

CHENNAI

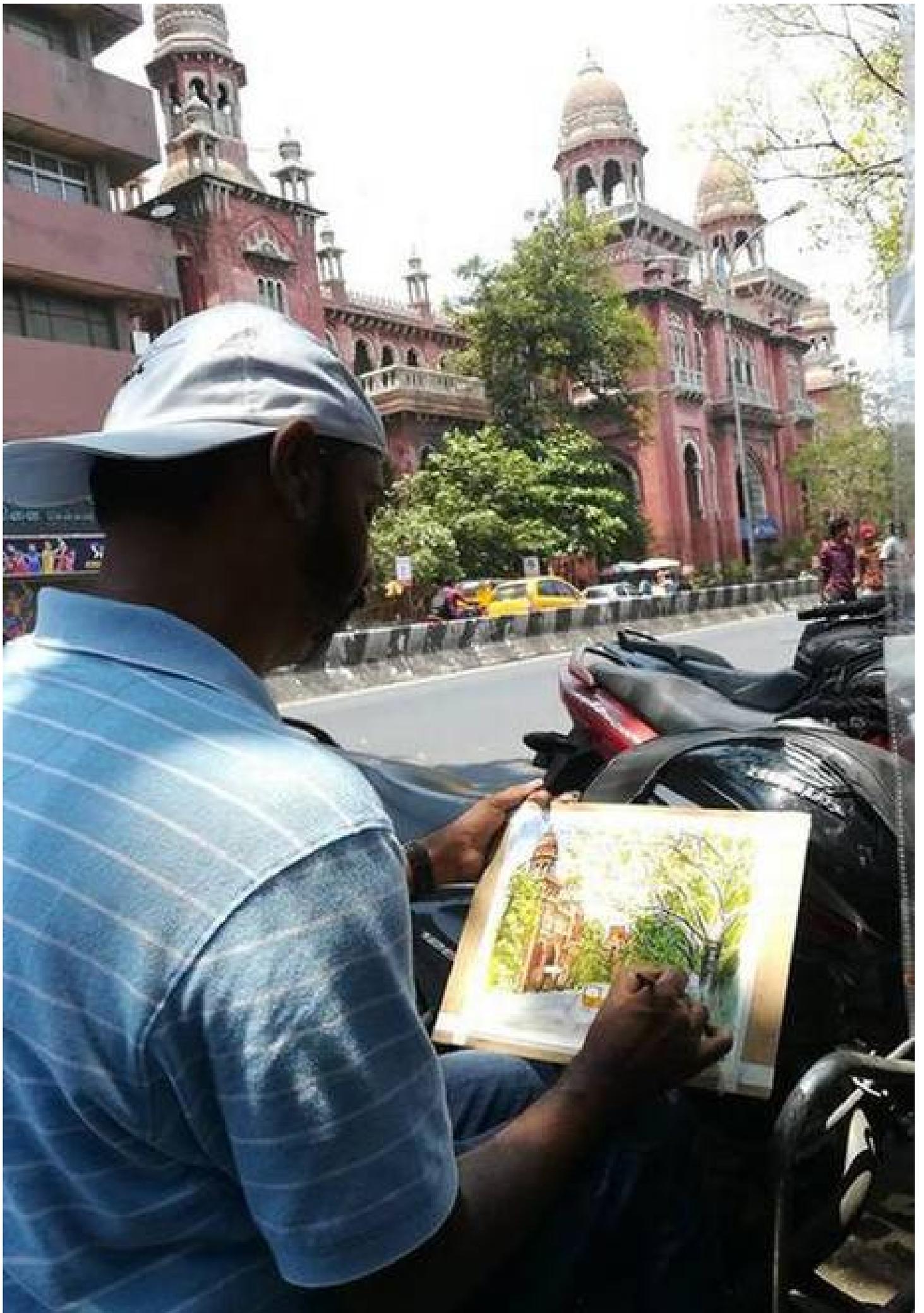
How meetup groups are staying in touch through virtual platforms

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AUGUST 03, 2020 14:23 IST

UPDATED: AUGUST 03, 2020 14:23 IST

By adopting technology, hobby groups with a pronounced presence in Chennai are not only connecting with their members but are also capturing the imagination of the wider world



Chennai Weekend Artists: Missing the outdoors

Every Sunday morning, art lovers across age groups would park themselves at a new location in Chennai with their canvases, paint brushes, charcoal pencils and other paraphernalia to sketch and paint and share their impressions.

When the first lockdown was clamped in March, Chennai Weekend Artists wasted no time in moving its activities online.

“With all our memories of places and hangouts in Chennai that we have covered, we moved indoors,” says Muralidharan Alagar, who started Chennai Weekend Artists in 2012. Now, they continue to meet every Sunday, from 11 a.m. to 12.30 p.m., but virtually.

The online format is marked by greater variety and creativity, and more members can join in. The programme starts with people talking about how they are coping with the new normal. Sometimes, a member would draw and others would reproduce the work. There’s a ‘portrait of the week’, ‘topic of the week’ and an album for people to add to their works. There are timeliness to be followed.

“Sometimes when it’s a member’s birthday, we all draw a portrait of the person and invite feedback,” says Muralidharan. He agrees that a lot more learning and sharing is happening virtually, but it cannot replace the experience of the outdoors.

The outdoor experience of talking to onlookers, getting a word of praise and motivating art enthusiasts to join them brought about a whole new experience and joy.

“Nochi Kuppam near the Marina Beach was one of our favourite spots. Whenever we would park ourselves there, the children from the fishing community would gather around us. I used to take extra papers to allow them to sketch too. We miss those interactions,” says Muralidharan.

Humour Club International: A blast from the past

Recently, Humour Club International (Triplicane chapter) entered its 37th year. The Anniversary meet-up is one of the most-awaited events in its annual calendar, drawing

more than 2500 people at a city auditorium. This time, the meet-up arrived and left, without so much as a chuckle. They group gave the celebration a miss.

The chapter, one of the most vibrant humour clubs in Chennai, is taking time to adapt to the new crisis. Since the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus, the Club has not held any virtual get-together for its 1900 members.

But the Club has been doing the best it can to spread positivity and cheer. Every day, it sends a YouTube link of with “tidbits of humour club programmes” from the past to members’ WhatsApp numbers.

“This is not a group but end-to-end encryption. Anybody can enrol, it’s free of cost and open for all. Please share with people who you think need some positivity in these times,” says Kannan B., the chapter’s treasurer. Each joke/speech/anecdote, which runs from 5 to 30 minutes, is carefully chosen so that it can be a laugh riot for all the family members. The chapter also has a Facebook page where clippings and photos of old programmes are being fed regularly. He says there is a request from members to meet virtually and the Club is exploring various options.

Its monthly meetings held at Mylapore Fine Arts Club every second Sunday attracted close to 1000 people. “How do we accommodate so many people in a virtual platform? Besides, a majority of our members are senior citizens and switching to a virtual platform may not be easy for all, but we are trying,” says Kannan.

Naveena Koothupattarai: Theatre and social distancing

Theatre groups may be using digital tools to survive during COVID-19, but the challenge still remains steep.

Naveena Koothupattarai, an acting and theatre group at Valsarvakkam, has divided the students into smaller groups and staggered the classes.

Each class has only four or five students.

“Sometimes the class would begin at 6 a.m,” she says. Masks are a must and hand sanitiser is kept at the entrance of the house for students to disinfect themselves before entering.

“Learning theory itself is tough, then how can one teach drama, voice modulation, direction, script writing without any face-to-face interaction and practical classes,” says Aathira Pandialakshmi, an actor-cum-trainer with Naveena Koothupattarai.

Except when there is complete lockdown, the centre conducts its classes from the rooftop of a house where it functions. “Luckily, distance is not an issue for most of my students as a majority of them stay in and around Valsarvakkam,” says Aaathira.

“We have also tweaked our syllabus a bit so that students can grasp lessons faster.”

Go on a heritage walk, virtually

You can now walk down the lanes of Armenian Street, and explore a few heritage houses of Mylapore and do a tour Chennai from the comfort of your home. Heritage groups in the city have quickly adapted to the new normal, moving walks to virtual platforms.

On May 22, the annual Ramzan Heritage Walk was held for the first time on a virtual platform – Facebook Live. “We tried to recreate the physical walk to an extent,” says Kombai Anwar, heritage enthusiast who conducted the online session with Tasneem Akbari Kutubuddin and Jahir Hussain. The walk dwelt on the Muslim communities in Chennai.

Madras Inherited, an initiative by a group of architects and volunteers, is now on social media. The group has been actively organising heritage walks since 2018. The group has been engaging with heritage lovers both online and offline, so that when the lockdown happened they could quickly switch to digital platforms.

Its virtual walk every Monday, a series that covered 12 locations in Chennai, recently drew to a close. Now, it has started a social media project where there is trivia, etymology and focus on heritage buildings. There is also a comic series launched to explain heritage.

“Every Tuesday, we conduct ‘Talking City’ where the focus is on lesser-known heritage buildings and a narration of its story. We use our database of photos and materials to give participants a feel of the place,” says Ashmitha Athreya, head of research, Madras Inherited.

With walks beoming an integral part of Madras Day, would we witness virtual tours? Anwar, who does walks for Madras Day and also the Nawab of Arcot: Walajah Trail, says he is yet to hear from the organisers: “One advantage of going virtual is that you would have people from various parts of the world who might be interested in the event.”

Thiru-Vi-Ka Speakers Forum: Resetting the template

Members of Thiru-Vi-Ka Speakers Forum share a special bond with neighbourhood parks. It's here that many of them developed their public speaking skills by listening to talks, and delivering some themselves. Since the Forum started 17 years ago, neighbourhood parks have been their meeting place every Sunday. The pandemic has forced them to move to a new venue.

“What do we do, the crisis is such that we have to make the best of what is available to us,” says B. Damadoran, founder of the Forum.

As parks are still out of bounds for people, it was only natural for them to adapt to technology-driven platforms.

“We have 28 chapters, each meeting in a park. But with the lockdown, they have been adopting different collaboration strategies,” says Damadoran.

Three to four of these chapters meet on Zoom and some use WhatsApp. “Each group is different; the Jeeva Park group is highly tech-savvy and moved online in April itself,” says

Damodaran. Members of Gill Nagar share a video on WhatsApp and discuss the topic.

And yes, they miss their outdoors meet-ups.

“When you stand and talk in an outdoor setting, it’s an altogether different confidence that the speaker develops and this is something that cannot be replicated online; so we are waiting to see parks reopen,” says Damadoran, adding that they would follow all precautions if they were to resume meetings at parks.

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