



**Budget 2017 tries to control damage**

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## Oil spill pollutes Chennai coast

ARITRY DAS

Two ships colliding near Kamarajar Port in Ennore on January 28 resulted in a massive amount of oil spill which has polluted almost the entire coastline of Chennai despite all efforts of government and environmental activists to contain it.

While on January 30 the oil polluted the Marina coast, the slick has now travelled further south reaching the shores of Besant Nagar, Thiruvanmiyur, and Palavakkam.

A Coast Guard official P. Singh said that the main oil spill at the spot of collision had been contained with special equipment as part of the National Oil Spill Disaster Contingency Plan and would not spread further. "Whatever has gotten out is coming to the shore and we are collecting



**The Coast Guard pumping out crude oil from the sea at Bharatiya Nagar Beach, Ennore.** ARITRY D

it."

The oil spill is being cleaned by the Coast Guard, volunteers from different NGOs, fishermen and local people. At Bharatiya Nagar Beach of Ennore—one of the worst

affected areas—seven tanks of oil alone were collected till midday by hand.

"It will take us another week to complete the clean up," said P. Singh on January 31.



**People rescue a turtle covered in crude oil.** ANINDITA B

The thick sludge could be removed only with pots and hand instead of motorized suction pipes.

"The Government is helping by giving motorized suction pipe but it is only taking in water," said volunteer G. Ezhumalai,

coordinator of Tree Foundation Community.

A lot of marine creatures have been victim of the oil spill. "If the oil remains there for longer, fish won't be able to breathe and eventually die," said Ezhumalai.

Sathish, a fisherman from Bharatiya Nagar in Ennore, said he had seen at least 10 turtles floating dead. According to him, sea creatures were dying in the shallow water where the crude oil had accumulated.

The oil spill has hit fish sales too.

M. Ravi, a fisherman from Ennore said, "The fish stinks of oil and hence people are not buying them. We are also unable to go fishing as the oil ruins the fishing net and then it cannot be used."

Having no work at the daytime except for helping in oil clean up, the fishermen are getting drunk near the beach.

"Our whole families are suffering. The fish market has been empty. We expect more support from the Government. At least they should ask people to start buying fish as soon as this is over," said Sathish.

## New US Bill will hit H1B workers

ARADHANA KALIA

Indian IT stocks on last week reacted sharply to new reports about a leaked US Bill to revamp the H1B work-visa programme under which Indian software firms send their workers to client locations in the US.

Tech Mahindra share lost 9.5 per cent, Infosys 4.5 percent, TCS 5.5 per cent and Wipro, which saw its largest fall of 4.1 percent in nine months. The firms recovered and at the end of the day, Infosys closed at 2.01 per cent, TCS at 4.47 per cent, Tech Mahindra 4.23 per cent, and Wipro 1.62 per cent.

The High-Skilled Integrity and Fairness Act of 2017 introduced by California Congressman Zoe Lofgren in the US House of Representatives calls for more than doubling the minimum salary of H1B visa holders from \$60,000 to \$130,000. The draft legislation also proposes to reserve 20 per cent of the H1B visas allocated annually for firms that have 50 or fewer employees.

The Bill if passed would mean that companies would have to either pay \$130,000 or more for skilled foreign workers, or employ American citizens at lower wages.

Muthuswamy R, the Chennai head of Tech Mahindra, said "They have raised the minimum salary to an amount that can only be earned by a person who has grey hair on his head and not someone with an experience of 5-10 years. So of course it will have a massive impact on the workforce."

According to an IANS report in 2016, 72 per cent of all the H1B visas issued by the US worldwide went to Indians.

The aim of the H1B visa programme was to supplement the US workforce with high-skilled workers to do jobs that Americans were not skilled to do. But over time, there have been many complaints that a lot of companies use the H1B visa to replace American workers as foreign workers can be hired at lower salaries with similar skills. In some cases, American employees have alleged that they were made to train H1B holders to do their own jobs, and then fired.

"As a whole it is going to have an impact on the industry and many Americans have voted Donald Trump as US President to do this. The Indian IT sector depends upon the US market; if the Bill is passed it may have to find new market and avenues," said Ruban Hobday head of FICCI Chennai.

"But I don't think it's something to worry about because our talent pool is much better than anybody else's. Plus, it also gives an opportunity for people to look for avenues in India as today they can earn the same here," he added.

IT sector employees think that the only thing one can do right now is to wait and see what happens.

"At the end of the day it is their country's policy, they can lift the ban tomorrow and then impose it again. So we have to wait and watch till the decision is taken and start looking for opportunities within and outside India" said Adithya S, an IT sector employee.

## Jallikattu culture "debatable"

Supreme Court: "Conservation of a culture should not involve inflicting unnecessary pain or suffering on animals"

APARNA DHANASEKAR & ANANYA SRIVASTAVA

The Supreme Court has refused to stay the Prevention of Cruelty (Tamil Nadu Amendment) Act, 2017 to permit Jallikattu and questioned the "basis" of the challenge made by animal rights activists and Tamil Nadu's stand on how the sport was linked to Tamil culture and traditions.

The Bench comprising Justices Dipak Misra and Rohinton F. Nariman while rejecting Compassion Unlimited Plus Action's (CUPA) plea, pulled up the Tamil Nadu Government for its failure to maintain law and order during the protests. "Please tell your State Executive, law and order has primacy in a civilised society," it said.

The Government had amended the Prevention of Cruelty Act to appease protesters who were opposing the ban on jallikattu. The protest turned violent after the



**Jallikattu in Avanniapuram near Madurai.** WIKIMEDIA

police started evicting the crowd that gathered on the Marina Beach in support of jallikattu.

Senior advocate Siddharth Luthra appearing for CUPA said that the basis for challenging the amendment was the violation of the 1960 Act by the state.

The Bench gave CUPA two weeks time to file fresh petitions and the State four weeks to file counter affidavits.

Meanwhile, Marina Beach, venue of the week-long protest, remained desolate after ban orders were imposed prohibiting the

assembly of five or more persons till February 12. The ban orders were withdrawn last week.

According to the police the protests, while remaining peaceful at the outset, ended with unrest after "anti-social elements" hijacked the agenda.

The beach was secured by several police units to prevent any protest.

The Sunday crowd and regular picnickers were missing except for the joggers, morning walkers and a few tourists.

The ban has hit small vendors on the beach.

Bhaskar, who sells ice cream, said, "For the past five days, all small shops are more or less closed because there is no crowd. Our business will be hit for the next 15 days."

"I have been running this business since 2000, and earning between Rs 700 and Rs 800 in a day. Now only four or five people buy ice cream," he added.



**Temporary stalls at Nadukuppam.**

AMBIKA R

## Temporary shops for fish vendors

AMBIKA RAJA

Fisheries Minister D.Jaykumar inaugurated the temporary fish vending stalls in Nadukuppam on Thursday. The older fish market was destroyed during the confrontation between the Police and the jallikattu protesters on January 23.

The market built by the Tamil Nadu Fisheries Department along with the Chennai Greater Corporation has 90 stalls that can accommodate two workers each, according to G.Ravi, a Fisheries Department official.

"Construction of the temporary stalls commenced on January 28. The fishermen have been cooperative so far. They are worried that if their shops are shut down for a long time, the customers would go to other markets. That is why we are building temporary stalls for them," he added.

Jaykumar earlier visited the site and promised to rebuild the 200 shops that were damaged in the violence. Chief Minister O.Paneerselvam had also promised that the new market would be 'modern and hygienic'.

Kalaiarasu, a fisherman, said, "The officials claimed that around 100 people will get their livelihood back once the stalls are open. Right now we are struggling to make a living. For days, we have not been able to go fishing. The oil spill that occurred in Ennore has also affected the waters here."

The newly built stalls are made of galvanised iron sheets and are 1.6 metres long and 1.2 metres wide. "The total length of the stalls is 106 metres. The materials used are fire proof and reliable. Until the new place is built they can work here," said Assistant Engineer M. Kathirvel.

However, not all fish vendors in Nadukuppam are satisfied with the temporary relief they are being given. They feel that once they start working in the stalls, the Government will not rebuild the old market.

"Let them build the stalls. We are not going to work there. We may sit or sleep in the stalls but we will not sell our fish," said Anandi, a fish vendor. "This is not the first time we are being tricked. We will fight until our demands are heard," she added.

## No NEET for Tamil Nadu

ANNU KAUSHIK

The Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly passed a bill today that exempts the state from National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) at UG level. Now admission to medical courses like Bachelor of Medicine or Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) and Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) will be done on the basis of the marks obtained in higher secondary examinations (10+2).

The NEET was introduced in 2013 as a common entrance test for admission into private and

government medical colleges. It replaced the All India Pre Medical Test (AIPMT) and individual entrances conducted by the states and colleges.

However many states including Tamil Nadu had protested this decision citing that state board students give exams in vernacular language while NEET is in Hindi and English. The NEET syllabus is based on the CBSE textbooks while the state boards follow a different syllabus.

Mohanapriya who teaches Biology at Rani Lady Meyyamai Higher Secondary School, Adyar

said, "The syllabus of the state board schools are much less compared to the CBSE schools so NEET would be a backset for Tamil medium students."

Mohanapriya said that none of her students took coaching for NEET due to financial issues.

The move was also welcomed by some members of the medical fraternity.

Ganesh Kumar who did his MBBS from Chennai Medical College in Tiruchi, said that he got admission through +2 marks.

He said, "Being a Tamil medium student it was difficult for

me to compete with the better English medium students."

Anu Asaitambi, an MBBS student at Madras Medical College said, "The government should have first improved the syllabus and teaching at the state boards to bring it on par with CBSE schools, before introducing NEET."

However Wesley M, faculty at the Akash Institute, Adyar, saw the bill as detrimental to students.

Wesley said, "The Tamil board students just mug up the syllabus and don't have any real understanding of Biology which is tested only in the entrances."

## Traders set to ban Pepsi & Coke, for "exploiting" water resources

ANINDITA BANERJEE

The Jallikattu protests in Tamil Nadu seem to have made way for new demands and revival of earlier appeals as the Tamil Nadu Vanigar Sangangalin Peramaipu has decided to stop the sale of soft drinks of multinational companies including Coca-Cola and Pepsi brands from March 1 2017.

The move came in during the week-long protests across the state over Jallikattu, or the traditional bull-taming sport. People debated on how to take this movement further to address other looming issues.

The demand to ban Pepsi and Coca Cola products was prevalent in most of these protests where youngsters were seen smashing bottles of these foreign soft drink companies to protest the exploitation of water resources.

The traders' union is of the opinion that the soft drink companies use the State's waters to manufacture its aerated drinks while farmers and the common public of the state are facing a shortcoming drought. According to them, Pepsi and Coca-Cola are exploiting the water sources of the farmers and the people and then using in their factories.

"Pepsi and Coca-Cola are taking water from the Thambarabarani River in Tirunelveli district because of which farmers have no water for irrigation," said Tamil Nadu Vanigar Sangam President Vikramaraja.

When asked where the local company Kalimark takes water from, he said, "definitely not from the Thambarabarani River." "Local brands like Bovonto need to be brought forward again. The locally manufactured products are our pride," he added.

Over 15 lakh members of the association have decided to stop the sale of soft drinks of multinational

*The Traders' Union: "Pepsi and Coca-Cola are taking water from the Thambarabarani River in Tirunelveli district because of which farmers have no water for irrigation."*

companies, educate the merchants about the ill effects of the MNC's and promote the local beverages.

While Pepsi Co. and Coca Cola India are yet to respond to this,

many of the shop keepers are saying they would not ban anything unless it has been legally announced by the State Government.

"It is a ban imposed by traders' bodies and not by the Government; it has no legal backing. In such a case, why should we stop selling them and cut off our source of income? We will stop only when the CM asks us to," said Ramakrisnan, a local shop owner who sells around 50-60 bottles of soft drinks a day.

Though the ban is largely being considered fruitless, some are of the opinion that such a decision

should have been taken earlier. Aritra Sengupta, an IIT student, strongly believes that Pepsi and Coca Cola do more harm than the public is aware of.

"Why kill yourself slowly by consuming these products? If this is successful in TN, I would urge the other State Governments to also ban these brands."

Owner of another small shop, Sushila G., content with this decision said, "If Vanigar Sangam demands, the selling will be stopped. Substitute products are available in plenty. It will not affect the business in anyway. We are not interested in selling them either"

The Madras High Court, in November 2016, had ordered the State Industry Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu (SIPCOT) to stop, as an interim measure, the supply of water from the Thambarabarani River to Pepsi and Coca Cola, which use several lakh litres of water for the manufacture of their products. SIPCOT operates a special economic zone in Gangaikondan in Tirunelveli.

The ruling was welcomed by farmers and activists in the region who had been fighting against the two companies and the State Government for several years.

# Healing DeMo wounds

ARITRY DAS

The Union Budget 2017 presented on February 2 aimed at damage control post-demonetisation and hence it focused on the most affected areas such as rural economy, small businesses, and the middle class, said Sabuj Kumar Mondal, Associate Professor of Economics at IIT Madras

Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) which constitute 96 per cent of the total number of companies filing tax returns saw a reduction in the corporate tax. Companies with turnover up to Rs. 50 crore will pay 25 per cent tax instead of 30. Its effective tax rate was relatively higher than bigger companies and deserved incentive for growth, according to Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley.

"Keeping in mind the impending Goods and Services Tax (GST), tax reforms were kept within direct taxes," said T. Venkat, a Development Studies student.

With the hope of bringing more people into the tax-paying net, the salaried middle class, earning



Finance Minister Arun Jaitley briefing the media PTI

between Rs. 2.5 lakh and Rs. 5 lakh per annum, will pay only 5 per cent tax as against 10 per cent earlier.

Referring to the 10 per cent surcharge on incomes between Rs.50 lakh and Rs.1 crore per annum, Rajesh Jetty, an IT worker, "The increased surcharges on luxury items would again balance out the relief given in income tax to the middle class."

With the recent spectrum auction in telecom sector and crusade to curb black money, the budget focuses on digital

transaction for "speed, accountability and transparency". It would be encouraged through introduction of Aadhar card based payment system and 10 lakh point of sale terminals set up by banks.

While Jetty lauded the digitisation efforts as need of the hour, blogger Venkat said, "Digitisation got more importance than social sector spending. There is also little follow up on previous budget promises."

"The allocation for education and health sector has increased

marginally," said Venkat.

In 2015-16 the funds for University Grants Commission (UGC) was reduced by more than 50 per cent. With an allocation of Rs 4,692 crore this year, UGC fund has increased only by 7 per cent.

Reacting to this, Prof. Mondal said, "Economist Amartya Sen once said that India wants to become a leading global economic power with an unhealthy and uneducated population."

The budget proposes to maintain fiscal deficit at 3.2 per cent of GDP in 2017-18, which is lesser than last year's 3.5 per cent. "It's a good target to encourage investors," said Prof. Mondal.

On the integration of rail budget with general Budget, he said: "it is a key move by the government. They are bringing all modes of transport together. It would result in better infrastructure."

To alleviate poverty, the total allocation for rural, agricultural and related sectors has been increased by 24 per cent to Rs. 1,87,223 crore. However, the drought across India had not resulted in debt waiver, Prof. Mondal pointed out.

# A boost for MSMEs

ANKITA BOSE

The tax cuts announced in the Union Budget 2017 for the Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) will increase job opportunities, according to experts.

The corporate tax for the big industries remained at 34.61 per cent but the tax rate for MSME's having an annual income of less than Rs. 50 crore was cut down to 25 from 30 per cent.

The Economic Times said, "the SME sector that was hit hard due to demonetisation has something to cheer."

According to P. Diwya, executive officer at the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) Southern Centre, a lot of additional income will be generated in the country with increased job opportunities, especially in the textile industry, most of which fall under the category of MSME's.

"The 5 per cent tax reduction will also benefit women as a lot of women are employed and seek employment in such sectors," she added.

Another sector that will reap benefits is the real-estate sector as



INDUSTRY

housing and infrastructure were hugely emphasized in the budget. The infrastructure industry status given to the affordable housing sector will boost the real estate developers.

"By giving industry status to affordable housing, banks will lend more to projects in the affordable housing segment and create larger access to funds," said Diwya.

"The real estate sector has been experiencing a low during the past 2-3 years. This move will surely lift it up," said Diwya.

The cut in the tax rates of the salaried class by 5% for individual earning of Rs. 2.5 lakhs per annum upto Rs. 5 lakhs per annum will

positively affect the consumer goods market.

Pavitra L., Public Relations Manager at Integrated Brand Communications said, "The decrease in tax rate for the employees would increase their personal disposable income, leading to higher consumption of market goods."

Another major decision put forward in the budget was the abolishment of the Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB) to ease the inflow of foreign direct investment.

According to Diwya, the relaxation of FDI policies will enable more foreign ventures to invest in Indian companies, leading to growth in the national corporate firms.

"The foreign investment will give rise to a competitive national market thus introducing better quality products in the market," she added.

"Overall, the budget promises a homogenous growth for the industrial sector in the country. We had expected the corporate tax for big industries to be cut down slightly, but it is more or less a well sorted out budget for us," said Diwya.

# Car market may be hit



AUTOMOBILE

AKHIL VISHWANATH

The automobile industry in India was left dispirited by Finance Minister Arun Jaitley's decision to put brakes on cash deals above Rs. 3 lakhs from April 1.

"The number of people showing income more than Rs. 50 lakh in the entire country is only 1.72 lakh. We can contrast this with the fact that in the last five years, more than 1.25 crore cars have been sold. From all these figures we can conclude that we are largely a tax non-compliant society," said Jaitley during the budget session.

The move will slow down the luxury car market and indirectly restrict the motor vehicle loan services sector that offered loans not entirely but as a proportion of the vehicle cost.

"Before demonetisation, people paid nearly 60 per cent of the cost by cash and 40 per cent through a bank. Even the automobile financier funds just around 40 per cent of the cost. They hardly give 80 per cent of the vehicle cost as loan," said Shrinivasan K, secretary, Motor Vehicles and Allied Industries Association, Chennai.

"Jaitley said that 1 crore cars have been sold. Manufacturing has increased. Previously, manufacturers were fewer. Now, there are different models. Second-hand car sales has improved. Now, all the dealers have got a general manager for second-hand vehicles, for exchanging an old car with a new one. Only the difference in amount is paid. These exchange schemes sta-

bilised sales," he added.

Now, the industry expects a steep climb following dull sales for two quarters, hit by demonetisation, which affected the four-wheeler segment much stronger than the two-wheeler segment. The number of enquiries became fewer and bookings were cancelled.

"Automobile sales will be marginal. Even rural demand will get reduced. Only two wheelers will have a gain. Transportation of goods is required, especially for remote villages. Tractor sales will get affected," said an office bearer, Chennai Goods Transport Association.

"Although there is demand for commercial vehicles, the new policy, once implemented will affect sales. Mostly, truck drivers do not own trucks. Their owners will continue to run old trucks. The business model is such that restricted cash-transactions will not only affect commercial vehicle sales but hit goods transport as well," he added.

The budget showed its persistent focus on infrastructure with an outlay of Rs. 3.96 lakh crores. The allocation for rural sector was increased by 24 per cent to Rs. 1.87 lakh crores. The funds for the development of rural roads is set at Rs. 27,000 crores.

"The growth in auto industry would rebound to the pre-demonetization level through revival of the rural market and substantial increase in expenditure on infrastructure, which are two key factors responsible for the recent growth of the industry," said Vinod K Dasari, President, Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM), in the official press release.

However, the sentiment in the automobile sector suggests that these measures to lay new highways and to provide better last mile connectivity would have been beneficial to the commercial vehicles segment if the cash-dealing restriction hadn't been introduced.



Will the farmers get credit in time for a good crop? PEOPLES ARCHIVE FOR RURAL INDIA

# Agricultural credit increased

AMBIKA RAJA

The Union budget 2017 has increased agricultural credit to Rs.10 lakh crore from Rs 35,984 crore and promises more insurance cover for farmers.

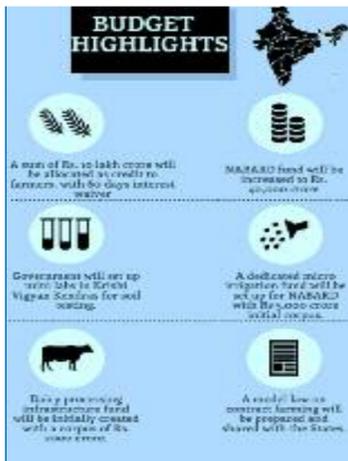
A total sum of Rs.1,87,220 crore was allocated for Rural, Agriculture and Allied sectors.

In his budget speech, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley pointed out the necessity to increase production, productivity and handle post-harvest challenges. He said, "for a good crop, adequate credit should be available to farmers in time."

Under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bhiman Yojana (PMFBY) low premium insurance to farmers will now cover 40 per cent of the crop area as against 30 per cent in 2016. The budget estimate for PMFBY has been increased from Rs 55,000 crore to Rs 13, 400 crore.

Emphasising the importance of the Soil Health Card Scheme that carry crop-wise recommendation of nutrients and fertilisers, Jaitley said that 100 mini labs would be set up in Krishi Vigyan Kendras to test the nutrition requirements of the various soil samples.

According to Subha Satish, a senior official from the Tamil Nadu Agriculture Department, the 2017 - 18 budget is 'welcoming' and 'far reaching'. "The schemes that have been setup by the Government have been working extremely well so far. It covers the rural areas extensively. The increase in farm credits and decrease in in-



INFOGRAPH BY AMBIKA RA

terest on short-term loans are some of the good moves."

The budget highlights also include the setting up of a dedicated micro irrigation fund under National Bank For Agriculture & Rural Development (NABARD) with an initial corpus of Rs 5,000 crores and the aim of achieving 'per drop more crop'. Daniel Samuel, Agriculture

Economics Professor from the Tamil Nadu Agriculture University believes that this year's budget aims at 'crisis management' rather than 'long term goals'. He said that although the budget seems interesting at the first glance, it has left out several major issues.

"The Government has allocated no fund for seed farming, fisheries, sericulture or horticulture. Moreover, issues such as soil erosion, landslides and other natural calamities have been completely ignored in the agriculture budget," Samuel added.

Referring to the Rs.75 lakh kept aside for post-harvesting challenges,

K. Manoj, an employee of Annam Agrotech Pvt Ltd said, "Post harvesting challenges, especially packaging of food items and transportation are quite relevant in today's context. In most cases the vegetables get damaged before they reach the market due to poor packaging. Although the money allocated for this is not a lump sum, I'm glad that the Government touched upon this issue."

However, M.Kunjanjan, a farmer from Calicut, Kerala has a different take on the 2017 budget. "Even if the Government grants farm credits and reduces interest rates, the money does not reach the right hands."

"What we need is better facilities to have better yield. We should be able to buy more machines and fertilizers at a cheaper rate. Only then can we repay the loans on time," he said.

# Disappointment over 6% hike for Defence



DEFENCE

ADITHYA KUMAR

The budget hike for defence for the year 2017-2018 is just 6 per cent with a 10 per cent increase in the capital allocation and this is not enough, according to experts.

There is criticism that the current increase would not be able to cover the cost of inflation, which was 5.22 per cent last year; this would consequently raise the cost of revenue and bring down the capital to procure new weapon systems and modernise equipment.

Professor Utham Kumar Jamadagni who teaches Defence and Strategic Studies at the University of Madras, however said it was still too early to assess the long term effects of the marginal hike.

According to him the One Rank One Pension scheme has burdened the government already. Under the Defence Procurement Policy that was launched in 2016, the aim was to indigenise weapon production. In a way the government is trying to get more foreign investment.

"It would be unfair to criticize or compliment the government at this point due to these commitments the government has

**The defence budget is an estimated 1.62 per cent of the GDP this year.**

made already," says Jamadagni.

The exclusion of pension from the current budgetary allocation will mean more money for providing better weaponry and to improve the current equipment, according to experts. A major chunk of the budget last year went to salaries and pension which led to reduced funds for maintenance and operations. However, there were reports that last year the government was left with a surplus of Rs 13,800 crore after it spend the money meant for modernisation.

China spends a whopping \$144 billion on defence while the US has a budget of \$582.7 billion.

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley has allocated Rs.2,74,114 crore exclusive of the pension for defence. This accounts for 12.77 per cent of the total expenditure by the Central government. The current defence budget is an estimated 1.62 per cent of the GDP

In terms of capital allocation, the Defence Ministry got Rs.86,448 crore which is a 10 per cent hike from last year's Rs.78,586.68 crore. The allocation for pension is estimated at Rs.87,540 crore.

# NO SERVICE TAX ON IRCTC ONLINE BOOKING

Solar panel for 7000 railway stations; bio-toilets for all trains proposed

ANINDITA BANERJEE

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley gave rail commuters a major reason to cheer on Wednesday when he announced that the service charge on booking of tickets through IRCTC will be removed.

Jaitley also announced that Rs 55,000 crore has been allotted to Indian Railways from the government end and the total capital and development plan for Railways has been pegged at Rs 1.31 lakh crore.

Demands for scrapping the charge had gained momentum after demonetization when many people were forced to book

railway tickets online due to lack of cash.

"What was the point of introducing cashless transactions when you charge extra for it? I am very happy that this year's budget has scrapped these charges!" said Saraswathi, a frequent rail commuter.

Jaitley however also hinted that railway tickets may get more expensive as railway tariffs would be fixed taking into consideration costs, quality of service, social obligations and competition from rival transport forms.

IRCTC, which derives a third of its revenue from service charges used to charge Rs 40 for every



RAILWAYS

ticket booked in air-conditioned

classes, while for sleeper class; a service charge of Rs 20 was levied while booking through the website.

The Budget also proposed a corpus of Rs1 lakh crore for a rail safety fund to be spent over five years; solar power for 7,000 railway stations; redevelopment of 25 railway stations; 70 projects for construction and development through joint ventures with nine state governments; and commissioning of 3,500 km railway lines in 2017-18.

Addressing the concerns of differently-abled persons, Jaitley said that 500 stations will get lifts and escalators.

Making rail travel more

comfortable and maintaining cleanliness were the other focus areas where the railways plans to spend Rs 2,100 crore on enhancing passenger amenities.

All rail coaches would be fitted with clean bio toilets which contain anaerobic bacteria that break down excreta into methane and other gases that escape into the air by 2019.

Unmanned railway level crossings are also to be eliminated by 2020.

"The budget all in all is a very fine one. A lot of mentioned schemes will help passengers and since no new project have been announced; it will make the

department further responsible to complete the pending ones," said S. Anantharaman, Divisional Railway Manager of Chennai.

Vashista Johri, general manager, Southern Railway said, "We are planning to carry out joint ventures with the State Governments of Kerala and Tamil Nadu for development and construction projects." He also added that a new metro rail policy would be announced that would focus on increasing job opportunities.

Coach mitra facility will be introduced to register all coach related complaints and SMS-based "clean my coach service" has also been put in place.

# Health allocation goes up by 22.5%

## Timelines for eliminating diseases

ANANYA SRIVASTAVA

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley has increased the allocation of funds for the health sector in the Union Budget 2017-18 while providing timelines for eliminating diseases and incentives for using public healthcare.

The allocation was increased from Rs 39,888 crores in 2016-17 to Rs 48,880 crores, a hike of 22.5% in 2017-18. The budget targeted elimination of kala-azar and filariasis by 2017, leprosy by 2018, measles by 2020 and tuberculosis by 2025.

It aimed at transforming 1.5 lakh health sub-centers to wellness centres and building two new AIIMS in Jharkhand and Gujarat.

Senior citizens will receive Aadhar based smartcards to monitor their health details. Rs 6000 will be given to pregnant women as an incentive for delivering babies in hospitals and not through midwives, and also for vaccinating the child. This was introduced last year by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on December 31.

However, Dr Priya Selvaraj, Gynaecologist/Obstetrician at GG



Hospital said that while the idea was good in short term but it might not reach all women.

"It is not enough to provide an incentive to make them come to the hospital. They have to bridge the gaps in the system. Affordable health care at the doorstep, vaccinations, free medicines for the mothers are the factors that make the process come full circle," she said.

"Nurses should visit every trimester and preventive checkups must be held to combat anaemia," she added.

High prenatal mortality in India is only documented in a medical institute, she said, adding deaths elsewhere would not be recorded.

"I can't believe how they came to such an accurate, albeit meager, figure as Rs 6000 for the incentive."

On the rising number of c-sections in private hospitals, despite possibilities of natural births, Selvaraj said that it is "mostly because patients fear the process. The fertility center where I work, only one to two deliveries are normal because too many risks and complications are involved".

About the incentive, Dr Manu Lakshmi, Obstetrician and Gynaecologist at Guna Fertility Center said, "Institutionalized births are still better than unassisted, unsafe births carried out by midwives. You can't just look at c-sections and disregard the bigger problem of prenatal mortality that has gripped the country."

"Even a small addition of funds in health sector would definitely be better for women," she added.

Naveen Kumar, Senior Manager of the Deepam Educational Society for Health (DESH), an NGO, said that non-communicable diseases (NCD) need more funds.

"The budget should have brought up measures to screen patients in both urban and rural areas for NCDs and women for 30 years for cervical and breast examinations, and ensure availability of drugs," he said.

# Major share for rural sector

ANANAYA BANERJEE

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said, "This will be the highest ever allocation for the rural employment programme," as he increased the allocation for Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) to Rs 48,000 crore for financial year 2017-18 from Rs 38,500 crore in the last fiscal.

The government had spent Rs 47,000 crore on the scheme in the previous fiscal as the expenditure had exceeded the funds allocated for it. Having celebrated 10 years in 2016, this programme has generated 19.86 billion days of employment benefitting 276 million workers, with more than half the jobs going to women and almost a third to members of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

"The budget allocation only matters if MGNREGA works as per the legislation and is granted enough resources for work to be provided on demand," says Poona Rey, a student at the Indian Institute of Management. She adds, "This is more important now than ever before as demonetization has critically affected rural India."

Swachh Bharat Abhiyan was allocated Rs 9,500 crores which is a huge dip from last year's Rs 11,300 crore.

"Announcing new initiatives and not following up on the older schemes will prove to be quite a



Farmers employed under MGNREGA scheme in Tiruvallur PRUDHVI.

problem," says Aarti, who works with Business Line. She feels that the government is falling short on its promises as several toilets built for Swachh Bharat have not been maintained after their completion.

Conversely, the allocation for education was increased by 9.9% this year, which makes it Rs 79,685.95 crores from last year's Rs 72,394 crores. Of the total outlay, Rs 46,356.25 crores is for the school sector and the rest for higher education. In the higher education sector, the finance minister said the government will undertake reforms in the University Grants Commission of India. Good quality institutions would be enabled to have greater administrative and academic autonomy. Colleges will

be identified based on accreditation and ranking, and given autonomous status. A revised framework will be put in place for outcome based accreditation and credit based programmes.

"We have proposed to introduce a system of measuring annual learning outcomes in our schools. Emphasis will be given on science education and flexibility in curriculum to promote creativity through local innovative content," the finance minister said. Academicians raised concerns over the inadequacy of the allocation when the Finance Minister indicated such a reformative path for education in this year's budget.

According to Suresh Babu, who teaches at Indian Institute of

Technology in Chennai, the government has too many ambitious schemes. He feels that within the given budget, all the government reforms might not get implemented due to an inevitable fund crunch.

"A lot more should be done in the education sector to meet global standard, by allotting more funds and addressing the problem of lack of quality teachers in Indian schools," he said.

According to Babu, the government plans to invest in rural areas to create more jobs. "By increasing literacy levels and providing skill-based education, the government needs to enable the rural youth to become employable."

# Smokers already paying more for puffing away

ANKITA BOSE

Smokers will be unhappy as the 6 per cent hike in the excise duty on cigarettes will make it a costlier habit. Cigarette prices are likely to increase in April after the budget proposals take effect but most local vendors in Besant Nagar and Adyar have already increased the prices, charging Re.1 extra for each cigarette.

Neeraj, a shopkeeper in a small cigarette and teashop in Adyar said, "Since the budget has been announced, we are charging more because prices have increased." Many consumers are also unaware that the new budget will be put to effect from April 1.

Deven, a 24 year old student in Adyar was in shock, "I didn't know that the vendors are cheating us. I thought that the prices have increased from today."

Sudipto Dutta Roy, a Sales Executive at the Indian Tobacco Company, said that retailers and vendors would increase their stock in the coming months leading to high demand for cigarettes. When

the company hikes the prices in April, they will sell the stock at the higher price. However, sales are likely to drop for two months after April due to this.

About the overall effect on sales due to the budget, he said, "There will be no decrease in volume but there might be a down trend in terms of value. Consumers might shift to a lower price-bracket, increasing the demand for shorter length cigarettes. But overall, sales will not be affected much."

Although, tobacco products consistently witness an upsurge after every annual budget allocation, experts are of the opinion that it hardly affects consumption or battles the problem of tobacco addiction.

Dr. Arpan Choudhury, a physician and expert on tobacco addiction said, "Statistically, no one has ever quit smoking due to a price hike. It is either due to a disease or it is a conscious decision."

Apart from cigarettes, excise duty on all other tobacco products were increased in the 2017 budget.

# Taxes halved for income upto 5 lakhs

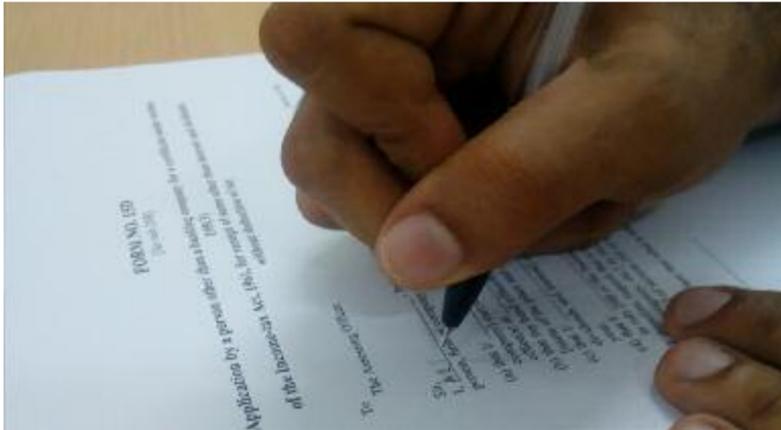
AATHIRA PERINCHERY

Personal income tax (IT) will be halved for people with income in the Rs 2.5 lakh to Rs 5 lakh tax slab, under the tax reforms announced by Finance Minister Arun Jaitley in the Union Budget 2017-18.

The 10 per cent tax applicable in this slab earlier, has now been reduced to 5 per cent. The existing rebate available in this slab will be reduced to Rs 2,500 and will be available only to assessee up to income of 3.5 lakh.

"The combined effect of both these measures will mean that there would be zero tax liability for people getting income up to Rs 3 lakh and the tax liability will only be Rs 2,500 for people with income between Rs 3 lakh and Rs 3.5 lakh," Jaitley announced.

According to him, if the limit of Rs 1.5 lakh under Section 80C for investment (which deals with tax benefits on equity savings schemes) is used fully, zero tax would be applicable for people with an income of up to Rs 4.5 lakh. The total amount of tax



The single page tax filing form will make things easier. AIHIKS

foregone on account of this measure would be Rs 15,500 crores. While the announcement brought smiles to many, the benefits may be fewer than we think, say experts.

"I don't think the 5 per cent reduction in individual tax in the

2.5 lakh - Rs 5 lakh slab will make a big impact," says V. Sriram, chartered accountant at Bala and Co., in Indira Nagar. "It will only benefit in a few thousand rupees. Around 85 per cent of our clients end up having zero tax anyway thanks to existing rebates

and investments."

Manoj Mullath, founder and CEO of Capricorne Mindframe, a wealth management company in Chennai, says "The tax burden has definitely been reduced. The 5 per cent cut means a saving of Rs 12,500 per individual. Though this

may not be too much, the reform is aimed to please the middle income group, who were one of the worst-affected due to demonetisation."

What the government is trying to do, Mullath says, is to create a level playing field by decreasing tax to encourage more people to file their taxes.

The single-page tax filing form that will be adopted will also help.

"Filing income tax returns was a headache earlier; the forms ran into two-three pages, Form 16 and so on. Now the single-page tax filing form will remove mind blocks about having to file tax returns," he adds. "A new slab between Rs 10 lakh and Rs 20 lakh would have made more sense," says Sriram. "It would have benefited the middle class tax payer more."

Additionally, first-time tax payers will not be scrutinised. The tax rates for all other slabs remain the same at 20 and 30 per cent. While a surcharge of 10 per cent will be levied for those whose annual income is between 50 lakhs and Rs 1 crore, the surcharge on Rs 1 crore or more stays at 15 per cent.

# Informal auto spares market faces closure

With old car models being phased out, the demand for spare parts has gone down

AKHIL VISHWANATH

Old vehicle scrapping policy was a thrust that the automobile industry expected in this year's budget on one of the rare occasions when environmental arguments and industry demands hit the same note. But the Government has been mulling over this policy for two years now.

The policy would have cut harmful emissions, increased sales for automobile manufacturers, improved overall fuel efficiency in the economy, reduced the import of oil, multiplied government revenue through taxes levied on purchase of new vehicles, and reduced the dependence on steel imports as the old metal would be melted for recasting.

According to the policy statement, two-wheelers over 10 years old, and four-wheelers over 15 years old, would be scrapped.

The resistance to this policy comes from pensioners, medium-income and cash-strapped owners who wish to maintain the vehicle and refuse to replace their old car with a new one by spending saved up cash or by taking a loan. Exchange schemes run by automobile companies and the argument that purchasing a new vehicle would offset the maintenance cost fails to beat the significant at-a-time investment the

buyer would have to make.

Since the service tax was kept unchanged this year, the after sales service cost will remain the same. However, it would still remain high at company service centres.

The policy if implemented will hit the automobile spares market. People go to Puduket or other auto spares market, which catered to their requirement of a low-cost maintenance job, such as fixing a broken tail light.

If old cars are scrapped such markets will have to shut down because there will be no takers for old spares. Also these markets can't compete with the wide-spread network of dealerships selling fast-moving and newly-styled models and the spares for the new vehicles, according to Chandramouli S, Madras Motor Parts Dealers Association.

Markets like Puduket also gathered the scrapped auto parts and pumped them back into the system by selling them to notified agencies such as the government controlled company for trading in metal scrap, Ministry of Steel Trading Company (MSTC).

However, Mohammad Ali Irfan, who runs his father's auto spares shop in Puduket, says "The scrap business is not our business. But, we would direct the scrapped parts lying with us to steel furnace units. When it comes to new parts,



Labourers working in the Mayapuri scrap market, Delhi

THE TIMES OF INDIA

nowadays, we procure it from distributors through proper channels, by paying taxes and producing bills."

"Gone are the days when parts could be stolen or smuggled. We can procure old-design parts in that manner but not for latest design," he says.

Irfan, a graduate in English Literature, is preparing for law entrance exams. He believes that

the informal spare parts business without government intervention to formalise it will shut down in 10 years and with it the scrap business.

Although people still visit the market for an odd spare part, Aarif, Irfan's brother said that the footfall has nearly halved since the Chennai floods.

Days of resting in water-filled clogged roads led to rusting of inner parts. Now, Irfan and Aarif

sell head light, tail light, bumpers, alloy wheels and tyres.

"Since we can't pay high prices and procure latest-design parts, people don't come to us," said Irfan. And, the absence of a scrapping policy has led to dumping yards filled with mountains of discarded parts that pass neither through company service centres nor through informal spare parts markets.

# Cash donations to political parties capped

ANNU KAUSHIK

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley while presenting the budget announced a cap on the funding that a political party can receive from an individual source in cash, limiting it to Rs.2,000.

Earlier, political parties did not have to disclose their source of donation if the amount was less than Rs 20,000 in cash. The limit is set on donations made in cash but parties can receive donations via cheque and digital mode.

Jaitley said that an amendment to the RBI Act was proposed which will enable issuance of electoral bonds which can be purchased from designated banks and redeemed later by the political parties. Every political party has to file Income Tax returns.

There have been demands for political parties to come clean about their source of funding. Parties had cited sale of coupons, membership fee and donations as their main sources of funding. But most parties suggested that their donations were made by 'unknown' sources.

The move was applauded by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi. He told The Financial Express, "any

step to clean political funding will be supported by us."

However, in an official statement published in The Hindu, Aam Aadmi Party leader Manish Sisodia said that reducing the cash limit would not stop parties from exploiting the system.

Few experts are unsure if this move would be viable.

Ruban Hobday, FICCI (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry)-South India Chief said that the move would not affect the way industries funded the

political parties. He said, "Industries, if willing, would still spend huge amounts on political funding."

"The only difference would be that they would be more careful in following the official protocol due to the introduction of electoral bonds and digital mode of payments," he added.

S. Murari, a senior political analyst said that the cap was just on cash donations and not the overall donations and parties could still undertake their source of funding.

He said, "This is just an attempt to limit political corruption but unless the parties agree to the proposed reforms nothing would happen."

**"Industries, if willing, would still spend huge amounts on political funding."**

# 'Media misreported Kashmiri aspirations'

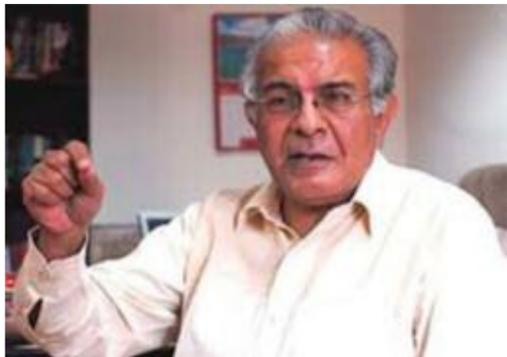
AIHIK SUR

Wajahat Habibullah, a former IAS officer who has served in Jammu and Kashmir, has blamed the media, especially the visual media, for misrepresenting the 'aspirations' of the Kashmiris. The media made the Kashmiris look like "a bunch of terrorists, with stones and guns," Habibullah said.

Speaking at the Asian College of Journalism, Chennai, on how the media had failed to report the incidents in Jammu and Kashmir properly, Habibullah said that media never talked about how Kashmir acceded to India.

"Sheikh Abdullah, the head of the government in Kashmir, even before independence, had stated that he wished Kashmir to be a part of India."

"After the United Nations Resolution, Abdullah, speaking to Joseph Korbel, the chair of United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan, made it clear that his own preferred choice would be independence but that would not be a viable choice for the people," he added. Habibullah said, "The extent of Sheikh Abdullah's influence on the Kashmiris was rarely talked about, and talked about even less when he was



Wajahat Habibullah blames the media for misreporting

arrested in 1953."

Sheikh Abdullah was arrested in 1953 when he was accused of conspiracy against the state for allegedly backing the cause of an independent Kashmir.

The media repeatedly reported that Kashmir was India's Achilles heel and portrayed Kashmir as a Muslim majority area that rooted for Pakistan, he added.

In 1990 the local Muslims had risen against the state and they did seek support from Pakistan but the Indian media ignored the reason behind the uprising and turned it

into a proxy war between Pakistan and India.

Drawing a contrast between how the written media that published information which was true but their circulation in Jammu and Kashmir was low.

"What is universally accessible is visual media, and it has done a lot of harm," he added. Habibullah also admitted to the failure of administration.

"I admit smilingly that I have been a failure," he said, adding that whenever officials or politicians visited any place they would be flanked by security. "Fear is the reason for the failure of administration," he added.

who had recently debuted for India against England, was detained by the police in 2009 on suspicion of carrying explosives.

Habibullah quoted the police as saying that they had to be suspicious because he was a Kashmiri and an Indian.

Habibullah formed a group of well-respected retired officers who visited the affected places, put together a report and presented it to the government urging it to open a dialogue.

The youth in Kashmir whom they spoke to felt that there was no one in India who cared for them.

"No other newspaper took up the report except for The Indian Express," he added.

Habibullah said that it was only the written media that published information which was true but their circulation in Jammu and Kashmir was low.

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"I admit smilingly that I have been a failure," he said, adding that whenever officials or politicians visited any place they would be flanked by security. "Fear is the reason for the failure of administration," he added.



The lone bicycle at Ekkatuthangal Station in Chennai

ARADHANA K

## Chennai Metro Rail offers bicycles on rent

ARADHANA KALIA

The Chennai Metro Rail Limited (CMRL) launched on January 19 an experimental project to rent out bicycles to commuters at Ekkatuthangal station in order to reduce the traffic congestion on Chennai roads. CMRL has kept ten bicycles at which the commuter can hire after he pays the initial deposit of Rs 3000.

"This pilot project started two weeks ago and we have purchased ten bicycles, eight are for men and two for women. After getting down from the metro if commuters want to go to any nearby destination they can use the cycle," says M.S.

Laxmi, Revenue Manager at CMRL. "Commuters can hire the bicycle for free but to secure our asset which is taken from there we are asking for a refundable deposit of Rs 3000," she adds.

It will be a one-time deposit and the passenger will be given a cycle pass by the station controller after he shows an identity proof (Adhaar card, ration card or PAN card). The bicycle can be hired from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. But even two weeks after this scheme was started, passengers are hardly aware about it and some feel the security deposit is too high. "I did not even know about this scheme till now. Plus the amount of deposit is too much. They can give

the cycles for hire on a daily or weekly basis," says Arvind S., an employee at the nearby Redington India Limited.

Some people had concerns regarding their safety as they think the roads are not biker friendly. Manjula who works at the Customer care at the Ekkatuthangal station says that only a few people have come to enquire about the scheme and none of the bicycles have been hired till now.

There is only one bicycle in the parking area and the rest are stored in the godown. Only three posters which are too small to be noticed by any commuter advertise the project.

## Hotel Saravana Bhavan is all set to reopen

AIHIK SUR

Hotel Saravana Bhavan on Peters Road which was sealed on Tuesday by the Greater Chennai Corporation is soon slated to be reopened. It was closed off due to lack of parking facilities.

The Peters Road branch opened on July 6, 1993 with all the necessary permission and licenses.

The traffic police did not issue a No Objection Certificate (NOC) because there were no parking facilities.

According to one of the notices issued to the hotel on December 19, 2014, "All existing Hotels/ Restaurants/ Eateries that do not have adequate parking place have been advised to identify new parking sites for their customers."

The Corporation then sealed the restaurant.

Kamala Kannan, 41, Creative Manager of Saravana Bhavan said, "The sealing off our restaurant is just because of the parking

facilities. It is not because of quality drop as has been reported in the media."

**The Saravana Bhavan outlet on Peters Road was closed due to lack of adequate parking facilities, but now is all set to reopen.**

"We have now secured a plan for a parking lot," he added.

Shruthi Jayaraj, 53, a housemaker and a regular at Hotel Saravana Bhavan said, "I was deeply saddened when I heard they were shut down. Lately their quality of food had dipped a little. Though I hope they will reopen soon." The Greater Chennai Corporation officials however declined to make any comment.

## Green spaces disappear in south Chennai

Farm land area has decreased but human habitation has increased

AATHIRA PERINCHERY

Ever wondered why those local greens and spinaches are not as common, or cheap, as they used to be a decade ago? Scientists have shown that while agricultural land in south Chennai has decreased almost three-fold over the last 15 years, the area under construction has grown almost two-fold. This rapid urbanisation could affect the environment, they warn.

Research shows that Chennai lost one-fifth of its greenery over the past 20 years. Its area has also expanded, from 174 sq km to 426 sq km. Southern Chennai (including Adyar, Thiruvanniyur and Velachery), is the recent hub of development with IT parks, showrooms and offices sprouting rapidly.

To find out exactly how much urbanization has eaten up southern Chennai's green spaces, scientists in Madras University's Department of Applied Geology used remote sensing and GIS techniques to analyse the extent of land use and its changes from 1990 to 2005. They found that areas of human habitation increased by more than



Many pasture land like these have been converted to urban areas

1.5 times over these years: from 7.5 sq km in 1990 to 11.5 sq km in 2005. They also found a decrease in agricultural land: from 17.4 sq km in 1990 to a mere 6 sq km in the year 2005.

"Any coastal urban area will expand," says Head of the

Department of Applied Geology (DAG) K. K. Krishnamurthy, one of the authors of the study. "The question is how to accommodate the huge urban population, while sustaining ecology and environment." Stricter construction regulations are a must, he says.

"Now, the height of a building is defined by the width of the road it is located on. But it should be determined by soil conditions and sub-surface geology also; scientific data should be used for plan approval purposes." Another issue is of residential areas being

converted to commercial ones. "This was a residential area when we came in 1963," says Karate R. Thiagarajan, former Deputy Mayor of Chennai, who lives on the Sardar Patel Road near Adyar's Madhya Kailash junction.

"Others sold their lands and apartments or commercial buildings came up. We cannot stop this from happening. The government has to create better facilities like drainage without affecting water bodies or blocking water flow.

"Proper drainage and rainwater harvesting are crucial, says author M. Jayaprakash, associate professor at the DAG. "Wastelands - called *poromboke* - are our natural draining systems and need to be conserved," he says.

But such open lands exist only in villages now, rues Vijaya, a domestic worker in Kanagam. "There is no place to cultivate keerai (spinach). Before, greens were available for sale everywhere, and were cheap: one bundle at just Rs. 5. Now, they are available only in markets and cost up to Rs. 20."

As the green spaces disappear, so do the greens.

## Philately not so popular

ADITHYA KUMAR

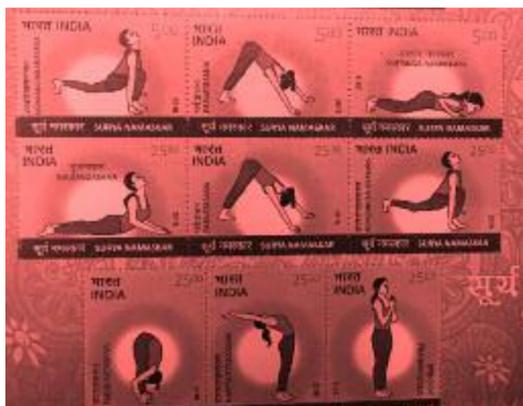
Philately, which used to be very popular in the past has lost its sheen due to the lack of awareness among the younger generation, says a stamp collector.

"Letter writing is much less these days than before let alone stamp collection. If you asked a lay man, only 1 out of 100 may have heard of philately," says B. Mahesh, who is a member of the South Indian Philatelist Association and also a collector of stamps for the past 35 years.

Mahesh has a collection of around 50 lakh stamps, some are his and some are his father's who is 84 years old.

The association, which has 650 members across south India, has been trying to spread awareness regarding philately through talks organised at schools. Due to problems of time they are not able to cover too many schools.

"A lot of schools turned us away when we went to them to talk about stamp collecting saying that it will just waste the children's time," says Mahesh. With more and more pressure being mounted on children and youngsters academically and



International Yoga Day Surya namaskar stamps | ADITHYA K

professionally, hobbies like philately are often discouraged as they may take up too much of time.

According to Mahesh, the parents of these children need to be informed too about this hobby so that they may pass this on to their children. Meanwhile, the Philatelic Bureau in Chennai, located next to the Head Post Office on Anna Salai is being renovated and new equipment is being brought in to

spread more awareness about this hobby.

The Bureau has been hosting exhibitions and even movies at times in order to let people know about the hobby. The bureau allows people to open a philatelic account and they can have their stamps delivered to their doorstep. They have even introduced a personalised stamp with a person's face printed on a stamp. As of now,

the bureau has 4500 members. The membership has been rising at 10 to 20 per cent per year.

"As much as 20 per cent of the total number of account holders are students," says an official at the Bureau.

There is a lot of nostalgic value attached to these stamps, so when adults who may have been collectors see them at an exhibition, it rekindles their interest.

In a lot of families, a member of the family may have this hobby and then the younger generation is encouraged to follow it.

A lot of people also believe that it takes a lot of money to collect stamps and investing about Rs 3000 per annum is enough to maintain a good collection, says Mahesh. "Stamps provide valuable information about the wildlife, history, culture and current affairs which children should be exposed to," says Mahesh.

But will the hobby disappear or become obsolete? Apparently not. Unique stamps are being made to pique the interest of collectors. There have been stamps made of wood, marble, embroidered stamps and even holographic stamps are available.

## Civil cases pile up in HC

APARNA DHANASEKAR

Laws are made to protect the rights of the people, and courts to ensure that the rights are not violated.

But for 60-year-old K. Krisnaveni, laws and loss is the same. Her single room thatched dwelling in Royapuram, where she has been living for more than 20 years now, is at the risk of being grabbed by a realtor in the locality.

"I filed the case in 2014. I don't think it's going to end anytime soon," Krisnaveni says. This is her ninth visit to the city civil court in three years. There are many litigants like Krisnaveni.

The number of cases pending in the Madras High Court (MHC) has been on a steady rise with civil cases forming more than 75 per cent of the total cases pending. According to the National Judicial Data Grid (NJDG), a monitoring portal to identify pending cases, the pendency in MHC as on February 2, 2017 is 75,357, of which 58,814 are civil and 16,543 criminal cases.

"When it comes to civil cases both the parties involved do not agree or settle easily. For the lack of understanding, the case drags on for years," K. Poongundran, a senior lawyer explains.

Mounting cases, combined with vacant positions of judges and lack of social awareness among the masses has increased the pendency. Including the 15 judges appointed in 2016, at present there are 57 judges in the MHC against a current sanctioned

strength of 75. Eighteen posts are still lying vacant.

"When a judge is appointed, his retirement date is more or less known. Vacancies can be avoided if the next appointments are planned," Poongundran adds. P. Chandrasekaran, a civil court lawyer, explains that lawyer's intuition to prolong litigation for monetary gain, or the clients wish to prolong the case knowing they would lose it, are major reasons.

Methods like Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) are a success in the west. ADR is an out-of-court settlement process, where a third party neutral member solves the dispute between the parties involved. It is applied in civil cases. "The 75 per cent of the pending cases, that is all the civil cases can be solved through ADR," says S. Arunachalam, President of the Society for Alternate Dispute Resolution (SOFADS), Chennai. ADR halves the time

spent in courts for both lawyers and the parties, also reducing costs. Lack of awareness among the lawyers and people is the sole reason for the logjam, Secretary of SOFADS, Selvaraj explains.

"Lawyers hesitate to recommend alternative dispute resolution as they think their fees will be reduced. In fact, it is completely different. In alternative settlements, the lawyer gets more than the fees he gets to earn through other cases. Alternative dispute resolution will definitely help reduce the burden. It would take years for the court to solve all these pending cases," he sighed.

**As on February 2, total pendency is 75,357, of which 58,814 are civil cases**