

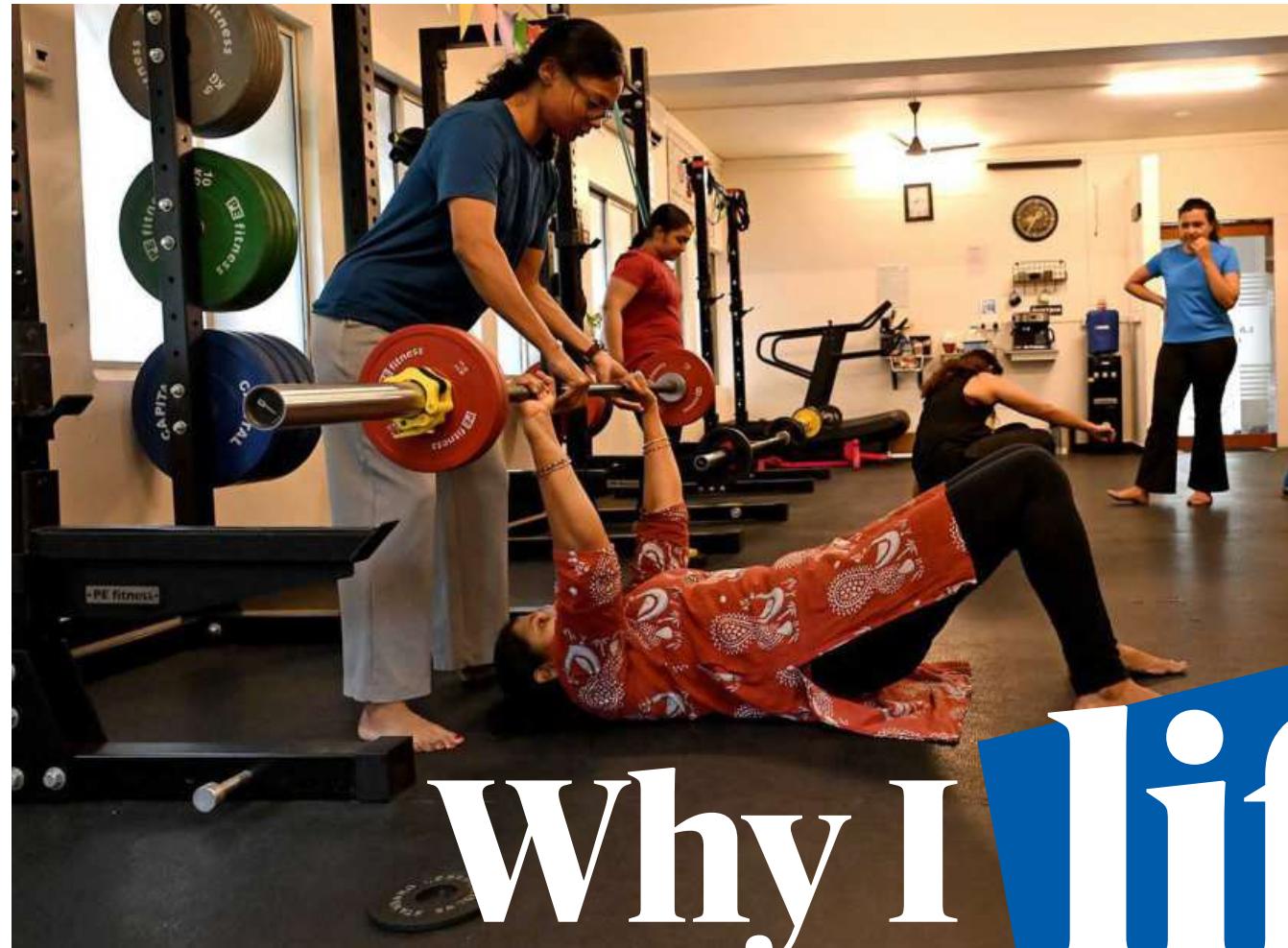


metro PLUS

THE HINDU

Visakhapatnam zoo collaborates with Vandalur to conserve the Asiatic wild dog **P2**

WHAT RAM EXPLORES IN PARANTHU PO P4



Hot off the press Women across age groups have pivoted to training intensely and lifting heavy weights at gyms across the city. Here, women are performing overhead presses, deadlifts and lat pull-downs at Ladies Club, T Nagar.
S SHIVARAJ

spike in the number of women coming up to her, setting goals like doing a deep push up or completing a pull up. "There is a deep shift. The aesthetic goals of losing weight have dropped. More women are looking to lift heavy and develop strength," she says.

Manjuk A who is a national level power lifter and a strength training coach with 10 years of experience, says that women tell her about the lifestyle changes they have witnessed. "They are able to lift their own luggage, are able to balance better and have less aches and pains," she says. She adds that she is often told that they have been able to manage their period cycles better too. "Strength training has several benefits. Women tend to lose bone density and muscle mass sooner than men so it is essential for women to lift weights along with a healthy lifestyle of eating nutritious meals. Training also helps against conditions like osteoporosis and arthritis that often set sooner in women. It also really helps women's mental health," she says.

Rini has often been part of gyms where the ratio of coaches who are men and women is nine to one. "Many times, male coaches have provided impractical solutions to real-world problems for their female clientele. Women do not just participate in the workforce. They also do work at home. To expect a businesswoman to do an impossible number of steps and give her a hard diet

to follow without taking into account her circumstances is silly but is often the case. Also, in gyms, the voices of women clients



and trainers are often overlooked. I want to change that at my gym," she says. Rini's favourite part of coaching is when women shock themselves by how strong they are.

Sheba Devaraj, who is not only a coach, but a competitive weight-lifter now, says that she has often encountered this feeling. The latest was when she was classified as an athlete whilst participating and winning the gold at the Asian Masters Weightlifting Championship held in Doha and bronze for weightlifting at the World Masters Games at Taipei this year. "I had tears in my eyes when they played the Indian

National Anthem on the podium. I didn't expect it," she says. Sheba's fitness journey has been long. Five years since she opened Creed Strength and Conditioning Studio in Alwarpet, Sheba says that the journey towards building her gym has been arduous, long and deeply rewarding. She hopes to

work with clients across gender and is happy to coach those who would like to compete. "I could not find coaches when I wanted because many did not want to waste time coaching an older woman. I feel vindicated now," she says.

Ananya Parekh who has been training for a year now, says that gyms, including women-only ones that entirely focussed on weight loss, were intimidating spaces that gave her "the ick". In gyms with men, her space was often impeded on or she was at the receiving end of unnecessary advice. Today, with consistent training, she is able to deadlift 100 kilograms and is consistently seeking newer fitness goals. Strength training helped her clinch the third place at the Tamil Nadu Masters Swim meet in the 50 metres breaststroke category.

She says, "although it looks aggressive, lifting is actually calming. It gives me the space to be mindful of myself and of others. It helps me access my internal reservoir of strength. Other women should lift because they should be able to experience what I feel today."

Why I lift

Once the domain of muscle bros, gyms are changing as women of all ages take over the barbells, lifting heavy weights, focusing on protein intake, and working on their pullups

as she was keen on creating spaces that reduced the barrier to women trying to be fit. At her gym, people across age groups between 16 and 65, can be found doing curls with heavy dumbbells, squatting, deadlifting, doing weighted push ups, and even performing pull ups. "There are no hierarchies and nobody is talked down to. What one wears should not be a barrier to lifting what they want to lift. There are no assessments here. The aim is to show women the joy in the process of getting stronger," she says. Currently, 70 people train at her gym but she also has a thriving online coaching community.

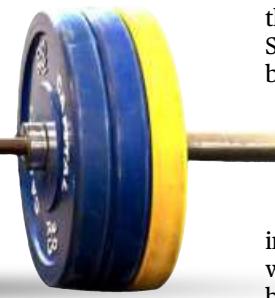
Prashanti also began a group, Women in Fitness, with 21 coaches on a WhatsApp group, so that women in this industry can gather to talk shop. "We meet once a month, deliver a presentation on coaching and programming related topics, and have conversations about the industry and our own practices. We also generously share leads," she says.

A deflection
Rini Richards, a coach who has been in the industry for seven years now, is part of this group. Earlier this year, she opened her gym in Adyar – Fytlyf360 – where she does semi-private training for her clients who have mostly been women. Since she has opened her space, Rini says that she has noticed a



How strength training helps women

- Offsets bone and muscle degeneration.
- Keeps arthritis and osteoporosis at bay. Women are more prone to it.
- Aids gaining muscle and regulates hormones.
- Helps recover from falls, especially in an ageing population.
- Improves mental health.





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Fifty-one year-old Safira Altaf walks into Ladies Club, an all-women's gym in T Nagar, twice a week at 8.30am and a knot, eyes rimmed with kohl, and a book in her hand. Her class does not start for another half an hour but she enjoys the occasional chat with her mates before she begins loading her barbell with weights earmarked for her lifts. "Everyone is so friendly here. I enjoy speaking to them. If not, I tend to catch up with my book. Right after, I pick up my weights," she says.

In May this year, Safira lifted 65 kilograms on her deadlift set. Until three years ago when she began her lifting training, she had 'sub-zero' athletic abilities, she says, laughing. "Before the lockdown, my son tried to get me to lift but I was very reluctant. Historically, we have heard false news claiming that lifting will 'affect' the uterus. It got me worried. But during the pandemic, many doctors put up videos endorsing strength training. I was intent on joining an all-women's gym because I wanted to feel comfortable. I am now hooked. I take my protein after class and ensure that I hit a gram for every kilogram of my body weight," she says.

Safira says that when she first joined the gym, she wore a salwar kameez and dupatta. No questions were asked. Over time, she has warmed up to the idea of tracksuits. Her son runs a gym too but she prefers being here as this women's-only gym is a liberating space where she is focussed on getting strong, ensuring that she does not depend on kin for care in her 70s. "I want to cook, clean and fend for myself at that age," she says. "I like coming here because I am able to see women older than me, causally lifting heavy weights. Younger people too. There is an extra energy. My mythical aches and pains have disappeared," she says.

Safira's experience of seeing more women occupying the gym floor now feels far more ubiquitous than before. Prashanti Ganesh, who runs Ladies Club, says that gone are the days when weight training was meant for athletes and gym bros. Everyone who walks into her gym, picks up barbells. The level – beginner, intermediate, and advanced – is determined by loads. An athlete who competed at school-level, Prashanti says it was difficult for women to find space in structured, organised sport. Often, when she would attempt to play cricket and football with her friends at the local Corporation ground, her presence would be unwelcome. Years of seeking, training and educating herself through internships, certifications and seminars including in India and the United States, led to forming her first venture back in 2015.

One year ago though, she chose to run an all-women's gym "alienating 50% of the billings according to the auditor"

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As dawn breaks over the Eastern Ghats, the rustle of leaves and bird calls merge with a flurry of movement inside the Indira Gandhi Zoological Park in Visakhapatnam. Away from public view in a quiet, forested space of the zoo lies India's only conservation breeding centre for the endangered Asiatic wild dog, also known as the dhole (*Cuon alpinus*). The rust-red dholes, lithe and full of kinetic energy, dart and leap across their large enclosures. Their piercing eyes scan every movement. "They're incredibly alert, agile and difficult to restrain," says Dr Bhanu, the zoo's veterinarian.

The centre is collaborating with zoos across India to enhance the genetic diversity of this elusive species. One such key partner is the Arignar Anna Zoological Park in Vandalur, Chennai. "We are collaborating with Vandalur Zoo to assess their dhole stock for breeding compatibility. The idea is to exchange scientific information and animal history data to identify potential matches and broaden the gene pool," says G Mangamma, curator of the Indira Gandhi Zoological Park.

Such coordinated breeding efforts and information-sharing platforms are critical to sustain genetically viable dhole populations across Indian zoos.

Back in Visakhapatnam, the breeding season has begun, a time of heightened activity and focussed calm. "Administering vaccines or medical aid is only possible through a blowpipe, due to their fidgety and skittish nature." Among the 40 dholes currently housed at the centre, including 16 pups, a few potential breeding pairs have been identified. "We first allow the pair to get used to each other's presence by keeping them close, but separated by a partition in the night kraal for two to three weeks," explains Dr Bhanu. "If no signs of aggression appear, they're moved into the day kraal together."

Once pregnant, the female enters a 62 to 63-day gestation period. About three weeks before delivery, she begins exhibiting denning behaviour, a clear signal for keepers to prepare.

The breeding journey of dholes at Visakhapatnam Zoo began

A look inside India's only Asiatic wild dog conservation breeding centre in Visakhapatnam, now collaborating with Vandalur Zoo

Reviving India's elusive predator

three decades ago. In 1992 and again in 1994, wild dholes from the Eastern Ghats, one male and five cubs, were inadvertently trapped in open moats and retained by the zoo authorities. Over the years, through careful pairing and observation, they grew the stock into a small but genetically valuable population.

Dholes are known for their complex social structures. Unlike solitary predators, they live and breed in packs with a strong hierarchy. "Successful breeding happens in stable groups," says Mangamma. "Single-pair enclosures rarely work, so we are also collaborating with other zoos like Nehru Zoological Park Hyderabad and Sri Venkateswara Zoological Park Tirupati to establish social groups and bring in new genetic material."

The breeding enclosures themselves are thoughtfully constructed, sprawled across



Puppy paw-ty
A wild dog with the fresh litter at Indira Gandhi Zoological Park in Visakhapatnam.
KR DEEPAK



2,662 square metres, lined with native trees like jamun, neem, and bamboo. There are shaded patches, water pools, sunlit clearings and enough space for the animals to express their natural behaviour. Dholes here can leap, play, rest and dig, just as they would in the wild.

Post-partum, the mother is rarely seen, emerging briefly for food or to check for predators. Keepers observe from a distance

to minimise stress. "Sometimes, if a pup is born weak or the mother feels threatened, she may kill her own young," says Mangamma. "This is a known behaviour in carnivores. It's a survival strategy."

Challenges

Despite its successes, the breeding centre faces several challenges: the small founder population, genetic bottlenecks and limited proven breeders. To address these, the zoo plans a series of research and collaborative initiatives. If supported by the Central Zoo

Authority, future studies will include faecal DNA analysis for genetic profiling, development of dhole ethograms (behavioral blueprints), restraint protocols to reduce capture stress and enhanced inter-zoo data sharing networks.

The ultimate goal? "To create a genetically diverse, behaviourally sound captive population that can serve as a source for potential reintroductions into protected wild habitats," explains curator Mangamma.

Each dhole at the breeding centre is tagged using non-toxic dyes or ear tags. Individual histories are meticulously recorded, from medical records to breeding logs. "There's still so much we don't know about dhole biology," says Mangamma. "Our data collection will help fill the gaps from mating rituals to pup development."

Conservation breeding is more than a numbers game. Dholes face mounting threats in the wild. "Shrinking prey base, habitat loss and increasing human conflict are some of them. Captive breeding provides a safety net, but it also serves as a living laboratory to deepen our understanding of the species," says zoo biologist G Purushottam. With support from wildlife institutes like Wildlife Institute of India Dehradun and LACONES Hyderabad and from government and academic institutions, this off-display sanctuary for the wild dogs has the potential to become the heart of dhole conservation efforts in the subcontinent.

Weaving history

To mark 25 years of the M.Rm.Rm. Cultural Foundation, Fibre to Form: The Kottan Story celebrates Chettinad's palm leaf basket

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Once reserved for weddings and temple rituals, the Chettinad *kottan*, a hand-woven palm leaf basket, returns to the spotlight at The Folly. The exhibition, Fibre to Form: The Kottan Story, marks the beginning of the M.Rm.Rm. Cultural Foundation's 25th year celebrations, spotlighting a craft that was revived, sustained and reimagined by the foundation over the last two decades.

"This is our first project and most successful one," says Visalakshi Ramaswamy, founder of the foundation. "We have got all that we wanted to do with this – revive, document, and sustain it for 25 years."

When the foundation began working with the *kottan*, there were no plans to turn it into a commercial product, but sustaining the craft meant adapting it to the present. "It was an object used in rituals and wasn't in demand in today's day and age," she explains. "So, I turned the basket into a packaging product."

The *kottans* on display span years of design from older ritual-style baskets to recent festive collections and new revival efforts in crochet and bead work. "This revival happened unexpectedly when we found someone in Gujarat who wanted to teach bead work. They trained our women, and then some local people who themselves do crochet. We felt like we had come full circle. The *kottan* was complete, so it felt right to celebrate it," she says, adding that these baskets will also be on display.

"It's not as simple as it looks. It's quite complicated," says Visalakshi. To weave a *kottan*, tender palm leaves are harvested, sliced into thin strips, dyed over the course of two days, and woven



Craft revival A woman weaving a basket at the M.Rm.Rm. Cultural Foundation; Kottan baskets. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

into baskets while they are still wet and pliable.

It is a time-consuming process, and the foundation works with over 100 women in and around the town of Karaikudi. "They have been with me for 25 years, and all of them went through a year-long training to be able to make *kottans*," she says. Still, she admits the future of the craft is uncertain.

Challenges, she says, have been constant – from sourcing raw materials and convincing women to continue the work, to marketing and making sure the products reach the right audience. "The motto of my foundation, however, is to document and revive," she says.

The exhibition also marks the beginning of a series of showcases by the foundation, each highlighting a different revival effort. Upcoming chapters will focus on Athangudi tiles, traditional lime plaster, handwoven saris, and more.

Fibre to Form: The Kottan Story is on display at The Folly, Amethyst on June 27 and 28.



SOUTHERN LIVING

Home is where the monkeys roam

Sri City may not have a beach, a bar, or reliable laundromats, but it offers something rarer: rocket launches and a regimented life that would make a colonel proud:

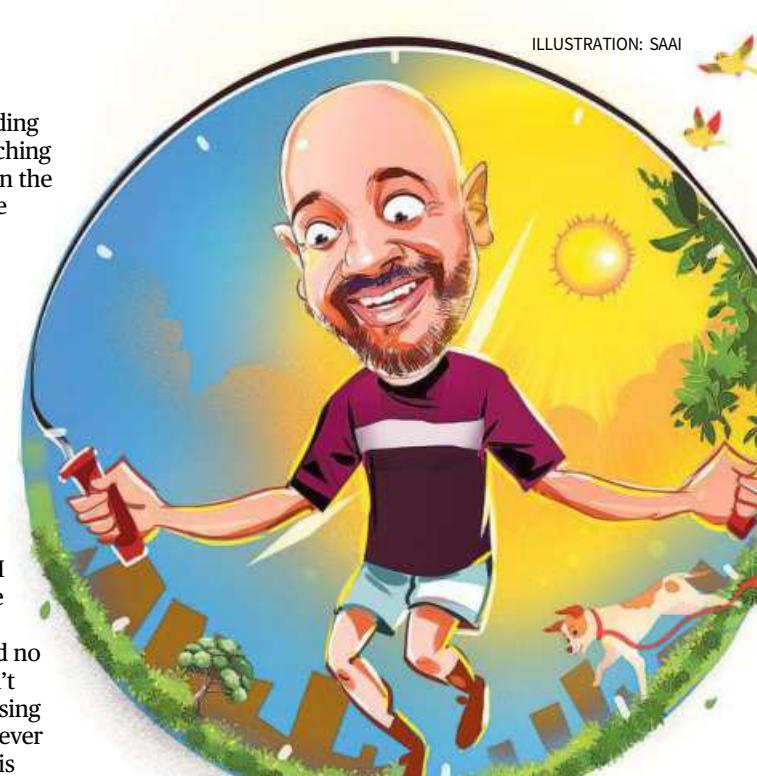
Prajwal Parajuly

At the risk of reading like someone itching to be punched in the eye, I will say I am more content in Sri City than anywhere else. Friends accuse me of toxic positivity.

Sri City has allowed me to build a life I didn't know I wanted. I am a cliché and a half. For more than a decade, I led the opposite of a structured existence. I slept when I felt like it. I woke up when I felt like it. I wrote when

inspiration struck. I said no to any writing that didn't excite me, fully recognising the privilege at play. I never made my bed – I say this with zero exaggeration. But humans thrive on routine – you don't need an expert to tell you that. Mundane things are a beautiful thing. Sri City has provided me with more structure than even school did.

The regimented life I have here would make a colonel proud: wake up at 8am; walk and jump rope in the neighbourhood park; say hello to Machu, the dog, who makes a dash for my



crotch; write a little; head to work in the university shuttle whose driver doesn't return my greeting; classes, students and administrative meetings (fun, fun, eww); head home in a shuttle where the driver deigns to smile at me; eat a dinner as tame as the day; grade papers, and call it a night. Contrast this with my life in New York, where I eat breakfast at 6pm and go to bed at 4am, and you know where the Sri City evangelism comes from.

I may have lulled you into believing that I live in a place where nothing happens. But excitement is never far off. I find it in the scavenger hunt triggered by the Krea laundromat losing an entire bag of my clothes. At other times, excitement visits me in the building in the form of monkeys whose

habitat we have destroyed. And sometimes I even invite it – excitement, that is – into the sitting room of my apartment with the two bathrooms whose shared wall goes only three-quarters of the way up when I host poker games with a mix of players of superior, adequate and dubious skills.

But who needs excitement where there's equilibrium? Who needs excitement where there's teaching?

I am among those writers who like teaching more than they like writing. I often say, to my publicist's horror, that I got into writing not because there was a story in me bursting to come out but because it was the easiest path to fans, fame, and fortune. (Ha). I write for all the wrong reasons, the shallow reasons. But teaching? Teaching is what I do for the soul. Teaching is what keeps me up at night. It helps that Krea University students are smart and likeable (except when they switch off their cameras on Zoom).

Sri City is where I started writing again after quite a hiatus. For far too long, I clung to the coattails of the two books I wrote ages ago. I had stopped enjoying writing because it had

become a job. But once I got settled here, I took a stab at translation. I finished a

children's book. I worked on travel essays. A similar burst of efficiency had last hit me in 2019 when I decamped to Landour in Mussoorie.

Landour is pretty, though. Aesthetically, Sri City has no business being this petri-dish for productivity, and yet the words are

flowing in genres and languages I didn't think I had any talent for.

I know I am aided by the lack of theatre, casinos, and concerts. But where there are no bars, there's the sky-high up, where we are sometimes treated to rocket launches from the nearby Indian Space and Research Organisation. There may not be a beach, but we have the ... winter monsoons. I kid. We have Pulicat Lake close by, and waterfalls and hills to hike to. This is slow living at its best.

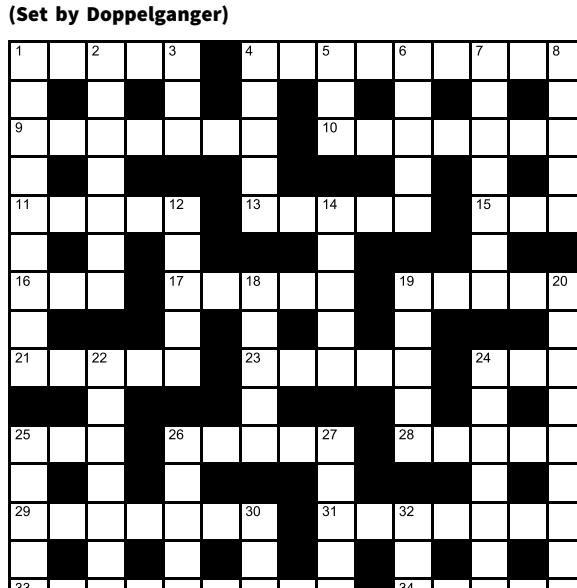
Could life be better? Yes, no doubt. I'll never forgive Krea University for excluding dosa from its dinner menu. The mess food is decent for campus fare, but I didn't uproot myself to eat butter chicken, egg curry and paneer lababdar. I have a problem with the freezing classrooms, but I carry a jacket with me at all times. I wish house help were easier to find. The university does send a revolving trio of cleaners three times a week – and they do a good job – but the stipulations of their contract dictate that they just sweep and mop the floors and clean the bathrooms. How much easier life would be if someone cooked, did the dishes and put the laundry away.

They could skip the bed, though. These days I make it first thing in the morning.

Prajwal Parajuly is the author of *The Gurkha's Daughter and Land Where I Flew*. He loves idli, loathes naan, and is indifferent to coffee. He teaches Creative Writing at Krea University and oscillates between New York City and Sri City.

METROPLUS QUICK CROSSWORD #9

(Set by Doppelganger)



To play The Guardian Quick Crossword, The Hindu Cryptic crossword, Sudoku & other puzzles online, scan the QR code.

Across

- 1 Athletic events (5)
- 4 Believed without question (9)
- 9 Affecting with great wonder (7)
- 10 Worthy of punishment (7)
- 11 A ____ hunt is the hunting down of an individual for heresy (5)
- 12 Per unit costs of a commodity (5)
- 15 Clouds ____ the stars (3)
- 16 Such a person shows no emotion (3)
- 17 A ____ in the tail is an unpleasant end to something (5)
- 19 The subject of a discourse (5)
- 21 The national bird of Sri Lanka is bald (5)
- 23 A special edition of a newspaper (5)
- 24 One, ____ buckle my shoe goes the nursery rhyme (3)
- 25 Can be seen around three sides of India (3)
- 26 The fundamental ingredient (5)
- 28 Allegretto, andante or allegro (5)
- 29 One cannot be ____ for breaking the law (7)
- 31 The Vikings landed in this country before Columbus (7)
- 32 These are prescribed by healthcare professionals (9)
- 34 A limited or first experience (5)
- 35 At the same time (9)
- 36 With absolute conformity (7)
- 37 It can run on snow (3)
- 38 Class of water-soluble crystalline

Solution #9



Dial p for pizza (Below) Mozzarella triangles; (right) Umami Mami mushroom pizza. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND SANGITA RAJAN



Shot on OnePlus

#FramesofIndia

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In *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, Ryan Gosling's character Jacob, the effortlessly charming womaniser, eats a slice of New York pizza dressed in a blazer and formal pants. He leans on a railing, and the slice is folded just the way it is meant to be. It is casual, confident, unforgettable. This is not the only time a New York slice made it to the big screen. From *Spiderman to Miss Congeniality*, Hollywood has long cemented its cult status. And now, Chennai has another spot attempting to bring a slice of the Big Apple home.

Za Pizza Cafe, located on the now-tattered Khader Nawaz Khan (KKN) Road, channels a classic American diner with dark blue and red accents and a geometric black-and-white tiled floor. One wall is filled with framed covers of *The New Yorker*. There is an open kitchen towards one end, where a 400-kilo pizza oven quietly churns out perfectly crisp pizzas once every six to eight minutes. "In Chennai, a lot of people were doing Neapolitan-style pizza, so we decided to do something completely different, and that's how we decided on New York pizza," says Ritvik Varun, one of the founders of Za Pizza Cafe.

So what makes a New York pizza? By definition, a New York pizza has a thin, crisp crust, that can hold its shape. It is topped with a simple uncooked tomato sauce, and low-moisture

Slice and the city

A piece of New York lands in Chennai with Za Pizza Cafe's foldable pies, bold toppings, and diner-style charm

mozzarella cheese that melts without making the crust soggy. It is popularly sold by the slice, which is folded and eaten on the go. It is everything a Neapolitan pizza is not. "In New York, they sell it by the slice. Here, we are still educating customers that reheated slices are not old food," adds Ritvik.

Apart from pizza, the menu has a wide selection of small plates and salads. We try the Kentucky chicken tenders served with three house-made dips – spicy ranch, classic ranch, and hot honey. They are crisp on the outside and juicy on the inside, and pair well with all three dips. For non-meat eaters, a similar small plate option is the crispy oyster mushroom wings.

The garlic parmesan pillows, brushed with garlic butter, come with a cheese dip but go great with the pesto dip that you can

order separately. There are seven dips on the menu – ranch, spicy ranch, hot honey, chilli garlic oil, pesto, buffalo, and cheese – and each one can be ordered to go with different small plates, or even the pizzas. "We call them crust dippers because a lot of people do not like eating the crusts of the pizzas, and these might help," says Varun Sheth, the co-founder.

An Instagrammable small plate is the mozzarella triangle with a

In New York, they sell it by the slice. Here, we are still educating customers that reheated slices are not old food

RITVIK VARUN
Co-Founder, Za Pizza Cafe

cheese pull that can stretch for days. Though under-seasoned, it goes best with the tangy, spicy buffalo sauce, rather than the chunky marinara sauce it is served with. From the pasta section of the menu, we try the spicy vodka macaroni with ricotta. Despite the name, the sauce contains no vodka, using white wine vinegar instead to mimic the flavour. The pasta is slightly overcooked and not al dente.

Currently being sold as full 12-inch pies, the pizza section has a range of vegetarian and non-vegetarian options. "Usually New York pizzas are much larger – 16 or even 18 inches – but we have only started with 12 for now," says Varun. "Our aim is to evolve constantly." We try the Umami Mami, which is topped with caramelised onions, mushrooms, truffle oil, confit garlic and parmesan, and stands up to its name. The Chicken Pizzaiola, topped with marinara sauce, grilled chicken, black olives, sun-dried tomatoes, and finished with garlic aioli, leans towards tangy and could benefit from a drizzle of hot honey.

One stand-out feature of Za is how seriously they take even home delivery. Each delivery includes a card with reheating instructions for a pan, a microwave, and an oven. Says Ritvik, "After all, pizza tastes best when reheated."

Za Pizza Cafe is located at 9, Oyster Building, 1st Floor, Khader Nawaz Khan Road, Chennai. A meal for two costs ₹1,000.



Moments that matter

"Ichigo Ichie: One Lifetime, One Meeting" is an upcoming exhibition by Chennai-based artist and designer C Aditi Maithreya. Rooted in the Japanese philosophy that

every moment is once in a lifetime, the show offers a thoughtful visual journey through two series – Ikigai; which reflects on purpose through Japanese life principles, and Play 'Pause', which explores mindfulness using music as metaphor. Aditi will also lead an engaging art workshop where participants can explore basic colour theory and create their own wall art on mini canvases. @Kadambari Art Gallery, Dakshinachitra Heritage Museum, Muthukadu, July 5 to 19. Workshop is on July 6, 3pm to 6pm, to register, call 9382628919.



Craft and community

Kamala Crafts Shop, presents C4C – Care for Chendamangalam, a curated collection of soft, breezy contemporary Chendamangalam sarees and fabrics. The pop-up honours the handloom weavers of Chendamangalam, Kerala, the craftspeople who rose with quiet strength after the devastating floods of 2018. C4C is a tribute to their resilience, skill, and timeless tradition. Each piece in this collection carries the story of a community that wove its way back to hope, one thread at a time. @Kamala Craft Store, Royapettah. June 26 to 28, 11am to 7pm. For details, call 98407 00445.

JITO Chennai Plus Hosts Grand Launch of JBN Power Conclave, Enriched by Rishab Rikharam's Sitar Magic



In a vibrant celebration of entrepreneurship and culture, JITO Chennai Plus hosted the grand launch of Pagaria JBN Power Conclave, setting a new benchmark for business networking events in the world. The evening was inaugurated by Pramod Chordia, Chairman of JITO Chennai Plus, and Kailash Golecha, Chairman JITO JBN Apex, who together unveiled the vision for a more connected and empowered business community. The event was further graced by eminent dignitaries including Narendra Sririmal (Vice Chairman JITO Apex), Mahaveer Lunawat (Director In Charge JITO Apex), Ujjwal Pagariya (Title Donor – Pagariya JITO Business Network) and Dhiraj Bothra (JBN Chapter Director, JITO Chennai Plus), each playing a pivotal role in the launch of this ambitious initiative.

Jain International Trade Organisation (JITO) stands as a global force, with 75 chapters across India, 40 international chapters, and an impressive 18,000 members worldwide. JITO's core pillars are Seva, Knowledge & Economic Empowerment. The upcoming JBN Power Conclave, scheduled for August 15-17 at ITC Ratnagiri in Colombo, promises to be a landmark event, fulfilling Economic Empowerment facet of JITO. Attendees can look forward to meticulously curated one-on-one networking sessions, providing

entrepreneurs and business professionals with invaluable opportunities to connect and collaborate. Additionally, mentorship sessions with renowned business stalwarts are set to offer guidance and inspiration to the next generation of leaders.

Adding a cultural crescendo to the evening, the audience was treated to a spellbinding sitar performance by Rishab Rikharam Sharma. Hailed as a child prodigy and now an internationally acclaimed maestro, Rishab's emotive and technically brilliant renditions created an atmosphere of awe and admiration, perfectly complementing the spirit of innovation and excellence that defines JBN.

This remarkable evening not only celebrated the launch of a powerful business network but also underscored the harmonious blend of tradition and progress, promising a bright future for entrepreneurs and music lovers alike.

Instagram:

jitochennaiplus

jitochennaiyouthplus

Subtle, spiced, scenic

Up North at Pullman Hotel is Chennai's newest rooftop spot serving fusion chaat, kebabs and more

S Poorvaja
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When we walk into Up North at Pullman Hotel for dinner, we are treated to views of the bustling street on Anna Salai below while ensconced in a tastefully done-up glass house.

Pullman Hotel, an international chain owned by Accor, a French group, threw open its doors in February this year. Up North, which was the rooftop restaurant in the hotel's earlier avatar as the Raintree Hotel has made a comeback.

"This is not your typical North Indian restaurant focussed on sharing portions and family meals. The menu is well thought out and concise, with a combination of small plates, kebabs, crafted cocktails and mains to choose from," says Vinod Ramamurthy, general manager, Pullman Hotel.

We start off with their cocktails. The Gulab Martini, a rose and gulab-infused vodka cocktail is just the right amount of sweet. The Imli Old Fashioned, a gin cocktail with tamarind chilli and orange bitters however needs to be dialled down on the sourness.

There are quite a few fusion experiments on the menu, we soon discover, and one that proves to be a success is the crunchy ghevar chaat, which blends sweet and spicy flavours with a tamarind chutney topping mixed with berries. The deep fried bite-sized haleem croquettes however needed to be seasoned better.

As we move onto the kebabs, the murgh malai kebabs do not disappoint; the succulent, creamy chicken pieces are perfectly cooked.

Dal makhni here comes much hyped, and does not disappoint and is best paired with the restaurant's crumbly, soft garlic naan. The chicken



Sky-high (Left) Kunafa gulab jamun; (inset) a watermelon based cocktail. SANGITA RAJAN

biryani then follows, steaming hot and placed on the table in a pot with the seal intact. While the rice is light and fluffy, and the chicken generous in quantity, the biryani definitely needed punchier flavours to stand out.

The desserts dig into; both the falooda tres leches and the kunafa gulab jaman are innovatively plated.

We notice Up North's diners are a mix – large families trooping in for a late dinner and younger diners, eager to take in the views. Vinod says that this is what they hope to cater to.

Whatever category you fall into, if you want artsy shots of your dal makhni with the views, we suggest you pick the tables in the corners near the glass-panelled walls. The kebabs are good of course, but the views make them better.

Up North is at Pullman Hotel, Anna Salai. A meal for two including alcohol costs ₹3,500 plus taxes. For reservations, contact 9150001759

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Director Ram, whose 'Paranthu Po' is hitting screens on July 4, on his approach to cinema



City tales Director Ram; (below) actors Shiva and Grace Antony in *Paranthu Po*. THAMODHARAN B

Filmmaking is therapeutic'

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While the lights and cameras are being set up, director Ram confesses this is his first interview since 2019's *Peranbu*. "Gone are the days when we hoped for just the film to succeed; now we hope even the interviews do well, wondering if a good one might at least pull in 10 more people to the theatres," he says, a statement that peeks into how this constantly evolving media ecosystem can be overwhelming, even if you are a master filmmaker who has made sharp socio-political commentaries like *Kattradhу Thamizh, Thanga Meenkal, Taramani* and *Peranbu*.

Ram's films, usually, have all typically been released after long intervals; only *Taramani* and *Peranbu* were released within two years. This year, however, his fans have reason to rejoice since two of his films are gearing up for release - *Paranthu Po*, set to hit screens on July 4, and the long-delayed Nivin Pauly-starrer *Yezhu Kadal Yezhu Malai*. "We shot both films simultaneously and finished *Paranthu Po* a few months after wrapping *Yezhu Kadal*.... The latter still had some work to be done on the release front, and so we asked producer Suresh Kamatchi if we could release *Paranthu Po* first, and he agreed to it," says Ram, adding that *Yezhu Kadal*... will also release three or four months later.

Paranthu Po, from the promo material, hints at a breezy comedy-drama, a first for a filmmaker known

for helming intense socio-political dramas.

Paranthu Po, Ram says, is about the lives of characters oblivious to living as 'slaves' in a city. "We all come to a city like Chennai because it tells you that if you come here, you can succeed in life. Moreover, cities become places you can go to after escaping the values that a village imposes on you. A city thrives in the dreams it gives its inhabitants. If a city can house only the successful, the population will be smaller, and there will be

Paranthu Po also features Malayalam actors Grace Antony and Aju Varghese. Also playing pivotal roles are Anjali and a child artiste named Mithul Ryan.



nobody to work for those successful people. So, for a city to function, it needs such slaves, and it is that pursuit of a dream that enchants them; they won't even know they are enslaved."

Paranthu Po, he adds, takes us through the lives of one such middle-class family entranced by that dream. "It speaks about their happiness, their goals, and whether 'vaathu muttai irundhu dinosar varuna varaa' (will or will not a dinosaur come out of a duck egg?)

Actor Shiva plays the lead role in *Paranthu Po*, and it is a surprise to see the actor known for his commercial comedy films star in a Ram film. The director credits Shiva as an actor who can pull off natural performances. "He's a long-time friend of mine; we both made our debuts in 2007, and we had been discussing a potential collaboration ever since. Because he is such a natural actor, you might at times wonder if he is acting as an idiot or if he is one. His comedic timing is also quite extraordinary. Moreover, we needed a 'grown-up child' for this role; yes, he's a father, but he has the heart of a child. That's who Shiva is," explains Ram.

Ram's films, especially *Peranbu* and *Thanga Meenkal*, feature breathtakingly picturesque locations, often set in the mountains or valleys.

"Climbing mountains makes me peaceful, and so does the sea breeze," says Ram, while reaffirming that Nature is all around us, even within concrete confines. Does shooting in such serene locations feel as therapeutic as one can imagine?

"Filmmaking itself is therapeutic. When

you start shooting, you will forget everything else. In a 30-day schedule, you might even forget your family until they call you because cinema can steady your mind, and it happens to everybody on the set."

Ram has made three films since the passing of his guru, the legendary Balu Mahendra. Has he ever wondered what the veteran would have said had he watched these films? "Yes, I thought about that for *Peranbu*, because it was something that was straight out of his school of filmmaking. If he had watched *Paranthu Po*, he would have enjoyed it as well since it has some good humour, and I think he would have laughed out loud."

To watch video interview, scan QR code

Life and death

Abhishek Bachchan returns with another quietly vulnerable role in *Kaalidhar Laapata*, the Hindi adaptation of the Tamil film *KD*

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It's a strange thing to wonder: how do Indians dispose of their own? The 2019 Tamil film *KD* took a comic look at thalaikoothal, the ritual practice of senicide (simply, killing off the elderly) in certain districts of Tamil Nadu. For the film's upcoming remake, *Kaalidhar Laapata*, transplanted to the Hindi heartland, director Madhumita was in search of a comparable phenomenon.

The Hindi heartland obliged. "In a lot of the states up North, there is the practice of leaving one's loved ones if they are aged or unwell at the Kumbh Mela. It is believed that God will take care of them," Madhumita says.

She made another crucial tweak to the original material. The protagonist of *KD* was an 80-year-old man recently awoken from a coma, who, having overheard his family's plans to euthanise him, embarks on a transformative journey after befriending a street urchin.

KD (short for Karuppu Durai) was played by Tamil theatre veteran Mu Ramaswamy. The character in *Kaalidhar Laapata* is younger, and suffers from Lewy Body dementia. What's more, he is played by Abhishek Bachchan.

"Memory loss is always interesting to explore when a character is younger," Madhumita expands. "For instance, there is a thread of unrequited love in this story. Kaalidhar is torn between wanting to remember and wanting to forget."

Bachchan, quietly vulnerable in a beard, was drawn to the 'pathos' in his character, a man who has



Abhishek Bachchan and Daivik Baghela in a still from *Kaalidhar Laapata*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

always lived for others and sacrificed so much – and for so long – that life has just slipped him by. It's another of Bachchan's gently inward roles, after *Ludo*, *I Want To Talk And Be Happy*, that centres on an adult-child relationship. "It's never too late to live your dreams. That's what Ballu (played by debutant child actor Daivik Baghela) teaches my character Kaalidhar."

Abhishek, who featured in the recent comedy hit *Housefull 5*, is hoping to return to a more mainstream performing language (he has the king and the historical Raja Shivaji in the offing). The actor concedes that, in the last few years, he has 'saturated' himself with a certain filmmaking sensibility. "I have enjoyed doing these films but I also want to get back to commercial massy stuff," he says. "I want to jump off buildings, ride bikes, dance in Switzerland and sing beautiful songs!"

Kaalidhar Laapata will release on ZEE5 on July 4



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Real classic

The restored version of *Sholay*, one of Indian cinema's most iconic films, is set to have its world premiere at the II Cinema Ritrovato Festival in Bologna, Italy, on June 27. This screening marks the first time audiences will witness the original, uncut version of the 1975 classic. Directed by Ramesh Sippy and written by Salim-Javed, *Sholay* has long been considered a landmark in Indian filmmaking. The film, stars Sanjeev Kumar, Amitabh Bachchan, Dharmendra, Hema Malini, Jaya Bhaduri, and Amjad Khan as the infamous Gabbar Singh. It follows two small-time criminals recruited by a retired police officer to capture a ruthless bandit terrorising a village. The restoration was carried out over three years by Film Heritage Foundation in collaboration with Sippy Films Pvt. Ltd. The restored cut reinstates two previously unseen scenes and the film's original ending, long thought to be lost. "This is a tribute to the vision and legacy of my grandfather G.P. Sippy," said producer Shehzad Sippy. "It has taken us three years, but we were able to bring the film back to its full form."

