



DAY'S DIARY Cpt America debut

Comic-strip superhero the star-spangled Captain America debuted on this day in 1941 in *Timely* (later *Marvel Comics*)

ROBOTIC ELEPHANT

SOLD FOR \$3.1 MILLION
The first comic, in a near-mint condition, featuring the superhero's first appearance sold for \$3.1 million, making it the top five most expensive comics ever sold



'SUPER SOLDIER'

Joe Simon and Jack Kirby created the character, Steve Rogers a would-be army enlistee. He received a top-secret serum to become "super soldier"



FILM ADAPTATION

Chris Evans played hero in the film. Expanding on Marvel's cinematic universe, the movie delighted both comic fans and critics

I am a Martial Artist, but still feel unsafe at night

PG 4



In 2014, efforts to pull out Ayyapankutty from a swamp in Edakochi went in vain, as the elephant died due to exhaustion | FILE PIC

STENI SIMON

Weighing 800kg and towering at 10-and-a-half feet in height, Irinjadappilly Raman's 'nada iruthal' (ceremony of offering elephants to deity) was held amid much fanfare at the Irinjadappilly Sree Krishna Temple in Thrissur district on Sunday. Within two days, Raman has turned out to be quite a sensation. Even the international media is now discussing him. What makes him special? He is a robot.

Well, robotic elephants are nothing new. They have made news earlier, too. However, this was the first time such an electric elephant was being 'accepted' by a temple. Raman was gifted to the temple by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (Peta) India with the support of actor Parvathy Thiruvothu.

This development comes at a time when there have been calls to end the practice of using

captive elephants for temple rituals, and free the gentle giants from cycles of torture.

A day later the Aluva Thiruvairanikulam Mahadeva Temple also drew attention of animal lovers, as its management committee used a wooden palanquin instead of an elephant for 'ezhunnellippu' (deity's procession). Sources say the move was part of a decision to not put elephants through trauma, especially considering the scorching weather.

"We had used 'ratham' (chariot) instead of elephants for two years. This year, we used the palanquin for *vilakku ezhunnellippu* in the temple," says a Thiruvairanikulam Mahadeva Temple Trust Committee member, requesting anonymity.

"Nowhere in the scriptures is it written that 'ezhunnellippu' should be carried out using an elephant. Thus, the temple committee decided to use a palanquin made of teak."

In 2018, the Nalppathennewsaram Sree Mahadeva Temple in Alappuzha district

BREAK THE CHAIN?



The Thiruvairanikulam Mahadeva Temple Trust recently decided to use a teak palanquin instead of elephant for the 'ezhunnellippu' ritual



Robotic elephant Raman at the Irinjadappilly Sri Krishna Temple in Thrissur

As 'Robo Raman' emerges as a sensation, TNIE speaks to stakeholders on freeing hapless elephants from shackles of torture

had proposed putting an end to use of captive elephants for rituals. Instead of the caparisoned elephants, *jeevathas* – wooden structure used in temples of central Travancore to mount the idols of deities – were proposed. The Kanichukulangara

Temple in the same district, too, had set a similar example.

Currently, 'Robo Raman' has spurred discussions on using mechanical elephants so as to keep temple ceremonies safe and free of cruelty. While animal lovers welcome the idea,

elephant owners and traditionalists see it as an assault on the land's culture.

Khushboo Gupta, director of Advocacy Projects, PETA India, who was present at Raman's 'nadayiruthal', says the "frustration of captivity" causes el-

ephants to run amok. "We are happy that such a step was taken by the temple, and are ready to assist other shrines that wish to replace the live elephants with robotic ones or alternatives like chariots and palanquins," she adds.

Khushboo points out that the ban on use of weapons such as bull-hooks to handle captive elephants has been ineffective. "They are still used openly," she notes.

"We hope the government encourages other temples in the state to adopt such alternatives."

Notably, some days ago, a Goa-based NGO called Centre for Research on Animal Rights wrote to Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan for an inquiry into the deaths of 138 captive elephants in the state over the past five years. It also sought retirement of all elephants

aged over 60, and recommended the use of mechanical alternatives at 'poorams'.

"Elephants paraded at festivals across the state are beaten, goaded and dragged with the banned weapon called *ankush* or *thotti*. They are made to stand for hours under the scorching sun," noted the letter.

The animal welfare body also highlighted that it had recorded 27 instances of elephants going berserk in the current 'pooram' season alone.

Former Animal Welfare Board of India member M N Jayachandran concurs, adding that the recent case of celebrity elephant Thechikottukavu Ramachandran running amok in Palakkad was "painful".

"Forest officials claim that no such incident had occurred, and that the elephant had charged forward after hearing the trumpeting of another elephant," says Jayachandran, who is currently associated with Sojourners for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

"Many years ago, we had done an inquiry in which the elephant was found to be unfit for processions, as it was partially blind and could be easily provoked. However, it is still used in temple festivals and rituals."

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VOICES



Robotic elephant Irinjadappilly Raman



Ebin Baby, teacher and pooram lover

I believe the use of elephants for festivities was an old way of showing power. Under current laws, torture of animals is punishable. Thus, such traditions should change



Ananthakrishnan Prasad, medical student

It is high time to end traumatising the hapless creatures in the name of culture. Captive elephants endure a lot of torture before being grandly paraded at festivals and public events



Savitha Olappamanna, elephant lover and teacher

I grew up seeing the elephants and other cultural practices of Kerala. Hence, I cannot even imagine a pooram with a mechanical elephant. However, I am against the cruelty against elephants. They should be fed well and given proper care like old times

HOSPITALITY

The curious case of a 'lost' Russian tourist

ANU KURUVILLA

THE case of how Rivkatovich Salavat, a 32-year-old Russian tourist, who got waylaid by difficult circumstances in Fort Kochi, found refuge in the company of strangers brings to the fore two stories. While one is radiant with the warmth of locals here, most of whom are dependent on tourists for their livelihood, the other is tainted with the apathy of officials.

Salavat, who doesn't know any language other than Russian, has been stranded in Kochi for several days. His ordeal, however, will soon be over, as he is slated to leave for Russia on March 3.

"The first time I came across Salavat was when he came to the cafe where I work. He was there to watch the FIFA World Cup matches," recalls Anish P H. On that first meeting, it struck Anish that Salavat did not have any money on him.

"Despite not knowing Russian, I was able to gather that someone had stolen all his money," Anish says.

However, the gravity of the situation that had befallen Salavat became clear to Anish when he found the Russian sleeping on a bench outside the cafe the next morning. "It became a routine. He would come to the restaurant three times a day, and then he would go sit on the beach, eyes fixed on the sea. He would be there till very late into the night, and then he would come back to the bench to retire for the night," Anish says.

Anish approached the authorities



Rivkatovich Salavat with Anish PH in Fort Kochi | A SANESH

seeking help on behalf of the Russian. "But nobody was interested," Anish recalls. This prompted him to bring the matter before the media. When Salavat's plight made news, Tourism Minister P A Mohamed Riyas intervened.

"If the police had taken immediate action, the tourist wouldn't have suffered for long," says Anish, criticising the lack of amenities and security for tourists in Fort Kochi. "All the police did was confiscate his visa and passport."

The indifference of the officials was perhaps made less severe by the hospitality of Fort Kochi residents. Patricia Bosco is one of them. None of the narratives weaved around Salavat — that he was an alcoholic and drug addict, that he was insane, etc. — fazed her. When she saw a young man suffering, she opened her doors. "I invited him to my house," says Patricia.

When TNIE spoke to the officials, we learned that Salavat's visa had not run out yet. His documents were confiscated by the police so that the Russian would not lose those as well before he exited the country. Rather than ensuring the tourist's safety, the officers seemed to be content with the fact that Salavat had the assistance of local residents.

"Salavat lives with my parents and two children. I have found no truth in rumours," Patricia says. She was able to gather info about him through a friend who knew the Russian language.

Anish, Salavat's "favourite person", also rubbishes how the Russian had been labelled in the news. "He is from a good family in Russia. He is one of five siblings; he had shown me pics. The poor man just lost his way after losing his money and valuables," Anish says.

XPRESS FOCUS

VELIYATH GARDENS A PARADISE OF TROPICAL FRUITS

When a Dubai-returned former expat businessman, who had a passion for greening the earth, chose to set up an exotic fruit garden on one acre of land in Manjapetty near Aluva, he was taking a major gamble. But now, 12 to 13 years on, Sreekumar Menon, who founded the enterprise called Veliyath Gardens, should be patting himself on the back. From a handful of green shoots, the tropical fruit garden currently boasts of 500 varieties of fruit bearing plants. Not only that, the fruit garden is spread across 3 acres.

How did Sreekumar Menon hit upon this novel idea? "Right from childhood, I had an abiding interest in planting saplings. Thus, Veliyath Gardens was just a case of pursuing a penchant dating back to my formative years."

"The idea germinated in me during my stint in Dubai. That's when I got the exposure to the wider world and this helped me distil my experiences into something more solid and creative," he said.

An interesting thing about the fruit garden is that it is mainly into the sale of saplings rather than fruits. "This is so because we need fruits to produce saplings. As a result, the fruits grown at the garden cannot be put up for sale," said Menon.

A visit to Veliyath Gardens, which provides a surreal experience, can indeed be an eye opener. "There are exotic fruit bearing plants from virtually every corner of the world. For instance, seeing the sapling of an



Sreekumar Menon, founder



exotic fruit bearing plant, which is endemic to the Amazon forests in faraway Brazil, can be a real eye-popper. Similarly, the charm of seeing man-made greenery, which extends as far as the eye can see, is truly exhilarating," affirmed Menon.

As for the fruits grown in the garden, Matoa (Indonesia) is the fastest growing one and Bor Therkara from Myanmar is among the biggest. A few of the fruits, include Miracle berry (West Africa), Pakistan Mulberry (Pakistan), White pineapple (Latin America), Governor's plum (Madagascar), Surinam cherry black (Surinam), Ongo fruit (Africa) etc.

Managing such a behemoth enterprise can be a truly daunting task. However, the suave businessman that Menon is, means that he is able to ensure the entire thing works like a well-oiled machine.

"To manage the garden, there is a highly committed moderate-sized workforce. Because the methods to be employed for producing the saplings, like grafting, budding etc, involve manual labour.

We also use only cow dung-based manure for plants in the garden. The fact that since these saplings are insulated from pests means that there is no need to use pesticides or insecticides," he pointed out.

At any given time, around 200 or so saplings will be readily available at Veliyath Gardens. Prospective customers can approach us directly. We will help them make informed choices on the basis of their respective requirements. That's, some may have enough land at their disposal and will not have a problem having one or two trees in their property. There might be others with only limited space available and they will want to tailor their requirements accordingly," Menon disclosed.

On the type of clientele he gets, Menon had this to say, "There are people for whom an indulgence like this is a real passion. It's almost akin to those with a penchant for pests. This means that no matter what, these people will continue with their biggest passion. For them, their entire lives revolve around this."

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