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Rise in beach drownings

DIKSHYA SINGH

Beaches in Chennai claim five lives every week on an average yet the authorities have failed to put necessary lifesaving mechanism in place to prevent the deaths.

This week five young men drowned in the city's three beaches while swimming. On Sunday (February 8), three students drowned in Elliot's Beach and a 17 year old drowned in Marina Beach while another kid died in Ennore Beach on Monday (February 9). In 2013, 258 people drowned in the sea off Chennai, according to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data.

The number is the highest among the major 53 cities covered by NCRB and it has been growing.

Although, the incidents of drowning have increased in the past few years, none of the beaches have a lifeguard or the required equipment for rescue.

Horse-mounted policemen and the ones in All-Terrain Vehicle (ATV) are constantly patrolling the beach chasing away those trying to swim, pointed out T Subbarao sub inspector at D5 Marina Police Station.

Marina Beach — Asia's longest



Visitors at Marina Beach. PHOTO: DIKSHYA SINGH

beach — that runs for 13 km is visited by more than thousands of people every day with only 20 marine police constables on duty.

"But once in a while someone jumps into water, unnoticeably, despite all the cautioning," Subbarao added.

Akash Joseph, a -20 year old stu-

dent from Adyar said he and his friends swim in Elliot's Beach — another major beach in Chennai — almost every day. "When we spot the cops coming we come out and once they are out of sight we re-enter," he said.

Placing cautionary signs that nobody follows and manning the

beach with horse-mounted patrolmen without proper training in rescue might not be enough to save a drowning person.

According to Tarun Murugesu, lifeguard trainer who heads the Chennai chapter of Rashtryia Life Saving Society (India), ordinary policemen might not be able to do

the job of lifeguards as it requires a set of skills along with being a strong swimmer.

"In busy beaches such as Marina and Elliot's placing lifeguards and other necessary infrastructure to save lives should have been mandatory," he added.

The Society, which currently trains lifeguards for five star hotels and clubs in Chennai, have worked with a batch of fishermen at Besant Nagar beach couple of years back.

"Fishermen are the most suited for lifeguards work but they cannot function effectively without the equipment such as rescue tubes, floaters and rescue tubes, among others," he said.

Other cities such as Mumbai and Goa have now lifeguards placed at major beaches.

Murugesu further recommended the formation of a body under the coordination of Chennai Corporation, Police, Fire and Rescue Department, Coast Guard and Emergency Medical Services for prompt rescue.

Although, Indian Coast Guard's Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) has a helicopter service to rescue those lost in the sea, it is of little help for the rescue of the ones drowning in the beach.



Encroachments on the Cooum. PHOTO: DIKSHYA SINGH

Cooum River to get a new lease of life

DISHANK J. PUROHIT

Five years after the Integrated Cooum River Eco-Restoration was abandoned, a new project to clean up the river has been proposed by the state government, but experts believe this too could meet the fate of the previous projects.

The new project at a cost of Rs 604.77 crore is the latest in the long line of projects that have been announced to clean up the Cooum. All the other projects have been abandoned mainly because of the regime change, critics say.

Vishwanath, a project engineer associated with the Chennai River Restoration Project (CRRT) said that several departments had been roped in for the project including Public Works Department (PWD) and River Works Departments.

But CRRT would continue to function as a nodal agency for dredging, treating sewage and removing encroachments in the river bank. The sewage treatment plants would be constructed in some areas so that the water could be reused.

T. Ramakrishnan, a journalist with The Hindu said the core problems of the river had not been addressed in any of these projects.

"The main problem is that the mouth of the river near the Napier Bridge remains choked due to sand bar. Therefore it prevents the river from draining into the sea. I don't think even this project will succeed until these major problems are sorted out," he said.

In the 1960s when DMK leader M Karunanidhi was PWD Minister, he undertook some work like laying cement slabs along the banks from the Chetput bridge to the Napier Bridge to protect the sides of river, Ramakrishnan said. The DMK Government had also launched projects to pump the sand out of the mouth of river, but all projects were later stopped.

The toxic waste and sewage released into the river have taken their toll on the biodiversity of the Cooum. As many as 21 types of fish found till 1970s are now extinct.

"Fish certainly cannot survive in toxic waters of the present day Cooum" said Dr P Sudhakar joint director, CPR Environmental Education Centre.

Dr Sudhakar said that he was not hopeful about the future of the project as many such projects in the past had gone into vain.

"I am not sure about the success of such projects anymore. Even with a new plan, it will take another two decades to clean the river and that requires prolonged commitment," he said.

The 72 km long river originates in Tiruvallur district before it enters Chennai.

The extensive pumping of groundwater reduced the base flow in the river. Also the release of untreated sewage, industrial waste and indiscriminate encroachment along the banks led to the slow death of the river.

In September 1967, then Chief Minister C.N. Annadurai inaugurated the Cooum Improvement Scheme. In February 1973, Karunanidhi, who was chief minister inaugurated a boat service at nominal rates, but the project failed.

Another attempt to clean the river was made in 1996 after the DMK government returned to power. This time with the support of Union Government a Rs.1,200-crore Chennai City River Conservation Project (CCRCP) project was launched to control the sewage outfalls and strengthening the sewer networks. Again an attempt was made to restore the river to its old glory in 2006. This time the new Chennai River Authority was formed to coordinate the various projects.



A car with fake high-security plate in Pudupet. PHOTO: DIKSHYA SINGH

Police crack down on fake number plates

DIKSHYA SINGH

Sticker shops are overcharging car owners to replace the number plates of their vehicles with the ordinary ones following the government crackdown on the so-called "high-security" plates with 'IND' letters.

The shops that prepare the number plates ask more than Rs 450 for a set of painted plates which used to cost about Rs 100.

After the crackdown launched by Regional Transport Office along with the police, many distressed car owners sought to change the 'IND' plates to ordinary ones.

Each shop quotes different rates and some have demanded as high as Rs 1000 for a simple plate, said Ramesh Sowrirajan, driver for a multinational company executive, who was in the Pudupet market looking to replace the number plates for his employer's BMW 320d.

"I would rather cover the IND sticker with white paint," he added.

Shops such as Milap's Stickers and Shine Sticker Shop in Pudupet — one of the largest automobile spare parts in Chennai — say that they are charging higher than Rs 450 for both front and back plates.

"We ready the plates within 30 minutes so we are charging more," said S Irfan Malik, owner of Shine Sticker.

However, according to Ranjit Agrawal, owner of KSR Sticker Shop in the same market, a simple painted registration plate costs about Rs 50 and digitally printed cost about Rs 150. In December, the State Government launched the drive to ban the fake high-security number plates with a hologram sticker and letters IND. RTO intensified the drive fol-

lowing the Madras High Court's directive in January that called for stringent measures.

Though the real high security plates have been made mandatory in the neighbouring states, the Tamil Nadu Government is yet to introduce the system in the State. The lettering 'IND' is only one of the many features of these plates that are supposed to be tamper-proof and secure.

The high-security number plates have a chromium based hologram with an alpha-numeric code that contain identification of the vehicle — registration number, make, model and engine number. Likewise, these plates come with counterfeit-proof rivets so that the plates can not be replaced once the rivets are unscrewed making theft difficult. The fake high security plates sold by the shops in Chennai are ordinary plates with a sticker that looks like a hologram without any of the security features.

Police inspector L Selvam who was checking vehicles on Anna Salai along with RTO personnel, said Tamil Nadu would soon introduce the real high-security plates which would be installed by RTO authorised shops.

Mostly, vehicle owners were paying more money for the fake plates believing that those were real high-security plates which would make their vehicles secure from theft, he added.

Rajiv Rameswaran, officer at RTO said that they collected Rs 100 as fine from those vehicles that were running with the fake plates.

The police had confiscated fake stickers from the shops and now many vehicle owners were replacing the plates" he said adding that the drive had become successful.

Mixed response to HC's ban on fashion shows

DISHANK PUROHIT

The Madras High Court ban on beauty and fashion pageants in colleges and universities in Tamil Nadu has evoked a mixed reaction from students and teachers. While the students are disappointed with the decisions, teachers have welcomed the ban.

Akanksha Gongotra, an aspiring model and a first year student of accessory designing at National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) Chennai, said "The light, the sound and the ambience of ramp is a thrilling experience, you also get to showcase your dresses. You can ban beauty contests if there is any hint of obscenity or revealing clothes, but fashion shows are different, and are important for every fashion designing institute."

While asking the Tamil Nadu government to issue a circular to ban such events in all educational institutions Justice T S Sivagnanam said "It is not known as to how walking the ramp would benefit a student pursuing a course in engineering."

Supreet Hegde, Cultural Affairs Secretary, IIT-M, said that it was wrong to say that an engineering college could only have activities and events related to engineering.

"Here in an engineering college we have literature and arts clubs, they organize various activities throughout the year. Similarly we also organize fashion shows to give creative boost to our students and a chance to dabble in something else," he said.

But not everyone agrees with Hegde's assertion. Dr. P.C Varghese, Honorary Professor, Anna Uni-

versity, welcomed the ban.

"These days colleges organize all sorts of competition like Mr. Fresher and Ms Fresher, I have never been comfortable with such events inside the campus. They are incompatible with the ethos of a University that offers high end research facilities and access to best academic journals to its students" Dr Varghese said.

Santosh Hegde, a member of IIT-Madras's committee which organized Sarang, said that the ramp walk in the last edition of Sarang was a big hit.

"Jury members judged contestants solely on their creativity in dresses. It had nothing to do with beauty of any individual or how one looks," he said

Dr.R Radhakrishnan, retired professor of civil engineering at IIT Madras said that usually student bodies organize such show with the knowledge of college administration

"I have serious reservations about such events, there is absolutely no justification for such kinds of shows in a place of academic excellence, although these are my private views, but these shows creates lots of distractions," said Dr. Radhakrishnan.

However, fashion designer Divyanshu Bajaj said "it is appalling to hear that we have become very insecure about other cultures and their influences".

He said that these shows also brought various ethnic designs from different states of India on one ramp, and thus were not wrong. "The blend of different colours and designs and fabrics is as much a piece of art as a painting is, I can't see a rational reason behind the ban," he said.

Drone operators run into turbulence

KUSHEL M

Drones being flown for recreational purposes have run into turbulence with the police cracking down on the remote controlled devices and their owners despite there being no law that prohibits their use.

However, according to a public notice issued by the Office of the Director General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) on October 07, 2014, regarding the use of Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS), "No non government agency, organization, or an individual will launch a UAS in Indian Civil Airspace for any purpose whatsoever."

The notice also spoke of the need for formulating the regulations (and globally harmonize those) for certification and operation of UAS in the Indian Civil Airspace.

A Chinese national, Suquaing was detained by the Mylapore po-



A remote operated drone in Chennai PHOTO COURTESY: WWW.BGR.IN

lice for flying a drone fitted with camera near Marina, on February 8.

Earlier, a drone operated by a 29-year old church musician crashed on the terrace of a service apartment on January 6 in MRC Nagar, falling on a sunbathing foreigner. The man was arrested under section 287 (negligent conduct with respect

to machinery) and 336 of the IPC (Act endangering life or personal safety of others) after guests of the hotel filed a complaint.

Braj Kishore Ravi, IPS, Civil Defence Department, Tamil Nadu said, "So far there are no rules but they are in the process of being formulated."

Dinesh Karthik, one of the managing partners of Adler Aerospace Training Center, Thiruvanniyur, says "Armed forces have decided to collect information about drone users so as to know which drones are to be allowed. This can be done through tracking of serial numbers which are present in every drone."

The Sree Sai Aerotech Innovations Pvt Ltd sells drones and provides training. Bhuvana, director of the institute, says, "There is a need for regulations for drone flying as in the case of the UK and the US. There should be a limit on how high it can fly so as to avoid obstruction and accidents."

Anand Krishna Gupta, an aeromodelling enthusiast says "You can buy drone assembly kits or ready-made drones from hobby centers like the Emerald Hobby Center on Mount Road or from Shree Sai. The propeller, server, receiver and transmitter can be assembled together in a price range of between Rs.

15,000 and Rs 40,000. The ready-made drones are available at Rs. 8,000. These drones are capable of speeds up to 40 km/hr."

The recent incidents involving the drones have highlighted the need for aerospace enthusiasts and training centers to gain permission for their hobby. Bhuvana says, "Within city limits, you need permission from the local police."

Anand added playgrounds in educational institutions were the best for flying drones as they were away from city traffic and obstructions like high rise buildings.

Drones are being used for aerial filming, according to Dinesh Karthik. They are also being used for agricultural purposes like in seeing how much water or pesticides are needed for an area, says Bhuvana.

Aerospace centers train students who like to fly drones.

"If you are a skilled pilot, accidents can be avoided," says Dinesh Karthik.

Parents are teachers, home is school

DISHA SHARMA

Chennai is witnessing a rise in the number of parents opting for homeschooling for their children because of the "undue pressure" and the "lack of creativity" in schools.

Balachandran, a parent who organises a meeting of homeschoolers says that more than 50 parents have joined the group since it began two years ago in Chennai.

"Our community is growing as fast as those in Bangalore and Pune, which have a high number of homeschoolers," he said.

Manish Jain, an alternative education activist, who organised a workshop for homeschoolers at Vidya Sagar in Kotturpuram, derives his ideas of alternative education from his experiences of homeschooling his daughter.

"We have a factory model of schooling where we only focus on producing skilled workforce for the global economy. There is no place of creativity here," he said.

Jain criticized homeschoolers for following the syllabus that is taught in schools. "We need a system of unschooling where fixed syllabus is

done away with for a more flexible syllabus. The child needs to be an active participant in deciding what he wants to learn," he added.

Poonam Natarajan, founder of Vidya Sagar, an NGO that works with differently-abled people, said "Our workshops usually have 60-70 per cent occupancy. But this time, I had to turn parents away during the registration period itself."

Jacinth Anil is mother to two sons Ashish (12) and Dave (8). She took her sons out of school when she shifted to Chennai with her husband after spending a few years in the US.

"My husband got the idea from our neighbours who had taken their kids out of school because they believed the schools exerted a lot of pressure on the children," she said. Jacinth, who resides in Kelambakkam, travels extensively with her children to make



Jacinth Anil, a homeschooler, with her children, Ashish and Dave. PHOTO: DISHA SHARMA.

up for the lack of schoolgoing experience.

"Sometimes, when my relatives

talk about coaching their kids for medical and engineering entrances, I get anxious about my own kids' preparedness. But it gets easier when I think about how happy kids are," she said.

Jacinth is open to sending her children back to school if they ask for it when they grow up.

However, not everyone was convinced with Jain's model of "self-designed learning".

Mahalakshmi S, a teacher in a vernacular school in Madurai, believes that conventional education helps underprivileged children to make a better life for themselves.

Being educated in Tamil helps them learn better. But that doesn't help them get a job in the competitive world," she said,

on being told about the importance given to the mothertongue in Jain's model.

Geethanjali Sridhar, an architect based in Chennai, believed that homeschooling was an elitist concept that was not for the poor.

"Poor people work long hours and cannot monitor their children all the time. Also, how will they guide their kids when they need help if they are not educated?" she said.

Maria Josephine, a special educator V-Excel Educational Trust in RA Puram, believed that homeschooling could create a dearth of professionals if it became widespread.

"It's true that schools sometimes exclude children who are different, but they show academic talent that cannot be dismissed," she said.

The fact that homeschooling requires full time work and financial stability was reiterated by Deepa Dixon, who left her job to homeschool her six year old daughter.

"I am planning to enroll my child in National Institute of Open Schooling soon, so that she would have some valid certification for admissions in the future," she said.

Transgenders feel 'demeaned' by Corpn

JUSTIN RAO

The transgender community in the city has filed a complaint against corporation officials who had used two transgenders to shame a city hotel for defaulting in payment of property tax.

Members of the transgender community met City Police Commissioner SP George and asked him to take serious steps as they felt violated.

On Monday, two transgenders were sent by city corporation officials to a hotel in Guindy. They were asked to dance and embarrass the hotel management into paying up the taxes. The hotel management paid the tax immediately and called the police.



R. Jeeva, Founder and President, Transgenders Rights Association. PHOTO: JUSTIN RAO

An official in the Assistant Police Commissioner's office said that

the transgender community had taken offence and wanted the police to take action as their image was portrayed negatively and their rights were violated.

However M K Diwakar, an official in the Revenue Department said that the matter had been blown out of proportion and refused to divulge any details.

Another corporation official said that the Corporation's action was not a violation of human rights.

"The transgenders were paid for the job and were not forced to do it. How is that a violation of somebody's right?" he asked.

The official said that using transgenders was the last resort and they had to do it helplessly. "The intention was not to violate their rights

but only to recover the tax," he said. R. Jeeva, Founder and President of Transgender Rights Association said that it was a cheap move by the corporation especially at a time when transgenders were struggling for a place in society.

"What happened was highly unacceptable and we condemn it," she said. Jeeva said transgenders struggled for housing and jobs.

"You don't give us respectable jobs but instead demean us by throwing us back to the same position. By doing this, you are reinforcing the belief that transgenders can only intimidate people," she said.

Meanwhile the Police Commissioner's office has said "We are probing the matter and necessary steps will be taken."

Garbage bins to make Marina cleaner

DIA REKHI

The Chennai Corporation has made it mandatory for food vendors on the Marina to have dustbins as part of a campaign to clean up the beach.

Over 1,000 food vendors sell everything from peanuts, corn, ice cream, sandwiches and seafood while hordes of people visit this beach. An enormous amount of garbage is generated on a daily basis - wrappers, paper plates, cups and spoons - and lies strewn all over the beach.

Now, as ordered by the Chennai

Corporation, red, blue, green, yellow, pink, or orange coloured dustbins are there beside every stall on Marina Beach.

J. Jayalakshmi, set up her 'Mumbai Chaat' stall five years ago and bought herself a dustbin fearing a

"The Corporation ordered us all



A stall in Marina Beach with a dustbin. PHOTO: DIA REKHI.

to buy dustbins and so we did because no one wants to pay the fine of Rs. 500," she said.

Speaking of whether the installation of dustbins has had the desired effect, she said, "Even now people litter the place but compared to how it was before, things are better."

V. Jayanti, who serves beach goers with cut mango and pineapple, echoes what Jayalakshmi said.

"I had a dustbin earlier also but now I take it more seriously," she said adding that the Corporation too had been coming to check if these vendors had obeyed their

rule.

"They have come to check twice already in this one month. They haven't caught anyone because everyone has bought and is using a dustbin."

The beachgoers seem happy about this new rule as it ensures or at least aims to keep the beaches clean for people to enjoy.

S. Manoj, who visits the beach often to unwind after a long day's work said, "The dustbins have really helped. The amount of littering has decreased and because of that I feel like coming to the beach often."

Is Chennai free from rabies?

CHANDNI.U

Chennai has been "rabies free" since 2010, according to the Non-Governmental Organisation, Blue Cross of India but the website of riftingoundation of India states that rabies had claimed 26 lives since 2011.

"These rabies affected patients get bitten by dogs outside and the patients come to Chennai to get themselves treated," justified Dawn Williams, Residential General Manager of Blue Cross of India.

"I have never come across a rabies case in my career but dog bites are common. It must be the vaccine we provide that cures them," said Ravichandran. S, general physician in Asian Hospital, Besant Nagar.

Around 14 cases of dog bites were registered on one day at the Rajiv Gandhi General Hospital.

The Chennai Corporation along with Blue Cross and other NGOs had begun the Anti-Rabies Vaccine (ARV) drive, last year and the process is still going on.

"Above 80,000 dogs are out on the streets and 70-75 dogs are brought here every day for vaccination. We release them in the exact place from where they were

brought," said Dawn Williams.

"This drive is a sham. It has to be a continuous process. Immunising them just once will not help. Also, the Chennai Corporation picks up five dogs out of ten in an area and sometimes they are not sent back to the place where they were picked up from," said Muralidharan. S, an animal activist.

The dogs are to be sent back to the same location as it is a territorial animal.

If they are sent to a new place, they get provoked easily, endangering the local people. Blue Cross is given the exact location of each dog including the phone number of the dog-catcher, the vehicle number and it is also signed by three witnesses present there.

"The dog-catchers get bribed by the people of the particular locality and are asked to change the address of the dogs and send them someplace else," said Williams.

According to Williams, the people who litter the roads are the cause of dog breeding.

"Many dogs get attracted to the food waste, they mark it as their territory and hence dog breeding takes place at a faster pace," he said.

Claiming credit for LPG subsidy scheme

ERUM KHALED

The Direct Benefit Transfer scheme adopted in Tamil Nadu on January 1, 2015, will now give around 4.5 lakh customers a subsidy of Rs 563 on their gas cylinders directly into their bank accounts.

This scheme was initially introduced by the UPA government but faced many hurdles in the methods and procedures.

According to BJP State Office Secretary Sarvottam, "The UPA government had introduced the scheme but it had many problems with its implementation. Now our government is thinking that the idea of direct benefit transfer will be far more useful instead of involving other agencies."

However, according to Congress spokesperson, N.A.Gopanna, "When we wanted to implement the scheme, the NDA particularly the BJP, strongly criticized and opposed the scheme."

"Now after coming to power, they began implementing the same policy that they had opposed earlier."

Gopanna added "The BJP government wants to give money instead of rice and other pulses. We are opposing it since we wish to give the people subsidies directly. This is a great blow to the food security act and they want to dilute



LPG Cylinders transported in Chennai. PHOTO COURTESY: FINANCIAL EXPRESS

the act. This is totally anti-people."

However, Sarvottam said that this scheme was better than the previous scheme of directly giving subsidies to people as it erased the problem of middle men. He said

the ultimate aim of the scheme was to reduce government subsidy directly since it was going unchecked.

With regards to the scheme he said, "There seems to be some



The new IRCTC service allows people to book tickets online with cash on delivery facility. PHOTO COURTESY: TRAK.IN

Most MRTS stations clueless about cash on delivery system

JIGYASA WATWANI

Chennai, Feb 11: Most station masters along the Chennai MRTS (Mass Rapid Transit System) are clueless about the cash-on-delivery payment option for buying railway tickets online, more than a month after the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) came out with the scheme.

IRCTC launched the scheme in collaboration with Noida-based firm Anduril Technologies. Tickets can be booked online on bookmytrain.com, a website owned by the company.

"The beta version of BookMyTrain's mobile app was out just a week back. But we launched the scheme in the city around one to one-and-a-half months ago," said Sandeep Yadav, Technical Department head at the company. IRCTC customer care officials confirmed the same.

However, the station master at Velachery said that the scheme would be implemented in Chennai only after February 27. Similarly, the woman manning a reservation counter at the Thiruvanniyur station said she did not know of any such scheme.

Mohammad Arif, a passenger standing in the queue at Tiruvanniyur, said "I have heard about the scheme but I couldn't get any clarity on whether it has been started or not. So I came here myself to book my tickets in person."

On the other hand, Yadav said that a significant number of people from Chennai had already begun booking their tickets via bookmytrain.com, though he refused to divulge numbers.

The cash-on-delivery scheme

was aimed at helping passengers in the city, who do not have access to net-banking facilities, book their tickets in advance.

It was also aimed at engaging the customer directly, thereby eliminating the need for travel agents.

It seems, however, that the initiative has not had any impact on reducing the number of people waiting in queues at reservation counters of the MRTS.

"Nearly 360 people come to book their tickets here daily. Even if we assume the scheme has been implemented, it doesn't seem to have had any impact because the number of people that come for booking has remained the same during the past month or so," Thana Babu, reservation supervisor at Thiruvanniyur, said.

However, the Deputy General Manager at the IRCTC Office in the Chennai Central Station refused to comment.

All kinds of tickets, from general to waitlisted, tatkal, ladies' quota and senior citizens' quota can be booked online. However, booking of tatkal and senior citizens' quota tickets would require a proof of identification, Yadav said.

"The procedure is very user-friendly. New users must first register on the IRCTC website/app. They can then book their tickets 60 days in advance and get it delivered at their doorstep two days before their journey date," he added.

Customers would have to pay a service charge apart from the ticket fare. The charges would be Rs. 60 for a ticket in an air-conditioned compartment and Rs. 40 for a ticket in a non-AC sleeper/chair car compartment.

IRCTC launched the scheme in which tickets can be booked online on bookmytrain.com. However, station masters say the scheme would be implemented in Chennai only after February 27.

Two sides of the same city

JUSTIN RAO

When you step outside the Greenways MRTS Station, the stink from the canal around it hits you. But if you walk just a kilometre from the station, towards Madras Boat Club, there is no stink, no garbage piled up on the road. There are huge dustbins.

The Madras Boat Club road is possibly Chennai's cleanest area, with a dustbin every 30 metres. From the main road leading to the Club, there are four huge dustbins situated at regular intervals. There are huge bungalows and the area is clean.

According to, Himantha Bora, who has been working as a security guard at the guest house of Ashok Leyland for the past two years, this is one of the "best maintained streets."

"Cleaning starts from seven in the morning, with corporation employees cleaning the entire area," he says. The garbage vehicle comes twice a day, at 12 noon and 11 in the night, to collect garbage.

"The timing is such that by noon most of the cleaning work is done



There are dustbins every 30 metres on Boat Club road while the Mylapore slum has no dustbins. Photo Credits: Justin Rao

in the houses and then same goes for night as the garbage at the end of the day," he says, adding that even the residents follow the timings for dumping the garbage.

Just 3 kms away from Madras Boat Club, there is a slum near Mylapore MRTS station. Like Greenways, the canal near the Thirumayilai station welcomes you with a stink.

The stink does not go away as you walk out of the station. There are piles of garbage too even though there are dustbins. Most of the garbage is spilled outside on the road.

"There are no dustbins inside the area, they are there only near the station which is of no use to us," says Nambi a local resident.

The sanitation workers of the cor-

poration, Nambi says, usually clean the "outer" areas of the slum and "nothing much" is done inside the slum.

Garbage piles up on the street not only because of lack of dustbins but also because of the habit of dumping rubbish where ever one wants.

"Where one throws his garbage, we start throwing at the same place and then that is how a spot for garbage is formed," Nambi says.

This is starkly in contrast to the Madras Boat Club road, where, Bora says, people are extremely careful with garbage disposal.

"Nobody throws garbage on the street as there are chances others will see it and create problem," says Bora and adds that even the residents take extra care when it comes to garbage disposal.

With nearly 15 sprawling bungalows on each side, the Madras Boat Club stretch is clean and maintained as it has houses of ministers, engineers, defence personnel and guest houses. The Mylapore slum on the other hand is crammed with small dingy lanes and houses. Both areas have garbage, but, both deal with it separately.

No use for a bio-toilet



What happened to those fines on public urination? A bio-toilet seems a useless prop here. Seemingly unnecessary, it does not seem to provide intended relief though. Photo: Karthik Ramakrishnan



V.M Parthasarathy with his family. Photo Credits: Disha Sharma

From boardrooms to farmlands

DISHA SHARMA

V M Parthasarathy starts his day at five in the morning by drinking a concoction of tulsi and coriander leaves and a breakfast of organic "pink" idlis.

Throughout the day, he works at his farm in Avadi, growing red rice and millets, besides various other herbs and spices. His wife Rekha manages the 15 Organic Farmers' Market (OFM) shops that they have opened throughout Chennai.

Five years back, Parthasarathy was a financial consultant with HCL Technologies, drawing a six figure salary every month. His wife worked as an operations manager in HP Private Ltd. When their first child Siddharth began to suffer from a serious nervous disorder a few months after his birth, they became worried.

"The doctors said that his nervous system was underdeveloped. However, we found that around 60 children from the hospital were suffering from the same condition. That got us thinking," said Parthasarathy.

Siddharth spent a fortnight in the hospital before the seizures could be controlled.

Later, Parthasarathy read a report by World Health Organisation (WHO) that said high levels of DDT, a banned pesticide, was found in mothers' milk in Chennai. Soon after, he became involved in a movement that promoted chemical-free horticulture in the city.

Two years later, he quit his job to form OFM to counter the high prices at which organic food is sold at retail chains. The farmers' collective organises a meeting on the first Saturday of every month, where farmers are encouraged to adopt chemical-free practices.

Parthasarathy is now a full time farmer. His wife left her job in August last year and manages accounts and logistics of OFM.

"We sometimes lose custo-

mers because we are unable to cater quickly to the demands of the large number of people who have converted to organic living," he said.

Dismissing all the apprehensions that his friends and relatives expressed, he said that organic farming was much more profitable than chemical farming, even though it took more time.

According to him, farmers usually make Rs 5,000 per acre in three months, but organic farming yielded Rs. 12,000 per acre in four months, with no input costs.

Moreover, the monthly expenditure of the family has come down from Rs 60,000 a month to Rs 10,000.

"I no longer pay for groceries, travel or maid. We even stopped speech therapy sessions for our child, and he is learning much more ever since. So we end up saving more," he added.

The journey from a corporate boardroom to irrigated farmlands has not been without hiccups.

"It took trial and error to get the hang of things. There is a lot of contradictory information regarding seeds and irrigation," said Parthasarathy. There are also a lot of misleading agents involved.

"I once met an agriculturist who offered to give me a 20 percent discount. But he was selling seeds of same quality at twice the retail price," he added.

Proving wrong all those who called his passion short-lived, Parthasarathy is looking to cultivate a larger variety of crops after with the help of his wife.

"I think we were lucky to be able to take such a step as we had financial support. A lot of people have to put in their whole life's savings just to acquire land. So, if they could do it, why not us?," he said.

Siddharth is now four years old, and thanks to his father's organic living, hasn't had a seizure in a long time.

Chennai among 100 Resilient Cities

KUSHEL M

Chennai being a coastal city with a flat terrain and problems like flooding and climate change makes it ideal for the Rockefeller foundation funded 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) project according to experts.

Raj Cherubal, Director-Projects, Chennai City Connect, an infrastructure platform for urban stakeholders, said "The project is about resilience from a climate change point of view. Cities like New York have come up with strategies to counter their climate change problems while cities like Bengaluru and Chennai are not advanced enough to take on the problem."

"A lot of things need to be done. The Corporation will appoint a Chief Resilience Officer. Departments like the Public Works Department have to develop a co-ordinated approach," he said.

The New York-based non-profit organization Rockefeller foundation included Chennai along with Bengaluru, Surat in its 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) project. The resilience challenges of Chennai lie in its aging infrastructure, overpopulation, pollution or environmental degradation according to the initiative's official website.

The Pallikaranai wetland, one of the last remaining natural wetlands of South India is subjected to indiscriminate dumping of toxic waste along the road,

discharge of sewage which has shrunk the wetland to a great extent.

Informal peripheral settlements in low-lying coastal areas run the risk of being affected by floods, says the initiative's official website. Chennai's coastline is inhabited by fishermen. For instance Srinivasapuram, a fishermen's hamlet on the Marina, was devastated by the tsunami in 2004.

"Chennai encounters threats of cyclones, global warming and flooding which puts the city at a disadvantage. The 2004 Tsunami is a once in a blue-moon phenomenon but such a disaster are a test of the resilience of the city in bouncing back after a disaster. Chennai responded in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami by developing an early warning system," added Raj.

The project remains a source of skepticism, according to Karen Coelho, urban studies professor at Madras Institute of Development Studies.

"How do you predict and build stress-proof cities? Such a project requires a culture of citizen participation, sharing of data and services between various bodies that make up an urban area. There was a similar project in the mid 1990's by the United Nations. The moment it went into the hands of the government, it failed miserably. The Chief Resilience Officer will probably be someone from the city corporation," Coelho stated.

Pancreatic cancer on the rise

DIA REKHI

Pancreatic cancer is the fourth leading cause of death among Indians, according to doctors who blame it on high fat diets.

The survival rate is extremely low with nearly 94% of the patients dying and only 6% living for 1-5 years and only 6% living for more than five years.

February marks World Cancer Day and as part of numerous awareness programmes that took place

in the city, an area of concern that was highlighted was that of the increasing number of cases of Pancreatic Cancer among Indians.

Dr. S. Selvakumar, gastroenterologist at Selvarangam Nursing said, "Pancreatic cancer is common in the West as they have diets that are very high in fat. In India too, the number of cases has increased in the last two decades as we have begun to adopt high fat diets."

"People who smoke and drink are at risk. Generally, those who

drink a lot develop chronic pancreatitis which in turn can lead to pancreatic cancer." Physicians, he said, find it very hard to diagnose this cancer as there are no symptoms that can be specifically attributed to it.

In order to prevent pancreatic cancer, Dr. Selvakumar said, "One must lead a healthy, low-fat-high-fibre diet, abstain from smoking and drinking excessively in order to prevent developing pancreatic cancer."

A day-to-day struggle to make ends meet

DIA REKHI

Sunday is considered the best day of the week by a lot of people because it is a day of rest, but it is not so for the men and women who line up on either side of East Coast Road at Neelankarai hoping to be picked up for work in construction sites.

"Sunday is generally a day to rest but because the demand for work is so much, we come here on Sunday too," said K. Murugan, who arrived at the market at 6:30 a.m.

Over 60 people assemble here at 7:00 a.m, not just from Neelankarai but Injambakkam, Palavakkam, Vettuvankeni, Sholinganallur and even Thoraipakkam.

When a contractor or employer arrives at the spot people surround him - all talking at the same time while others rush to the spot and those on the other side jump over the divider because walking to the zebra crossing 50 metres away could make them lose their job.

"We stay till noon and waiting for someone to come and give us work," said M. Sekaran who gets paid Rs. 600 to do construction work when selected by contractors who come looking for labour.



Waiting for work. Photo Credits: Dia Rekhi

Unlike Sekaran, S. Anandi has a few more options for employment. Not only does she do construction work but like all the other women at the market, she does domestic work in households, schools and colleges.

P. Lakshmi would rather do domestic work on daily wage basis rather than work at a household for a monthly salary because it gives her flexibility.

"If I have to attend a function for 10 days, no employer will let me

go. Here, I can take leave whenever I want without worrying about my salary being cut," she said.

Often these people have to go to Kovalam, Mahabalipuram, Tambaram and sometimes places as far as Tiruchi.

Their transport to the site is arranged by the contractor, if they are lucky, food is provided (though most of them bring their own lunch) and the return bus fare is provided.

"As long as I get paid, I will go anywhere and do anything. I need to feed my family at the end of the day. And without work, how can we eat?" said A. Vasantha, a mother of two children who study in the Corporation school in Palavakkam.

This work is not permanent and hence there are days when these people go without any work.

"I get work only 10 to 12 days a month but still I come here every-day," she added.

Almost all the people gathered at the market were earlier engaged as agricultural labourers in areas like Viluppuram, Tiruvannamalai, Tiruvallur and other districts. They migrated to Chennai in search of better employment.

"Water was becoming a problem

in my area and I would only earn Rs. 50 a day whereas I earn Rs. 500 a day here. That is why I gave up agriculture," said S. Palani, who is from Viluppuram.

A contractor arrived asking for twelve women for construction work. Though there was a heated argument over who should go and who should not, through dialogue and deliberation, a decision was made.

The contractor organised a goods carrier and ordered the women to get in quickly as they had to travel 40 km to get to the site in Navallur for the work.

"This is how things work here," said M. Prema, "whenever someone needs labour they come here and then it is first-come-first-serve basis. Depending on the number of people the employer requires we decide amongst ourselves and send people unless he specifically asks for someone."

For the 50-60 people who had gathered in the market, more than half had to leave with no work.

At 11:30 a.m, K. Nithya said, "Sunday is a bad day. Not many people come looking for workers on this day," as she picked up her bag with her packed lunch and began walking home.

Loans boost car sales

DIKSHYA SINGH

More people are buying cars these days with registration of new vehicles in Chennai growing by 10% in 2014 thanks to the easy availability of auto loans.

Chennai city saw 6.7 lakh units of new cars registered in the first seven months of the current fiscal year —from April to December 2014 —according to statistics of Tamil Nadu State Transport Authority. In the corresponding period of last year, 6.1 lakh units of new passenger vehicles were registered.

"The number of vehicle registration has been increasing in the city with the increased income and most importantly due to convenient lending by the banks," said P Vijayaraj, Joint Commissioner of Road Safety at State Transport Authority.

The banks in Chennai are financing the new car purchases at interest rates as low as 10.4% with equated monthly installments (EMI) of Rs 7000.

"With my current income, I am able to pay EMI of Rs 10,000 and will be debt free in four years," said Kalyan Murali, a 27 year old HR professional who was at V3 Hyundai showroom in Thiruvanniyur inquiring about the loan offers and car models.

State Bank of India offers auto loans for new cars at 10.4% interest rate, HDFC Bank charges 10.75%, Axis Bank and Kotak Mahindra Bank charge 11%, Indian Bank

charges 10.75% as interest, according to rate comparison websites such as deal4loans.com and bank-bazaar.com.

K Rajeshwaran, Chief Manager of State Bank of India, Tidel Park branch said that auto loans were the most enquired about product in their portfolio.

"Most of our borrowers in the auto loan segment are young professionals, and they usually buy hatchbacks that are priced below Rs 5 lakhs," he said.

The loans can be sanctioned within a week following verification based on the applicant's income and employment detail, he added.

Bipin Raj, Loan Officer at Indian Bank's Adyar Branch said that the bank mostly provided the loans if the EMI was less than 40% of the total income.

New cars were available at prices as low as Rs 3 lakhs and average income of mid-level employees were higher than Rs 30,000, so they could repay the loan in five to seven years, he said.

The discount schemes offered by the motor companies have further pushed the sales of automobiles.

"Since we launched the discount offer from the beginning of the year our sales have increased," said Ashish Pillai, Assistant Sales Manager at V3 Hyundai showroom in Thiruvanniyur. Depending on the model, Hyundai is offering discount from Rs 34,000 to Rs 1.6 lakhs.



The horses continue to canter for Chellappa. PHOTO: KARTHIK RAMAKRISHNAN.

Life is a carousel ride

KARTHIK RAMAKRISHNAN

It is around 9 in the morning and the chatter of school children drifts in from Venugopal Vidyalaya Matriculation School in Mandaveli. Opposite the school, a bespectacled old man waits with his small carousel. The school children take rides on the carousel during the break.

"Business is not what it used to be," says K. Chellappa (85), the sole proprietor of the carousel, who is dressed in a white shirt and white dhoti.

There are four horses and small chairs beside each horse in the carousel. They are named after Tamil film personalities: Kamal Haasan (red), Rajinikanth (blue), Ajith Kumar (grey) and Vijay (pink). A multi-coloured canopy of sorts provides shade for the horses

and their riders.

Chellappa has owned this carousel for a long time. "For more than 40 years, this has been mine, and this has been my business, going around the city with this."

"Many years back, I used to go around the city, taking my carousel to many areas. I used to push it past the traffic to many schools. Business used to be good," he reminisces.

Chellappa now limits himself to Venugopal Vidyalaya every day, for an hour each in the morning and the afternoon.

"My legs don't let me go around the city much."

On some days, he earns a hundred rupees or thereabouts, but he says such days are rare.

"Not many children feel attracted by this anymore. I do get a few customers everyday, but they are few. Anyway, I come out

without fail," he adds. He charges Rs. 10 per person per ride.

But sometimes he says that health constraints prevent him from coming out with his carousel for a few days or even weeks together. But when he feels fine, he always gets back to business.

"It is not about the money now. I don't have anybody to feed now; those days are gone. I just want to do this because I want to keep earning something by myself," he says.

A widower, Chellappa has family members who support him.

"I live with my eldest son now. I have another son, who lives in another city. My wife and daughter passed away many years back," says Chellappa. He says he is taken care of well by his son.

"I am going to get another grandchild in a few months," he grins.



Kurtas made by Bodo tribe, Assam. PHOTO: ERUM KHALED

Crafts from all over India on one platter

ERUM KHALED

Craftsmen and rural entrepreneurs from all over India showcased their talents and goods again this year at the annual Dastkari Haat Samiti Crafts Fair. The fifteen day fair which was sponsored by the Dastkari Haat Samiti in collaboration with the Kalakshetra foundation was inaugurated on February 6 on the Kalakshetra ground.

The fair featured a wide range of products from clothes, shoes, furniture, accessories, handiwork items each designed according to the style and beauty of the state where they came from.

Dastkari Haat samiti organiser Charu Varma said, "The dastkari haat samiti provides a platform to all these small scale rural workers to showcase their beautiful products."

"Handicraft industry in India is slowly losing its beauty and people prefer to buy readymade goods from malls", said added. "These workers spend hours carving items with their own hand, they work from scratch and they sell these products at such a reasonable rate, yet people still do not buy them at their original price."

The Dastkari Haat samiti founded in 1986 is a national association of artisans. It brings people from all over India in a common platform to expand the market for their handicraft goods.

Goods made by workers in Rajasthan, called 'Haathi Chaap',

was a main attraction this year.

"We make goods out of elephant dung and cotton fabric," said the salesman Sushil Rao. This venture was started in a small village called Sangar near Ajmer eight years ago by Mahima Mehra. The collected elephant dung is processed and mixed with cotton fabric to produce paper. The paper is used to make a variety of goods like posters, copies, wall hangings, small diaries, etc.

However, goods from Haathi Chaap are not well known across India. Mehra says, "The Dastkari Haat Samiti provides a big platform to make people all over India aware of the products. Since we are not a big start-up we do not have the necessary means to do wide scale retailing." Currently, the only store they retail their goods to in Chennai are Kalpadruma and Cityphilips.

Another stall which saw a considerable amount of popularity was traditional handloom kurtas from Assam. Nandani Musari, the sales lady said, "These kurtas are made by women of the Bodo tribe and is funded by a NGO called Aagor."

Musari, also a member of the Aagor NGO mentioned that these kurtas were in high demand and were almost always sold out in any exhibitions. Even big retail brands like FabIndia buy from them. "Each kurta is priced at Rs 700 which is a reasonable price. The money which we earn from these sales goes directly to the women of the Bodo Tribe," she added.

Number of Parsis dwindling in Chennai

JIGYASA WATWANI

The Jal Phiroj Clubwala Dar-e-Meher wears a deserted look amid the hustle-bustle of Royapuram in North Chennai. With the exception of a dog locked near the house of the priest and two kittens sleeping at the entrance, there is no one in sight.

This 105-year institution is the only Parsi temple in the whole of Tamil Nadu. It is the place where the Parsis living in Chennai gather.

"The Parsi population of Chennai is around 220. People usually don't come here on weekdays," says Bomi V. a priest at the Jal Phiroj Clubwala Dar-e-Meher fire temple in Royapuram.

However, Zarin Mistry, Secretary of the Madras Parsi Association, estimates the number of Parsis in the city to be around 250-300.

The Parsi population in the country has declined from just under 1,15,000 in 1941 to 69,601 in 2001. In keeping with this nationwide trend, the numbers have declined in Chennai too, Bomi adds.

"Yes, the numbers have declined in Chennai as well because many of



Parsi fire temple. PHOTO COURTESY: THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS.

our youth have left for other cities and/or countries," a worker at the temple said.

Bomi says one of the main reasons for the Parsi population declining so rapidly is because they do not marry outside the community.

However, Mistry argues that almost all the marriages in the last 10 years have been outside the community.

"But we do not encourage the children of Parsi women married to non-Parsis, to become Parsis and enter the fire temple. That may be

one of the reasons for the decline in our population," she added.

Other reasons for the dwindling Parsi population include late marriages and high divorce rates. "The birth rate of the Parsi population is lesser than the death rate," Bomi said.

The community, however, has made significant contributions to the city, from the 105-year-old Fire Temple in Royapuram, to small Irani cafes on Mount Road.

Famous Parsis of Chennai include Hormusji Nowroji, a civil engineer who helped construct

Flying high with the disc

Award-winning film gives frisbee team new hope

JUSTIN RAO

Despite taking part in four national events and always falling short of winning, a frisbee team in Chennai is the happiest. It has won a prize. Not on the sea shores of Chennai, but in a foreign land and for something different.

175 Grams, a short film about this frisbee team from Chennai won the 2015 Sundance Institute Short Film Challenge, sponsored by Bill Gates and Melinda Gates Foundation.

"Overwhelming," says Bharat Mirle, co-director of the movie. "This is the biggest encouragement we could get in movie making. And this wouldn't have happened without Fly Wind," he says.

The 8-minute film narrates the story of Fly Wind, the frisbee team which mostly comprises kids from Urur Kuppam slum near the Besant Nagar Beach.

"We have four college kids, three 12th standard kids, two 10th standard kids and one 8th standard kid. Together they make Fly Wind. And you'd be surprised how well they juggle between books and frisbee," says their mentor Ramkumar, fondly called as Boon. Boon started Fly Wind in 2010 with a few friends who shared the love for the sport. However, they couldn't give required time to the team owing to their professional commitments.

"When we were on the verge of dissolving the team, these kids who used to always watch us play, approached us and asked if they could join. Just then, Fly Wind was born again," he says.

The team practises thrice a week—Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday—for one hour in the



Reaching for the sky. PHOTO COURTESY: FACEBOOK PAGE OF 175 GRAMS.

evening. But the day begins at 4 in the morning with a fitness exercise. "The stress is never on winning, it is just about enjoying what we play," Boon says.

The idea behind the short film came last year when Boon met his old friend and a frisbee player himself, Arvind Iyer, who also co-directed the short film. The film was shot in two and a half days on the Besant Nagar Beach over a weekend in June. The post production took weeks and the film competed along with entries from as many as 90 countries in the Sundance Festival.

"It won because of its unusual story. Its not about poverty but

'175 Grams', a short film about this frisbee team from Chennai won the 2015 Sundance Institute Short Film Challenge, sponsored by Bill Gates and Melinda Gates Foundation.

from different socio-economic backgrounds come together to play a sport, build dreams, work hard and aspire to win, a sport which many in the country don't even know exists," says Mirley.

Four kids from the team have been selected for the World Frisbee Championship to represent India to be held in March. Currently in Mumbai gearing up for the championship, the kids are extremely excited with the recognition.

"The win has infused a new energy in the team. The exposure they have got, the faith that they can achieve everything by playing has been tremendous," Boon says.

overcoming poverty. How kids

Stand-up comedian's zingers draw flak

LAVANYA NARAYAN

Karthik Kumar, a Chennai-based stand up comedian, was asked to pack up his act after a member of his audience objected to his lines and threatened to sue the owner of the venue.

According to the venue owner, the offended member of the audience believed that the set's content went against the values of Indian culture. The show had references to the female sexual organs and four-letter words were used.

"I've had to temporarily cancel the open mic night due to this incident; this is a growing problem in our country. Everything is being looked at from the perspective of religion," she said.

"Furthermore, the audience member told me that if the routine was done in Tamil, they wouldn't be having a problem with it. It's utter hypocrisy," she added.

Karthik Kumar, who founded Evam Entertainment, said "This incident is not the first time I've faced such a situation. In 2013, we (Evam) staged a play titled 'Ali J' at the



To speak or not to. PHOTO COURTESY: THE HINDU.

Edinburgh Fringe Festival, which received a great response. When we came back to India to showcase it, that's when the problems started."

"Hindu fundamentalist groups threatened

to burn down venues where the play was to be staged, leading to a cancellation by the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival and other places. Finally, we performed the play in Bangalore under police protection."

Karthik added that these instances coincided with the build up to the 2014 elections. "It's my belief that these people are self-proclaimed culture protectors. Somebody needs to inform our Prime Minister that this is not the kind of progress he seems to want to achieve for India. This is possibly

turning into an epidemic."

The Chennai incident follows the highly publicised roast done by Mumbai-based comedy group All India Bakchod (AIB), which attracted a great deal of controversy

since its release on YouTube. The group made jokes in "bad taste" about Bollywood stars Ranveer Singh, Arjun Kapoor and others. Adverse reactions from various pressure groups prompted AIB to take down the video.

Bollywood film PK, which came out in December last year, drew controversy. Its poster showed lead actor Aamir Khan almost entirely nude, with just a transistor radio covering his private parts. The cast and crew of the film came under fire mainly from pressure groups, stating that the film was anti-Hindu.

Deepu, one of the open mic organisers and a regular on the comedy circuit, has a slightly different take on the issue.

"There are two levels to this issue. The first one is that taking offence is not specific to India. The feminist vs. comedian battle happens everywhere. The second one is that the environment in India alters as per the political climate. Roast comedy- as also stand-up comedy- is a Western concept and it's going to take India another 30 to 40 years to get used to this", he said.