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**A board game convention?** Gamers come together to celebrate Indian launches **P3**

**WHAT IS VIJAY'S FAMILY STAR ABOUT?** **P4**



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THAMODHARAN B



## Meet the Manjummel Boys

**Chidambaram,**  
Director

The response *Manjummel Boys* got from Tamil Nadu has been overwhelming; we were really not ready for this!

The writing process was tough; I had it in my mind that the film had to start with the Tamil song from Kamal Haasan's *Guna*. For the climax, as the situation was claustrophobic, the melody would help calm things down. The lines perfectly fell in place; I think that it was made for me 30 years ago.

When I first met the real-life Subash [the film is based on a real incident], I realised that the story is about an atheist becoming God. Because, someone who has almost seen death and come back is equal to God; from my first interaction with him, I decided to write my screenplay around this. I also decided to cast many directors as actors in the film — Soubin (*Parava*), Lal Jr. (*Driving License*) and Khalid Rahman (*Unda*), and that worked in my favour. They knew the value of time and understood what was going on.

In terms of business, the success of *Manjummel Boys* might eventually pave the way for bigger films in Malayalam cinema.

However, as writers for Malayalam films,



**As writers of Malayalam cinema, we keep thinking of the budget when we pen our scenes. That's why we weave in more drama. This limitation is our superpower**

we usually do not dare write a big spectacle, because we know we will not get that kind of budget. So, we weave in more drama in the dialogues and focus on domestic interactions, and things that happen in a confined space. When we write, we keep thinking about the budget. That limitation, I believe, is our superpower.

Currently, even as we are thrilled about the love the film is receiving everywhere, we are releasing its Telugu and Hindi dubbed versions on April 6. Personally, I do not want it to release on any OTT platform soon!



To watch the interview of the *Manjummel Boys* team, scan QR code

**Srinivasa Ramanujam**  
srinivasa.r@thehindu.co.in

Once upon a time, a man fell into a pit and his friends helped him get out.

This seemingly simple storyline is the base around which recent Malayalam film *Manjummel Boys* revolves. But as with most of Malayalam cinema, which makes the ordinary charming and the everyday epic, *Manjummel Boys* too weaves in enough thrill and tension into its script, leading to much excitement in cinema halls.

In Tamil Nadu, where the film has been a blockbuster, the crucial climax featuring Soubin Shahir, Sreenath Bhasi and the rest of the actors – peppered with a song from Kamal Haasan's 1991 Tamil film *Guna* – met with rapturous applause, something largely reserved for the entry scenes of the superstar.

While the 'Kanmani Anbodu' melody made a comeback, *Manjummel Boys* made history, becoming the first Malayalam film to collect ₹200 crore at the global box office. The motley team behind this successful film discusses it all during a recent visit to *The Hindu* office in Chennai. Excerpts:



**Ajayan Challisery,**  
Art director

Initially, I was told that *Manjummel Boys* was the story of a man who falls into a ditch. I had no idea what kind of a ditch it was. Later, I realised that the story was about Kodaikanal's Guna Caves. So, we went on a search for places that share a resemblance with the caves. But we all know how much of a beloved space this is for people in Tamil Nadu, so it was challenging to show a mere copy.

We realised that it was going to be difficult to shoot a 11-member core cast for 30 days in a space like this. When we went to the real location, it was difficult to even spot the ditch as it was covered in 16 years of soil and moss. Moreover, the 80-feet depth had to be taken into account.

In Kerala, there was no space of such scale where the cave could be recreated. After a long-drawn search, we



found an old, abandoned godown in Perumbavoor which was converted into the caves. It was 50-feet deep but the platform was designed in such a way that water seeps into it from every direction.

During the Kodai schedule, we studied the rocks and made their moulds, which were cast in Kochi for recreation. It took us two months to do this. Three five-floor-high ditches were stitched together to create the final cave [into which Subhash falls]. It was extremely dangerous to shoot the scenes inside because of the depth. We shot there for three months, thankfully without any injuries or unfortunate incidents.

## An auto ride through Chennai

*Asha The Auto-Driver* is an ode to Chennai's hardworking women

**Akila Kannadasan**  
akila.k@thehindu.co.in

**M**any of us have come across an Asha in the city. A khaki shirt over her sari, her long hair in a braid, and a tired, but cheerful smile on her face, she navigates her auto through peak Chennai traffic. *Asha The Auto-Driver*, recently brought out by Tulika Publishers, is an ode to many such hard-working women in the city. "The story is inspired by the auto drivers I came across

in Chennai," says the author Aruna Shekar, who is based in Auckland, New Zealand.

As someone who lived in Chennai's Indira Nagar in the late 1980s, she has fond memories of auto rides through the city. The author completed her Master's at Madras University and eventually moved. Aruna visits her sister, who lives in Kilpauk, every year.

In her book, she takes readers through Asha's routine through the week. "She is proud of her auto, and is ever cheerful," says Aruna. The story

begins at the railway station, where Asha waits at an auto-stand with her auto that sports bright pink flowers.

There is something else in her auto: a bag of jasmine buds she bought from the flower market in the morning. Asha strings the flowers as she waits for her passengers to arrive: when she

**On the go** Sandhya Prabhat, the illustrator, brings alive the essence of the city.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

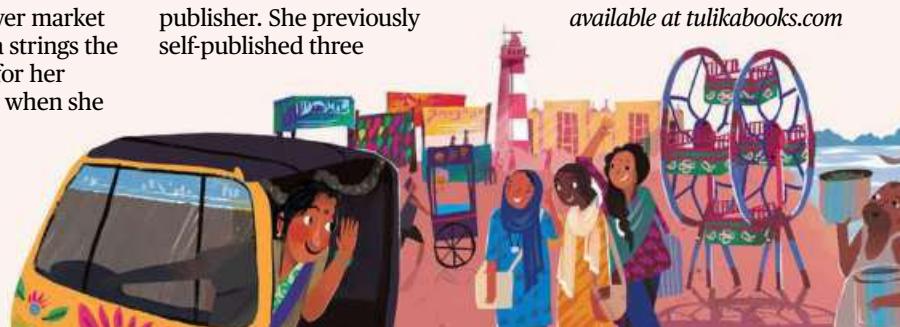
is not riding, she is stringing flowers.

Sandhya Prabhat, the illustrator, brings alive the essence of Chennai and its people: the beach with its carousel and shoot-the-balloon games; the lighthouse and football grounds, and the cows that amble through our streets.

*Asha The Auto-Driver* is available in nine languages, and is Aruna's first book with a traditional publisher. She previously self-published three

children's books, *Guess Whose Tail This Is*, *One of a Kind* and *Pet Pals*. "I'm now working on a story about an ostrich and a camel, that takes place in Rajasthan," she says, adding that there is another title about mangoes in the pipeline, also for children.

*Asha The Auto-Driver* is available at tulikabooks.com



**Weaving a French connection**

Hours of skilled labour and technique hide behind the sequins and stitches of Vastrakala's elaborate Paris Fashion Week repertoire. This Indo-French company based in Chennai, has collaborated with the likes of Lesage, a storied Paris-based haute couture firm, to bring alive aesthetic hand-embroidered pieces. The Alliance Française of Madras invites participants to view *Threads of Time*, a Franco-Indian legacy, a retrospective focussing on Lesage interiors by Vastrakala. At Alliance Française of Madras, 24, College Road, Nungambakkam. From April 6 to 15 from 10am to 6pm. Entry free.





## Get, set,

# roll

Gowri S  
gowri.s@thehindu.co.in

Pick your boat. Bid for your oarsmen. Bet on rival boats.

We are in the backwaters of Kerala's Alappuzha, rowing vicariously through meticulously marked and beautifully-illustrated race courses, in boats made of cardboard. Vallamkali, a light strategy board game inspired by the famed boat races of Kerala, has us – a group of five – hooked. We loudly bid and chant, with bated breath, as the race begins. Easily the loudest table there, we were later told.

Spread out on adjoining tables are other board games, most of which are made by Indian companies, each with a distinctive design, inviting keen players as they walk into TTOX Chennai, the city's first-ever board game convention, that wrapped last week. Here, you find games that follow the local spirits of Ladakh; the architecture and design of the Taj Mahal, or the business strategy of a tea stall with a

**Chennai's first-ever board game convention** saw a passionate community of players, designers and publishers come together for hours of continuous gameplay

steady flow of customers, apart from battles fought that make history as we know it today.

An attempt to bring the already-thriving community of Chennai board gamers, publishers and designers together, the event saw a footfall of almost 400 gamers, designers and enthusiasts.

"The fact that there are more than 10 board game cafes in Chennai is testament to the

strength of the community here," says Phalgun Polepalli of Bengaluru-based Mozaic Games, who brought this novel format of a convention to Chennai.

Apart from playtest tables (categorised into light-medium games and medium-heavy games) where anyone can try a game even if that entails hours of continuous gameplay, there is a library with 700 games mostly donated by volunteers and cafes,

a games shop, and a table solely dedicated to Dungeons and Dragons. "D&D is a favorite among the Gen-Z and Gen-Alpha because they watch shows like *Stranger Things*. The dungeon master, Arvindh Sundar, one of the best in the country, ended up doing three sessions!" Phalgun says.

"This is a catalyst and will accelerate a culture where people are free to choose any game they want and sit with it, in no rush."

About 50% of the participant crowd has arrived from outside Chennai, travelling from Lucknow, Chandigarh, Kanpur and Bengaluru to experience the convention. Here, one can spot eager participants playing games



**This is a catalyst and will accelerate a culture where people are free to choose any game they want and sit with it, in no rush**

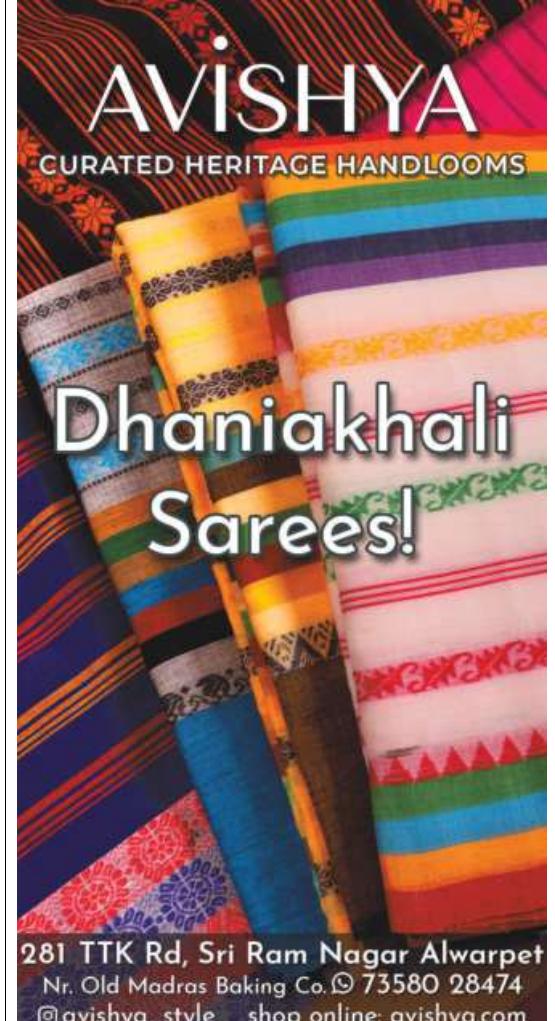
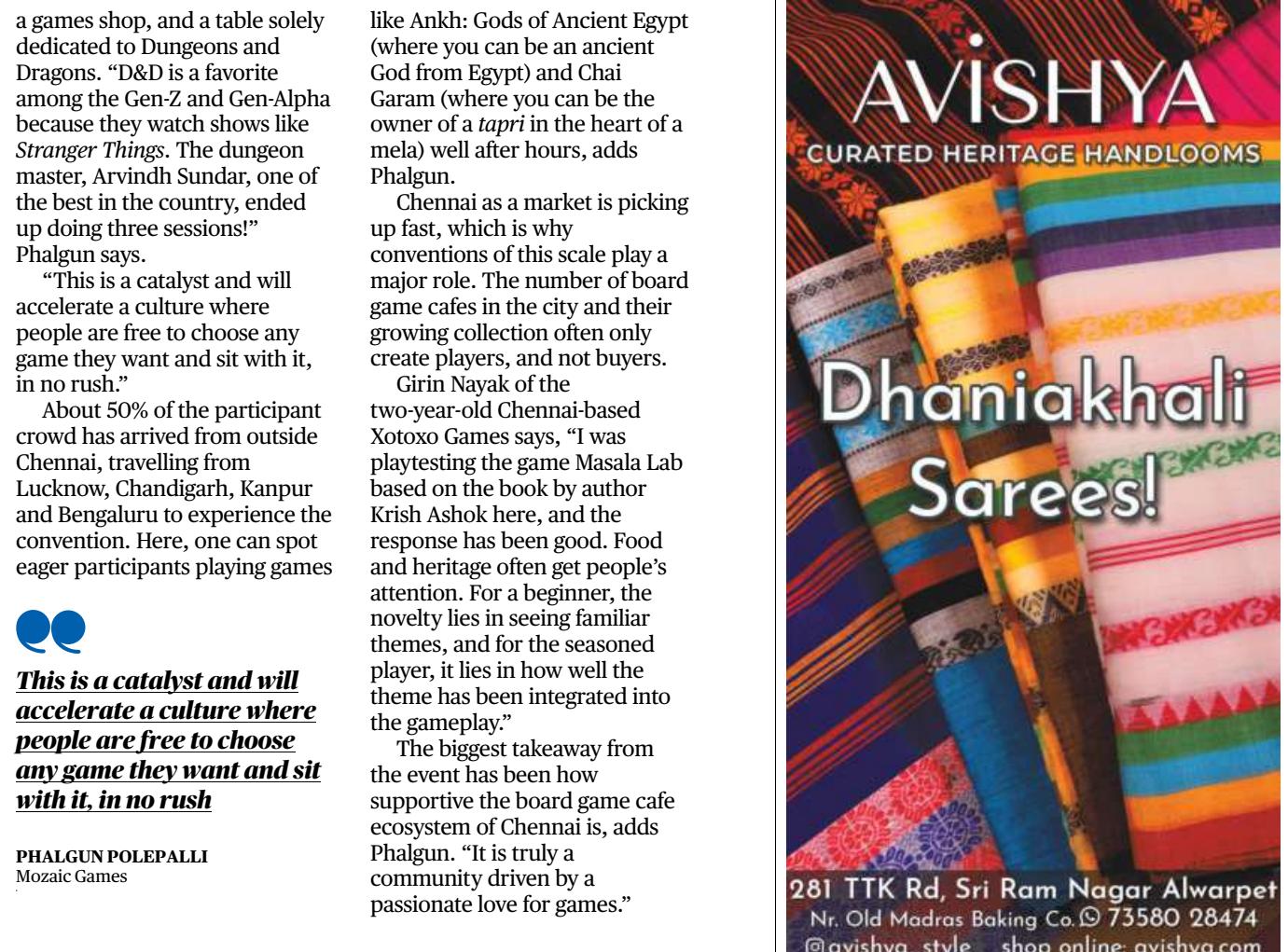
PHALGUN POLEPALLI  
Mozaic Games

like Ankh: Gods of Ancient Egypt (where you can be an ancient God from Egypt) and Chai Garam (where you can be the owner of a *tapri* in the heart of a melia) well after hours, adds Phalgun.

Chennai as a market is picking up fast, which is why conventions of this scale play a major role. The number of board game cafes in the city and their growing collection often only create players, and not buyers.

Girin Nayak of the two-year-old Chennai-based Xotoxo Games says, "I was playtesting the game *Masala Lab* based on the book by author Krish Ashok here, and the response has been good. Food and heritage often get people's attention. For a beginner, the novelty lies in seeing familiar themes, and for the seasoned player, it lies in how well the theme has been integrated into the gameplay."

The biggest takeaway from the event has been how supportive the board game cafe ecosystem of Chennai is, adds Phalgun. "It is truly a community driven by a passionate love for games."



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## Foraging in the hills

Taste the Western Ghats with Kodai buddha bowls and more at a pop-up by The Kodai Chronicle Trust and Chennai's Amethyst

Chitradeepa Anantharam  
chitradeepa.a@thehindu.co.in

When you try the Nilgiris trifle pudding at Amethyst's Wild Garden Cafe, you can also update yourself on the challenges of the Western Ghats. In association with The Kodai Chronicle Trust and Wild Garden Cafe, Amethyst, food historian Rakesh Raghunathan has curated a two-week food festival showcasing the produce of the Western Ghats.

The *Kodai Chronicle* (TKC), an eco-publication based in the Western Ghats, is an independent, community-driven monthly publication that aims to showcase the biodiversity of the landscape it is set in, explore the challenges it faces and encourage community stewardship. "We are all set to launch *The Sky Island*, a publication which will focus on climate change and its impact on the Western Ghats," says Rajni George, editor-in-chief, *The Kodai Chronicle*.

A food festival can be a powerful way to illustrate the riches of the region. The Nilgiris and Palani Hills grow fruits such as oranges, bananas, plums, avocados and tree tomatoes; vegetables like carrots,



**Kodai Connect** The food festival will present produce from the Western Ghats through innovative dishes. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

cauliflowers and beetroot; tea; coffee; and spices like cardamom and pepper. Promoting the produce from this region is an effective way to support cultural traditions and sustainable agriculture.

Describing how he put together the menu, Rakesh says, "I have used tree tomatoes, smoked hill garlic, bamboo rice, millets and certain varieties of roots and tubers from the region. I have also recreated the Kodai molaga bajji."

Highlighting local ingredients, there is potato and cheddar cheese soup, Nilagiri mutton soup and a soup made using fresh turmeric with chicken dumplings. All major ingredients are sourced

from the region which lends every dish a distinctive aroma and flavour.

Stuffed mushroom casserole made using mushrooms sourced from the forests of Kodai, buddha bowls, and potato and peas gratin, served for mains, makes diners reminisce their time in the hill station. For the non vegetarians, there is a herbed chicken and bamboo rice bake.

The meal ends with the Nilgiris trifle pudding, masala chai tres leches and Kodai banana churros.

*At The Wild Garden Cafe, Amethyst, Royapettah. Available till April 19, lunch and dinner. For bookings, call 9382713370.*

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**Movie for a cause**

Punjab Women's Association, a non-profit organisation presents a fundraiser show of award-winning film, *The Detective Detectives*, directed by Paritosh Painter. The programme is in aid of charity for Radhatri Nethralaya Eye Care Hospital and TANKER (Tamilnad Kidney Research) Foundation for dialysis patients.

@PVR SPI Escape, EA Mall, Royapettah, April 7, 6.30pm. For tickets, call 9840442104.



**Art and ideas**

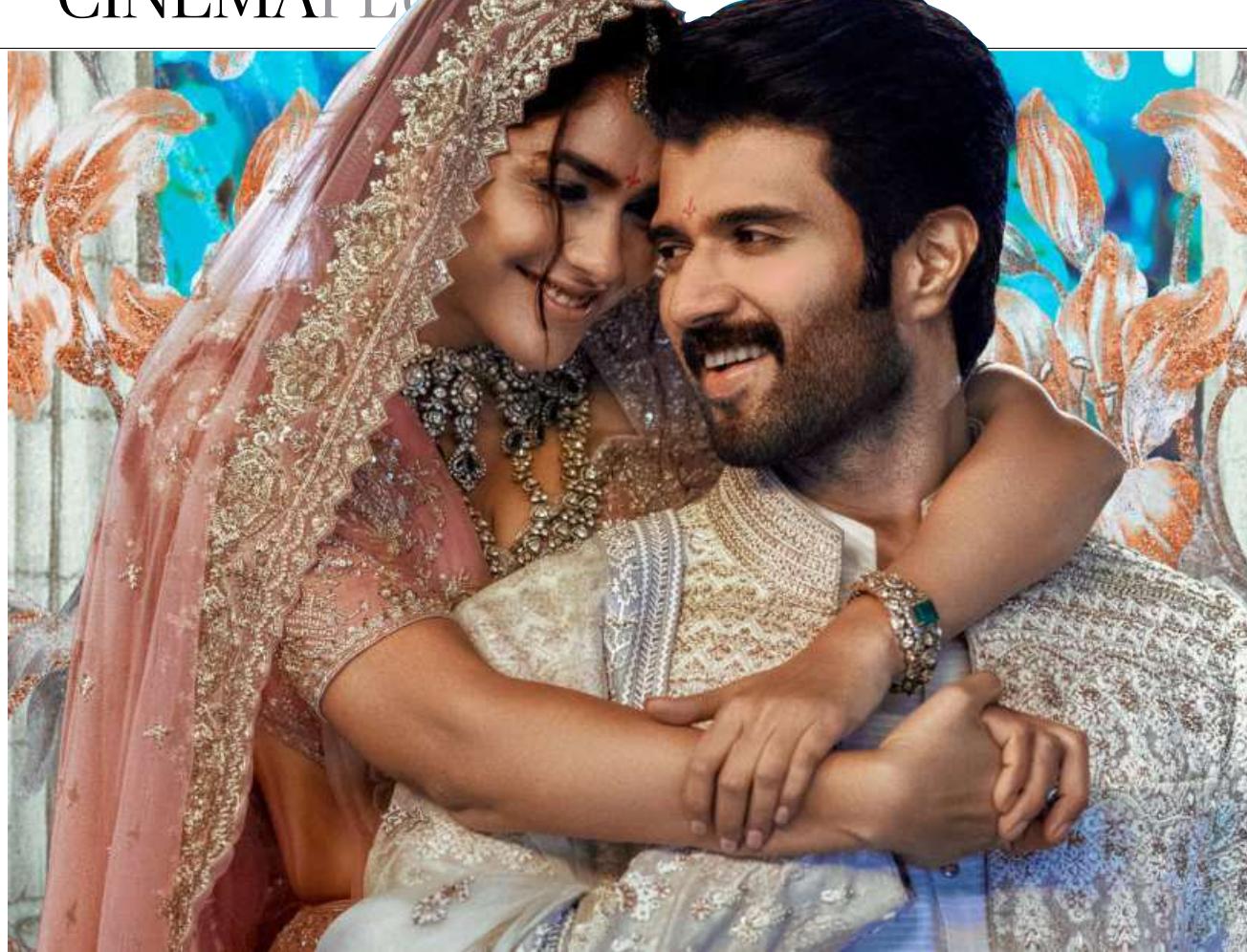
Backyard is hosting a night pop-up market with over 30 brands. The event aims to promote the power of an idea, and the love that is handmade. This night-themed makers' market provides a platform for artists, creators, small business owners, passionate side-hustlers and happy dreamers. Entry to this event is free. @Backyard, Adyar, April 6, 5pm to 10.30pm. For details, call 7358458117.

**Kutch on a plate**

Chef Poonam Dedhia has curated the best of Kutchi cuisine, famed for its rich culinary heritage, aromatic spices and flavours, as part of the Gujarati Food Festival presented by Kailash Parbat. For welcome drinks, there are jamun shots and gudh ka sharbat (a summer drink made using raw mango, mint and fennel). Pick from methi na gota, bajra na chamchamiya, surti pyaz ka samosa, stuffed tomato bhujia and more, for starters. The main course menu features panchkutiy shaak, bhinda sambariya, aakhi dungri lasan nu shaak, Gujarati vadha nu daal, Gujarati kadhi, and green moong dal khichdi. There will be live counters as well. Sweets and desserts from the region such as finiya, choorma ladoo and moong dal barfi will be available. The Gujarati thali is priced at ₹349.

@Kailash Parbat, all outlets in Chennai. The thali is available from April 5 to 14 for lunch and dinner. For details, call 9150016049.





# Star of the show

**Actor Vijay Deverakonda discusses the middle-class setting of his latest film *Family Star***

**Sangeetha Devi Dundoo**  
sangeethadevi.k@thehindu.co.in

**I**n a balmy summer afternoon, with barely three days to go before the release of his new Telugu film *Family Star*, Vijay Deverakonda is a picture of calm. The actor reveals that at least 50 people known to the producer, the director and his own family members have watched the film, and there is an air of cheer and confidence.

One of the first video promos of *Family Star* summed up the essence of Vijay's character, a combination of a family man and a star who flexes his muscles. The initial title in consideration, however, was different. "The original title was the hero's name, Govardhan. In real life, this is my father's name. In the film,

the grandfather passes on this name to my character and believes that the boy can shoulder the family responsibilities," says Vijay. Once the film went on floors, the team wanted a title representing someone in each family who makes everyone feel secure. "Every family has a star. We wanted a title that would resonate with everyone through that characterisation."

*Family Star*, in which he shares the screen with Mrunal Thakur, is his second collaboration with director Parasuram Petla after *Geetha Govindam* (2018). "When I take a flight to travel, I most often interact with people; at almost every airport I come across people who tell me that they loved *Geetha Govindam* (GG) and ask me when I will do such a film again. This time, we went all out to try and ensure that the audience has a blast," says Vijay.

**Saraswathy Nagarajan**  
sarawathy.nagarajan@thehindu.co.in

**T**wo friends with stardust in their eyes travel from Kerala to Madras, the Mecca of filmmaking in the Seventies.

Malayalam film *Varshangalkku Shesham*, written and directed by Vineeth Sreenivasan, trails the two as they travel from Kozhikode to Madras, hoping to make a mark in cinema. Reaching theatres on April 11, the film is about their struggle and success as they follow their heart.

*Varshangalkku Shesham* zooms into Kodambakkam through the lives of Venu and Murali, essayed by Dhyan Sreenivasan and Pranav Mohanlal respectively. "One dreams of making it big in cinema while the other has his own plans. Murali motivates Venu to go to Madras. What happens to those friends is the story of *Varshangalkku Shesham*. Covering five decades, the film throws light on cinema by charting the lives of the two," says Vineeth.

Since Vineeth's father, actor-writer-director Sreenivasan, had made the same journey from Kerala in the Seventies, the question follows whether it is based on his tryst with cinema.

"Not completely. I have listened to his stories about his early life in Madras and also the experiences of many of his contemporaries in cinema. During my school days, I used to be an ardent reader of popular Malayalam film magazines such as *Nana*, *Vellinakshatram* and *Chithrabhumi* which carried articles and interviews of those working in cinema. It was a different world and most of the news on cinema was shared only through

A lot has changed since the times of GG. "Back then, we had nothing to lose," Vijay recalls. "I was just winging it; I was a young boy happy that I was getting to live my dream of acting in films. I loved going to the sets and acting and did not think further. It took me a week to understand Parasuram's style of

**The next few years are going to be physically challenging, with films in different time periods. I will sport different looks and speak different accents**



working. Now, I vibe with him instantly; when a director knows that an actor understands what he wants, he has a blast. Our craft has improved; we understand a film's structure and performance much better. There is also an added sense of responsibility."

**Middle class memories**  
*Family Star* is billed as a film set in a middle-class milieu. Having grown up in a middle-class setting, did Vijay rely on his muscle memory of real-life observations to play the character with added familiarity and authenticity?

"Certainly. Buji (Parasuram)

and I know how boys from middle-class families

In the days following the release of *Arjun Reddy*, Vijay had told this reporter that he hopes that even a decade down the line, he can retain the freedom to choose films without the restrictions of image. Ask him if he still has that freedom or have business constraints come in with his stardom, and he says it is a mix of both. "I am open to working with any director or producer and any genre except horror, which I do not enjoy watching. But I want to do films that will be watched by a large section of the audience. I cannot do a niche film if I cannot control the budget and the cycle of business."

He explains that some of his films that were made on small budgets were sold for high prices, leading to disappointment. "I want everyone who buys the film to be in a safe zone. If I can control the budget and how the film is sold, I can do a small film. For instance, the way Aamir Khan worked on *Taare Zameen Par*."

Vijay cites an example of how he wanted to co-produce and do a brief part in director Shree Karthick's *Oke Oka Jeevitham*. "I loved the script. I offered to play a small part, produce it and market it such that I disclose that I liked the story so much that I produced it. But the producer felt that the strategy would not work and I took a step back. I was sure it should not be marketed as my film."

Vijay's line up includes a film with director Gowtam Tinnanuri, one with Rahul Sankrityan and another that is yet to be announced, in diverse genres. "I'm excited about all of them."



**A trip to the past** Vineeth Sreenivasan; (below) Pranav Mohanlal and Dhyan Sreenivasan. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Some of the old-time studio scenes were shot in Coimbatore and Pollachi. "A lot of hard work and planning has gone into this shooting. Art director Nimesh Thanur reimagined Madras for us at Aroor."

Does Vineeth, with his impeccable track record at the marquee, get butterflies in his stomach as his movie reaches cinemas? "One gets that feeling about four to five days before the release. Till then I am engrossed in its making," he says with a laugh.

"There is a sense of relief when a project reaches its destination, from an idea to a visual story. That feeling is undeniable."

There is the satisfaction of realising that one has been able to complete it in a way one had visualised it."

Vineeth wears many hats – writer, actor, director, lyricist, singer and composer – all with elan. He has also brought in several newbies who are now making waves in movies. This time, he introduces musician Amrit Ramnath, who makes his debut as a music director. "He is in his twenties and I felt his perspective would be interesting and enhance the film."

Vineeth admits that his decisions to choose a teammate are largely based on intuition. "Usually, I narrate stories that are in my comfort space. *Varshangalkku Shesham* is a completely different film. It is a movie about cinema. I like working with newcomers as they bring in fresh perspectives and ideas."

## CINEMA IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Malayalam film *Varshangalkku Shesham*, directed by Vineeth Sreenivasan, revolves around two friends wanting to make it big in films

these magazines and not through television or social media. Those inspired me."

He recollects how during stage shows, actors like Mukesh and the late Innocent used to regale the team with stories of life in Madras and cinema. Vineeth was able to get a ringside view of filmmaking and the action while Sreenivasan was shooting for Priyadarshan's *Chandrakala*, starring Sreenivasan and Mohanlal.

"Before I became a resident of the city, it was a place that had always fascinated me. I had stayed for short

periods in Kodambakkam, Ashok Nagar and so on... I believe that *Varshangalkku Shesham* has captured that mood of tinsel town in the Seventies and Eighties."

Starring many of the actors he worked with in his previous film, *Hridayam*, *Varshangalkku Shesham* has a huge star cast, including Nivin Pauly, Aju Varghese, Basil Joseph and Kalyani Priyadarshan, among others.

Shot in 40 days on sets in Kerala, Coimbatore and Pollachi, the movie recreates the Kodambakkam and studios of Chennai at Aroor, Kochi.

# Laughter, the best medicine

**Meet Chennai-based cardiovascular surgeon Dheeraj, also the hero of upcoming Tamil film *Double Tuckerr***



**Operation theatre** Dheeraj in *Double Tuckerr*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**Srinivasa Ramanujam**  
srinivasa.r@thehindu.co.in

This helped fine-tune the storyline. Children are our target audience."

**D**heeraj has just finished a bypass surgery when we call him. "The patient is fine," he tells me cheerily.

The 42-year-old popular cardiovascular surgeon has a busy week: apart from attending to his patients, he is also completing last-minute formalities for the release of his Tamil film that hits screens on April 5.

Titled *Double Tuckerr*, the film features Dr Dheeraj in the lead role, along with two angels, named 'left' and 'right', brought to the big screen thanks to animation. Directed by Meera Mahadhi and also starring actors like Smruthi Venkat, Kovai Sarala and MS Baskar, it promises to be a fun-filled talk about life after death. "After all, laughter is the best medicine," says Dheeraj.

The journey of *Double Tuckerr* started with a narration that was supposed to be for five minutes, but ended up lasting an hour. "Throughout the narration, I just couldn't control my laughter," he recalls. The initial storyline featured Yama and Chitragupta, with the idea of casting Yogi Babu and Munishkanth, but that was vetoed as Yogi Babu had already done a character on similar lines in another project. That was when the concept of angels popped up. At each step, I kept asking the question: why should people watch this film?"

