fear the commonly used methods of fracking which involves injecting high pressure liquid to extract oil or gas will have its damaging effects last for decades. The 31 oil and gas fields discovered in the on-shore part of Cauvery Basin have been categorised as 'small oil fields.'

Prakhar Sarkar, an engineer working with Shell says, "Fracking is usually not employed for such small and mature oil fields. One rather goes for directional drilling or conventional drilling which has no such repercussions. However, the technique of extraction may shift to fracking when the oil produce reduces considerably. That would be another 15-20 years in the future though."

Most of India's oil comes from fields which are dying, left with roughly another five to six years of life. As volatile crude oil prices urges India to reduce its dependency on imports, the country needs every drop of oil that it can extract.

Dr. R. R. Krishnamurthy, head of the department of Applied Geology



Protestors against the Neduvasal project |

THE TIMES OF INDIA

in Madras University, says, "It is not the drilling methods that are toxic for the environment but rather regulatory boards such as Directorate-General of Mines Safety who overlook every possible clause of the Mines Act, 1952."

"The Pollution Control Board is a joke. The most important step post-drilling is capping of the oil rigs so as to restrict toxic drilling fluids from contaminating the water and ground," he said.

Environmental activist, Nityanand Jayaram has actively opposed the project citing rampant air pollution if methane is

extracted. He has also expressed his fears of blowouts – an uncontrolled release of oil or gas from the wells.

Both these fears seem unfounded, according to experts. The methane produced from agricultural waste and methane gas emitted by cows and other livestock have a more significant impact on air pollution. The methane extraction from coal-beds is optimised obviously for profitability of the organisation.

Prerna Kaura, field engineer at Reliance says, "Blowouts are extremely uncommon. This is perhaps the only factor which sees

extreme adherence to safety requirements. Blowout preventer is a valve that eases the pressure on gas release which is periodically checked for maintenance in all plants across India."

While post-drilling maintenance and rehabilitation has shown a poor record in the past, especially when handled by corporations such as Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), the processes involved in drilling are not damaging, agrees Sarkar. This calls for a more robust balance and checks rather than canning projects.

Meanwhile four IT employees

were arrested on February 28 at Tidel Park IT-sector area for trying to stage a protest against the Neduvasal project.

Three of the IT employees involved worked for Cisco systems, an American multinational company. The fourth participant worked for Indian Post. However, the four were released from the Taramani Police Station lock-up the same night.

Over the week, a large number of students, Chennai-based IT employees and celebrities like director R Pandiraj and Thangar Bachan have visited Neduvasal and engaged with the protesters. The protesters plan to surrender Aadhaar and ration cards, form a human chain from Neduvasal to Pudukkottai, hoist black flags and also light traditional lamps at all houses in the villages.

On February 15, the Central Government approved Karnataka-based Gem Laboratories' project to extract hydrocarbons from the Neduvasal oilfields.

Criticising the Central Government's decision, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Edappadi K Palaniswami told the Express News Service, "At Neduvasal, the Centre should not implement the hydrocarbon project without consulting the farmers as well as the State government." Palaniswami has conveyed his discontent to Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a meeting.

SHOMIK SEN
BHATTACHARJEE

Chennai residents were hit by the nationwide one-day bank strike called by the United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU) on February 28. Major public sector banks including State Bank of India (SBI) and Punjab National Bank (PNB) downed their shutters.

Bank employees gathered at Valluvarkottam holding placards reading "Strengthen public sector banks" and "Say No to bad loans". AIBEA General Secretary C.H. Venkatachalam told PTI, "Clearing services have been impacted. Financial instruments worth Rs. 19,000 crore has been held up."

A representative of AIBOA's Chennai office said "27 Public Sector banks have joined together in protest today across all districts in the state apart from regional and rural banks. Private banks benefit if we downsize on employees, hence they chose to stay away."

The UFBU which is an umbrella body for nine bank unions called the strike after the Indian Banks Association (IBA) did not agree to the union demands in a conciliation meeting before the Chief Labour Commissioner on February 21. The demands made by the union include accountability of executives in mounting bad loans and pay for overtime during

demonstration.

While cheque clearances were among the major issues faced by people, a large number of Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) around T Nagar, Egmore and Rajaji Salai ran out of cash by 3 pm. SBI's e-corners which allow for cheque and cash deposits also saw huge crowds.

Ashok, an employee at a furniture outlet in Nungambakkam, said, "Today is the last day of the month and I need to get these cheques through. I was told that clearances would be difficult because all the employees are on strike. I have to wait till tomorrow."

An Axis Bank employee at Adyar said, "We're fully operational today and we have received our pay for overtime during demonisation. Cheque clearances and money transfers from public banks are not going through because of the strike, but operations should be normal tomorrow."

Raghavan, a lawyer who was depositing cash at the State Bank e-corner at Rajaji Salai, said, "Gone are the days where bank strikes affected customers directly. Now most transfers are done online through net banking. The apps have also helped simplify the process."

The strike also impacted government treasury transactions and money market operations.



People travelling on the footboard mindless of the danger

| SANJANA GANESH

A deadly risk

SANJANA GANESH

Footboard travelling on the Electronic Multiple Unit (EMU) and Mass Rapid Transport System (MRTS) services can be prevented only by regular monitoring and creating awareness, said P Vijaykumar, Superintendent of Government Railway Police (GRP).

After the February 23 accident near St. Thomas Mount railway station, where three were killed and four were injured while travelling on a train footboard, the GRP and the Railway Protection Force (RPF) are taking safety precautions to prevent further accidents.

A probe by the Commissioner of Railway Safety (CRS), Southern Region, K A Manoharan is under way.

"We have organised awareness programmes with RPF advising the passengers not to resort to such dangerous modes of travel. Despite repeated instructions, these incidences continue to take place," said Vijaykumar.

In 2016, the number of deaths reported due to trespass, suicide, and falling down in railway property came down to 1,297

against the 1,410 in 2015.

Defaulters rarely pay the price. Last year only 20 commuters were fined for footboard travel and 10 for jaywalking every day despite numbers being evidently higher along the suburban line.

Footboard travellers however have complaints of their own.

Between 9 am and 2 pm, there is only one train every 30 to 40 minutes between Tambaram and Chengalpet.

Slow trains stop at all intermediate stations and there are only two fast services from Chengalpet.

V. Sudharshan Karthik, a passenger, said school children often played games while boarding and alighting the train.

"They usually run with the train along the entire platform and mount it exactly as it leaves the station. It is terrible."

School children at Mandaveli station who were travelling on the footboard dismissed pleas urging to move inside the coach. "I was not standing on the edge," said a young boy who did not wish to be named.

A senior GRP official said, "Public negligence is the primary problem. No amount of punishment is a deterrent."

Ola-Uber drivers form unions

SAURYA SENGUPTA

Drivers of app-based taxi services like Ola and Uber have decided to form a union against discriminatory employment practices by the companies and alleged ill-treatment from customers.

The union, All Cab Driver's Welfare Association, has been set up in order to present collective demands before their employers. Previously, no such arrangement existed, and employees had to approach the company hierarchies on a personal level.

After similar strikes in Bangalore, Mumbai and Delhi, the move comes as yet another setback for these services, which have been the target of the ire of their employees, as well as governments.

While drivers have complained of constantly changing fares, and

minimal employment rights, state governments across the country have claimed that 'surge pricing', the pricing system where fares increase with demand, is illegal, and an unfair trade practice.

Thirumaal Vallagan, an Ola driver, says that the incentive system has changed completely and drivers now have to work longer hours, and drive longer distances as a result.

"Previously, we were given a bonus depending on the number of rides we accepted in a day. But now, it is dependent on the total fares we are able to accumulate in a day. This is difficult because it is not up to the driver anymore, as he may not get longer trips, and we also have to drive for longer hours every day."

Drivers also hope the union will be able to assert their rights against alleged exploitation and misbehaviour by patrons.

"Often, we have to ferry customers who are inebriated, and they either misbehave with us, or damage our taxis by vomiting inside them," says Vikas Yadav, an Uber driver.

However, some customers have disagreed with this claim, and blamed the drivers. Kiran, a resident of Guindy, said drivers often try under-handed ploys to make a fast buck, and are always ill-behaved.

"Today, I booked an Uber cab, and the driver began the trip without even reaching my location! The entire amount got deducted from my online wallet, and I did not even manage to get another taxi."

Ananya Dixit who lives near Chennai Central station claims that these taxis take advantage of Chennai's poor public transport system. "Uber and Ola felt like a ray of hope against the transport

system, but their surge prices are horrible, and drivers cannot navigate properly."

Karan Jain, an employee at Uber's Chennai office in Guindy says their drivers are not employed by the company, and so the company has no liability towards them.

"There is a proper system in place if drivers are unhappy. A redressal committee is appointed, and they speak to the driver concerned. If they are still not placated after the meeting, they are free to leave the partnership."

The anger against companies like Uber and Ola are not limited to Chennai, and are part of a larger international phenomenon, where drivers are unhappy with their employers. Recently, Uber CEO Trevor Kalanick was spotted in an intense argument with a driver, who claimed Kalanick's policies had made him bankrupt.

Pepsi, Coke go off the shelves

PRIYANKA P

Many shops and eateries in Chennai stopped selling soft drinks of international brands on March 1 after the Tamil Nadu Traders Association called for a state-wide boycott on the drinks following the Jallikattu protests in January.

Some of the Jallikattu protestors brought up the issue of multinational companies like Coca-Cola and PepsiCo using state water to make their drinks, especially as Tamil Nadu is facing a drought. Immediately after this, the traders association called for the boycott and spent a month creating awareness among traders and shopkeepers about the ill-effects of these drinks.

Popular restaurant chains like Pizza Hut and Dominos have also stopped selling Pepsi and Coca-Cola.

"Earlier, if we got a profit of Rs 51,000 a month, Rs 25,000 used to come from the sale of Coca-Cola. But, we have stopped selling it after we got orders from higher-ups," said Manoj M, store manager at Pizza Hut, Adyar.

Some are now planning to come up with new ideas for drinks. "We have already introduced lemonade in our store," Manoj adds.



Soft drinks at a shop in Adyar |

PRIYANKA PARTHASARATHI

Owners of small-scale businesses are now stocking up locally-made drinks.

"I am trying to finish the Coke and Pepsi stocks I have. However, we have already brought bottles of 'Bovonto'. Its sales have gone up in the last two months," said Kumar Swami, owner of Aisuwariya Hot Chips in Adyar.

Swami also said that many youngsters had come up to his shop and asked him to stop selling drinks of international brands after the protests.

The press release also said that these companies provided direct employment to 2,000 families in Tamil Nadu and sustain the interests of thousands of farmers, by procuring agri-produce.

Meanwhile, the Madurai bench of the Madras High Court has dismissed a Public Interest Litigation seeking to prevent the makers of Coca-Cola and Pepsi from drawing water from the Thamarabarani river for their bottling plant in Gangaikondan village in Tirunelveli district.

PIL in HC to remove Amma's photos

SHREYA RAMAN

A Public Interest Litigation (PIL) has been filed in the Madras High Court to remove late former Chief Minister Jayalalithaa's photos and name from the state government schemes and government offices.

The PIL was filed by J Anbazhagan, a Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) MLA.

He stated the February 14 Supreme Court verdict that convicted Jayalalithaa in the Disproportionate Assets case as the grounds for the PIL.

TKS Elangovan, DMK spokesperson said, "Jayalalithaa was convicted by the SC. So to keep her as the face of state schemes or to keep her photos in government offices is wrong."

VP Kalairajan, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) MLA from T Nagar said, "As far as the name is concerned, they are 'Amma' schemes, not Puratchi Thalaivi Jayalalithaa schemes. 'Amma' is just mother. For us, she is the Amma. And as for the photos, she has been the Chief Minister of this state for four terms, she deserves that respect."

"All this is just DMK's ploy to destroy our party. They have tried it many times and like every time, they won't succeed," he added.

P Gurunathan, a High Court Advocate said, "A similar petition was filed by an earlier DMK government. They failed then. Now the grounds are different. Jayalalithaa has been convicted by the SC. This is the only thing that distinguishes this writ petition. Otherwise, it is not wrong to have a former CM's photos in government offices. It is a form of respect. However, the case is different now. All of us are eagerly waiting for the verdict."

"Every person is equal under the law. So, a convicted person should not be adorned," he added.

Amarnath, an AIADMK supporter said, "Yes, Amma took money, but who in power does not. It is natural. She did so much for the people, yet all people see is the money thing. It's not right."

Fee-hike not a 'big' issue New TNPCB measures for biomedical waste

SHREYAS UGBADE

Law students in the city have mixed opinions about the recent hike in the application fees for the All India Bar Examination (AIBE), conducted by the Bar Council of India (BCI).

The revised fee is Rs 3,650. "Last year, I paid Rs 2,750 [for the exam]. The increase in fee is close to a thousand, which is quite high. Even NEET charges only Rs 1,000. Our annual college fee is Rs 500," said Vijay Krishna, a post-graduate student of Dr Ambedkar Law College, adjacent to the premises of the Madras High Court. However, not everyone shared his concern.

"It is not that every year they [BCI] increase the fee. Poor students who are good in academics can make up when they start practising," said Aparna, a second year law student who was sitting with colleagues inside the campus. "[It is] not a big issue," was the group chorus.

Gopinath, a final year student was not aware of the revision. His colleague, Kingsley Johnson, was aware but raised no objections. For Johnson, it was a "small cost" for



Second-year students of law

SHREYAS U.

getting enrolled 'permanently' in the Bar. "After studying hard for three years, even if the fee is high, we have to pay [it]," said a student filling his form outside the Tamil Nadu Bar Council (TNBC).

TNBS Secretary, V Dakshinamoorthy, said the State bar council had nothing to do with the issue as the BCI decided the fee structure.

"A share [of the enrolment fees] goes to the Advocates Welfare Fund. Once enrolled, it is for a lifetime. They [BCI] give a certificate and an ID card. There is so much procedure involved. When an advocate passes away, his/her family

gets Rs 5 lakh or Rs 10 lakh from the Bar Council. So it is sort of an insurance plan," said a faculty who refused to be identified as the matter pertained to the BCI.

Even the "legality" of the AIBE has been challenged in the Supreme Court. However, the faculty and the students of the law college felt the examination did serve a significant purpose.

"The government of India is trying to improve the quality of legal education. In India, there has been a proliferation of private law colleges other than the National Law Schools. Due to this, many

fresh graduates, when they become advocates do not even know the basics. A committee, set up after a ruling of the Supreme Court, suggested that an exam on only the basics [of law] be conducted. This is reasonable," said the faculty.

"Our profession is like that of the doctors. Quality has to be ensured," said Vijay Krishna.

Ramachandran, a student of fourth year said, "Degree does not make you an advocate. It only makes you eligible for the Bar council exam. Our future is thus precariously left to the whims of the Bar Council of India."

S.MURALIKRISHNA

The Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB) has introduced regulatory measures for the treatment and management of biomedical wastes generated in hospitals. The new set of measures requires the hospitals in the State to comply with Biomedical Waste Management Rules, 2016.

"The TNPCB directed all hospitals to keep records of the quantum of biomedical waste disposed to the Common Biomedical Waste Treatment Facility (CBWTF)," said Sugandhi Sundararajan, Public Relations Manager, Apollo Hospitals, Greaves Road.

"Earlier, a private biowaste management company managed our hospital wastes but now they've (TNPCB) made it compulsory for hospitals to dispose it off to the CBWTF," said Sugandhi.

All the hospitals have signed agreements with the Common Biomedical Waste Treatment Facilities (CBMWTF)

The CBMWTF now has autocla-

vers, shredders, incinerators and secured land fill facilities.

"The biowastes generated at the hospital are segregated into four categories and only then do we dispose it off to CBMWTF," she said.

"The clinical waste, infectious waste, sharp waste and bottles waste produced come up to 1300, 700, 40 and 150 kgs respectively," she added.

Last year, it had come to the TNPCB's notice that some of the city hospitals were selling biowastes to outside agencies to be marketed again.

Such a practice was not only illegal but also posed a serious threat to healthcare standards in the state. This had let the TNPCB to the formulate the Biomedical Waste Management Rules of 2016.

"We have kept accurate records of the biowaste produced in the city and we've been adhering to all rules set forth by TNPCB," said a senior official at Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital, Park Town.

Disinfectant records, pretreat-

ment of liquid waste and records on biomedical waste are up to date here, she added.

A private waste management company GJ Multiclave (India) Pvt. Ltd, although, still treats biowastes for around 10 hospitals in the city.

"We scientifically process infectious waste, hazardous waste and radioactive materials and we always meet the standards set up by the government" said Karthik, an employee at GJ Multiclave, Adyar.

"From hospitals, we receive hypodermic needles, syringes, scalpels, discarded medicines and cytotoxic drugs," he said.

The company, authorized by TNPCB, also treats and safely disposes of materials contaminated with blood, used tubes, medical syringes and catheters.

The company has now introduced a new bar coding system for biomedical bags.

Standardization of the recycling process as well as regular supervision becomes imperative in the situation.

Amma canteen drains coffers

S.MURALIKRISHNA

Allocation of funds to Amma Canteens (Unavagam) is depleting the Municipal Corporation exchequer greatly, according to Corporation revenue officials.

"The expenditure on the canteens only in Chennai easily crosses Rs. 100 crores per year whereas the corresponding profits are incomparably low" said Srinivasan, a revenue department employee under Amma Unavagam section.

Amma Canteens, though a social welfare measure, is also having adversarial effects on other civic schemes and projects as funds have to be diverted to meet the canteen's monthly requirements, added Srinivasan.

The estimated profit from all the canteens under the Chennai Corporation reaches only up to Rs. 45 crores this year and this is approximately one third of the total expenditure, said Srinivasan.

"For the 377 canteens under 15 corporation zones, the Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation (TNCS) provides rice at Re 1 per kg whereas dal and oil are supplied at standard market prices" said Chandra, cashier at the Amma Unavagam near Besant Nagar bus depot.

The Amma canteens, even with TNCS's rice subsidy, are proving

financially unsustainable as the price at which food is sold is nowhere near the estimated expenditure.

At the canteens, idlis are served at Re 1, sambar and curry-leaf rice at Rs.5 and curd rice at Rs. 3.

According to Chandra, even with 750 people coming in daily, the canteen's profit comes up to only Rs. 3500 a day.

Another point cited as the reason for the Chennai Corporation's increased expenditure is the corporation's absolute reliance on the Triplicane Urban Cooperative Society (TUCS) for supplying vegetables, cooking gas and other provisions. The TUCS supplies to all the canteens in the city.

The corporation, however, owes the TUCS about Rs. 4 crores on gas and provision services (excluding past tabs) and almost Rs. 10 lakhs on vegetables.

For a corporation that is already under budget deficit, a social investment like Amma canteen is thus proving a financial burden for the exchequer as well as a hindrance to other corporation projects.

"However, the allocation of funds for the canteens is a priority as the poorer sections benefit widely from the programme," said Srinivasan.

'Ability to collect taxes coming down'

REVATI KRISHNA

The Union Budget 2017 "is a preparatory tax structure in a pre-election mode" said Mr. Parthasarathi Shome, Chairman, International Tax Research and Analysis Foundation at a seminar organised by the Madras Institute of Development Studies on February 27.

The seminar was chaired by renowned economists who expressed their opinions on the multiple facets of the Union Budget.

The speakers, including Shome, weighed the pros and cons of the 2017 with sufficient scrutiny. Shome pointed to the absurdity of in the income tax forms wherein the government asked for information on people's wealth but did not impose tax on it.

Dr. S. Narayan, former Finance Secretary, said the ability of the government to collect taxes was coming down.

Economic activity level at the central government level had come down severely considering there is "devolution of 40 per cent power to the states."

Mr. T.C.A. Srinivasan Raghavan, Consulting Editor, Business Standard thinks the idea of keeping six Goods and Services Tax rates in India is just an exhibition of "India's Brahmanical mystery".

Raghavan's scepticism is much in line with the ongoing criticism



Left to right) S Narayan, Parthasarathi Shome, KL Krishna and U. Shankar

REVATI K.

directed towards the Finance Ministry as to whether their motivations are entirely objective.

He called the budget an institution of political policy and not an institution of economic policy. It was mainly targeted towards poli-

cies that might garner votes.

Dr. Soumya Kanti Ghosh, Group Chief Economic Advisor, State Bank of India, Mumbai, said taxes had been reduced and more avenues for government expenditure with respect to social welfare sche-

mes had been introduced.

Schemes such as 'Mission Antyodaya', 'SWAYAM' (virtual platform for online courses for the youth), increased allocation for women and children among others were introduced, he said.

However, he remained sceptical about long-term benefits.

Dr. D.K. Pant, Chief Economist, India Ratings, New Delhi, who is an established chartered accountant by profession criticised the Rs 72000-crore disinvestment program of the government.

The disinvestment program suggested in the budget would be detrimental to the employment levels in the country.

Dr. Suresh Babu, IIT Madras, challenged the government's claims of an overall increase in capital expenditure and said that it only came from the road and transport ministry.

The fact that the central government had allotted only Rs 10000 crore for recapitalisation of banks was repeatedly questioned by Babu.

According to Babu, the Central Government had allotted Rs 3600 crore for education but Rs 3000 crore from that was for 23 IITs and 31 NITs; Rs 75 crore for the Prime Minister's Research Fellowship which is again given to only 1000 B.tech students; Rs 35 crore is kept aside for some fellowship for 1000 M.Tech students from IITs.

Therefore, he pointed out, 87 per cent of the funds was kept aside for the IITs.

Such a skewed development proposed in the education sector this year was going to be very detrimental for the country's future.

After monsoon failure Chennai faces massive water crisis

PRIYA SHRIVASTAVA AND SIDDESH RAUT

The failure of the North East Monsoon combined with the falling levels in the reservoirs that feed Chennai have forced residents to buy water from tankers, thus raising alarm about the weather conditions that dominate Chennai's atmosphere.

The situation is especially bad in areas like Adyar, Velachery, Guindy and Taramani. "We have been getting water only once a week now whereas, we used to receive at least once in every two or three days," said Basanth K, a resident of Adyar.

The storage level in the four principal reservoirs, Poondi, Cholavaram, Red Hills and Chembarambakkam, is not more than 15

per cent of their capacity.

Of the total capacity of 11,057 mcf [million cubic feet], the lakes have only 1,708 mcf of water as on today. On the same day last year, there was 7,955 mcf of water.

Poondi with a total capacity of 3231 mcf has only 789 mcf of storage.

Cholavaram has 26 mcf of storage out of a capacity of 881 mcf.

Red Hills has 716 out of 3300 and Chembarambakkam has 177 out of 3645, according to sources at the Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply & Sewerage Board. (CMWSSB)

"We are making sure that water is supplied to all residents and that there is uninterrupted water supply in all 23 filling points across the state," said a Metro Water official. "As of now almost 800 to 830 mil-

lion litres of water is being supplied to the city every day," he added.

As part of the solution, the CMWSSB has begun studying the feasibility of tapping surface water from abandoned quarries across Chennai and its suburbs, confirmed officials.

With an initiative by the Metro Water Board, 23 quarries in Maangadu, three in Thirunermalai and another three in Nanmangalam are to be tested for clean water with research undertaken by the Environment and Geology department of MGR Polytechnic College and the Civil Polytechnic Department of Anna University.

The delay of in supply from the Krishna river from Andhra Pradesh, which flows into the Poondi reservoir, has added to the problem. Meanwhile weathermen have

predicted that Tamil Nadu will get showers in the first week of March.

According to data compiled by Weather enthusiast and blogger Pradeep John, Tamil Nadu got 166.9 mm of rainfall, whereas Chennai got 137.9 mm in March 2008. This was the largest recorded rainfall in the state during March.

John, a regular blogger of the weather patterns since 2010, was however, not too hopeful for Chennai this year.

"I am not expecting too much for Chennai. Even a 10-20 mm rainfall in Chennai will make me happy. It will not bring any inflows into the dams of Chennai. It is the best we can hope for, given the current circumstances."

John said the cause for March 2008 rainfall was because the cool



Poondi reservoir short of water levels |

PRIYA S.

waters in Central Pacific basin (called the La Nina phenomenon) were receding. It was also the time when the Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO), an oceanic-atmospheric phenomenon which affects weather activities across the globe, moved into the basin. The first week of March of 2017 would see the same phenomenon recurring across the state.

"It isn't a surprise that rains are going to follow this and it's just a matter of time," he says.

According to John, the areas of rainfall depend on the movement of the upcoming system (mostly a Low Pressure Area).

"All of South TN areas, (Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi, South Interior Tamil Nadu, Delta regions, Periyar belt, Dindigul, Tri-

chy, Madurai, Central and South Coastal Tamil Nadu will get rains," he said

Western Tamil Nadu areas like Coimbatore, Nilgiris and Tiruppur will also get rain after system comes into Kanyakumari, he adds.

"The challenge before CMWSSB is thus a multi-dimensional one and a major issue for residents of Chennai."

| Reservoir | Full Storage | Level on Feb 25 | % storage |
|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|-----------|
| Chembarambakkam | 3645 | 173 | 5 |
| Red Hills | 3300 | 676 | 20 |
| Poondi | 3231 | 835 | 26 |
| Cholavaram | 881 | 17 | 2 |

Water storage levels in various reservoirs | SIDDESH R.

'Fast-track' passports through post offices

SHREYAS UBGADE

Although the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) announced its plan to deliver passports through post offices, officials at the Chennai Head Post Office say they are yet to receive the "official communication" to implement the project.

"We were expecting the orders from the Postal Directorate [Delhi] on February 28. There was no official communication," said Mr Kumarakrishnan, Assistant Postmaster General, Chennai Circle.

According to the information available on the MEA website, the MEA and the Department of Posts (DoP) had set up Post Office Passport Seva Kendras (POPSKs) at Mysuru in Karnataka and Dahod in Gujarat in January as a pilot project. After its success, the MEA decided to start POPSKs at 56 locations across the country.

"Once the centres start functioning, the passport services will be available in Vellore and Salem. At present, people have to travel to Chennai and Coimbatore [to get the passports]," said Mr



The Head Post Office on the Mount road | SHREYAS U

Kumarakrishnan.

"The DoP will provide space, furniture and man power required for the project," he added.

Alok Ozha, Chief Postmaster General, Head Post Office, said the aim of the initiative was to deliver passport services "at the door of citizens" across the country.

"The Ministry of External

grant statutory powers under the Passport Act to the Postmasters, which will empower them to issue passports," said Ozha.

The Passport Act regulates the issuing of passports and travel documents.

"This will revolutionize the process of acquiring passports. It will be hassle free," he said.

The move was different from earlier attempts to deliver passports efficiently.

"In the attempts that were made earlier, only interview slots and dates could be fixed at the Regional Passport Offices. But, for the interview, people had to travel to Chennai. Now, they can get everything done in Vellore and Salem," said Ozha.

"This will save time and cost of travel," he added.

Gopi, a passport agent on the Mount Road said, "For the last 25 years I have been in this trade. It will not have any impact on my business."

"The initiative may take a while to pick up. Most of the people are not even aware of the documents required for application [for passports]," he added.

Affairs (MEA) wants to decentralize the provision of passport services, but does not have enough outlets," said Ozha.

"The postal service is the most decentralized pan-India network under the command of the Director General of Posts, PMO. With 1,55,000 post offices, there is one for every three villages. The MEA will

Life beyond poetry : P. Babu

RUPALI PANGTEY

When Prabhakaran Babu came in 1985 to Chennai from Thiruvallur, little did he know that he would soon be contributing his bit in Tamil Literature where he would be awarded Tamizh Nidhi Award. He received this award on February 27 for his contribution to Tamil Literature for the past 25 years.

A post-graduate in Chemistry from Presidency College, Madras University, Prabhakaran has been interested in poetry since the age of 14.

"I have always been a voracious reader; I was quite influenced by social issues and philosophies. It is my teachers who would encourage me to read and write further," he



Prabhakaran Babu | RUPALI P

says. However, as fate would have had it, Prabhakaran completed his education and started working in

Bhabha Atomic Research Centre. However, long hours and disconnect from the family lead him to leave his job. He soon joined a bank.

Today he is a retired former zonal manager from the Bank of India. Till last year he was the zonal manager at Kerala.

"You need to find time to do things one enjoys. I don't believe in leisure activities like watching television, or going to cinema theatre. The idea is to keep oneself busy," he said.

When he recast Thiruvalluvar's 'Thirukkural' from ancient Tamil language to contemporary Tamil, a first in Tamil literature, he wanted to keep the language of the text as close to the general public as much

as possible.

Influenced by Sangam literature, he believes that in today's times it is necessary to have a cultural identity such as Tamil identity, which the Tamil society tried to recapture especially during Jallikattu protests.

However, he believes that to write poetry, experiences of rest of the country during his transfers regarding have been quite vital for him to understand cultures.

With a family of four, where his daughter is a lecturer and son is an acoustic engineer, Prabhakaran continues to keep himself busy.

Besides being a prose and poetry writer, he has reviewed books in Dinamalar, a regional newspaper.

'Give-up' subsidy drive on to optimize PDS reach

SHREYA RAMAN

The State Government has begun a 'give-up' subsidy drive in the Public Distribution System (PDS) to optimize the reach of the PDS system and eliminate bogus billing.

The drive enables people who don't use their subsidy to give it up through a simple online process.

S Madhumati, Commissioner of the Civil Supplies and Consumer Protection Department said, "In Tamil Nadu, we have a Universal PDS. Everyone irrespective of their economic and social background is entitled to the commodities from the fair price shops."

The drive is a result of the implementation of the National Food Security Act, 2013. The Act seeks to provide food and nutritional security to targeted priority households. Based on the Act, the Indian Government has

fixed the coverage in Tamil Nadu at 62.55 per cent of the households in rural areas and 37.79 per cent in urban areas.

According to the Act, the State Government has to provide the people covered with additional subsidies or monetary compensation. Madhumati said, "We are not interested in providing them with money, so we are giving them further subsidies."

According to a State Government Order dated October 27, the monthly offtake of rice under the PDS is 3.23 lakh metric tonnes while the allotment is 2.96 lakh metric tonnes. The deficit was being met through additional allocation from the Central Government. However, since July last year, the additional allocation has stopped.

The increased demand because of the Act and the lack of additional

allocation has increased the pressure on the PDS.

"The drive is an attempt to relieve the PDS of this pressure and to enable the distribution of the essential commodities to the people who actually need them," Madhumati said.

The drive also aims to reduce bogus billing in the PDS.

Madhumati said, "Many times, people who don't really need the subsidy, buy the rice to make food for their pets or give to their servants and some even sell it. This is called bogus billing and it is really unfair for the poor."

The drive however doesn't seem to have enough takers. Krishnan CV, a resident of Chinmaya Nagar said, "I doubt many people know about this drive, I did not. And even if they had, no one will actually take time out to give up the subsidy. No one cares enough."

Libraries to be revamped

PRIYANKA PARTHASARTHI

Tamil Nadu public libraries will soon see children's corners, e-library facilities, and new categories of books, said Dr. S Kannapan, Director of Public Libraries, here on February 28.

Kannapan was speaking at an event organised by the Indian Public Library Movement (IPLM) in collaboration with the National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) foundation and the M.S Swaminath Research foundation to strengthen public libraries as knowledge and learning centres in India.

Kannapan said that Tamil Nadu now had over 9055 public libraries in rural areas and at least one library in all its 32 districts.

Referring to the various facilities provided at the Anna Centenary Library, including an 'own book' reading corner, Kannapan said that Tamil Nadu should be a model to other states.

Highlighting the problems public libraries face these days, Srikanth Sinha, CEO of NASSCOM said



PRIYANKA P

that the government should provide books that catered to people's interests in specific communities.

"People sitting in Delhi send across books to districts across India not knowing what these people like to read," he added.

Sinha also emphasised the importance of an informed librarian in guiding the readers and the need for a book retirement policy.

"I have visited libraries where books that nobody has borrowed

for over 25 years still occupy shelf space. Instead new books could be brought in," he added.

Shubangi Sharma, Executive Director of the IPLM, said that the libraries would be tying up with schools to provide books that catered to the interests of students, and collaborate with the British Library to offer English classes.

"IPLM has already started working in 100 plus districts in 20-25 states across India," she added.

The event also saw the launch of 'm-ice' - Mobile Information for Communication, an application that gets together with public libraries to provide information about books, resource persons and institutions across various categories.

Speaking at the event, M.S. Swaminathan said it was nice that the event was held on the National Science Day and that IPLM was a significant development.

Remembering Rukmini Devi

RUPALI PANGTEY

Born on February 29, Kalakshetra Foundation celebrated Bharatnatyam revivalist, Rukmini Devi Arundale's birth anniversary by organizing its annual dance and music festival named 'Remembering Rukmini Devi' here, on Tuesday.

Archived photographs of Rukmini Devi were put on display for the visitors. Some were rare photographs from her life.

With a thick attendance of the older generation, alumni and students of Kalakshetra Foundation, a dance drama called Siri Purandara was performed by post graduate students and faculty members on the second day of the five day festival.

"She is one of those Bharatnatyam dancers who have been responsible for making it respectable. She brought a moment of renaissance. Her entry into this profession enabled young women to take this as a hobby or as a profession," said an elderly woman in her seventies who was once a Bharatnatyam dancer. Shradha, a student said, "The story

has been adapted into a dance performance for the first time, even I haven't seen it."

This drama deals with Siri Purandara, a Carnatic singer, and his journey from being a diamond merchant, Nayaka, to a Haridasa, one who worships Krishna, and the obstacles he had to face in order to become one.

The recitation of the drama was in a mix of Tamil and Kannada. Hari Padmanabhan who played Nayaka portrayed the journey of a miserly diamond merchant to a Haridas through swift movement of hands quite well. Meanwhile, it was Aryamba, a post graduate student who impressed the audience with her meaningful expressions as Sarawati, Nayaka's wife. The perfect synchronization of feet and hands with the ebb and flow of music charmed the audience.

Also present at the event was the foundation's chairman, N. Gopalaswami who launched the Sixth edition of Kalakshetra journal along with Lakshmi Vishwanathan, a Bharatnatyam dancer herself.



Rukmini Devi



The story of 'Siri purandara' was performed at the festival | RUPALI P

- * Rukmini Devi established Bharatnatyam as a mainstream art when it was seen as a dance of 'devadasis'.
- * She was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1956.
- * After the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of Kalakshetra, her health failed; she passed away on February 24, 1986.
- * The Sangeet Natak Akademi Puraskar (Akademi Award) was awarded to her in 1967 the highest recognition given to practicing artists, by the Sangeet Natak Akademi.

India's oldest bookstore gears up for a modern makeover

SHILAJIT MITRA

In tow with its sister shop in Bangalore, Higginbothams on Chennai's Mount Road - India's oldest bookstore - is gearing up for a year-long renovation process that involves a complete makeover of the heritage structure and advanced digitization.

Presently, the colonial structure's front entrance is blocked by construction work for the city's new underground metro service.

Visitors are ushered into the grand interior from a side-door and directed away from the ground floor's far end where work on fresh floor-tiling is underway.

Gautam Venkataramani, director of Higginbotham's and grandson of the founder S Anantharamakrishnan said, "The Metro work, along with the e-commerce segment catching hold of the country, has meant that the store hasn't been very active in the last few years. Once the Metro project is completed, we are get full-time into revamping the shop."

Explaining the modus operandi of the renovation work, he said, "We've paid special attention to the heritage aspect of the building, retaining the original exterior structure and fully restoring the damage caused by wear and tear over the years."



Higginbothams..all set for a makeover |

SHILAJIT M

The owners, catching up with changing times, are keen on extending the 'non-books' sections of the shop.

This would include a brand new cubicle for video-games and international television shows.

The stationeries and gifts section will be further extended to accommodate electronics and accessories.

The children's section would include toys, school gear and a fully furnished art material section.

A major concern for renovators is the 15,000 square-foot heritage ceiling. Chennai's heavy rains have worn out the 173-year-old Greek palladium structure, causing

damage to the iron-and-wood beams.

Last year, rain water dripped through pores in the ceiling and damaged the top floor of the bookstore. The real challenge lies in restoring the roof without closing down the shop for visitors, which would affect sales.

"The digitization process will begin with the installation of a customer-friendly integrated software that would help locate titles and authors in a jiffy. Browsing the shelves would be easier for visitors and reduce the workload on floor assistants," said K Sudharshan, the head cashier of Higginbothams.

NATIONAL SCIENCE DAY

Innovations on display

PRIYA SHRIVASTAVA

An artificially constructed wetland made by the students of MAM College of Engineering and Technology emerged as the winner at Innawah, an innovation competition organized by the Pan IIT Alumni Leadership Series (PALS) Team on the IIT Madras campus here on Tuesday.

Started in 2014, the competition had participants from various local engineering colleges in the Chennai and Trichy-Salem region exhibiting their technological innovations this year.

"This is an event where students are encouraged to display their various innovations that are socially, technologically relevant and for all practical purposes," said Alamelu N, a core team member of PALS.

The team from MAMCET had created an artificial wetland for the decoloration of water without using any electricity or chemicals. It has only the micron-filter running on electricity. Compared to other electrical treatments of water, the wetland is cost-effective. Water goes through various stages of Coagulant, Paddy Straw and Charcoal, which remove the colour in water. Next, the Eichhornia crassipes [water hyacinth] absorbs the heavy metals present in the water.

"Making remedies using plants is an emerging concept in biology and the treated water that comes out of this wetland is suitable for domestic purpose," said N. Venkatesan of MAMCET.

"Our idea came from the theme of this year's competition, which was to conserve natural energy. So we thought of using natural sources, all reusable and locally available, to treat textile effluents in a natural way," said P. Kiruthiga of MAMCET.

The Loyola Icam College of Engineering and Technology, the first runner up at the exhibition, presented an irrigation controller using microcontrollers and sensors assisted by android application

control. This system works by a soil moisture sensor to calculate the values of moisture in the soil and another set of sensors to detect the local temperature.

"If brought under practical usage, this device would help the farmers in more efficient irrigation," said Kiran Lalwani of LICET. An android application gives alerts on the status of the soil and an on and off switch allows the farmer to water the plants.

The second runner up was a product, Jal Seemak, made by students of KCG College of Technology. Their tagline 'Zap the Tap' is a call to eliminate the use of faucets. "Jal Seemak is a hygienic tissue, which is 60% water and which will not generate any waste, as it is 100% degradable," said Sreevatsan V of KCG College. These wipers can be used to wash hands and will replace taps and finger bowls.

Made by the students of Agni College of Technology, Swarabots, is inspired by how the bees and the ants work. It is a sophisticated design of multiple robots that coordinate among themselves and are able to perform certain agricultural operations autonomously.

"This is the kind of robotic technology that can be a substitute for manpower, and it will solve problems like migration of labourers and shortage of day-workers for farmers," said Balaji S, a student of the college.

The bots comprise of cultivating mechanisms like ploughing, spraying, drilling and seeding. Several air-borne bots will monitor the growth period of crops and detect the state of leaves, whether healthy or decayed. The status of operations will reach the farmers through mobile phones.

Another exhibit was the Smart Energy Audit Device (SEAD) used for energy audit in residential buildings that monitors the electricity used by household appliances. Besides optimizing the consumption of energy, it detects the CO2 emission levels.



A scientist demonstrating magnetic levitation | SOHINI G

'Basic science will give global leverage to the nation'

SOHINI GHOSH

Even if 10-15 per cent of the youth pursue basic science in this country, it will give the country a better leverage globally, according to Dr. B. Chandrasekaran, Director of CSIR- Central Leather Research Institute, here.

Addressing hundreds of college students who had gathered to participate in the National Science Day celebrations at CSIR-CLRI, Chandrasekaran emphasized the importance of sustainable development through science in an increasingly degrading and unstable world.

It was of utmost importance that the academia community came together. Barriers of science, arts and commerce would become insignificant when working for humanity, he added.

Experiments such as isolation of DNA, which sees its usage in forensic sciences, were demonstrated and the students seemed enthralled to see the texts from books taking shape in front of their eyes. Magnetic levitation which has trains moving at the speed of aircraft in Japan held teachers and students in awe as a magnet was shown levitating in the air after liquid nitrogen was poured over a piece of ceramic, allowing superconductivity in the material, working on the same principle as the trains do.

All laboratories were thrown

open to the public and laboratory assistants remained busy, enthusiastically answering questions about various apparatus and natural phenomenon

Dr.S. Easwaramoorthy, a scientist in the Chemistry department, said, "This an attempt to allow students to take a glimpse of the practical applications. Students often lose interest as they are unable to correlate their textbook content to its applications in real life."

Agreeing with Dr. Easwaramoorthy, a second-year student of Zoology and Botany of Ethiraj College Batul Khan commented, "Our lab work in the curriculum is often substandard and doesn't interest most of us. After a point our only motivation to work is grades. I will look up more on agarose gel electrophoresis because the demonstration here was really interesting."

In his address to students and teachers Dr. P. Ramamoorthi, Professor of Madras University, hailed C V Raman's innovations, on whose birthday National Science Day is celebrated, as pathbreaking. He rued the failure of subsequent Indian scientists in achieving anything close to what he did, despite the resources at their disposal. However he added, "The baton has passed on to the next generation and I believe they can create wonders as they're among the sharpest and brightest.

Decoding life puzzles

SIDDHESH RAUT

Cryptography starts to become a fatal problem when it creates a false sense of security, according to Dr. Amritanshu Prasad, a professor at the Institute of Mathematical Sciences.

Speaking at the 'Science at the Sabha' held at the Music Academy, Prasad explained the basic principles, evolution and the challenges faced by cryptography: the science of the coded message.

A key breakthrough in cryptography was when Polish mathematician Marian Rejewski and Bletchly Park scientist, Alan Turing cracked the German's Enigma Machine in the Second World War. The scientists' efforts stopped the War four years earlier; saving an estimated fifteen to twenty million lives.

Prasad explained how scientists Whitfield Diffie and Martin Hellman laid the foundation for modern encryption today in a 1976 paper. Here, data is first encoded by converting in the form of very large prime numbers. Manually

decoding of the numbers becomes highly time consuming. This, Dr. Prasad attests, is the reason why messages sent on the internet through whatsapp and E-commerce transactions are considered safe.

"Normally, by today's standards, using the 2048 encryption code, it would take days, perhaps longer, for the fastest super-computers to decode a single message," he says, but warned the audience against complacency.

"Recent advancements in Number Theory, is creating new methods that allow for faster methods of solving clock arithmetic," he said.

Dr. S.Krishnaswamy from Institute of Mathematical Sciences said human beings were nothing but "a bag of molecules" and that understanding molecules was key towards understanding biological life processes.

He explained how Nobel-winning scientists such as Dorothy Hodgkin, Linus Pauling among others studied the structure of insulin (the sugar processing

hormone, the lack of which causes diabetes), the nature of bonding in molecules and the structure of Deoxyribo-Nucleic-Acid (DNA) respectively.

Inspired by their work, Dr.G.N.Ramachandran, joined the Department of Physics at the University of Madras in 1952 as its head. He published a paper along with Dr.Gopinath Karta which explained the molecular structure of Collagen, a protein which makes up 30 per cent of every mammal.

This work led Dr.Ramachandran to create a yard-stick measurement for the possibilities in which proteins can form bonds. The result was the Ramachandran Plot which is responsible for cataloguing 1, 20,000 validated protein structures.

"Dr.Ramachandran was considered a Nobel-worthy scientist. It is a shame that he was not awarded the prize," said Dr.Krishnaswamy.

"We need more people to ask the right questions in this field," he said.

Genome-sequencing earning its stripes

SANJANA GANESH

India's tiger population would increase only if wildlife reserves provide human-free paths for the big cat's movement, said Uma Ramakrishnan, associate professor from the National Centre of Biological Sciences (NCBS).

She was speaking at the Music Academy as part of the 'Science at the Sabha' event hosted by Institute of Mathematical Sciences (IMSc) on Sunday.

Ramakrishnan said tigers often experienced depression due to inbreeding in sanctuaries such as Ranthambore National Park and due to urbanization. The expansion of National Highway 7 (NH7) connecting the Pench reserve and Kanha would result in loss of the tiger corridor. This would mean

that less genetic variation would take place further leading to extinction.

In her research, the speaker studied the fecal DNA of tigers to detect the decrease in numbers. "In the last 200 years, the tiger population has been reduced by 90 per cent. The British bounty hunted the national animal before independence. A large number still continues to be the victim of poaching," she said.

Though the feline population was increasing it was slow. Genome sequencing must be done effectively to change the status quo.

The transition from genomes to galaxies dominated the second part of the lecture series.

Senior Professor Yashwant Gupta from National Centre for

Radio Astrophysics, Pune said that the human understanding of the universe was only five per cent of what lay beyond the skies.

Elements such as dark matter and dark energy together amounts to nearly 95 per cent of the unknown. "The scientific mind is yet to uncover dark energy. We only know that it exists due to its gravitational force," he said.

Gupta spoke about the lack of extra terrestrial beings and the recent discovery of seven Earth-like exoplanets.

After explaining the basics of astronomy through the evolution of the telescope, he went on to discuss India's contribution to space. He lauded the role of Astrosat, India's first dedicated multi-wavelength space observatory.

T Nagar to Times Square?

SAURYA SENGUPTA

Shoppers and shopkeepers at T.Nagar were treated to the final trial-run of the proposed 'Pedestrian Plaza', before the project gets under way later this year.

The trial, held for the second time, was used to assess public response, as well infrastructural feasibility before any confirmation was made, the Greater Chennai Corporation claimed.

The structure is set to stretch for 1.4 km, from Panagal Park to Anna Salai, and will make space for eateries, greenery, and public performances.

Either side of the Plaza will be left free for two-wheelers and

buses. Cars will not be allowed into the road.

However, the two-wheeler lanes will be used to ply battery-operated vehicles for the elderly, and physically challenged.

However, not all seems rosy for the Corporation's attempt to turn "T.Nagar into Times Square." Several residents of the locality, and traders expressed their doubts about the project, and its impact on their daily lives.

V. Karunakaran, a resident of Cress Park Street, lauded the efforts, but claimed that the traffic situation might make the project untenable.

"I'm not quite sure how they'll manage to divert all these cars from Thyagaraya Road. The road used to

be very congested, but that was because all other arterial roads are too narrow."

Shopkeepers too are unhappy with the arrangement.

Janardhan, a corn-seller with a stall in front of a Ramraj Cotton store, said he not only feared eviction, but was uncertain about whether he would be able to relocate to another viable location.

"We are used to a lot of daily business here because bikers, pedestrians, and people from cars stop in front of our shops. If they have to travel from elsewhere, our business will take a hit," he said.

Janardhan said shopkeepers should have been consulted before such decisions were taken.

Some visitors did seem to warm

up to the idea of a more permanent, and organised structure.

Vinitha, a mother of two, claimed her children enjoyed the activities which were planned during the final trial.

"Life-size snakes and ladders boards were put up, as well stalls where children could sit and draw. It will become a relief if those became permanent."

Corporation Commissioner D Karthikeyan said a part of the road was converted into a pedestrian zone for first trial run on November 20, 2016. A similar approach was adopted again to check the design.

Both the State and Central governments have released funds for this project aimed at promoting non-motorised transport.

100 years later, we remember our soldiers

Farewell My Indian Soldier is a film that recalls how 140,000 Indian soldiers fought in France and Belgium during World War I

SOHINI GHOSH

Indian soldiers numbering up to 140,000 battled extreme cold weather and religious divide too on the Western Front of France and Belgium in 1914 during the First World War.

The travails of the soldiers who fought a war that was never their own and suffered wounds thousands of miles from home have been reconstructed on the silver screen by Vijay Singh nearly a 100 years later in his docu-drama Farewell My Indian Soldier (FMIS).

The film does not merely revive the memory of the Indian soldiers. It documents the problems that plagued the troops in the barracks. For instance there were nine kitchens to cater to the different dietary requirements of all.

Despite being co-produced by Rajya Sabha TV, it was the French Defence Ministry that had premiered the docu-drama and not the Indian Defence Ministry in July 2016, Vijay Singh reminisced to reiterate his point of how the idea of nation-state was a misleading concept that people held onto.

Away from home, these brave hearts often grew close on furlough, to French women - hostesses or nurses, discarding strong colonial influences. Children borne from such relationships were isolated and mothers were shunned. However the French women had a lasting impression on the Indian soldiers as they wrote back home with renewed outlook on education



Vijay Singh in conversation with Tishani Doshi | SAURYA S

and dissolution of caste and class divides.

The docu-drama painstakingly brings out the ordeal of the young soldiers using nearly 600 letters,

100 year-old songs and several archival documents, videos and photographs that covered the pain and void suffered by the families of nearly 10,000 soldiers who never returned. History comes alive in the testimonies of massacre, regret, awe, pain and longing.

FMIS, the English version of Mademoiselle France Pleure (Miss France is in Tears) was supported by the French Embassy and saw widespread appreciation by French viewers.

The docu-drama starred PalomaCoquant as a woman whose great-great-grandfather was an Indian soldier. It was screened at

Alliance Francaise followed by a discussion moderated by Tishani Doshi, with Vijay Singh.

Vijay Singh was asked about the apparent rise of extreme-right wing in France with Marie Le Pen emerging as a strong contender in the French Presidential elections.

"It is not Marie Le Pen or Trump who worry me. It is the people who support them. What are nations? Did Tughlaq imagine his nation before he invaded? Or Timur? Geographical territories are being redefined but it is our time to defend humanity now. We did it then and we need to do it now. Democracy is not given. It is an everyday fight which we often forget about," Vijay Singh said.

The Indian soldiers had battled at Ypres and Neuve Chapelle during WW I.

Storytelling with a purpose

SHOMIK SEN BHATTACHARJEE

It is an exciting time to be a South Asian today with Indians heading multinational corporations such as Google, Pepsi and Microsoft, according to stand-up comedian and filmmaker Aman Ali.

Addressing students at the Asian College of Journalism Ali stressed the importance of storytelling in these exciting times.

The professional comedian who has a keen interest in documenting the lives of Muslims around the globe said, "My objective in making these stories is not to combat extremism or to change opinion about Muslims but to tell human stories. I want Muslims to be appreciated as humans and as normal people."

Speaking about the stigma that Muslims faced in the US in the 'Donald Trump era' he added, "We want to stand up human rights and



Aman Ali has donned many hats | SHOMIK S

justice for everyone. We certainly have our differences in ideologies but at the end of the day we all care about the fundamentals like having a well-paying job, good life for our kids and happy relationships."

Highlighting the need for journalists to report carefully on sensitive issues regarding religion,

caste and race he spoke against the need for politicians and government spokespersons to feed media houses with news. Instead he urged journalists to spend time with people to understand the ground reality.

"Sensationalising and covering news which looks better on the

television as well as fake news is a huge problem in journalism today and this is not only an American phenomenon but applies worldwide," said Ali.

Reflecting upon the trend regarding stand-up comedy in India he added, "As a platform, stand-up comedy in India is better than it is in the US where you have an audience only if you're famous. Its different here where everyone is more appreciative of the medium rather than the comedian."

Ali, born of Hyderabad parents worked as a journalist for the Newsweek and Reuters before turning to comedy. Having toured across 28 countries, Ali gained prominence across social media platforms, co-creating '30 Mosques in 30 Days', a 25,000 mile road trip, talking about Muslims across the US. His current project is a documentary on a group of Muslim morticians trying to stop gang violence in New Jersey.