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# H1N1 tests expensive

SANTOSH GT

Chennai appears to be in the middle of a swine flu panic with eight deaths and 225 people being affected by the disease in Tamil Nadu, this year, so far.

While the Tamil Nadu Government is monitoring the situation and supplying Tamiflu tablets for the prevention and the treatment of the people, private labs are fleeing people for swine flu testing.

The swine flu test alone costs a minimum of Rs. 5000 in testing centres across Chennai, while the swine flu kit costs around Rs. 3000. Government centres do the test for free but there is a long delay in the results reaching the patients.

"I gave my sample for testing at a government centre and the results hadn't reached me even after three weeks. Fed up, I decided to get it tested at a private clinic but was shocked to find out that they were charging Rs. 7000," says Mala Mathews, a teacher.

While, cities like New Delhi



H1N1 Vaccination Camp organised by Chennai Corporation. PHOTO: The Hindu

have put a limit of Rs 4500 on the swine flu tests done in private labs, Chennai does not seem to have such restrictions.

Most residents are furious as it just a test and not the treatment and it is so expensive. However some labs try to justify the cost.

Says J. Dina of Bharath Scans,

"The swine flu test kit is priced at Rs 3000. On top of this we need special equipment and trained personnel who can do the test. This is one of the reasons it is so expensive."

However, Chennai residents do not agree with it saying that the doctors and labs should also think

about those who cannot afford the tests at private hospitals yet need the results soon.

Kanna, a daily wage labourer, says, "Both my sister and daughter had to be tested for swine flu so we went to the Government hospital. But they said the results will take time. We couldn't approach private clinics because we don't have that much money."

"The main reason swine flu tests are expensive, is because it is an imported test. The second reason is that it is a very specific test and hence the price hike. But there is still no reason for the test to cost more than Rs. 4000," says Dr Deviprasad, a city physician and Virologist.

While the private clinics are still making a killing, there are doctors who want the clinics to start charging less.

Dr Amita Murali says, "I do not see why the private clinics in charge of testing for the H1N1 virus charge so much for just a test. It can be brought down to around Rs. 3500 at least as a minimum.

They do not seem to realise that their primary job is to help people and not make money."

Officials from places such as Hitech Diagnostic Centre, Communicable Disease Hospital and Chennai King Institute, say that the tests are so expensive as there are only limited places where such a test can be done and therefore the price becomes more.

Says K. Janardhan of Jeevan Diagnostics Lab, "We do our best to provide it cheap for the patients but the testing kit itself is expensive and since we do not have subsidies from the government, we have to charge full price."

Chennai residents have asked Government officials to look into the matter and standardise the rates across all clinics and hospitals.

Another problem that non-Tamil speaking Chennaiites have to suffer is the language barrier especially on the Corporation of Chennai Swine Flu helpline (1913) where the operator only converses in Tamil.



Fr. Alexis Prem Kumar (R) with Fr. Francis Jayapathy addressing the Press Conference at Loyola College. PHOTO: Sruthin Lal

## "The next time we'll shoot you"

SRUTHIN LAL

"This time we release you, the next time if you come, we will shoot you" was the last thing the kidnapers told Father Alexis Prem Kumar (47) when he was released from an eight-month custody near Herat in western Afghanistan.

Alexis was abducted on June 2, 2014, while returning from a visit to a school where his mission, Jesuit Refugee Service has been working.

He was forced at gunpoint into a vehicle by a group of armed men.

When asked about the reasons for the kidnapping, Alexis said at a press conference that he did not know why they did it and it had nothing to do with his religion.

"I was treated very well [and] was always told that I would be freed soon," he said. He had been guarded by three armed men with his hands and legs chained.

"It was only because they did not want me to escape."

Alexis, accompanied by his family, was talking at the press conference organised by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) at Loyola College here on Thursday.

He said that the kidnapers were men who were injured in battle; they looked simple, ordinary and sometimes desperate.

According to Bharat, another resident, the problems are more in the outer-areas of Chennai, where people often don't get water at all.

place. They would give me a piece of naan and tea then. For lunch and supper, I was served naan, rice or vegetables and occasionally meat," he said.

Alexis said that only one of the kidnapers treated him rudely, insinuating that he should strictly follow the rules of the place and keep the time schedule. The group leader asked him everyday how he felt, mentally and physically.

He insisted that no ransom was paid for his release, when he was freed on February 17.

After he was released and was being taken back to Kandahar, his vehicle was caught in the crossfire of a battle between two groups. But he reached Kandahar safely. He said he did not know who was involved in the firing.

Referring to the treatment he got from the Indian Consulate in Kandahar, he said "The officer there treated me like a close friend. Since it was a Friday, a holiday, and I couldn't buy anything he gave me his shirt, pants and shoes."

Alexis has been working in Afghanistan as a part of the JRS since 2012. He said he had fear in his mind; but thinking of the Afghan children who were denied education made him overcome the fear.

He thanked Prime minister Narendra Modi, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval for their efforts in bringing him back.

## Teachers protest for better pension

SUHAIL BHAT

The Joint Action Council (JAC) of Government and Aided College Teachers' Associations and the Tamil Nadu Association of Non Teaching Staff of Aided Colleges (TANTSAC) launched a three day picketing program from February 24 to 26 in front of the Directorate of Collegiate Education in support of their demands.

Around 150 teachers from different colleges gathered in front of the DCE office at 10:30 am on February 24 and started shouting slogans denouncing the government for neglecting their demands.

As they forcibly tried to enter the directorate office, they were arrested by police under the Disruption of Public Order Act and were released later in the evening.

The major demand of the protesting teachers is that the government should implement the Career Advancement Scheme including specific pay and working conditions, for teachers appointed on or after January 1, 2006.

"The working conditions in the colleges are not conducive at all. The infrastructure is old and the government funding is irregular", said Gandhi Ragan, lecturer of Chemistry at RKM Vivekananda College.

The teachers are demanding that the Government scrap the new pension scheme under which teachers are paid Rs. 1500 less than the earlier figure if Rs. 14,940 per month.

The protestors asked the government to increase the retirement age of college teachers from 58 to 65 as recently recommended by the University Grants Commission (UGC).

The salary of the teachers in many self-financing colleges fixed by the respective colleges mostly fall well short of the minimum salary of Rs. 25000 per month as recommended by the UGC.

"We requested the Education Ministry of Tamil Nadu Government to set up a committee to look into the issue of payment of salary and regularization of service for the college teachers," said V Ravichandran, lecturer of Physics at Loyola College.

The other demands include filling of 2000 vacant teaching posts in a non-corrupt and transparent manner.

## Enough water for summer?

SRUTHIN LAL

With the summer season fast approaching, the data from Chennai Metrowater shows that the total storage of all the major lakes that supply water to the city stands at only one-fourth of their total capacity in the last week of February.

This is much less compared to the storage in these lakes in the same period in the last two years, which was about one third in 2014 and nearly half in 2013.

However, Metrowater officials said there was nothing to worry about and that the water supply to Chennai would not be affected this summer.

The combined storage of Poondi, Cholavaram, Redhills and Chembarambakkam lakes is now 2863 million cubic feet (mcf), compared to the total combined storage capacity of 11057 mcf.

In lakes like Poondi and Cholavaram, the outflow of water is found to be much higher than the inflow.

Chennai is not likely to get much rainfall in the next five months. The water supply to the city is about 600 million litres a day, according to the Chennai



With a capacity of about 3200 mcf, the Poondi Water Reservoir provides water to Chennai. PHOTO: Sruthin Lal

Metrowater Board website.

S. S Saravanan, Public Relations in-charge at the Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board said that there was not much to worry about the situation as there are alternative sources like Veeranam tank, that provides 74 cubic feet water a day, and two desalination plants and ground water that could supply water to Chennai.

Saravanan also said that the

board was placing restrictions on the water supply to reduce unnecessary usage.

"We will cope with the situation as we did last year," he added.

Saravanan also said that the Krishna water, that was about to come by the end of March would also help in solving the issue.

However many residents are unhappy with the way the Corporation supplies water. Sudari Sundararajan, a resident of Choolaimedu, said that for the last

three years she had been getting metrowater only for two hours on alternate days, between 6.30 pm to 8.30 pm. She had been complaining to the Corporation, but the officials there said it is as per government order.

"They claim that the city has no water problem, which is hilarious," Sundari said.

According to Bharat, another resident, the problems are more in the outer-areas of Chennai, where people often don't get water at all.

## Students back to rote learning in Class X

SETHURAMAN SUNDAR

Students in matriculation schools in the city are finding it difficult to make a transition to a system based on rote learning in Class 10, after going through the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) system followed until Class IX where they were assessed holistically.

The School Education Department of Tamil Nadu introduced the CCE and Trimester pattern for Classes I to VIII in 2012-13 in the State Board schools. It was extended to Class 9 last year.

As per this system, the student assessment comprises two parts: a written exam which is conducted for 60 marks at the end of each term and a formative assessment which is done throughout the term, based on activities such as projects, debates, group discussions and other extracurricular activities. However, in Class X, students have to write the board exams for 100 per cent marks. There is no continuous evaluation. This partial implementation of

CCE is being blamed for the unnecessary pressure faced by Class X students in this year's board exams. "It was impossible to fail under the CCE system. The students just had 3 to 4 chapters for their terminal exams and once they were done with the exams they didn't have to study it again. Even if they failed in their exams they could pass with the marks in the formative assessment," said Kalpana K.M Headmistress, Chennai High School, Kottur.

"Now in Class X, the students don't have formative assessment marks to fall back upon. If they fail, then they have to study at least 12 chapters in each subject for their board exams. These kids are not used to such a burden," she added.

According to Merin. R, a class X student of St. Raphael's Higher Secondary School, Santhome, studying the whole book proved to be very difficult as they were used to the trimester system. "At first, our class felt as though the teachers were compelling us to study. The transition has been quite difficult," she said.



Transition from CCE to a regular evaluation system in schools is making life difficult for students. PHOTO: Sethuraman Sundar

The pressure to score high marks does not make the life of students easier. "My parents are putting

pressure on me to score more than 90 per cent, even though my average score is between 50 and 60

per cent," said Ajith Kumar. D, a Class X student of St Mary's Matriculation Higher Secondary

School, Chennai.

According to S. Selva, a student from the same school, the weaker students were unable to manage in Class X as it depended purely on memorizing ability unlike creativity in the CCE system.

Tamil Nadu introduced CCE following the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in India, in order to structure the education in the state based on the national pattern. However, CBSE follows the CCE pattern in class X as well unlike TNSCERT.

However, some teachers and students favoured CCE and found no problems in coping up in Class X. R. Arvind, a student of St. Mary's Matric Higher Secondary School, Kotturpuram said he had no difficulties in Class X after coming from the Trimester system.

Speaking positively about the impact CCE has had, K. Betti, a science teacher of the Advent Christian High School, Kotturpuram said, "Attendance has improved and it is also nurturing the students' creative ability. CCE should be extended to Class X."

# WHAT'S ON THE MENU?



Christophe at Wafob'el; (Right) Su Jae Gul is all smiles at In Seoul. PHOTO: Shriya Sharma



## Meet, chat, eat

SIDDHARTH TIWARI

From delicious french brunch at Le Mandiere to thick cheese coated pasta at Mash; grilled chicken paired with chilled beer at Touchdown Bar to spicy chinese cuisine at Wang's kitchen. These are favourites for the youth in Chennai.

"I go out every weekend with my friends to relax after a week long work at college. Being a student we cannot afford costly places like Raintree or The Flying Elephant. But thankfully Chennai has a lot of options that don't cost you a fortune," said Muneeb a student at IIT Madras.

These popular hangouts offer food that costs somewhere between Rs. 500 and Rs. 1000 for two.

Mash is a small food joint right in front of the Eliots Beach that offers European cuisine, mainly Italian, at an affordable price. Order anything from their breakfast menu along with maska chai. They offer complimentary bread toast on any order during breakfast.

"We open at 8 am on Sundays as a lot of student-s come here for breakfast. They spend their time either reading or chatting while they have their breakfasts," said Venky, Mash's manager.

Advertised as a classic 'Americana Hotel', QT Grills is located in Adyar. It has dim lighting and poster of Uncle Sam hanging on the wall. Waffles, chicken salad and pancakes are on the menu. However the place has nothing to offer to vegetarians. The cost for two people at QT Grills is somewhere around Rs 500 to Rs 600.

"Baltimore crabs and chicken quesadillas is a must try here," said Aprajita, a software engineer at HCL technologies.

"I think they should offer beer, at least during weekends," she added.

Located at Crescent road Adyar, Azzuri Bay is a rooftop dine-in.



Chaats and burgers are some of the favourites among Chennai's youth. PHOTO: Siddharth Tiwari

The place is perfect for a good candle light dinner for couples. While the place offers a variety of vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes it is not hard on pocket. This makes the place appropriate for students who need not worry too much on the expenditure front.

The cost for two at Azzuri Bay is approximately Rs. 700 to Rs. 800.

A bustling commercial area in northern part of Chennai,

Sowcarpet is famous for its rich North Indian flavour.

The narrow streets have several roadside food stalls and small dhabas that offer a variety of fast foods like Pani puri, Samosa Chaat, Kachori and Chole baature.

"I come to Sowcarpet everytime I crave for spicy samosa chaat and sweet lassi. It is a blessing for North Indians like us in Chennai," said Mohit Singh, a sales executive at Toyota.

## Making Chennai their own

SHALINA PILLAI  
SHRIYA SHARMA

With more and more Chennaites ready to experiment with cuisine from other countries, the city has become an ideal place for foreigners to start restaurants.

From Italian to Korean, to Lebanese and Thai, Chennai is now a melting pot of different flavours. Recently ranked second in a list in the National Geographic of the top food cities across the world, Chennai has become a food lovers paradise.

The smell of wood fire oven pizzas amidst the al fresco setting makes Bella Ciao, the Italian restaurant on the Kottivakkam beach, the perfect place for some authentic Italian fare. Started in 1998 by 29-year old Ciro Cattaneo, Bella Ciao is now one of the most popular restaurants among Indians and Europeans alike. However, Cattaneo did not always start big.

"When he first came to Chennai in the 90's, it was difficult to find

any place that served Italian food. So he decided to open up his own small Italian place in Besant Nagar," said Danielle Cattaneo, Ciro Cattaneo's mother. The small place soon became a huge hit among Chennaites.

In 2002, Ciro shifted his restaurant to Kottivakkam. The rest of the Cattaneo family shifted to Chennai in 2005 and now help Ciro run the place.

"The people are friendly and we don't have any plans to shift back," Danielle said while talking about the future plans for the restaurant. "We like the East," she added.

Markedly lighter on the stomach, authentic oriental cuisine has become very popular among city dwellers. Going beyond just cabbage kimchi (fermented cabbage), the popularity of Korean food in the city is on the rise as people have started giving *beef bulgogi* (marinated beef barbeque), *bibimbap* (rice mixed with meat and vegetables) and *japchae* (stir fried potato noodles) a try.

When Seu Jae Gul came to

Chennai in 1995, as a Hyundai employee, little did he know that he'd quit his job to do what he loved - make food. Today, he is the proud owner of In Seoul - an authentic Korean restaurant on TTK road in Alwarpet.

After spending 20 years in India, Gul pointed out a huge difference between Indian and Korean cultures. "In Korea, our dinner time begins at 6pm and ends by 8pm. After that we drink. In India, people start eating only after 8.30 pm," he said with a grin.

The restaurant caters to mainly Japanese and Koreans with only 30 per cent Indian customers.

Taking advantage of the availability of fresh seafood, Dahlia, attracts sushi lovers from across the city. Located in Nungambakkam, this tiny eatery has been serving authentic Japanese food for 22-years.

"We come here at least once a month. The sashimi and the Sake, served with a side of fried shrimps are our favourites," said Aparna, a 43-year-old housewife.

For people with a sweet tooth, the newly opened Wafob'el ensures that one does not have to go to Belgium to eat Belgian waffles. Located in Nugambakkam, the waffle shop was started by Christophe and his Indian partner, Sajjad. Wafob'el, which opened on February 12 this year, is already getting plenty of customers.

Christophe, who shifted to Chennai three years back with his wife, only recently decided to open the waffle joint. "I used to bake waffles for my friends during get-togethers and I thought why not make the most of it," said Christophe.

"I love visiting this place. The owner is very friendly and the waffles are quite cheap," said Kunal, a second year student at Loyola College.

Christophe, ensuring that all the waffles are eggless said, "In Chennai, the people are mainly vegetarian." He quickly added, "Also, because I like eggless waffles more."

## Selling food to pay tuition fee

SUSMITA JOSEPH

When Tenzin Tashi and Tenzin Lobsang started Kailash Kitchen in 2008, they were college students in need of money to pay their bills. The restaurant serves authentic Tibetan food.

Tashi, a student of Loyola College, was hesitant at first but the encouragement he received from his college friends, motivated him to start the restaurant in Choolaimedu.

"We used to cook Tibetan food for our friends in Chennai and they loved it. They would beg us to make more and one of my friends suggested that Lobsang and I start a restaurant," he said.

They were able to start the restaurant without any hassle with a crowd of mainly college students, thronging the dimly-lit restaurant. "We were earning more than enough to pay our rent and college tuition fee. By the time we completed our course, we had a stable business," he said.

There is always a long line of customers waiting to get their share of *momos* and *thukpas*.

Aravind Kumar, a student of Loyola College, said "I have been coming here since it started. The food is affordable and the service is friendly. I do not mind waiting in line for even an hour for their food!"

Apart from Kailash Kitchen, there is another Tibetan restaurant called Passang in

Tambaram, which was started by Tibetan students from Madras Christian College (MCC). Its owner, Tenzin Passang, started the restaurant in 2013.

Passang says, "My friends and I used to set up momo stalls in our college during food festivals and they used to be the first items to sell out."

"I started the restaurant due to the great demand for momos in the city and the large number of Tibetan students in Tambaram who missed the food from their homes."

The restaurant is not yet well-known in the city but it is famous in Tambaram where students from MCC have made it their favourite hang out.

"The business is going well as students

really appreciate Tibetan food." Passang said. "The income from the restaurant has helped me to provide an education for my siblings."

Tibetan and Chinese food are in great demand in the city and several Tibetan students set up food stalls during college functions, helping them earn money.

Tashi from Kailash Kitchen finds Chennai a suitable place for business.

"People in Chennai are very peaceful and friendly. They are also open to trying out food from different cuisines. I had the option of moving to Delhi and starting a restaurant there but I chose to stay in Chennai which I have accepted as my home and where people have accepted me," he said.



The momos on offer here are available at Rs. 80 PHOTO: Susmita Joseph

## Grappling with the e-waste threat

SHAMBHAVI PRAKASH

The growing problem of electronic waste cannot be fully addressed until there is cooperation between people and the registered e-waste companies, say experts.

V.R.K. Raman, Senior Consultant at Tritech Systems, said, "Dissemination of knowledge is the key to proper collection and safe disposal of e-waste material. Households and big companies should understand implications of burning or breaking it and dumping in municipal sites as it releases toxic fumes that is immensely harmful to humans and environment."

Comparing Chennai with Kodaikanal, Raman pointed out that the latter is much cleaner because of a higher level of awareness among the people.

E-waste is any electrical or electronic device that is no longer fit for use and needs to be discarded. Polychlorinated biphenyls, Chlorofluorocarbons,



A truck carrying discarded electrical devices. PHOTO COURTESY: The Hindu

Polyvinyl Chloride are some of the halogenic compounds in e-waste. Outside that, heavy metals like Arsenic, Beryllium, Cadmium, Chromium, Lead, Lithium, Nickel, Silver and Gold are typically present. Raman added that in this endeavour the government and the private sector should join hands to

help the situation.

"It needs to be advertised to make the population aware of the dangerous effects of e-waste chemicals, otherwise they will continue throwing electronic scrap in the dustbin or sell it to the local dealers for some extra money, putting their ecology at risk,"

observed Raman.

"Moreover, strict rules should be put in place whereby its mandatory for every company to reveal the amount of e-waste produced annually and how much of it is disposed safely," he added.

Ultrast solutions's Mahesh Kumar, Business Development Executive said, "Not many consumers approach us because of local dealers ready to exchange scrap for decent prices. People should learn that proper disposal of old electronics in itself is a costly affair and therefore, expecting money for the scrap is not right."

Discussing the nature of their work, Kumar said, "We give details to the corporate sector regarding the collection and lift material from them, then cross check its exact weight. The scrap is segregated into plastic, aluminium and copper and dismantled using pneumatic tools."

Kuppathothi is yet another venture which buys recyclable e-waste from households.

talking of a similar situation said, "Our representative has a weighing machine and a price list as the money is paid according to the weight of the junk. But the problem is that people often bargain the prices of waste and prefer selling it to the local junk dealer who offers more."

"In contrast to developed countries across the world, e-waste recycling is provided as a service where consumers pay to have their old electronics recycled," she added.

Emphasizing the need to save the environment, Arun Kumar, Assistant Environmental Engineer, Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board said, "Even after the formulation of e-waste management rules in 2011, the bulk of e-waste is being disposed by unauthorised dealers who due to lack of capital and technical expertise use crude and hazardous recycling techniques like open incineration and acid stripping for extracting metals from e-waste."

SANTOSH GT

Chennai has come under the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) spotlight with the recent arrest of two brothers transporting three kilograms of crystal meth and a Ghana national transporting a kilogram of cocaine.

The drug culture has always been prevalent in Chennai due to its large student population, most of whom depend on marijuana.

Thomas Jacob\*, a third-year engineering student, "While it is not as easy as in North India, a 100 gram pack of marijuana, enough for 20 blunts, is available for Rs. 500. We call it 'student-budget weed'." Peddlers are present all over the city. They often roam around on scooters and can be spotted in crowded market places as compared to open areas. Says Vanitha\*, a dealer who's been peddling weed since 1971, "I've been dealing for more than 40 years now and I don't regret it. It has made a life for me and my family. Since I don't sell to underage customers, I assume that

those who come to me to buy know what they are doing as they're old enough." De-addiction is a difficult process and TTK Hospital has a de-addiction centre for victims of drug abuse. "I see many victims of drug abuse in a week. Most of them are college students. The taboo associated with women doing drugs is waning," says counsellor Aruna Kumar.

The NCB has been able to bust those carrying hard, synthetic drugs but the hunt for marijuana peddlers in the city is tough. "We conduct awareness camps and also have plain clothes personnel on duty at various locations," an NCB official said. The police aren't keen on arresting people caught with marijuana, which is an incentive for those smoking it.

"When the police caught me, they just confiscated my 200 gram pack of weed, asked me for Rs. 300 and lectured me on its dangers," says Mathew Chacko, a college student.

The police refuse to comment. \*names changed

## Drugs and the city

### RAILWAY BUDGET 2015-16

**₹ No increase in ticket fares**

**WiFi in 400 stations**

**24x7 helpline for passenger problems & security-related complaints**

**Advance ticket booking period increased from 60 days to 120 days**

**Swachh Rail Swachh Bharat Abhiyan to keep Railways clean**

**Surveillance cameras in coaches for the safety of women passengers**

**E-catering on IRCTC online**

**Train speeds to increase 20% in 2 years**

INFOGRAPHIC: Sadhana C & Priyanka Sahoo

## Mixed response

SHALINI RAJVANSHI

Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu rolled out the railway budget on Thursday, 26 Feb, amid high expectations.

The focus of the budget was on enhancing the travel experience of commuters. For the first time, no new trains were introduced.

There were mixed reactions from the public regarding what the budget meant for them.

"It is good that advance booking can be made 120 days before travel instead of 60 days. It has become easier to plan travel now," said Aditi Gupta, a student of literature in New Delhi.

She felt that the ticket vending machines would make it easier to procure tickets instead of standing in long queues and wasting time.

Prashant Goel, a trade consultant and political analyst, was of the opinion that the new budget was more pragmatic.

"It is not politically motivated. It is based on the need of the hour, such as food and cleanliness. The best part is that fares have not been increased further," he said.

He stated that it was a good move by the government to not announce new trains as these new projects hardly took off and were more a political gimmick.

"It is the first budget in which the opposition has not cribbed. Some from the opposition even appreciated it," he added.

However, not everyone is happy with the new ideas presented by the government. "It is a lazy budget," said Vivek Rungta, a software engineer working with Microsoft.

He said no concrete problems had been addressed by the government. "The government this time has only focussed on how to beautify the facade of the railway network. They should've introduced ways to tackle commuter rush and fare prices which at times are almost as much as an air ticket these days," he added.

Manu, a law student, was unsatisfied with the "lacklustre budget."

He said, "The government had been harping on the needs of the gareeb aadmi but no fares have been decreased. There was so much hype about the Swachh Bharat campaign but no substantial work has been done."

Radha Devi, a home maker, is happy about the announcement that surveillance cameras would be installed in the coaches for the safety of women passengers.

M. Michael, a Southern Railways official, commented that it was good that no new trains had been announced.

"Every year, so much is announced but so less is done. There are many pending projects but the government keeps announcing new ones every year even before clearing the backlog. For instance, the Erode to Palani line has still not been completed," he said.

# Saving incentives needed

SETHURAMAN SUNDAR

Higher income tax slabs, increase in the exemption limit under 80C and more incentives to increase savings and investment are some of the expectations of people here in this year's financial budget.

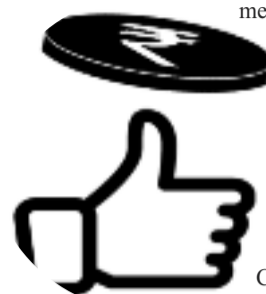
Curbing inflation tops the list of demands the Aam Aadmi has before the Narendra Modi government.

"The government should take steps to control inflation. Even though I had a salary hike five years back the effect is not shown in the savings because of high inflation," said M. Manimaran, Assistant Manager at State Bank of India's Indira Nagar Branch Chennai.

Over the years the government has consistently increased the tax exemption slab from Rs. 1.6 lakh in the Financial Year (FY) 2010-11 to Rs. 2.5 lakh in the last budget.

A similar hike is expected this year too; moreover, taxpayers want an enhancement of exemptions under section 80C of the Income Tax Act which gives deductions to invest in a broad range of products like provident fund, fixed

deposits and insurance policies and to meet expenses like repayment of housing loans.



"I want the general exemption limit to be raised to Rs. 5 lakh. The exemption under 80C should be raised to Rs. 2 lakh from the current level of Rs. 1.50 lakh," said R. Vignesh who works with Cognizant Technology Solutions (CTS) in Chennai.

"Moreover tax deduction for repayment of home loan interest should be increased from the present limit of Rs. 2 lakhs to Rs. 5 lakhs," he added.

According to V. Nagappan, Financial Consultant and President of Securities and Time Share owners Association, an organisation working on the welfare of equity investors, the government should give separate exemptions for

investments and genuine expenses like home loan repayment. "There is no logic in clubbing exemptions for home loans and Public Provident Fund in the same category. Moreover benefits under 80C should be linked to the slab," he said.

However some favour a proportional tax system, a system where the same tax rate applies for all income groups.

"It is better to do away with complicated exemptions and widen the tax net by reducing the tax rate," said Denny Kurier, a former financial journalist.

"Every government has to strike a balance between efficiency and equity. But in the quest to be fair towards taxpayers' government should not sacrifice efficiency," he added.

Regarding the scrapping of Dividend Distribution Tax (DDT), a tax on dividend paid by companies, Nagappan said, "DDT at the present rate of 15 per cent discourages companies from distributing dividends and opting for retained earnings. Moreover it is a case of double taxation as the company already pays tax on its profit. It will be better if the government taxes the dividend at the hands of the receivers."

## Academicians ask for implementation

SHALINA PILLAI

Ahead of the Union Budget 2015-2016, stakeholders in the education sector, in Chennai are demanding better implementation of existing schemes and a bigger fund allotment than previous year's figure of Rs. 68, 782 crore.

According to P. Ramaya, a professor at the Ambedkar Law College, the previous government had set up around seven to eight new institutions, from 2008. This year, she said that the Narendra Modi government should try and improve the existing infrastructure across universities.

"The government easily forgets that the institutions have to be maintained."

Ramaya added that it would be beneficial for both the students and the teachers if the government allotted a certain sum to renovate the existing buildings in universities. Last year, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley announced Rs. 500 crore for the implementation of 'Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya New Teachers Training Programme'.

However, government schools still believe that the quality of teachers needs to be improved.

"I think this budget should focus on teacher's training so that they can help improve the quality of the students," said Sicily Thomas, the Secretary of Avvai Home Girls Higher Secondary School.

"There is a government rule that says that all the students in primary



Schools want the government to improve the Gross Enrolment Rate. PHOTO: Shalina Pillai

was 82.0 per cent. For the Classes IX-X, it was 66.6 and for Classes XI - XII, it was 45.9 only.

Students pursuing higher studies, across the city, want the government to play a role in helping the students, especially from the lower income group, to get education loans easily.

"I had got admission for MBA in a private university, but no bank was willing to give me the loan looking at my financial background," said Amrita Panwal, a second year student at IIT - M.

According to a report in The Hindu, dated 20 August 2014, parents had filed a PIL in the Supreme Court asking the Centre to regulate private coaching institutes. However, the managers of the institutes are making no such demands.

"Most of the teachers who come here to teach are working part-time. They usually teach in other universities and take classes for extra income. It works for both the management and the teachers," said P. Ramesh, head of PS Coaching Centre, Adyar.

In all, there is a general consensus among all the stakeholders that for this year's budget, the Finance Minister should focus on spending and improving the existing schemes in the education sector rather than launching new ones.



## Slash interest rates, say small-scale industries

SHAMBHAVI PRAKASH

Although the small industries associations are critical of the government favouring multinational companies, this time they expect their needs to get acknowledged in the upcoming Union Budget 2015 with emphasis on new schemes and benefits, reduction of interest rates and taxation incentives.

Tamil Nadu Small and Tiny Industries Association (TANSTIA) Vice President, C.K. Mohan said, "Since the present sick unit rehabilitation programme is not effective, an appropriate sick MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises) rehabilitation scheme must be worked out at once so that the assets are not stuck when the investment is not used."

On the threats posed by unabated import of goods to the MSMEs, Mohan said, "A large number of items produced by the MSMEs are increasingly being imported from Bangladesh under South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) which adversely affects these enterprises."

TANSTIA further proposed in their Pre-Budget suggestions that the rate of income tax should be decreased from 30 to 20 per cent for MSMEs. For wind mill farms whose running cost is very low, accelerated depreciation should be restored. In order to boost the MSME sector, a stimulus package should be reinstated along with a rebate in interest rate.

P.B. Varadarajan, President of Renewable Energy Harvesting Environment Network



C.K. Mohan, Vice President, TANSTIA at a meet. PHOTO COURTESY: www.TANSTIA.net

Association (REHENA) said, "There is a lot of talk in the government to encourage the renewable energy sector but nothing is being done about it. The least that can be expected from the 2015 budget is incentives for installation of solar panels and other devices using renewable energy in all public buildings."

Raising the key issue of outstanding payment faced by the MSMEs, Varadarajan said, "MSMEs are the largest group of companies which are in a terrible state and need urgent attention. They don't cater to the broader market but to bigger manufacturers who often do not pay them on time."

When asked about his expectations from the Budget 2015, he said, "A statutory authority or

a fund should be set up to ensure timely payment to the small enterprises."

In Varadarajan's opinion, the government takes steps to benefit the big retailers like the Tatas and the Ambanis but does little for the MSMEs.

Similar concerns were echoed by the Secretary of Chennai Apparel Association, Padam Jain, about the hopes of the garment sector from the Union Budget. He said, "There is a rumour in the industry that excise duty may again be imposed. In that case, it will only increase the rates and add to unnecessary paper and office work, something we do not want."

"Another measure of the government which would greatly help the companies with small turnovers is subsidized loans given at a low interest rate. This is essential because these enterprises can't collect money by bringing public issues as is done by the Birlas and Ambanis."

T.V. Hariharan, President of CDISSIA (Chennai District Small Scale Industries Association) lamented about little access to technological advancements by the MSME sector. He said schemes like Technology Upgradation Fund (TUF) should be extended in the coming budget.

SADHANA C

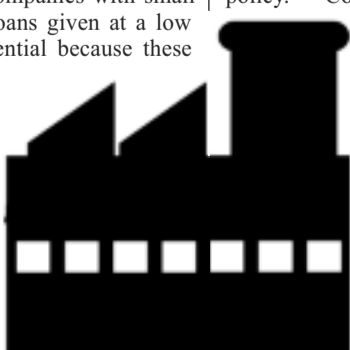
Businesspersons all over the country are looking forward to see what reforms the "business-friendly" Modi government would announce in its first full term budget.

Anand Sankara, Managing Director, Dharani Developers, a construction firm based in Chennai, hopes that the excise duty on steel and cement would be reduced.

"For the construction boom to continue, we need a liberal interest policy. Construction project

approvals should be centralised and norms should be brought in to speed up the process. In the current scenario, it's very difficult for construction companies to get a project off the ground," he says.

Ajith Krishnan, President of the India operations of NSK, a Japan-based firm that manufactures bearings and electronic steerings,



says that the automobile industry is hoping for inflation curbing measures as the auto-segment is extremely price sensitive.

## Women want more safety

PRIYANKA SAHOO

Women in the city say that apart from provision for healthcare, safety and better sanitation, proper implementation of allocated funds should be given importance in the Union Budget 2015.

"Funds allocated for women's welfare schemes do not reach the needy due to leakages in the system," said V. Balakarhika, Chief Manager of the Bharatiya Mahila Bank (BMB). She said that the work environment for women should be more conducive.

Sijo Joseph, a social worker at International Justice Mission, a Non-Government Organisation working for the rescue and rehabilitation of victims of human rights violations, said, "Women and children from the lower sections of the society are denied education and healthcare. Special Action Plans should be in place for better use of allocated funds."

The Nirbhaya Fund Scheme, which was proposed in the budget in 2013-14 and approved by the cabinet in 2014, was allocated about Rs. 1000 crore for the safety of women and girl children in public transport.

A press release from the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways on February 7, 2014 said that under the Nirbhaya Fund "a unified system at the National Level (National Vehicle Security and Tracking System) and State level (City Command and Control

Centre) for GPS tracking of the location of, emergency buttons in and video recording of incidents in public transport vehicles" would be set up in the first phase in 32 cities.

Women also emphasised the need for funds to encourage and assist women entrepreneurs.

S. Santhi, a T. Nagar resident who has helped set up about 50 Self Help Groups (SHG), said, "It is easier to get bank

assistance for SHGs but it is not so in case of personal loans for women."

Akshaya Kumar Sahoo, a Regional Rural Bank (RRB) Manager, said, "Women in need of financial assistance are deterred by high interest rates to ask for

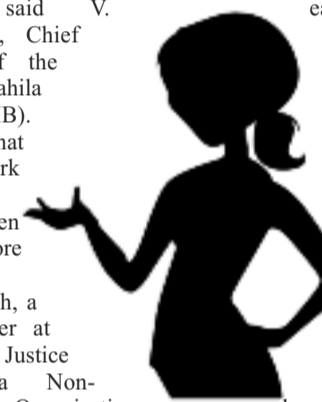
loans." Apart from lower interest rates, he also pressed the need for skill development training.

Santhi, who provides training to women for setting up SHGs, also said that skill development and awareness campaigns should be allocated funds in the budget.

Talking about income tax, BMB Chief Manager Balakarhika said that the tax slab should be the same for men and women.

In the budget 2013-14, the Finance Minister Arun Jaitley had made the tax slab same for men and women and raised the slab from Rs. 2 lakh to Rs. 2.5 lakh.

Home-maker V. Niranjana, who hoped for a reduction in the prices of vegetables and cereals, said, "If the prices of commodities don't go down, at least the income tax slab should be higher."



# World Cup fever hits City

SHRIYA SHARMA

The sale of cricket jerseys and bats has been soaring since the city after the ICC Cricket World Cup 2015 kicked off on February 14 in Australia.

Sporting goods stores in the city noticed a significant hike in the sales of their merchandise well ahead of the World Cup and expect the trend to continue now that the matches have started.

"There has definitely been an increase in sales in the last ten days. Each jersey costs Rs. 350, which is much more affordable here than in other shops. A lot of young boys have come in to buy jerseys, we even get bulk orders during the season," said Arif, Manager at Dhoni Sports in Chepauk.

Cricket fans, who are at their patriotic best when there is a match between India and Pakistan, have been flocking to these sports stores to show their passion for the game and for the country, according to Ravi Kumar, Manager at Sachin Sports in Chepauk.

"Our shop has been there for the last 30 years and when there is an India Vs. Pakistan match we see the maximum number of customers come in. Though profit is less by 10 per cent this year as compared to the last World Cup, it is still early to decide what the sales will be like this season", said Kumar.

Local sports goods shops, located on Wallajah Road near the Chepauk cricket stadium, sell their cricket merchandise at very affordable rates and cater to larger audiences as compared to branded



(Above) Cricket fans buying bats in Chepauk. (Right) ICC World Cup official merchandise at Nike outlets around the city  
PHOTO: Shriya Sharma

stores such as Nike, Adidas and Reebok. With jerseys not costing more than Rs. 400 and bats ranging from Rs. 500 – Rs. 1500, these shops have customers walking in throughout the day.

"We sell around 40 jerseys each month during World Cup season, with 2-3 being bought on a daily basis. The jersey costs Rs. 4995 which can be bought by itself or with the entire kit which includes track pants (Rs. 3000) and a cap (Rs.1000) as well," said Anand, Area Manager at Nike in Phoenix Market City Mall, Velachery.

Nike, though the official kit sponsor for the national team, has fewer customers at different outlets across the city as compared to the

local stores due to the exorbitant prices of their cricket merchandise.

"Buying jerseys from Nike and other big shops is a waste of money, I can buy a jersey, gloves, a bat and guards for the price of one jersey at Nike," said Manoj (16), a student and cricket enthusiast.

While some fans prefer getting their merchandise at pocket-friendly outlets, others remain brand conscious and would rather buy official merchandise.

"I only buy my jerseys from Nike. They last very long and are of very good quality. The World Cup happens once in four years so I do not mind spending a little extra", said Gautam, a 27-year-old software engineer and cricket lover.



# Ola autos a boon for drivers, public

SRISHTI PALIWAL

Ola auto services have emerged as a profitable venture for auto drivers and a convenient public transport for the people of Chennai, two months after the cab service inducted around 2000 auto rickshaws through their app based network.

Ola auto drivers earn Rs. 30 per ride from Ola over and above the meter fare for each ride that is booked via the Ola app; they are not obligated to pay even a single penny to Ola. This arrangement has proved to be immensely profitable, and convenient, say the auto drivers.

Sadayandi, an auto driver associated with Ola has a one month experience with the cab company's latest venture. From January 21 to February 19, he took 280 Ola trips and earned Rs. 8400.

"I'm able to make more money after joining Ola... I'm getting more customers and I don't have to pay anything to the company," he said.

"I already know where I will get the customer, I also know where the customer wants to go... everything is done on the app. It is very easy. I make about Rs. 1000 from Ola customers everyday," he said.

"Ola drivers get Rs. 100 once they complete a minimum of three

rides per day and on top of that they get Rs. 30 per ride", said Murugan an autodrivers who has not joined Ola yet.

Murugan believes Ola has come up with a very unique idea which is facilitating an additional income for the autodrivers. He earns Rs. 20,000 to Rs. 25,000 per month and is hoping to make an additional Rs. 10,000 once he joins Ola.

"A lot of my friends have joined Ola... there is a big queue outside the Ola office in Ramapuram as everyday around 150 autos are joining. I will join next week when there is lesser rush", he said.

With Ola's arrival, passengers have found faith in autos again. Auto drivers in Chennai often refuse to go by the meter and are known to charge excessive fare.

Ola not only provides customers with the convenience of booking an auto via their app, it also ensures that all Ola autos charge by the meter and only a convenience charge of Rs. 10 is charged over the meter fare.

"Ola autos have made travelling in the city much easier... I don't have to wait for 15 minutes across the Indira Nagar station like I used to before... I just book it via the app and I don't even have to haggle over the auto fare anymore," said Shruti, a student at the Mathematical Institute in Taramani.



Prof. Eric Lander, (left) interacting with students after his lecture at Lady Andal Auditorium, Chennai, accompanied by N. Ram, Chairman, Kasturi and Sons. PHOTO: Sruthin Lal

# Call for collective efforts in human genome research

SRUTHIN LAL

Genomic research since the completion of the Human Genome Project (HGP) has only "scratched the surface" of the possibilities it can offer, according to Eric S. Lander, MIT professor.

The project required an enormous amount of collaborative effort to realise it, said Lander, one of the scientists behind the Human Genome Project.

Lander said had if the Human Genome Project (HGP), launched in the 1980s to map the genome composition of humans, been a private research it would not have been possible to make the advances in genomic research that had been done so far.

On the role of India in the genetic research, he said the country had a major role in it as it had a "huge population with extraordinary diversity."

This made India "the most interesting country for genetic research."

Lander was delivering a lecture on "The Human Genome and Beyond: A 35 year Journey of Genomic Medicine," here as part of the three-city Cell Press-TNQ Distinguished Lectureship Series.

"The data we got from the project [HGP] is like a book whose text is in a language we don't know yet. We need to breath meaning to this meaningless text," he said.

Lander said that the genomic

research would lead to more understanding of the genomic origin of diseases.

Calling for called for healthcare systems the world over to be turned into an earning system by sharing information to facilitate genetic research, Lander said, the collective information that would emerge from the collaborative genetic research should lead to a "new taxonomy of diseases" and ultimately into a "library of life."

He mentioned the Precision Medicine Initiative of the US President Barack Obama, that dealt with disease treatment and prevention, taking into account variability in genes, environment, and lifestyle for each person.

He said that it could be replicated anywhere in the world and the data that were available from HGP could be its foundation.

Referring to media hype regarding the scientific research outputs, he said that when the HGP's results came out, New York Times reported, in 2001, that "genetic code of human life is cracked by scientist". That according to him was a sensational way of putting it.

Lander said that the same reporter, after ten years, wrote a story, "human genome fails to deliver."

When he was asked by this reporter, his advice to the science journalists, Lander said, "figure out how to make it clear and simple."

# Chennai's changing book stores

SADHANA C

Bookstores in Chennai are trying to diversify and set up an online presences to stay afloat and compete with e-commerce retailers.

Syed Nizam, Manager of Words and Worths, a bookstore in Besant Nagar which was started 14 years ago, says his shop is getting a web store soon.

"We are seeing a 10% loss in sales every month due to online stores," he says. "First we sold only books, but we had to start selling toys, games and accessories to attract more people."

The shop is tucked away in the basement of a building and the glass display below the shop's signboard is lined with Barbies, Hot Wheels cars and Chhota Bheem stuffed toys, with no sign of the bestsellers and children's books that the store has in abundance.

Chains like Odyssey, that were once known primarily as bookstores, have had to give way to retailing products other than books to stay profitable.

Only about a third of the shelf space at the Odyssey store in Adyar is stocked with books, the remaining being occupied by accessories and stationery.

"People who come to buy books also tend to buy gift articles or toys and vice versa. The income from the sale of gift articles is very encouraging," says Thyagaraj, the Floor Manager at the Odyssey bookstores in Adyar.

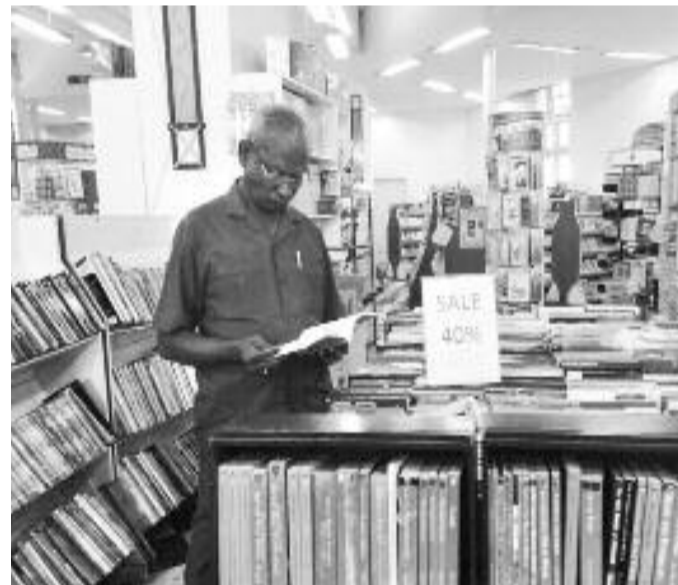
Some chains have started shutting down.

"We had to shut down as sales dropped," says staff member V. Gopi resignedly, as he oversees the closing of the Landmark bookstore at Spencer's mall on Mount Road.

One of 30 who worked in the shop, he says he doesn't know what he is going to do next.

This is the second of Landmark's stores in the city that was shut down in the last eight months. The one in Citi Centre was shut down last August.

However, the trend is different at the oldest bookstore in the city, the 175-year-old Higginbothams on Mount Road.



A customer browsing through the huge collection of books at the Higginbothams Store on Mount Road. PHOTO: Sadhana C

M. Hemalatha, Manager at the store who has worked there for 32 years, says that their sales are not really affected by e-commerce retailers. "We have lost out a bit on

the youth market though," she says. "Nowadays young people prefer to go to malls and buy books there."

Hemalatha concedes that physical bookstores cannot offer

the kind of discounts that online retailers do but she says that these discounts apply only to books by very popular authors and that their customer base is different.

"We have a strong Tamil language section and we supply books to many universities and colleges. There's no other physical store that completely caters to books like we do, but we're also trying to get an online store so that we can reach more people," she says.

At Tara books, in GCE colony, Thiruvanniyur, which is a publishing house-cum-bookstore that specialises in picture books for children and adults, Nancy Prabha, Store Manager, says that their online store helps them more as they have a niche market.

"If it were just art books in a housing locality like ours, there is hardly any scope of people coming all the way to buy books," she says.

"We conduct special art exhibitions and workshops throughout the year. People keep coming back to us regularly for these exhibitions and the books."

# Lack of facilities ails govt hostels

SETHURAMAN SUNDAR

The stench of urine and faeces, rats running in the kitchen, crammed rooms, leftover food dumped in the courtyard, thick cobwebs hanging in the toilet these are some of the features of the M.C. Rajah Hostel for Scheduled Caste students in Saidapet.

The situation is not very different in the Government ITI Boys (MBC) hostel in Guindy and the Government College BC Boys Hostel, Kailasapuram, Mylapore. All the three hostels lack proper toilets, libraries and recreation facilities.

The lack of quality food makes life tough for students who are first generation college goers hailing from the northern districts of the State such as Dharmapuri, Villupuram, Thiruvallur and Thiruvannamalai.

Getting admission in a Dalit hostel itself is a task.

"Though the classes start in the first week of July, hostels are allotted only during the second week of August. If a student has an acquaintance in Chennai he or she stays with them, others sleep on the Marina Beach and use the corporation toilets during this period," says M. Silambarasan, a student of Govt. Arts College for Men, Nandanam who stays in the Mylapore hostel.

"This long wait for hostel allotment forces half of them to drop their studies and go back home," says Silambarasan.

Once they get admission to the hostels, a fresh set of problems arise, space constraints



One of the toilets in MC Rajah Hostel Saidapet. PHOTO: Sethuraman Sundar

being the biggest of them. A typical 20 x 15 sq. ft room accommodates 10 to 20 students.

"Half of them sleep on the terrace, while four to five students sleep outside the room. Things get tough when it rains as everyone stays inside the room," says R. Manimaran, a third year Diploma in Mechanical Engineering student of Central Polytechnic College, Taramani who stays in Government ITI Boys (MBC) hostel in Guindy. The food served in the hostel mess is of poor quality and prepared in unhygienic conditions.

"The rice is sometimes half cooked, sometimes it's overcooked. There are weevils

in the rice on most of the days. If the rice is not of good quality the hostel authorities can return them but they seldom do it," says Nishant K., a third year BA Labour Management student of Tamil Nadu Institute of Labour Studies, who stays in the Mylapore hostel.

"Both the store room and kitchen are infested with rats. We get the food only after they taste it," he adds with a grin.

Though there is a provision for a gymnasium and games room, such facilities are non-existent. The gym in the Saidapet hostel has no equipment. Though there is a

functioning gym in the Mylapore hostel, there is no games room. The students in Guindy pool money to buy sports equipment.

Even the mandatory library room in the hostels is missing. The library room in the Saidapet hostel is used by the students to play cards. The students have to agitate to even get drinking water.

"We had to do a 'sit-in' protest two days ago as there was a water shortage in the hostel. Even to maintain the status quo we have to do a 'sit in' protest every six months," says Manimaran.

Employees in the Saidapet hostel blame the "corrupt and callous" administration for the problems.

"Though the government allots Rs. 985 for every student in the hostel not even half of it is utilised. The wardens and higher ups in Adi Dravida Department pocket the remaining amount. Last month G. Jagadeesan, former warden of the hostel, was suspended for misappropriation of funds," says an employee in Saidapet hostel.

According to this official anyone who questions the malpractices is threatened by the wardens and their cronies.

"They have kept some students on their side who intimidate other students if they raise their voice against what's happening here. I was transferred to Theni for writing a letter to the Commissioner of the Adi Dravida Department complaining about the malpractices here; the order was later quashed by the High Court," he says.