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THE HINDU

**Meet weavers and designers** crafting striking Indian garments at CCI's Tari **P2**

**MADHAVAN GOES DOWN MEMORY LANE P4**



# Selling the North-East Story

Take a stroll with us on this North-East food trail across Chennai and introduce your palate to the wonders of fermented bamboo shoot and eronba



**Momo nation** Plates of vegetarian and chicken momos from Momo Sa-Khang. AKHILA ESWARAN

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**T**wenty years ago, people like Maong Nungsang Jamir who began Naga Reju in Choolaimedu and Ramayon Keishing, owner of North East Kitchen, lit their stoves to serve Naga and Manipuri food to forlorn students and working professionals from the North-East, desperate for a taste of home. It was a privilege they never had.

With their interesting menus, there arrived a timid hunger among Chennai-folk curious to try different food spiced by pepper, cinnamon and the fiery Naga chilli, as well as new flavours like pungent fermented bamboo shoot. Over the last two decades, these restaurants have been crucial in introducing us to gravies, chutneys and salads vastly different from the kozhambus and tiffin items of our day-to-day. Till date, students or those visiting the city for various health treatments go up to the owners and request dishes from their hometown. When it is possible, the ask is accommodated. "Earlier, we used to bring back several spices from our hometowns to provide an authentic experience. Since more people from the eight states have settled here in Chennai, North-East provision stores have opened too. Things have vastly changed since I first began my restaurant in 2004. All for the better," he says. In the spirit of experimentation, walk with us on this North-East food trail and expand your palate.

**CONTINUED ON**  
**» PAGE 2**

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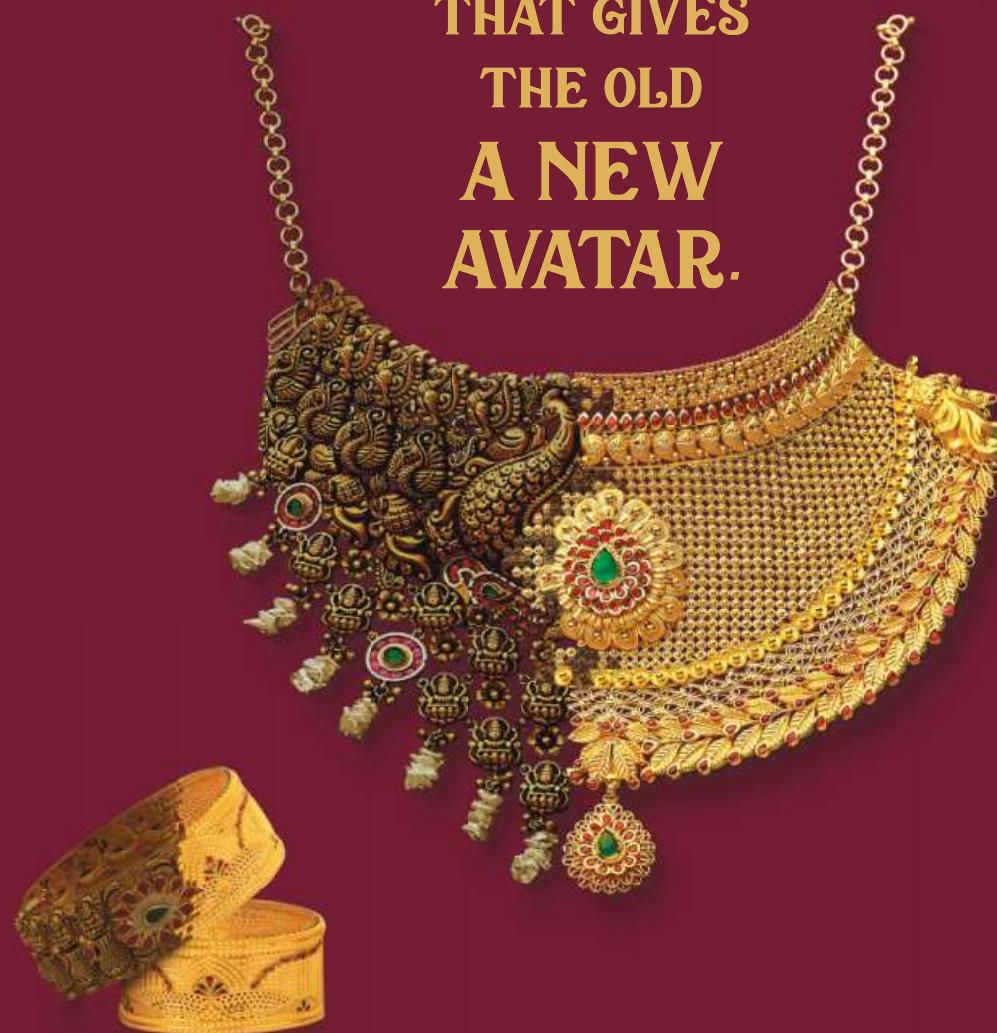


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PHOTO: AKHILA EASWARAN

**Naga Reju, Choolaimedu**

Maong Nungsang Jamir is a big proponent of cheap meals. When he was a student who arrived in Chennai in 1999 for the first time, he ate whatever was served at his hostel. "At that time, I didn't have a choice but once my brother and I moved to a rented apartment, we began spending a good amount of time learning to cook. Once we realised that there was a serious dearth of North-East cuisine in Chennai, it was about time to do something. My father suggested that we name our place Naga Reju, meaning a Naga shelter for travellers passing by. In 2006, we



**We recommend:**  
Naga king chilli with any meat and stir-fried bamboo shoot. **Price for two:** ₹400

became the first place selling pork, beef and chicken that was made the Naga way," he says. Maong adds that food across Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland is mostly similar. The meals are simple and light with boiled vegetables, a fresh salad with a bite, a protein (usually pork). No celebration is complete without it, he says), and some carbs, usually rice. Over time though, their Naga king chilli fry version of meats and paneer, has gained

popularity, especially among the local Chennai population. "I began Naga Reju in Choolaimedu because a majority of my community lived here. Rent was

cheap and we were allowed to be. At the start, 80% of my customers were from the North-East. Over the years, YouTube has popularised us. Many locals love our sweet, sour and pungent taste despite not being used to it. Now if you go to Nagaland, you will know exactly what you'd like to eat, just like how we now know the perfect consistency of sambar and the right softness of an idli," he says.

# Selling the North-East story

CONTINUED FROM  
» PAGE 1**Momo Sa-Khang,  
Choolaimedu**

Formerly Kailash Kitchen, named after the imposing Mount Kailash, Momo Sa-Khang began in 2007 as a refuge for Tibetan students who scoured the city's streets for a bite of fluffy, steamed momos. "I just really missed biting into a momo and I knew that several other Tibetan students did too. We decided to keep things simple and started a shop in Choolaimedu as I was familiar with the area and knew many Tibetan students who studied in Loyola College. We had only two dishes on the menu. A vegetarian and chicken version of a momo and of the popular warm

noodle-soup thukpa. We introduced the dhangtuk, a cold noodle dish, because it was better for the Chennai summer. The thukpa tends to make

the body very warm," says Rinchen Tashi, the owner who came to Chennai as a 20-something. "I am now 44 and do not plan to leave," he says. Momo Sa-Khang now has three stores under the ownership of Rinchen (at Choolaimedu, Anna Nagar and Besant Nagar) and two other franchises (at KK Nagar and Velachery).

At the restaurant is a gaggle of young women from Ethiraj College for Women who are here to try momos and chowmein after having watched an Instagram reel. S Mahavaishnavi is the only one among them

who has been here before and is a big fan of the economic pricing and their spicy momo chutney that often elicits expletives after subsequent bites. "We use the local red chilies from Chennai and flavour it with star anise, cinnamon, fennel seeds and sesame oil. That is what leads to the addictive taste," Tashi says. He adds that the chilies in his town are much hotter. "The people here have not been able to handle the taste," he says.

**Hotel Brahmaputra, Greams Road**

It has only been four years since Hotel Brahmaputra opened its doors but it has been dishing out a steady stream of their Assamese thalis replete with three kinds of potato variations; a paneer subzi; mixed veg subzi; a raw mango sweet pickle; and the watery, mild and comforting Assamese dal. Hotel Brahmaputra began to cater to a need. Located in Greams Road, the owners, who do

not wish to be named, say that several families from Assam, West Bengal and Tripura, began arriving in Chennai for treatment in hospitals in and around the Nungambakkam neighbourhood. Everyone wanted soft food, reminiscent of home.

"Since we cater to families that have patients, we wanted to keep it light and home-style," he said. Saswati

Sarkar who is in Chennai from West Bengal for health-reasons, says that there is usually less mustard oil in their food at home but the thali does its job. Besides the meal, the restaurant's staff recommends two kinds of fish – the katla fish and boal fish – which are popular both in their curry and fry formats. Even the simple aloo pitka with mashed potatoes tempered with mustard oil, onions, hot green chillies, is a well-loved dish here.

**We recommend:**  
The Assamese thali and the fish varieties. **Price for two:** ₹400

**North East Kitchen, Egmore**

Ramayon Keishing arrived in Chennai in 1994, as a bright-eyed bushy-tailed young man, hoping to crack the UPSC exams. "That dream was short-lived," he says, placing a North East Kitchen meal before me. On the sectioned plate is a wonderfully healthy affair – a fry and a gravy with a meat of choice; steamed spinach; a boiled potato and fermented fish chutney called eromba; and some fresh cucumber salad alongside a bowl of rice. As we eat, Ramayon, who is from Ukhru in Manipur, says that he wanted to open a restaurant that could unite all of the North-East folk. "Around 2014, there was some harassment of NE folk in major metros. I wanted to ensure that there was a place where everyone could feel welcomed," he says. In the 11 years that he has run the kitchen, Ramayon says that he has noticed drastic changes. While it was predominantly people from the NE who came to the restaurant when it began, the tables have now turned. "Now, 60% of the crowd is local. When they ask for takeouts, they specifically call us to ensure that the eromba is packed," he says. Shubham Hawlder from Andaman and Nicobar island, says that he visits NEK every time he is in Chennai. "There is a common misconception about food from the North East being bland. It is in fact wonderfully flavoured by ginger, garlic and whole spices. It does not have masala, and is hence light on the stomach," he says.

**We recommend:**  
The NEK meal, their chilli meat preparations and their Korean specialty dishes. **Price for two:** ₹600



PHOTO: R RAVINDRAN

# Tales of the loom

Crafts Council of India's textile showcase Tari — The Loom, will have 31 designers and weavers from across the country showcase a range of textiles

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The length and breadth of the country is home to a plethora of textiles; all indicative of a range of craftsmanship and skill. This has taken centrestage in the Crafts Council of India's (CCI) showcases in Chennai over the last two decades.

Tari – The Loom, the summer showcase organised by the CCI this weekend, will have saris, kurtas, dupattas and yardage from looms across the country. The saris at this showcase include jamdani, brocade, patola, Chanderi and chikan.

"Saris are the single most versatile piece of unstitched fabric. It is the mainstay of our handloom industry. As the late textile revivalist Martand Singh said, as long as that unstitched fabric remains in abundance and usage, all is well," says Bela Mistry Khaleeli, vice chairperson, CCI.

CCI, she says, has been interacting with artisans to revive and revitalise saris. "We aim to bring together a number of different weaves from across the country, and also promote it among younger people. The more people take to wearing saris, the more predominant it becomes," she adds.

At Tari this year, 31 collections will be showcased by artisans with a focus on sustainability and the use of eco-friendly processes. Jeenu Panika, a young 25-year-old weaver and designer who dabbles in tribal weaves from Kotpad, has a sari collection with unique woven motifs, natural colors and craftsmanship.

Benaras saris created by award-winning weavers who have revived the jamdani style of weaving on Benaras saris will be the



**Storied threads** From Kosala; (below) and a sari from Nadiya Paar. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

highlight of the brand Nilambari's collection, and Unma by Sapna will have handcrafted tussar silk saris with designs inspired by tribal tattoo art crafted from natural fibres and hand spun yarn. Among the other designers and brands participating are Vimor, Nadiya Paar, Kosala, Rajni, Sankari Boutique, Woven Collections, and Erisri Ahimsa Silks.

The Tari showcase will be focussed on an amalgamation of India's artisanal skills through summer centric textiles, says Jayasri Samyukta, executive committee member, CCI.

People in Chennai love seeking out handmade, artisanal textiles. This is an opportunity for anyone who appreciates India's indigenous crafts to meet the makers," she says. Artisans, Jayasri says, always have something unique to share. "Interactions with them provide a valuable insight into their craft, and personal stories of the journey of how it came to be," she adds.

**Tari – The Loom by Crafts Council of India will be held on March 7 and 8 from 10am to 7pm at WelcomHotel by ITC (formerly known as Chola Sheraton), Cathedral Road.**



**Mind over muscle**  
(Clockwise from left)  
Scenes from a previous edition of the Pangong Frozen Lake Marathon; Maj Amirtharaj dedicates the run to his children; and at the start line. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

# Laps around a frozen lake

Chennaiite Major Amirtharaj NS on overcoming the odds to run the high-altitude Pangong Frozen Half Marathon in Ladakh



TANGEDCO, and Government school teacher says the inspiration to run came from his 63-year-old father, Sathiseelan. "I don't come from a forces background. I was all set to be an engineer but joining the Army was a childhood passion. I excelled as a sportsperson, playing basketball, volleyball and squash at academy, Division and Command-level matches, but the push for running came from my father who has completed five half-marathons at his age," says Amirtharaj who followed the drum, serving on the LoC, the North-East, Ambala and Jaisalmer.

What Amirtharaj says next

about the training and simply surviving in these climes, where there is only 40% oxygen, can shock you. "Although I had been active for close to 12 years when I was first posted here, my BP shot up to 160/16. Army advisory includes only walking and no running at such altitude. Chilblains and frostbite are common. Three layers of clothing, balaclava and snow goggles leave you claustrophobic.

Even to warm up, you need to walk four kilometres. The sun comes up at 9am and you have to condition your mind to get up and get out. Food is mostly tinned and you crave oxygen 24x7. Sudden death is a constant," says Amirtharaj.

While the video of the run in this idyll looks exhilarating, it also seems to be the loveliest place to have a nosebleed. The marathon that saw entry restricted to seasoned runners from across the world and India was



also a pitch for battlefield tourism – Galwan Valley is close – and ecological sustainability. "I came to know of the marathon in August last. I had had an ACL reconstruction but was determined to not let that get me down. A memoir and its sequel by retired US Navy Seal David Goggins on mastering your mind set the pace."

Training for his first marathon, Amirtharaj made sure his Army buddy Lakhwinder Singh was always by his side. "I ran six days a week ranging eight to 10 kilometres a day. The average temperature was -28 degrees. My teammates thought I was crazy but I've never felt more alive."

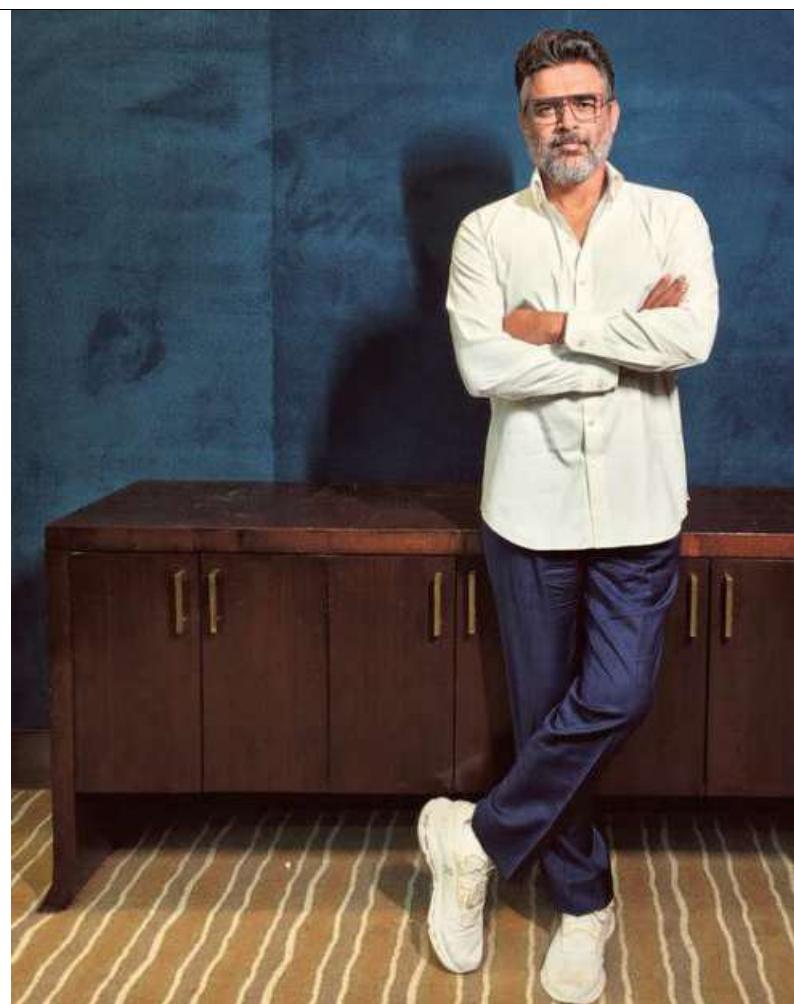
Race day dawned cold and grey but soon had the sun and clouds contend for dominion over the scree slopes. The lake had frozen over and the run began with the wave of a chequered flag.

For Amirtharaj, who clocked three hours and 10 minutes and dedicated the run to his children, the first 10 kilometres was easy. The second round was more a battle of the mind. "I wore no cleats. I ran in my sneakers and also managed to convince a coursemate, Major Vivek AR to run. And there was my buddy too. Suddenly, it became a friendship run. You had the option to slow down to a walk but to keep running without stopping was my win, more than completing the race itself," says Amirtharaj.





**Actor Madhavan chats** about his latest ventures and looks back at his time during *Alaipayuthe*, which released 25 years ago



**In the game**  
Madhavan; (above) with the team of Parent Geenee Inc. and (right) a still from *Alaipayuthe*.  
SRINIVASA RAMANUJAM AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Shot on OnePlus #FramesofIndia



#### Digital boundaries

With children reportedly averaging 4.5 hours of screen time daily, digital well-being has become an increasing concern for modern parents. Parent Geenee, a newly-launched location-based parental control app, seeks to solve this concern. With Madhavan on board as an investor and strategic partner, the team seeks to foster healthy digital boundaries in children. Sasi Naga, founder and chairman, says, "We hope to make digital supervision easier. Based on the child's location, parents can supervise what apps in a smartphone they can access."



The actor is a modern parent himself. In a decision prompted by the COVID-induced lockdown, the Madhavan household moved, lock, stock and barrel, to Dubai to ensure the best opportunities for Vedaant to pursue his passion for swimming.

**The waters beckon**  
Madhavan mulls at that decision and says, "It was an essential decision taken at the right time. He (Vedaant) was going through his growth spurt as a teenager and not having a pool to swim would have meant the end of his international swimming career. It was something Vedaant couldn't miss out on, and so, when we learnt, Dubai's pools were open... it was a good decision, as Vedaant excelled after that."

Not many people know that Maddy owns a boat in Dubai and also has a captain's license. "Yes, I do. I had to pass a written exam and go for a practical course. Managing a motor yacht on the sea is easy as it is a slow moving object but docking it is a completely different skill. To dock the boat safely without hitting the other boats was the biggest challenge," he says.

**Chocolate boy memories**  
Twenty-five years ago, his biggest challenge was facing the camera for *Alaipayuthe*, a film that boasts legendary names such as Mani Ratnam, AR Rahman and PC Sreeram, among others. The sight of Madhavan with headphones riding a bike, with the zingy 'Endrendrum Punnagai' track playing in the background is something that fans remember fondly.

"I keep questioning myself on what I did to deserve such



To watch video interview, scan QR code

a big break in the movies," recalls Madhavan, on his debut film celebrating its 25th anniversary this April. "Mind you, I was 30 years old when we shot *Alaipayuthe* and it was a love story! I look back at it with fear sometimes. What if I had failed? I look at my ability to dance and perform in that film and wonder how I lasted thus far as an actor. *Alaipayuthe* gives me mixed emotions; one of gratitude, to the entire team for having done that for me, but based on 25 years of experience, I also cringe looking at myself."

That's the past, but the present and future does look rosy for the actor. Up next, he has Hashikanth's *The Test* and Mithran Jawahar's *Adhistaasaali*. "I have done nine projects in the last couple of years. There will be more coming up."

One of those will be a biopic on legendary Indian scientist GD Naidu. What is with Maddy's fascination with biopics, considering he recently did one based on the life of ISRO scientist Nambi Narayanan (*Rockety*)? "That the world did not talk much about GD Naidu, who is considered the Edison of India, was enough motivation to take it up. But I think I'm done with biopics. After this, I want to make stories on progressive India."

When he is not out there doing that or docking his boat in Dubai, Maddy is busy trying to pick up new skills. "I wish to try out paragliding this year," he reveals, "Acquiring a new experience every year and getting a different insight into what it does is very important for people my age and older, because you don't want the mind to get sedate."

And for that, Maddy also nurses another dream: open a filter coffee chain. "Filter coffee has been far ignored. It needs to be understood and experienced across the world. I hope to do this soon," says the actor. For Maddy, there is always something brewing.



**Japan calling**  
The Madras Art Guild, supported by the Yuji Foundation, is set to bring the rich cinematic heritage of Japan to Chennai. Through a cultural partnership with the Consulate-General of Japan in Chennai, this year's edition will feature, on March 9, an exclusive Japanese Cinema showcase. The festival's special screening will feature a selection of acclaimed Japanese films, including *The Lines That Define Me and And So the Baton Is Passed*, Other films lined up are *Mondays: See You This Week*, *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*, and *BL Metamorphosis*. The screenings will take place at Kalki Theatre, VR Chennai.



**My biggest thrill**  
Actor Adarsh Gourav, known for *The White Tiger*, *Kho Gaye Hum Kahan* and the recent *Superboys of Malegaon*, is making his southern debut in a Telugu psychological horror-thriller. The film is being directed by Baba Shashank and produced by Jahnavi, daughter of RRR producer DVV Danayara. Adarsh said in a statement, "As an actor, my biggest thrill is to explore diverse narratives across industries."

# The brew is on

concerned if he has the smartness to understand that this recognition will soon fade, and that he has to make his own name."

Madhavan aka Maddy takes parenting seriously, despite admitting that his professional

commitments might not give him the space to spend more time with his 19-year-old. Which is why the actor has recently invested in a parental control app, Parent Geenee, besides being its strategic partner.

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**M**adhavan sports a warm fuzzy smile at the mention of his son, Vedaant Madhavan, who is making waves as a professional freestyle swimmer.

"As a parent, I'd rate myself 6 on 10," says Madhavan, rather candidly. "While I'm happy with Vedaant's achievements, I'm also nervous because he has attained recognition that might be disproportionate to his achievements. I'm not worried whether he will make it big or not; I'm more

**Lots of footage**  
Seasoned Malayalam star Manju Warrier opens up on her new thriller, which has also been dubbed in Hindi

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**I**tell Manju Warrier about my first memory of her from Malayalam cinema. In Shaji Kailas' *Aaram Thampuran*, she overshadows a formidable Mohanlal in the first scene of the 1997 blockbuster. She beautifully conveys the valiance of her character in a short scene that sets the tone for her chemistry with Mohanlal.

When did she realise that she could stand out on her own in a star-centric industry? "I was too inexperienced to think that way," says Manju. "In those days, my contribution to a film was limited to acting. I didn't have the exposure to suggest anything to the director."

Today, Manju ensures an all-round involvement in her projects. A decade ago, she signalled her comeback after a lengthy break from films with *How Old Are You*. Since the 2014 hit family drama, Manju has been the face of her movies, especially in Malayalam. "Now I involve myself in every stage of filmmaking, right from script discussion to post-production. My projects are more like a group of friends collaborating to create something

interesting," she says.

The actor has been on an experimenting spree, with her latest film in the news, *Footage*, being another unique attempt. The 2024 Malayalam movie will be released in Hindi on March 7, with Anurag Kashyap presenting the dubbed version. The found-footage film, which revolves around a curious couple, is directed by debutant Sajju Sreedharan, who edited popular movies such as *Maheshinte Prathikaram* (2016) and *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019).

*Footage* was an exciting film to pull off, she says. "The film has very few characters, and every scene had to be a single shot. All the scenes were choreographed carefully, and we worked closely with the cinematographer (Shinoz)

right from the planning stage."

The risks taken in *Footage* struck a chord with Anurag Kashyap, known for making path-breaking movies", says Manju. "Anurag sir's love for Malayalam movies is well known. When we first met, I was surprised he knew about my work. He has a set audience in Hindi, and I hope the film impresses them."

We see a conscious decision to do something different with each film. However, not all risks from Manju have paid off. "My judgments have gone wrong," she admits. "I learn from mistakes and go with the flow. I can't say it's the right method to deal with failures, but it works for me. I don't plan much. I go with my instinct."

Manju remains tight-lipped about her next, the highly-anticipated sequel *L2: Empuraan*, starring Mohanlal. "*Lucifer* (2019) was loved immensely, and I can't wait to see *Empuraan* on the big screen. My character is very interesting." In the second phase of her career, what excites her to be a part of a star-driven film? Is it about the lessons you gain from being a part of an ensemble? "No. For me, it's about my character's influence on the story. It's just not about being on a big set. It's about what my character has to do in the plot."

**Maayalam films are working not because they are mostly thrillers. They have succeeded because the content is good. Following a trend can backfire if you don't have material that engages the audience**

MANJU WARRIER



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