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Varanasi is awake. Even before the morning sun's rays hit Varanasi's ghats, the Ganga Aarthi begins. Replete with chanting of hymns, this aarthi, an everyday ritual, is an offering to the magnificent river. On its banks, a rare quiet envelopes Assi Ghat. Someone is chanting 'Om'. A few yards away, someone else is offering a *surya namaskar* to the rising sun. These still mornings offer Varanasi's finest moments. "There's a local myth that these neighbourhoods were all part of a big forest, and hence "van ras" lent its name to the place," says Pulkit Gupta, who runs Banaras Lanes, which curates walking tours, "For many, this is the place for spirituality and education." The narrow gullies here have a thousand stories to tell, each echoing with myth and history. They prompted celebrated writer Mark Twain to describe the town as, "older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together."

# Beyond the ghats

In Varanasi, mornings unfold with sacred chants and age-old wrestling arenas. We explore them with some spicy chaat and a cup of lassi

Varanasi - also known as Banaras or Kashi - has 84 ghats right now, with four built in recent times by the government. About 80 were built by different rulers, most from the Maratha empire. Explains Pulkit, "They would come here once in every year to perform certain rituals, and when they left, a few people would be left behind as caretakers." This explains the many festivals that are celebrated throughout the year in Varanasi. As Pulkit says, "In the 365 days of a year, there are 366 festivals here." To get a heady dose of celebration, look no further than the famous Kasi Viswanath, the city's spiritual pulse

that finds a mention in many sacred books. Destroyed and rebuilt over centuries, it remains the place Kasi is most famously associated with. We visit at around 10.30pm, as the temple gears up for *shayan aarthi*, an almost-informal good night gesture to the gods. Organised by local residents and not yet on things-to-do-in-Varanasi travel lists, the *shayan aarthi* is an audio visual experience. Hundreds of devotees chant a set of hymns in unison, almost like a choir. And the most beautiful aspect is none of these hymns are written, according to Abhisek Mishra, a Varanasi-based pandit, "While there are set hymns



**Spiritual awakening**  
Snapshots from Varanasi; (above) a training session at the Tulsi Ghat Akhada. SRINIVASA RAMANUJAM/I STOCKPHOTO

for other pujas in the temple, the recitation during the *shayan aarthi* has been composed and devised by the local residents."

**Fight club**  
At the Tulsi Ghat Akhada, a traditional Indian-style gym established in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and one of the oldest functioning akhadas, young men train under experienced fighters learning martial arts and mud wrestling. When we visit, we watch a young student place a *mudgar* - or the wooden club, usually used to build strength and endurance - on G Sharma's shoulders. "Traditionally, this *akhada* used to train warriors and prepare young men for protection of pilgrimage routes," he reveals, after lifting the 25-kg *mudgar* more than 25 times, an act that draws awe and praise among his fellow trainers. Today, many young boys and girls come here to strength train and learn *gusthi* for local tournaments. A custodian of traditional indigenous forms of physical training, the Tulsi Ghat Akhada is a reminder of Varanasi's physical culture, which held as much value as its spirituality.

**Food for thought**  
The Varanasi of today also offers rich heritage experiences to travellers. Many properties have sprung up near the ghats, like the recently-opened juSta Luxe - Kashi Parampara, a 80-year-old ancestral home, which offers experiences such as a traditional *aarthi* welcome, daily live musical performances and boat rides in the Ganges. For breakfast, we head to the Chachi Ki Dukhaan, a street-style eatery established in 1915. Sitting on oil tins that double up as seats, we sample the classic Banarasi breakfast trinity: kachoris, sabzi and jalebi. Glasses of fresh lassi from the hallowed Pehalwan Lassi, long favoured by local wrestlers for nourishment after hours of intense training, follow. Lassi and kachoris done, we head out to explore the busy streets, replete with constant honking and activity. For, Varanasi is awake.

The writer was in Banaras at the invitation of juSta Kashi Parampara



# Rooted in the wild

In Bandhavgarh, we set out on a safari, amid vultures and deer. Will we spot a tiger?

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The sounds of the forest deepen; the rustle of bamboo, the rhythmic call of drongos and somewhere ahead, the faint alarm of a spotted deer. A few turns later, as we round a bend, a tiger appears, reclining beneath a sal tree, its striped flank rising and falling in slow rhythm. For a moment, all sound stills. The forest holds its breath. I am on a safari at Bandhavgarh, with Guljar Singh, who has been exploring these forests for years. "The forest changes with every rain," he says as we drive past patches of grassland and sal thickets. Bandhavgarh's core area spans 720 square kilometres, with an additional 816 in the buffer. We spot the Indian pitta, resplendent in turquoise and orange, hopping across a fallen branch. Jungle owlets blink from their perch and a giant wood spider hangs between two trees, its web glinting like glass. Overhead, a small group of vultures circle lazily in widening spirals. The Tala zone, guide Guljar Singh explains, has become one of

Bandhavgarh's few remaining strongholds for these endangered birds. The tiger may be the highlight of the trip, but there is plenty to keep me engaged for the rest of my stay at Brij Sone Bagh, the newest retreat by Brij Hotels. Chiefly, the peace. The first thing I notice when I arrive, after driving four hours from Madhya Pradesh's Jabalpur airport, is the layered sounds of the forest. Cicadas, a distant call of an owl and the rustle of leaves. "This retreat sits within a natural forest of 32 acres," says Arvind Bhende, regional development head of Brij Hotels, over glasses of cold, spiced buttermilk. Pathways curve naturally around the terrain, and gardens merge seamlessly with the forest.

**Farm to kadhai**  
I dine beneath an old jamun tree. The cool air carries the scent of damp soil. A local, dressed in traditional attire to honour the serpent god, plays the flute as chef Dharmender Kumar - or Dharma as he is fondly called - tends to an open barbecue nearby. He slowly turns the chicken marinated earlier in the day with turmeric, ginger, garlic and a blend of foraged forest

herbs. The aroma of smoke, spice and mahua blooms mingles with the night air. Dharma invites me into his kitchen for what he calls a "farm to kadhai" session the next day. He has brought produce from the market - amla, bunches of coriander and green chillies. With measured ease, he shows me how to prepare amla pickle and a sharp, green chutney, adjusting the flavours by instinct rather than recipe. The chicken we marinate together - wrapped in banana leaves and slow-cooked in bamboo - appears later that evening for dinner, tender and fragrant, tasting of smoke, herbs and



**Forest haven** A tiger spotting; and inside the resort. Getty IMAGES/IStock AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

rain-washed soil. "Almost everything you eat here," Dharma tells me, "comes from within a few kilometres. That is our zero-kilometre kitchen." This "zero-kilometre philosophy" lies at the core of Brij Sone Bagh's ethos. Vegetables come from neighbouring farms, milk from local dairy farmers and grains such as kodo millets and lentils from nearby villages. Even the spices and mahua-based recipes have been sourced through local women's cooperatives. This approach cuts down food miles, sustains rural livelihoods and gives guests a taste of regional cuisine.

**Jungle safari**  
Back to the safari, we pause for breakfast at a designated forest clearing, where chef Dharma and the nature guides lay out warm parathas, fresh fruit and chilled watermelon juice on the hood of our jeep. Before leaving the Tala zone, we make a brief stop at Sheshshaiya, one of Bandhavgarh's most remarkable archaeological sites. Located deep within the forest at the base of a moss-covered hill, this ancient sandstone statue of Lord Vishnu reclining on the seven-hooded serpent, Sheshnag, is believed to date back to the 10<sup>th</sup> Century AD. The sculpture is protected by the Archaeological Survey of India and remains a symbol of the region's layered history. That evening, I walk to a nearby village where only three families continue the local craft of bamboo weaving. "There used to be more of us," says Karishma Basoi, deftly splitting a bamboo strip. "Now, only a few make tourist crafts." Her fingers move with a memory that predates the resort, the tiger reserve, even tourism itself.

The writer was in Bandhavgarh on invitation by Brij Hotels.

# Tasting modern Jaipur

From butter chicken vada pav to khoba quesadillas — Jaipur's culinary story gets a new chapter at Mirove Artisanal Kitchen

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In Rajasthan, where dal bati churma and lal maas take centre stage, a quiet revolution is unfolding. Across Jaipur, chefs and restaurateurs are reimagining the familiar, creating a foodscape that is rooted in tradition and yet refreshingly experimental. Tucked away in the C-Scheme neighbourhood, just minutes away from Central Park, Mirove Artisanal Kitchen, feels both, familiar and surprising: a modern take on the Pink City's soul in muted rouge. "We wanted the menu to be simple yet appealing," says Sonali Sharma, the founder. Conceptualised by Pantone Collective, New Delhi, and led by principal architect Tanya Chutan, the 8,000-square-foot space draws from Jaipur's heritage architecture - the geometries of Jantar Mantar with the repetition of traditional arches. For Sonali, Mirove was not a pre-meditated career move. That dream took shape when she met Jay Surolia. "He lived by the motto of entertaining people, making them laugh," says Sonali. "Jay, in fact, was part of the restaurant's ideation from the very beginning - he found the space, and was involved in everything from shaping the vision to selecting kitchen consultants." Tragically, Jay passed away before the dream materialised. The restaurant, aptly named Jay's Mirove, now stands as an ode to his spirit. Divided into local and global cuisine, the menu brings together the flavours of home and the aspirations of the new, well-travelled



**Plated** A spread at Mirove Artisanal Kitchen. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

generation. "We have tried to curate a menu that caters to our local audience as well as the people who have studied or lived in bigger cities, who now want those global flavours back home," says Sonali. The butter chicken vada pav, for instance, reimagines the Mumbai street food staple, served with hari sil batta chutney and seasonal mango chutney. Masala mutton ghee roast is a hearty, peppery affair, paired with bite-sized Malabar parottas. The khoba quesadilla is generously stuffed with chicken. There are hiccups: the spinach and cottage cheese dumplings taste rather flat despite looking promising. The 360-degree bar has just started serving cocktails, beer and wine. For a refreshing sip, people can opt for Sunset Muse, a beer sangria or a Dark Whisper that punches beer with an espresso shot. Then there is mulled wine, classic sangria, and also wine float. If you are a Rosé or a Prosecco person, there is that too. Whichever way you like, the bar now has a pour for every mood.

Its zero-proof menu also hums with energy. We try the rose and saffron-infused hibiscus tea, reminiscent of Indian mithai, and Midnight Fizz, which captures the nostalgia of sipping on *kala khattaa* after school. If you are in the mood for something edgier, order the northern lights, made with star anise-infused Sober Gin. The standout is the Macha Chai, while I personally still have not fallen for this trend, the hot matcha with spiced honey was convincing enough for multiple sips. The meal concludes with kesari tres leches, soaked in saffron and milk - warm, comforting and quietly addictive. For Jay, Mirove was about people coming together. As I watch friends and families gather over a steaming bowl of laal maas, I realise he's achieved just that. It is a powerful legacy. Mirove Artisanal Kitchen is in Malviya Marg, C Scheme, Ashok Nagar, Jaipur, Rajasthan 302001. Cost for two is ₹2000.

The writer was in Jaipur at the invitation of Mirove Artisanal Kitchen





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**Understanding harmony** and respite, at the South Asian Symphony Orchestra **P2**

**A LOOK AT DHANUSH'S TERE ISHQ MEIN** **P4**



**Spawn point South**  
(Clockwise from right) A gamer playing Street Fighter 6; player playing mobile game PUBG; and the Chief Minister's Trophy Games in Chennai. AFP, AP, AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## Loading level two

**Tamil Nadu becomes the first State to treat esports like a real medal sport at the Chief Minister's Trophy Games in 2025, and players say the shift has reshaped the scene from the ground up**

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In 2008, 18-year-old Mumbai-based gamer Reuben Pereira made a sizeable dent in the history of esports in India by winning a silver medal at the World Cyber Games for soccer video game franchise FIFA, in Germany. Seventeen years later, in August 2025, 25-year-old Street Fighter 6 player Dharun S won the gold medal at the Chief Minister's Trophy Games in Chennai, bringing attention to not just the future of esports, but also the momentum building up in Tamil Nadu's gaming circles.

What is striking today, Reuben says, is not just the structure but the sheer volume of players entering the arena. Where once Chennai's competitive scene could fit inside a single gaming café, qualifiers today fill entire halls. The shift is the result of accessible games, affordable devices, and tournaments that make competitors feel like they belong.

"Tamil Nadu players have become serious now. People are grinding, learning matchups, and asking for sparring partners. The scene has changed. Earlier, it felt like only a handful of us cared. Now, the competition is tougher," says Dharun, who has been playing in



tournaments for the last couple of years.

The Chief Minister's Trophy Games, organised by the Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu (SDAT), was Dharun's big break. This statewide multi-sport event brings together athletes from different backgrounds. In 2025, the Trophy Games made history by officially including esports as a medal event, making Tamil Nadu the first Indian State to do so. The competition spanned six gaming titles, including Street Fighter 6, EA FC, Valorant, BGMI, Pokémon Unite, and e-Chess, with a ₹1 lakh prize for individual gold medal winners.

Praveen Rathinam, president, Tamil Nadu Esports Association (TESA), says the CM's Trophy has done something few Government-backed events manage – it signalled legitimacy. "When the State puts its weight behind an event, parents start paying attention," he says. "We suddenly have teenagers telling their families they're 'training' for something real."



But legitimacy is only step one. Praveen explains that Tamil Nadu's esports structure, though young, is finally starting to take shape, from clearer tournament standards and player verification to slowly growing community networks. The challenge, he adds, is consistency. "If we are talking medals and global rankings, then we need sustained support. More tournaments, regulated formats, and a pipeline that starts at the school level," he says. "The talent is here; it just needs a proper ecosystem."

For Dharun, that ecosystem Praveen talks about is not abstract. It began with a Discord

### Mind the gap

Across Street Fighter, EA FC, Valorant and BGMI, women players remain a minority. "I walk in expecting to be the only woman in the room, and most of the time, I'm right," says Phebe Hepzibah, a 25-year-old casual gamer from Chennai. She does not enter tournaments anymore, but she has watched enough streams and local events to recognise the pattern: women are not absent, they are edged out by the atmosphere. "It's not the games, it's the space around them," she says. What she wants is simple — organisers who enforce behaviour, communities that do not tolerate casual misogyny, and a scene where women do not need a separate qualifier to feel welcome.

server. "I didn't even know Chennai had a Street Fighter server. Once I joined, everything changed. Suddenly, there were people to spar with, people sharing tech, actual competition," he said. That virtual room became his training ground.

### The long game

This shift on the ground is something veteran gamer Reuben Pereira has been waiting nearly two decades

to witness. Back in 2008, when he won silver at the World Cyber Games, esports in India was little more than a scattered network of private tournaments. "There was no structure, no system, nothing official. You just showed up wherever there was a café hosting something," he says. Watching Tamil Nadu now formally recognise esports feels like a full-circle moment. "If something like this existed in my time, I would've travelled all over India for it. This is the ecosystem we dreamed of but didn't have."

This boom is not hype — it is talent finally getting visibility. EA FC players have gone from isolated grinders to being part of a recognisable circuit with club-backed tournaments. "When EISL came in, things shifted — formats, analysts, prize pools. It felt professional," says Navin Haridoss, who won gold at the CM's Trophy Games for EA FC.

What has changed most, he points out, is confidence. "You have school kids, college kids, working guys... all playing in the same room. That never happened before." A decade ago, local tournaments felt casual — players arrived to hang out first and compete second. Now, he says, the room feels charged. "People come in with a plan. They've studied matchups, they've done their drills," he says. He has watched teenagers track frame data, organise district-level scrim (practice matches), and build small coaching circles — behaviours that used to belong only to international players. The irony, he points out, is that player skill is accelerating faster than the support structures around them.

"The grind is there," says Navin. "The hunger is there. What's missing is a calendar that keeps them battle-ready all year, not just for one Government event."

## When voices bloom together

**Khatija Rahman's artistry meets Kalyani Nair's expansive choral arrangements for the Garden of Echoes concert in Chennai**

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There are concerts, and then there are experiences — spaces that transport you to a different realm through music. Music composer and singer Khatija Rahman's upcoming show, The Garden of Echoes, belongs unmistakably to the latter. At Chennai's iconic Museum Theatre, this intimate concert will gather voices, memories, and melodies into one immersive experience.

The name 'Garden of Echoes', came from a deeply personal moment for Khatija while performing at her late grandmother's birthday celebrations, held at a place called Peace Garden in Red Hills, Chennai.

"When I say echoes, there's going to be a lot of voices; not just of me, but of many elements involved. There is a string quartet, a brass trio, there's my band, and then there's a conductor. We are a large ensemble, and I wanted that name to embody what we speak."



The Garden of Echoes is held together by its collaborators. The concert features The Sunshine Orchestra's String Quartet, a brass trio, the Indian Choral Ensemble directed by singer Kalyani Nair and co-directed by Karthik Manickavasakam, and Khatija's full band. With over two decades in the industry, Kalyani's sensibilities lend the performance its signature

**Mic drop** Khatija Rahman. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

warmth and depth. "Her arrangements are so soulful. It captures the sound I have always dreamt of."

The set list spans Khatija's musical journey which includes playback hits, reimagined versions of her compositions, and select covers rearranged in ways she has never attempted before. "The idea is to connect with people."

For Khatija, a little chant is what she describes as her pre-performance ritual. "I ask God to help me connect with the audience, because I still struggle with a fear of the stage, and I'm slowly working my way through it."

Behind the scenes, she is also building her own creative ecosystem. Rather than leaning on the legacy of her father, A R Rahman, she is forging her own path. "My father has helped me so much; he has always been there, but now it's my time to learn, unlearn, fail, and try everything on my own terms."

Khatija's band features a dynamic mix of musicians: guitarist Chris Jason, keyboardist Bhuvanesh Narayanan, bassist Laxman Arvind, drummer Guberan, and flautist Nikhil Ram. They are joined by the voices of The Indian Choral Ensemble's choristers — Aparna Harikumar, Sushmita Narasimhan, Nayansee Sharma, Ananya Bhat, Shridhar Ramesh, Manikandan Chembai, Neeraj MSG and Cyril Simon. The Sunshine Orchestra String Quartet features Vignesh U, Nandhini Anbazhagan, Ebinezer Gnanraj and Deepa S, along with a brass trio comprising Pavithra E, Mohammed Naveeth and Nandhakumar, headed by Lisa Sarasini.

Kathija may seem quiet to the audience but she has a different roar on stage. For that, a viewing of her performance is essential.

**Catch The Garden of Echoes on December 5 at the Museum Theatre, Egmore, 7pm onwards. Ticket on [bookmyshow.com](http://bookmyshow.com)**



### Drishti dialogues

The formidable, colourful symbols of *drishti* that find a place of prominence on many walls in Tamil Nadu will be in the spotlight at *The Hindu's* Lit for Life Unplugged in Chennai on November 28. Madco, a speakeasy on Cathedral road will host a conversation between Ashvin E Rajagopalan, director,

Ashvita's and Piramal Foundation, and Amar Ramesh, photographer and author of *Kolli Kannu: Drishti Paintings of Tamil Nadu*.

In the run up to *The Hindu's* Lit for Life festival on January 17 and 18 2026, partake in some pre-festival excitement with *Lit for Life Unplugged*. Follow [@thehindulitforlife](https://thehindulitforlife.com) for more updates.



**Ahead of South Asian Symphony Orchestra's performance** at ACJ, former Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao, the founder of the South Asian Symphony Foundation writes about finding respite in music



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When Paramanathan Ravichandran first arrived in Chennai 15 years ago, he had no idea what he would do for survival. He was among the thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils fleeing the civil war, hoping to restart life in a new country. “I walked aimlessly about the streets of Koyambedu for three days,” he says. He noticed many tea stalls dotted the neighbourhood. This is when an idea struck him.

Such establishments back home did brisk business with rolls – deep-fried golden-brown parcels of dough stuffed with chicken, eggs, and potatoes. To experiment, he decided to make a small batch of 30 rolls at his rented house in Porur with the help of his aunt Ragini and wife Dharuga. He began distributing them to shops in the neighbourhood, asking if they would be interested in selling this warm snack. “Some owners were kind and open to the new item,” recalls the 51-year-old, speaking of how he walked the length of the tea shop line for his business.

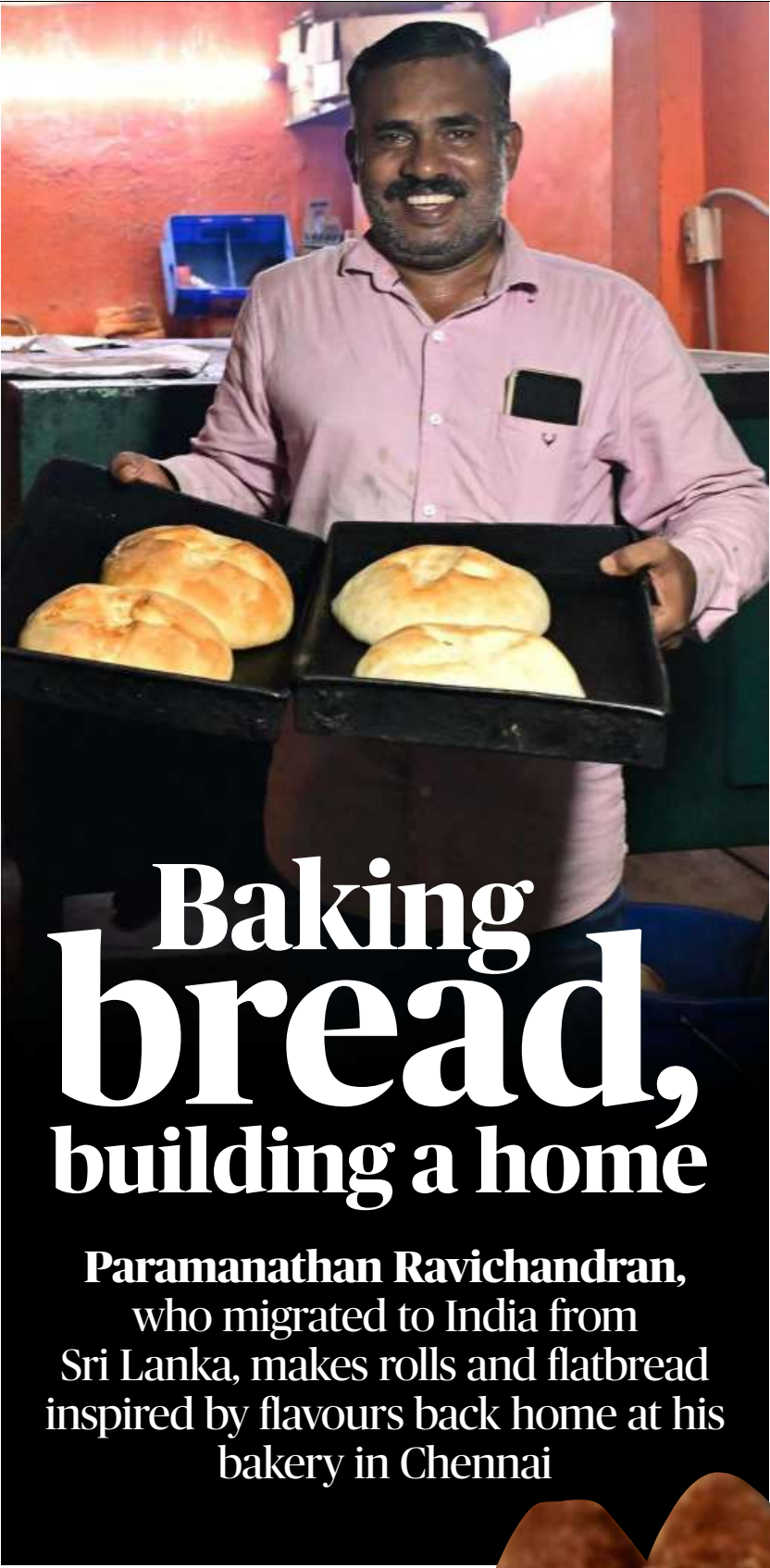
Gradually, the orders came piling in for all the varieties – chicken, egg, fish, and vegetable. Today, seated by the front steps of his venture KP Ravi Bakery tucked in a small lane at Alapakkam near Porur, he recalls the sweat and tears that went into setting up his business. This small unit with an oven only has space for two people to stand. It is Ravi's identity in a new land; one that is not too far away. One that he has carved out with difficulty.

**Adding up**  
Ravi came to India with nothing but two sets of clothes. He is from the village of Thennamaravadi that is about 65 kilometres North of Trincomalee.

Back home, he was a Maths teacher. “My father K Paramanathan, the village head, was a Maths teacher too,” he recalls. Ravi, known as ‘Ravi sir’ among school students, was always good with numbers. After completing his Bachelor's in Mathematics, he started his own tuition centre in Vavuniya and Mullaivu, and was especially skilled at handling class XII.

Life at Thennamaravadi, Ravi recalls, was peaceful. “In my boyhood, I would catch prawns and crabs in the backwaters that my mother would cook fresh,” he says. “My family had over 150 cows that would graze freely; we grew groundnuts, onions, and paddy.” But once the war broke out, the village was wiped out, and along with it, Ravi's family home, agricultural land, and a stable career in teaching.

In Chennai, he knew it was not



# Baking bread, building a home

**Paramanathan Ravichandran, who migrated to India from Sri Lanka, makes rolls and flatbread inspired by flavours back home at his bakery in Chennai**

going to be easy to start from scratch. Yet, his rolls did the talking. “I graduated to delivering orders on a cycle, and later bought a scooter,” he says.

At one point, he was making 2,000 rolls a day with a team of 14, supplying to IT companies, schools, and colleges in Navalur, Ambattur, and Kelambakkam, apart from tea shops in Parry's, T Nagar, Mount Road, and Madipakkam. This is apart from the railway canteens.



**Full of warmth** Paramanathan Ravichandran with the circular paan; *kombu* bun; (below) egg rolls. VELANKANNI RAJ B



**Learning to swim again**  
The floods of 2015 however, shook things up and Ravi incurred heavy losses. Despite the stumbling blocks, he kept at it, managing to survive through the pandemic, even adding paan, the famous Sri Lankan flatbread to the menu.

Today, it is among his best-sellers and Ravi says Sri Lankan Tamils from near and far reach out to him to buy the bread. He delivers paan at places as far as Kundrathur on his scooter, apart from Anna Nagar, Thiruvannamiyur, and Medavakkam in the evenings.

Paan, priced at ₹55 a piece, is a soft and flaky savoury bread and is available in two variations: roast and acchu. “We usually pair this with fish, mutton, chicken curry, or even dal,” he says. Ravi also makes the addictive kombu bun, a long, soft bread with a sprinkling of sugar on top. He is now experimenting with circular paan.

As tea time approaches, customers start trickling in and by 6.30pm, a small crowd has gathered at his shop. Ravi's phone keeps ringing with orders and he briskly packs rolls and paan.

Ravi's wife and 14-year-old son Kishan are now back home in Thennamaravadi. He too hopes to return. “I want to ensure my business can run on its own before I do,” he says. “This will take around three years or so.” He does not know what he will do once he is back in Sri Lanka. “Perhaps I can take up teaching again,” he says. “But before I leave, I want to buy a house in Chennai.”

KP Ravi Bakery is located at MG Chakkrapani Nagar, 14th Street, Alapakkam. To place orders, call 8148931500.

# Sole mastery

**World Championships of Shoemaking's winning designs arrive in Chennai**



**Step up** The shoe that received the second prize. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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A shoe may be worn every day, for style or comfort. But what truly makes it worthy of the World Championships of Shoemaking? The truth is that it is far more than its overall aesthetic – it lies in the precision of its micro-stitches, the fineness of its cuts, and, most importantly, the quality of leather.

The World Championships of Shoemaking held in May at the London Super Trunk Show 2025, showcased exactly that. The top three shoes were selected by an international jury and unveiled at the event.

After travelling all over the world at acclaimed bespoke stores, the shoes have finally arrived at the Bridlen store in Chennai, where they will be on display till December 7.

The annual event, started in 2018 by Shoegazing (a website run by Swedish journalist Jesper Ingevaldsson who is an authority on men's classic shoes) and The Shoe Snob (run by former shoemaker Justin FitzPatrick) in collaboration with blogger Kirby Allison and the Master Shoemakers book project.

This year's focus was a cap toe double monk strap model, with two straps made of the same piece of leather that covers the facing, attached to two buckles.

The first prize went to Louis Lampertsdörfer from Munich, Germany. What makes his shoe stand out is a thin sole with the stitching done at an impressive 30 stitches per inch. The second prize went to Ken Kataoka based in Tokyo and the third to Ken Hishinuma from Yamanashi prefecture, Japan.

According to Shoegazing, some of this year's key requirements were a ‘leather sole, dark brown sole and heel edges, and a natural coloured bottom.’

The overall criteria involve – degree of difficulty, execution, and design or aesthetics. Affan Mohamed K, owner of Bridlen, which was also one of the title sponsors of the championship, says, “These shoes are typically not designed to be worn, but they are more designed to show craft. The idea is to preserve the craft of shoe-making because it is a dying craft.”

By displaying the shoes in India, Affan wants to protect this craftsmanship.

“I want to go back to the old school way of shoe making, and see how we can reverse engineer this process. We can reintroduce it to factory-made shoes, in an attempt to revive the craft” he adds.

The 2025 World Championships of Shoemaking shoes will be on display at the Bridlen Labo, Venugopal Avenue, Chetpet, till December 7, from 10.30am to 6.30pm.



## Madras and art, a love story

Madras Art Weekend, the annual celebration of contemporary art in Chennai, returns and brings together galleries, artists and designers for conversations on the evolving art ecosystem. This edition's theme is Madras Reimagined and the event is at Taj Coromandel. On December 4, catch a panel titled Curatorial Cartography – Mapping Artist and Gallery Relationship, moderated by Pallavi Khandelwal at 11.30am. The discussion will feature Tarana Khubchandani and Satish Gupta of Art & Soul; Srila Chatterjee of Baro Art; Saurabh Singhvi and Vrindavan Solanki of Art Magnum; and Uday Jain and Ashok Bhowmick from Dhoomimal Gallery. Later that day is Design Through Our Lens, moderated by Samir Wadekar at 4.30pm. On 5 December, Pradeep Chakravathy will speak with award-winning architect Abha Narain Lambah in a session on the Art of Restoration at 11am. The programme concludes on December 6 with a full-day gallery walk-through for educational institutions, running from 11am to 7pm. Registration is mandatory for all events. Call 8667086322 or email info@madrasartweekend.com.



## Songs for the season

Madras Guild of Performing Arts returns with a performance by Tara and Trisha with an ensemble featuring Jaideep Vivekanand on lead guitar, Gerard Joseph on bass, Anish Chacko on keyboards and Ethan Ezekiel on drums. Hosting the programme is the adult choir and the lively Children's Choir, the Shortz. The performance is conducted by Atul Jacob Isaac. @The Government Museum, Egmore. On December 6, 7pm onwards. Tickets priced at ₹500 at mdna.in.

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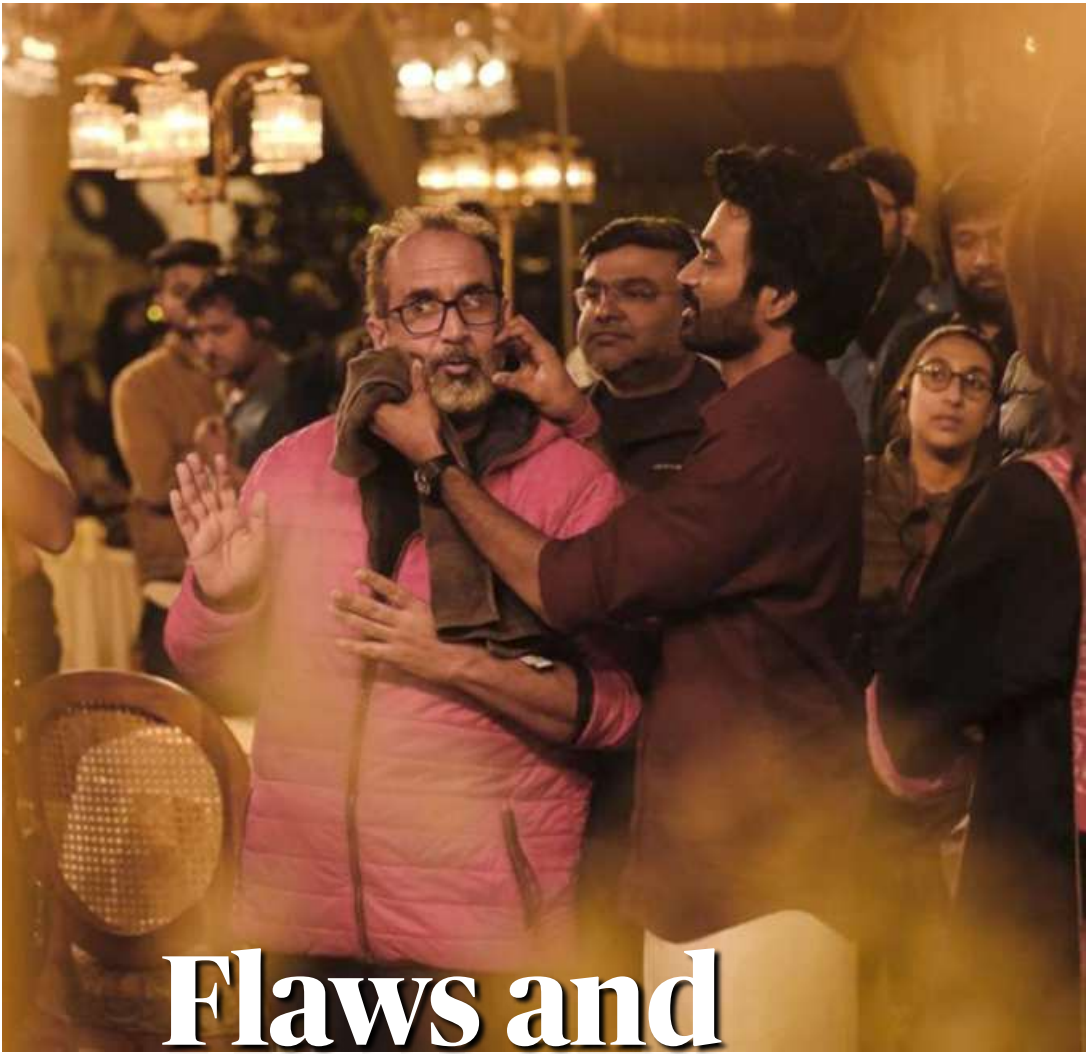
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# Flaws and FIRE

All about director Aanand L Rai's latest flick *Tere Ishk Mein*, starring Dhanush and Kriti Sanon

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Filmmaker Aanand L Rai has been working around the clock as his film, *Tere Ishk Mein*, releases this week. There is excitement in his voice when he tells us how he loves promoting his movies. “Usually, I can’t keep myself awake after 10pm. But these days, I am like a young boy, running around from one VFX studio to another sound studio,” says Aanand. There are glimpses of a stormy, obsessive romance in

*Tere Ishk Mein*. Operating in a world similar to that of *Raanjhanaa* (2013), the Dhanush and Kriti Sanon-starrer tells an intense love story between the protagonists, Shankar and Mukti. Aanand says he wanted to explore the maturity of love through the film. “There is so much action happening around, so I just felt that it is time to go for a deep, mature love story,” he says, adding that his perspective on love has taken a shift in the last ten years. “All of us evolve with time through our experiences. Sometimes, you get more

practical, sometimes you are emotional and vulnerable. All of that adds to our understanding of the feeling. So, as a filmmaker, I can put that on celluloid and see how others feel about it.” *Tere Ishk Mein* is also the third collaboration between Rai and Dhanush, after *Raanjhanaa* and *Atrangi Re* (2021). The director feels their relationship has grown over the years. “When I first met him, he was just an actor. Now, he is like a son to me,” says the director, adding, “We are selfish people who are together for some



**A complex world**  
Aanand L Rai and Dhanush from the sets of *Tere Ishk Mein*.  
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

reason. So, in such a space, if you discover a relationship that goes beyond just working in films, then it is magical.” It is also his third collaboration with AR Rahman, who has added a deepening complexity into the world of *Tere Ishk Mein*, whether it is the electrifying title track or the piercing study of melancholia in ‘Usey Kehna’. He calls Rahman a “master craftsman” for his astute ability to understand the narrative through music. “Whenever I have a layered story that has a lot to say, I need him. I can’t drive a film with such intensity alone. For me, he is like a strong pillar who is holding the roof together.”

Apart from generating excitement about the three artists coming together, the trailer of *Tere Ishk Mein* has also sparked discussions around toxic masculinity, with many describing Dhanush’s character as an ‘alpha male’. In a scene, he is shown violently entering a wedding ceremony and setting things on fire, threatening to burn the city down. The film is written by Himanshu Sharma (who also wrote *Raanjhanaa*) and Neeraj Yadav.

Aanand maintains that they just wanted to tell a story of two different kinds of people who fall in love with each other. “A story is never conceived thinking of your character as an alpha. For me, the character is emotional and sensitive and nothing that he does is wrong.”

The romantic drama is also being compared to Sandeep Reddy Vanga’s *Animal* (2023) and *Kabir Singh* (2019). Aanand feels that his film is different. “There are similarities in how the characters have aggression and rage. But those are just the ingredients and not the story,” he says.

The director also disagrees with the criticism that *Raanjhanaa* received for normalising stalking. “I never found Dhanush’s character in *Raanjhanaa* to be a stalker. It is just my perspective of a boy from Benaras, and that is his expression. Characters are bound to have flaws. I am just telling a human story of people with flaws.”



**Crime matters**  
Pavithra Janani in *Regai*; (below) Rajesh Kumar. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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It is past 9pm when I dial crime writer Rajesh Kumar’s number. The 77-year-old’s baritone sounds just the same from when we spoke six years ago. “I go to bed only at 12,” he says, adding that he writes till 11pm. Rajesh Kumar is the talk of the town in the Tamil entertainment world with web-series *Regai*, set to premiere this week on OTT platform Zee5. It is based on his novel *Ulagai Vilaikael* from the 1990s, which writer-director M Dhinakaran has further developed.

*Regai* forms the author’s first OTT collaboration and he is excited about it. “I have achieved proper recognition for my work only now,” feels Rajesh Kumar. “It is a medical thriller, one that features an invisible crime.” His quaint Coimbatore home that has played host to him churning crime novel after novel for decades is now hosting video calls, Zoom meetings and visits from the movie people over story ideas.

He sections time for his various affairs, writing with discipline every day from 9.30am. It is this discipline that saw him through the over 1,500 crime novels and his recent creative collaboration with Zee5. Tamil film directors have long been reaching out

# Hidden clues

Crime writer Rajesh Kumar steps into OTT space with medical thriller *Regai*, a web-series on Zee5

to Rajesh Kumar, with OTT platforms showing interest over the past few years. His crime stories, written with cinematic flair, are thought to be a good fit for the screen. However, he says that several discussions have been dropped over the scale of his stories.

Rajesh Kumar wonders if his novels would have reached the big screen sooner had he lived in Chennai. “I would’ve been more accessible then,” he says. But he maintains that his present life – one that revolves around his wife and his writing – is most important. “I’ve moved past the stage when I shift to Chennai and sit through long film discussions,” he says.

“My life is here [in Coimbatore] and my wife is more important to me than anything else.”

After *Regai*, the writer is set for further collaborations with Zee5. “Talks are on to develop my popular investigative characters Vivek, Rupella, and Vishnu,” he says, adding that Vivek will make for a spiffy detective on the lines of Sherlock Holmes, with Vishnu playing his flirtatious assistant.

Rajesh Kumar’s works, many of which are based on pseudoscience, have long surprised readers by predicting technology and crimes that are unfolding for real in today’s world. He is now working on a novel based on Artificial Intelligence. “Is AI good or bad? What will it do for humanity?” he asks, adding that his novel will delve into the most popular debate of today’s world. He recalls a reader asking him about the technology. “My answer to him was: what if AI knowledge is something planted by extra-terrestrials on us? Perhaps they landed on earth many years ago to intersperse among human beings. Never stop questioning, never stop speculating,” he says.

*Regai* drops on Zee5 on November 28.



## VJS in Arasan

Tamil star Vijay Sethupathi has joined the cast of the highly-anticipated *Vada Chennai* film *Arasan*, directed by Vetri Maaran and starring Silambarasan TR. This marks Vijay’s second collaboration with Simbu after *Chekkha Chivantha Vaanam* and consecutive collaboration with Vetri Maaran after their *Viduthalai* films. The news was announced by Kalaippuli S Thanu of V Creations. The update comes weeks after the release of the title promo of *Arasan*, which is a film set in the same cinematic universe as *Vada Chennai*, Vetri’s 2018 gangster epic starring Dhanush. The promo immersed audiences once again into North Chennai’s underbelly, further adding to the hype surrounding the project. Unlike Vetri Maaran’s previous films, *Arasan* features music by Anirudh Ravichander, marking their first collaboration.

# Spotlight on the Kumbh

Musician Siddhant Bhatia’s latest album takes Mahakumbh 2025 to the Grammys

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Earlier this year, all roads led to Prayagraj, which hosted the Mahakumbh 2025. An event that happens once in 144 years, Mahakumbh 2025 put the spotlight on spiritual enlightenment, attracting visitors from across the globe seeking to take a holy dip at the Triveni Sangam.

Classical singer-composer Siddhant Bhatia was there for a few days, but on a project commissioned by the Government of Uttar Pradesh. On the banks of the Ganga, Siddhant recorded live field recordings, which would then go for post-processing and sound mixing.

Within 45 days, Siddhant and team crafted 12 songs and 12 music videos, featuring more than 50 artists from across India and around the world. The result was ‘Sounds of Kumbha’, which has recently secured a nomination at the 68th Grammy Awards in the Best Global Music Album category. “It is a significant moment in my life,” he says, referring to not just the nomination but the album itself: “That I was entrusted to pull off such a beautiful musical experience is a huge blessing. I see this as a big step in globally promoting Indian culture.”

He is referring to the entire album that seeks to capture



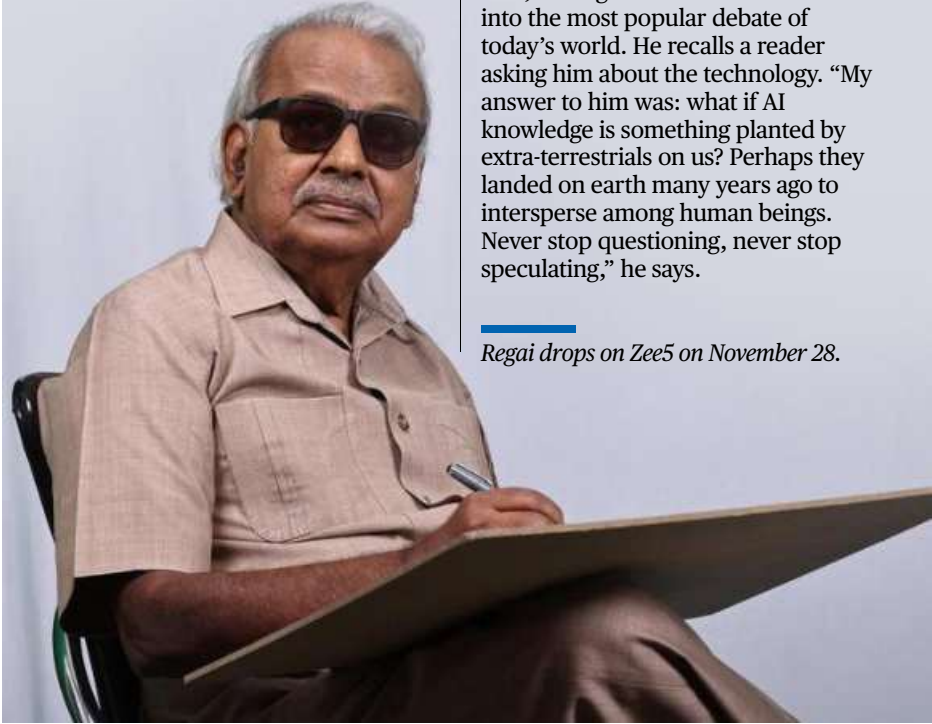
**Traditional blend**  
Siddhant Bhatia.  
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

the living energy of one of the world’s largest gathering. While the ‘Colours of Kumbha’ track was designed as an anthem that “hits the people and brings them together”, ‘Innervase’ was inspired by silences and ‘Maya’ was inspired by the large flow of people.

With established artists like V Selvaganesh and Rajakumari, along with musicians like Kanika Kapoor, Kala Ramnath and Bhanumathi Narasimhan, among others, ‘Sounds of Kumbha’ blends traditional sounds and mantras with contemporary music production. “The biggest highlight is the ‘Ram Ram’

track that features Gurudev Sri Sri Ravishankar.”

‘Sounds of Kumbh’, which also brings together distinguished producers such as Jim ‘Kimo’ West, Raghav Mehta, Madi Das, Ron Korb, Charu Suri, and Devraj Sanyal, hopes to give a sense of the Mahakumbh within the comforts of your homes, adds Siddhant. “I’m humbled that this project, which seemed like an almost impossible task initially, is now regarded as a proud product of India,” says Siddhant, who has also been nominated in the upcoming Grammys for another album, *Shayan*, by Indo-American pianist Charu Suri.



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