

# A Space of Freedom

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A graffiti of the vizha on the way. Photo: Ananya Vajpeyi

Chennai, Tamil Nadu: "I was born here," says K. Saravanan, a stocky curly-haired fisherman in his mid-thirties, speaking Tamil in a loud, slightly raspy voice, dressed in a dark pant and a lilac shirt. We are standing on a narrow strip of beach just north of his village, Urur Kuppam, hardly a mile from Elliot's Beach at Besant Nagar. He points to nothing in particular — an expanse of tangled foliage with polished leaves and purple flowers clinging to the sandy soil, the short cane fencing of a turtle hatchery painted yellow and green, a wall of low dunes rising into scrubland encroached by The Theosophical Society. A pitted bumpy road cuts through this terrain, its rough surface part red earth and part coal tar, occasionally patrolled by a police van.

The Bay of Bengal is behind us. Forty-eight hours prior, there had been a major oil spill at the Kamarajar Port 30 km north; the sand beneath our feet has delicate tracteries of black petroleum imprinted on it where the water touches the land before receding swiftly back into foam crested waves. The sky is a pale blue; a light, salty wind blows. Wispy clouds over a long coastline converging with the ocean on a far horizon suggest a timeless serenity, at odds with the upheavals unfolding in India's fourth most populated metropolitan city.



**Music on the bus. Photo courtesy: Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha**

In the preceding two months, Chennai has seen the death of its popular and authoritarian Chief Minister Jayalalithaa on December 5, and landfall by Cyclone Vardah wreaking havoc on December 12. Through most of January, the city has had enormous demonstrations around the charged issue of Jallikattu, a ritual of bullfighting that has become a flashpoint for identity politics in Tamil Nadu.

Saravanan says his mother gave birth to him in the shadow of dunes under the open sky 35 years ago, on this land they call *poromboke*. 'Poromboke' is a word with many meanings. Traditionally, writes Nityanand Jayaraman, a journalist and activist who runs the Coastal Resource Centre in Saravanan's village, "Poromboke denoted unassessed lands reserved for communal and public use, including commons such as cremation or burial grounds, roads, lakes, tanks, rivers, forests, grasslands, grazing grounds and the margins of roads, water-bodies and the sea."

But lately the term has entered urban slang, and pejoratively means anyone — an individual or a group — considered worthless, dispensable, without intrinsic value. From 'shared' and 'commons' *poromboke* has come to mean land it is not worth owning; by extension, a person it is not worth being.

"How did the meaning change from the one to the other?" is the question framing a music video released in mid-January this year that has since gone viral on the Internet, titled 'Chennai Poromboke Paadal'. The video, conceived by Jayaraman — ubiquitously called 'Nity' — and directed by R. Rathindran Prasad, features superstar vocalist T.M. Krishna singing Kaber Vasuki's lyrics in Carnatic style, set in a garland of six [ragas](#) beginning with Anandabhairavi, arranged by violinist R.K. Shriramkumar.

Everything about this video is startlingly dissonant and disjointed — from the swear-word in its title, to the rude contemporary street idiom of the lyrics, to the measured classical composition running almost 10 minutes, to the stunning visuals showing singer Krishna and his musicians wearing gas masks against silhouettes of gigantic smokestacks, monstrous automated cranes, rusted pipelines miles long and ashen badlands of a post-apocalyptic future. "I am poromboke," Krishna sings. "And you? Are you poromboke too?"



Children from the fishing community pose for the camera at the Urur-Olcott Kuppam Vizha in Besant Nagar. Photo: V. Ganesan

The devastated backdrop of the hit song turns out to be barely an hour from Chennai, as I discover the next morning when I drive Nity and Saravanan north on the Ennore High Road to the clutch of thermal power stations old and new set around Ennore Creek, where the Kosasthalaiyar and the Araniyar Rivers empty into the sea. The coastline is now awash with oil; rock embankments glisten a viscous black; blue waters have darkened. The air is acrid; a fine haze of toxic fly-ash hangs in the atmosphere, choking earth and rivers alike. One can neither breathe deep nor see far. Vicious smells assail one's throat and nostrils, as though one had set out for Madras but stumbled into Mordor.

One coal-fed thermal power unit discharges hot water exactly into the mouth of the estuary, disturbing the balance of fresh river water and salt sea water where they merge, and either driving marine fish back into the sea, opposite to their natural route, or poisoning them to death with chemical effluents. Mangroves, wetlands, marshes, forests, the Buckingham Canal, human habitations — all have vanished from the lunar landscape, stretching inland from the coast as far as the eye can see. The only denizens of this hellish place are migrant workers.

Nity takes me to see a photographic exhibition about Ennore Creek titled 'Haunted by Waters' by Chennai-based artist Parvathy Nayar at the DakshinaChitra Museum, on the southern outskirts of Chennai. The exhibit is not intended to be documentary, but rather as a critical reflection on the state of our environment. Nity's younger colleagues are upset by its abstraction. "I've no patience with pretty pictures of pollution!" says one activist, irritably.

Yet both Krishna's melodious voice and Nayar's minimalist images succeed in drawing my attention to the site of their respective artistic interventions, which turns out to be poromboke writ large — commons rendered wastelands. What ought to have been the shared natural resources of a fragile coastal ecosystem are encroached and usurped by the developmental state, displacing, impoverishing or eliminating hundreds of small fishing, boating and agricultural communities living along the eastern seaboard of peninsular India.

"Without the electricity produced by those power plants, we wouldn't be sitting here and talking," says Krishna, gesturing to the lovely café in refined Adyar where we're comparing notes on Ennore's dystopia over a pot of Earl Grey tea and thin slices of wheat toast. Others pay the price for our luxuries. His song opens with a gentle but unforgettable admonition:

[Poromboke is not for you](#)

Poromboke is not for me

*Poromboke is for us all*

*Poromboke is for the earth*

[It is our responsibility..](#)

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For over 15 years, Nity has been involved in environmental campaigns to protect Chennai's beaches, prevent government acquisition of coastal commons, stop the proposed construction of an elevated expressway connecting Marina Beach with Besant Nagar Beach that would obliterate all the fishing villages along the way and replace them with either artificially created 'green' stretches or alternative high-rise project-style housing for the displaced communities, as well as struggles around the zoning of private property and public land under the new Chennai Master Plan. Ennore Creek's near-complete ruin is but the latest of the battlefronts to be opened up.

Nity has found a staunch ally and indomitable brother-in-arms in Saravanan, who initially only wanted to protect Urur Kuppam's ecologically sensitive waterfront, and to demand better water-supply, sewage and garbage disposal facilities for the village from the city's municipal authorities. Gradually Saravanan has developed a formidable repertoire of tools: he has learned how to map coastal commons, acquainted himself with laws and regulations governing

poromboke

, and connected with villages all along the coast which face similar problems to his own.

Saravanan has kept busy being a full-time activist and campaigner, educating fishing communities up and down Chennai's coastline on claiming their rights to space, livelihood and a share of urban infrastructure, besides environmental protections. Only now is he considering actually taking up fishing, his ancestral profession.

In the past three years, Nity and Saravanan have been joined by Krishna, who walked in to Nity's office one day and made an unexpected offer to work with them in whatever way possible. How exactly they could collaborate was at first not clear to any of them.

The three men, together with scores of Chennai citizens from the most famous to the perfectly ordinary, now jointly organise an annual arts festival, the Urur-Olcott Kuppam Vizha. The

vizha

, literally celebration, is hosted by the twin villages of Urur Kuppam and Olcott Kuppam, and held in Urur Kuppam's village square, nicely positioned between its beach and its temple to the border deity Ellaiamman venerated by the fisherfolk.

The [vizha](#) eschews corporate sponsorships and institutional tie-ups, is entirely crowd-funded and volunteer-driven, thrives on social media, and invites participation from village and city alike. Multiple forms of music, dance, theatre and painting, classical and popular, elite and folk, mingle under the [vizha](#)'s varicoloured umbrella, and audiences are drawn as much by curiosity as by taste. Women, youth and children are enthusiastic participants.

Krishna himself is the

vizha

's most recognisable ambassador, insisting through his tireless evangelism — free concerts, teaching, lectures, articles, interviews and warm invitations to friends and fellow-travelers from near and far (like me) — that all of Chennai get on board what is growing into a movement for democratising and diversifying the arts within a complex urban space that should be shared but has so far been segregated.

The *vizha*'s third edition this year has included acappella singing by a children's choir at the Chennai Railway station; a concert by transgender devotional Jogappa singers from Maharashtra; a relay of folk-pop-classical musicians, including Krishna, singing on Bus No. 29C as it travelled from Perambur to Besant Nagar; and massive beach cleaning efforts by citizen-volunteers.

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At Krishna's outreach concert on Elliot's Beach on January 29, two simple white banners with black lettering in Tamil and English and line-drawings of fishing boats with nets are strapped to bamboo poles and planted in the sand: 'Urur-Olcott Kuppam Vizha: Celebrating Oneness' they read. Idle bystanders and dedicated fans alike begin to gather about the makeshift stage; a Ferris Wheel turns gaudily in the near distance, lights glimmer in the shops along Elliot's Beach Road, the sliver of a new moon rises to assume an Islamicate aspect close to jewel-like Venus, a woman carrying colourful balloons for sale stops to gape at the amazing sight of a Carnatic ensemble in full flow under the velvet sky.

Saravanan steps up the mic to welcome everyone to his concert, his

vizha

, his village, his beach. He invites all spectators to give generously to the festival and points to Nity standing by a table with a cardboard box to accept cash donations. The sense of hospitality and the note of ownership in Saravanan's voice come across effortlessly.

Two days later when I drive everyone to Ennore, we pull up beside the highway while Nity steps out to give a brief interview about the Kamarajar Port oil spill to a TV crew that has caught up with our car. As we wait, I take out my phone and play one of Krishna's soaring light-hearted songs I had recorded at the beach concert. A swift cascade of sweet high notes momentarily washes out the pollution surrounding us.

In the back seat, Saravanan stage-whispers something to Pooja, Nity's associate accompanying us. She leans forward to me and says, "Saravanan would rather that the singing be stopped immediately, please. He can't stand Carnatic music, except the poromboke song."

I grin at Saravanan in the rear-view mirror. He looks sheepishly out of the window to the choppy waters lapping at land's edge, smudged slightly black, yet still heaving and foaming in the bright sun, as though dancing to a southern music.

First published by

*The Hindu Sunday Magazine*