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At Melgaarsh, a Toda hamlet, we trace the sacred ritual of thatching an ancient temple **P2**

HIGHLIGHTS FROM
MOTO JAM 2025 P4

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Finance and emotional wellness

School of Life's summer workshop has something for children that most millennials wish they had studied about in school – finance. Over 11 days, the summer workshop for children will have sessions on personal finance; understanding how stock markets work as well as confidence building; dealing with jomo (joy of missing out) and fomo (fear of missing out); and vision board-making.

"We were keen on including topics related to finance so that children have a head-start with regard to this in life, and have experts from the field addressing them. Emotional wellness is important at a time when screens dominate our lives. The other topics we focus on, will help them with peer pressure and regulating their emotions," says Anjana Krishnaswamy, founder, School of Life.

Lady Andal School, Harrington Road, Chennai, from April 30 to May 10. For 7 to 11 years at 10am, and 12 to 16 years at 3pm. Register at 9342182735 or follow @school_of_life.in on Instagram.



School's Out

Summer camps are no longer about learning a song or two, or picking up a new craft. This year, Chennai's summer camps dabble in everything from finance to board games and weaving. Here are some of our picks that promise a distraction from the punishing heat

Rowing in the Adyar river

Being able to set out on an early morning row down the Adyar river, much before the heat takes over, is what participants at Madras Boat Club's annual rowing camp can gear up for. Having initiated several youngsters from the city into rowing over the last many years, the camp will take place over two batches this time.

"The camp will serve as an introduction to a sport that is fairly niche. Open to all children aged 13 and above, they can pick up the basics and choose to stick on with the sport much after the camp has ended," says Sumana Narayanan, vice captain of boats. Several participants who have picked up rowing at this summer camp, have gone on to compete in national events. "Rowing also inculcates discipline, hard work and leadership skills. Every person on the boat will have a part to play and they will learn to work together. The camp will train them physically and mentally," Sumana adds. Children are expected to have basic swimming knowledge.

@Madras Boat Club from May 12 onwards for 13 to 21 years. Contact 9445395089 for registrations.

CONTINUED ON
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Love so natural, only a natural diamond will do.



love,
from dad
COLLECTION
FOR SECOND PIERCING



DE BEERS
A DIAMOND IS FOREVER



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Recently, members of the Toda tribe, the oldest indigenous tribes of the Nilgiris, gathered at Melgaa(r)sh, an ancient hamlet above the Ooty Botanical Garden, for a sacred ritual. The men, dressed in the ceremonial embroidered shawls, bent down, bundling swamp grass called *avful*, endemic to the wetlands of The Nilgiris and found nowhere else on the planet. “A re-thatching ceremony of a Toda temple which happens once every 15 years, is in progress,” said Tarun Chhabra, a retired dentist and an expert on the indigenous Toda culture and local ecology.

We stood atop Manajakkal Mund (also called the Garden Mund) the principal hamlet of the patrician, and witnessed this rare spectacle.

From everything we gathered, we got to know that Todas earlier lived in the highest reaches in hamlets called ‘munds’. They had bamboo-vaulted homes shaped like rainbows that were usually patched with mud and straw. This, they believed, tackled the

Where the grass was green

Members of the Toda tribe gather a rare grass, found only in the Nilgiris to re-thatch their sacred temple

wind velocity at high altitudes. While the Todas of today have shifted from these traditional homes to modern concrete buildings, the temples are still built with cane, bamboo and *avful*. Once common in swamps in the main Toda heartland of Wenlock Downs, this grass has nearly disappeared from the wet grasslands of the mountains. Thin bamboo reeds called *theff* are bent together in bunches, while still green and

fresh, to give the temple the characteristic barrel-vaulted shape. These are fastened with peeled rattan cane. This bamboo reed, seen in many shola pockets of the Nilgiris, is now limited to some dense jungles on the South-West slopes. Similarly, rattan cane, plentiful on the Nilgiri slopes and some sholas, has virtually disappeared too. Todas go into the dense rain



forests on the slopes beyond the western catchment and Mukurthi to now gather the remaining rattan cane.

“When they decide to rebuild a temple, there will be a minimum of three ceremonies at different stages. When they bend *theff* and tie it in bunches, it is known as ‘kwehll (zh) g-vheel-pattyt’ ceremony where only the Toda communities take part. The Melgaa(r)sh clan especially contributes. There is also the ‘waadr-ofst’ ceremony where they add horizontal bamboo sticks. During the ‘poll(zh)y-veihhst’ thatching ceremony, they use the *avful* to thatch the dairy temples. These structures can last for decades. However, an occupant must light a fire within the building regularly, to ensure that the structure is exposed to smoke,” explains Tarun, who is also the founder of Toda Nalavaazhvu Sangam.

Set to a song
The front facade of the temple is thatched in an intricate way. It is a job that is reserved for elderly men of the clan. Before starting this, they make ‘toott’, a ring-like structure around which they thatch the grass and braid it with a stripped cane. This is called

One with Nature The Toda tribe at the dairy temple for a sacred ritual that happens every 15 years.
SATHYAMOORTHY M

‘podhaarr-thittyt’ and is done a few days earlier. “It’s an important occasion, a prelude to the main ceremony,” explains Tarun. Once the Toda men start thatching from either side, they begin singing songs till they meet at the the top of the half-moon structure of the temple. “In certain places, where the focus of divinity is placed, if you notice, there will be a special kind of cross pattern,” says Tarun.

As the ritual proceeds, the clan sings ‘konn-ezht’, sacred couplets in an impromptu oral poetry form. They assemble in a circle and have ‘pochazhky’ balls made with mashed little millet and a dollop of ghee in the middle. It is served on ‘kawkwehdd’ leaf. The Toda tradition easily dates back 4,000 years, says Tarun. “When a study was initiated on this grass, flowering specimens were sent to an expert in the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew for necessary identification. Todas, on the other hand, can readily distinguish specimens from other similar-looking species even at a distance. In the olden days, where Todas lived, *avful* flourished on the West side of the wetlands. When the dams came in, the wetlands got flooded, and eucalyptus, pine trees, and plantations, sprung up on the sides,” he says. “That is when everything changed.”

Hot cross yum

Ahead of Good Friday, here’s our pick of hot cross buns in the city



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Pumpkin Tales, Alwarpet
Pumpkin Tales, Alwarpet offers three types of hot cross buns. There is the classic, priced at ₹100 and cranberry and chocolate versions too (priced at ₹125). They are available till April 20. To pre-order, call 9952996446.

Ciclo Cafe
Ciclo Cafe offers a freshly-made traditional style hot cross bun priced at ₹99. It will be available from April 18 to 20 across its outlets at Kottupuram, Uthandi and Anna Nagar. To pre-order, call 9791948113.

Winners Bakery, Alwarpet
The traditional cinnamon-flavoured hot cross bun will be available here until April 20. They are economically priced at ₹40. For bulk orders and pre-booking, call 9962528110.

Buhari Mount Road, Anna Salai
This year, Buhari’s bakery chef has created a rose-flavoured Persian hot cross bun (₹70) besides the regular traditional ones (₹75). The buns are available only at the Mount Road branch from April 17 to 20. To order, call 7299902951.

McRennett
At McRennett, the buns will be sold from April 18 to 20. They are priced at ₹40. Available across all their outlets in the city.

Old Madras Baking Company
Old Madras Baking Company’s traditional variety of buns is priced at ₹80 and will be available from April 17 to 20. Available at all their outlets in the city.



Taking in the moment Comic creator Appupen. SUDHAKARA JAIN

Shot on OnePlus

#FramesofIndia

Crossing the vaadivaasal

A graphic book adaptation of CS Chellappa’s *Vaadivaasal* captures the ethos of Tamil Nadu’s spirited jallikattu

Parshathy J Nath

The crowd watches with bated breath. It is a tussle between man and beast. Who will win? Pichi the boy, Kaari the fierce bull, or the zamindar who owns the animal? Clouds of mud fly up in the air as the crowd in Chellayipuram throngs the *vaadivaasal* (entrance to the arena) to see the jallikattu action live. *Vaadivaasal: The Arena* is a graphic novel adaptation (published by Simon & Schuster) of the book by the same name by CS Chellappa published in 1949, written by author Perumal Murugan along with Bengaluru-based comic creator Appupen, who has also illustrated it.

Appupen stayed in Madurai for three days to soak in the chaos at the arena. “You have to be with the people, see the dust, and sweat.” Working with Perumal Murugan was one of the many highlights of this project for him. “He was

accepting of me. I wanted to show myself that I am thinking of the craft of storytelling in a way he can accept.” Initially, Appupen made a rough storyboard of 30 pages to show Murugan the nature of the work. “I told him for our comic, we won’t write what we have shown in the drawing. We wanted to talk to a more informed audience. And he took it seriously.”

The graphic novel medium urged Murugan to think more visually. “I already had an experience of writing film scripts. Appupen decided what was necessary and unnecessary according to his images,” says the writer.

As a writer who wrote the foreword for the republished version of *Vaadivaasal* in 2004, he was also familiar with the writings of Chellappa.

CS Chellappa looks at jallikkattu with the detached perspective of a writer, says Perumal. He does not look at it through the binary of right or wrong. “He is not trying

to take a stand for the humans or the bull. Writers stand in the periphery of an event, focussing on the emotions and stories involved.” In the novel, you see Pichi, a fallen champion, and zamindar in all his complexity. “The zamindar is not a bad guy. He has great qualities, he appreciates Pichi who is also not outrightly trying to be a hero, and is vulnerable,” says Appupen.

It is hard to miss the regional cadences in *Vaadivaasal*. From Pichi and Maruthan, his friend, to the grandfather figure who eggs him on to fight, their words carry the lilt of Tamil. Murugan says, “In the story, Pichi’s father, even after he is injured by the bull, does not tell his son not to take part in the sport because it’s risky. He urges him to keep his pride alive by winning the next game. Jallikkattu is a culture where so many factors come to play: pride, ego, rivalry and love. A writer’s job is to chart all these emotions.”

School’s Out

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Animals, awareness and empathy

Besant Memorial Animal Dispensary (BMAD), home to several furry friends, will throw open its doors in May for a summer camp that will have children learn about the workings of a shelter, as well as develop awareness and empathy towards animals.

“We will run two summer camps – one for children who have no exposure to animals and another for children who have attended our camps,” says Neeraja Venkateswaran,



head of operations, BMAD. “The five-day camp for new participants will introduce them to the medical treatments offered here, rescue operations and what they can do if they see an injured animal, how we work with large domestic animals, and a session on wildlife awareness,” she explains.

The participants will also learn about how they can use social media effectively to spread awareness; from rescues to how adopting pets will make a difference over buying from breeders. “The camp is not just about them learning about animals, but to encourage them to be responsible citizens and improve animal welfare,” Neeraja adds.

BMAD, Sai Ram Colony, Besant Nagar. From May 2 to 6. WhatsApp 6383046989 for registrations and follow @besantmemorialanimaldispensary on Instagram.



Weaving and printmaking

At Studio Vella’s quaint space in the city, children will delve into the arts with printmaking, paper crafts, weaving, graphite rendering, sketching, and more. Artist and textile designer Vellachi Ramanathan, who also teaches the Cambridge art and design curriculum in KC High, says that she works on developing self-expression and skill among children. “In contemporary art, textile and craft has a huge presence and is an important part of the camp. It also helps work with the motor skills of the children,” she says.

Vellachi says that these also help address attention deficiency. “In weaving for instance, even if you skip one step, you will have to unravel and start from scratch. This will ensure children work slowly and with complete attention. They will have fun, and pick up basic and intermediate skills in these artforms,” she says. The camp will be conducted by her and two other teachers who are qualified in the visual arts.

Studio Vella, 24, Arunachalam Road, Kotturpuram. In three batches from April 21, May 12, and June 2 for ages 7 to 10. Contact 9840779026 for registrations. Follow @studiovella_ on Instagram.



Board games

Endless TV time and YouTube videos aside, Untangle, a Chennai-based board game cafe aims to make children experts at not just playing board games, but also creating their own. “There are different categories of board games such as strategy games and auction games which children will be introduced to. Alongside this, they will work with each other on coming up with the idea and design for their own game,” says Subhatra Priyadarshini,

co-founder, Untangle. Over the course of five days, children will get to play over 50 board games. Board game experts and designers will come in to guide the children on their prototypes, and they will know more about the board game industry. “We believe in encouraging gadget-free time and have several adults come in to play board games for this, and that applies to children as well,” she adds. Untangle will also host a creativity summer camp which will have children try their hand at writing poems and story design, as well as a baking summer camp where they will make cookies, cakes and cupcakes.

Board games camps are at Untangle, T Nagar from May 12 and Teynampet from May 26. WhatsApp 9840457056 for registrations. For details, follow @untangleindia on Instagram.



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A red theater stage with curtains and a spotlight. The stage is set with red curtains and a red carpet. A bright spotlight illuminates the center of the stage.

A large, elaborate thali spread featuring a variety of Indian dishes including curries, rice, sweets, and breads, served on a white tablecloth.

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Sibi on donning the khaki yet again in upcoming crime thriller *Ten Hours*

Bhuvanesh Chandar

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He may not be the most consistent actor, but there's something desirable about Sibi Sathyaraj and his tenacious journey that makes you root for him. Perhaps that's why you would find many comments under the trailer of his upcoming film *Ten Hours* wishing for the actor to get his due. Sibi, too, is impressively self-aware of where he stands. "I will get my big break. I know it," says a confident Sibi.

Ten Hours, a crime thriller directed by debutant Ilayaraja Kaliyaperumal, tells a story that transpires over 10 hours in a night. Sibi plays a police officer named R Castro. "Overnight, he embarks into what turns out to be his career's most complicated



Officer takes charge

case, and the film travels with him as he encounters quite a few unexpected turns," says Sibi. This is the actor's fifth role as a cop, after *Naaigal Jaakirathai*, *Jackson Durai*, *Walter* and *Kabadadaari*. Too much khaki on the same shoulders can get quite monotonous, but Sibi has somehow managed to make the roles his own. "Maybe it is because of the success of *Naaigal Jaakirathai* that directors think I am tailor-made for the role. Moreover, thanks to the preparations I did for that

film — like the weapons training I underwent at a police academy in Adyar — I find it easier to get into the groove of a cop." In today's Tamil cinema, with bigger stars more or less settling for templates, an experienced actor like Sibi could dabble in some experiments, perhaps like his antagonistic turn in 2010's *Naanayam*.

"I have always been open to experimenting. I believe I started doing that right from 2007's *Lee*. But yes, I am on the course to do more

experiments," he assures.

20 years ago, Sibi was busy working alongside his father, veteran actor Sathyaraj, in titles like *Kovai Brothers* and *Vetrivel Sakthivel*, but except for *Jackson Durai*, the two haven't acted together since. In 2009, Sibi had told *The Hindu*, "Henceforth, we'll

Sibiraj has earlier played a cop in films like *Naaigal Jaakirathai*, *Walter* and *Jackson Durai*

Cop act

Sibi Sathyaraj in a still from *Ten Hours*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

team up only if the project is unique. I don't intend on riding piggyback on my dad." He even went on to say that those films didn't do him any good as much as they did his father. But then, given Sathyaraj's pan-Indian break post-*Baahubali*, you wonder if the on-screen father-son equation is up for a renewal, say, in a genre they hadn't attempted before. But Sibi reasserts his sentiment.

"I don't want to be in his shadow. That's why, after all those films, we took a break from working together. Even when we reunited for *Jackson Durai*, it was only because it had such a unique concept." The 2016 horror-comedy film featured Sathyaraj as a ghost. "We have now reunited for *Jackson Durai 2*, in which he is playing a villain opposite me."

When Indian cinema underwent a boom in OTT content, audiences and critics hoped it would lead to more niche, smaller attempts and a possible upsurge of the long-format — and more spaces that actors like Sibi, who started in the 2000s, could use to boost their game. Sibi accepts that this has not happened. "But there have been attempts like *Suzhal* and *Inspector Rishi*. So I am hopeful that more opportunities will open up."

After *Ten Hours*, Sibi has *Ranger* and *Jackson Durai 2* in the pipeline. "I am also in talks with director Ilayaraja Kaliyaperumal and the producers of *Ten Hours* for another project. We are also planning on mounting a project under our own production banner," says Sibi.

Ten Hours releases in theatres on April 18

Horror stories

Soha Ali Khan, who plays the antagonist in horror film *Chhorii 2*, talks about her diverse and trivia-rich career



A new outing Soha Ali Khan as Daasi Ma in *Chhorii 2*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Shilajit Mitra

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For someone with such a genre-agnostic filmography — Bengali arthouse cinema, disaster flick, half a dozen comedies — Soha Ali Khan had never attempted a horror. That box is now gratifyingly ticked in *Chhorri 2*, Vishal Furia's feminist horror sequel streaming on Prime Video. The film, starring Nushratt Bharuccha, returns to the sugarcane fields of the first film, introducing Ali Khan as the monstrous Daasi Ma, the reverend mother of an underground patriarchal order.

"I was surprised when they approached me for the antagonist," says Soha, who has mostly played citizens and upstanding citizens.

Building on themes from the first film, *Chhorii 2* rails against female infanticide and child marriage in the Hindi heartland. "As a mother to a girl child, I was disturbed by the mindset and conditioning that Daasi Ma represents," says Soha. "Of course, it is not something that only happens in far-off places. It happens close to home, amongst families of relative wealth and education."

Soha, a former banker, made her Hindi film debut in the 2004 romantic comedy *Dil Maange More*. However, as the daughter of Sharmila Tagore, her tryst with cinema began much earlier. In her memoir, *The Perils of Being Moderately Famous*, Soha writes lovingly about her four-second cameo in the

1979 film *Dooriya*, starring her mother and Bengali cinema icon Uttam Kumar. Given that she was barely a year old at the time, wasn't it the fastest star-kid launch in history?

"It's true!" laughs Soha. "I was a little infant in my mother's arms in a song. That was effectively my debut."

Her actual debut, it turns out, was meant to be Amol Palekar's *Paheli*. "Amol ji wanted to launch me with another young actor. As a student of History, I was taken by the film's Rajasthan setting and the beautiful costumes I was going to wear. I was so excited that I quit my job at Citigroup overnight and didn't tell my parents."

However, once superstar Shah Rukh Khan came on board, the film's profile increased, and both Soha and her co-star were dropped by Palekar (Rani Mukerji eventually played the female lead in *Paheli*). "Amol ji called and told me Shah Rukh Khan is doing the role of the hero. I was like, "Oh that's amazing!" I didn't realise that he was slowly breaking it to me that I wasn't playing the girl anymore."

Soha, who took a break from feature films after 2018's *Saheb, Biwi Aur Gangster 3*, is cautiously optimistic about the future.

"While good stories are being rewarded, people are still hesitant to embrace originality." A correction, she adds, is certainly underway in the industry. "Scripts are being reworked. As a female actor in my 40s, I am positive about the quality of roles coming my way. I couldn't say this, say, 10 years ago."



A song for Rajinikanth

Did you know Rajinikanth debuted in films 50 years ago? Yes, his first on-screen outing released in 1975, and despite technological changes and multiple stars entering the film industry, Rajinikanth is still considered the superstar for many fans. Celebrating this half century in a musical manner is Jammers United. This evening, celebrating Rajinikanth's evergreen songs over the years, will feature a live orchestra by Yuvaraj. Proceeds from the event will go towards Lara, an NGO working for the welfare of animals. *Endredrum Rajini* will take place on April 20 (6pm) at Museum Theatre. For tickets, visit mdnd.in/event or call 9840139422



When K-pop meets Kollywood



Tamil music director Dharan Kumar has a surprise for music fans. He has recently tied up with K-pop singer Aora for a track titled 'Tamil-K Gethu', which explores the cultural parallels between Tamil and Korean traditions. The song — written by lyricist Ku Karthik and directed by Arul — fuses K-pop's energy with Kollywood's soul, set in Chettinad-inspired rural backdrops while bringing together cultural elements. On the track, which premiered recently on Meera Music, a music platform from Meera, Cavinkare's hair care brand, Dharan said, "Aora brought in an infectious passion for Tamil culture, and we found so many surprising similarities—from the melodic scales to rhythmic patterns." Added Aora, "When I discovered how much Tamil culture reminded me of my own Korean roots, I knew we had something beautiful to celebrate. This song is my tribute to that connection."

When bikes flew

A peek into the celebration of all things motorsports at the recently-held Red Bull Moto Jam



Flying high

A stunt bike rider at the Red Bull Moto Jam. ALI BHARMAL AND S SHIVA RAJ



To watch a video from the event, scan QR code

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It's a bird. It's a plane. No, it's a bike. And it's up in the air.

At the recently-held Red Bull Moto Jam in Chennai's Island Grounds, bikes flew in the air and cars raced sideways. Even as the motorists had fun with their vehicles, audiences watched

in awe, in an evening that was all about speed and style.

They were not the only ones having fun. Director Lokesh Kanagaraj, a surprise guest, went on a spin with rally champion Abdo Feghali, who, sporting a yellow Chennai Super Kings jersey, did everything possible with a BMW M4 car including quick spins and fast turns.

Much later, Lokesh, currently working on Rajinikanth's *Coolie*, would say, "I've never experienced something like this."

That pretty much sums up the emotion that thousands of Chennaites felt, even as they experienced a multi-discipline celebration of motorsports with motorists pushing their limits with their machines. If stunt racer

Abdulrahman Ahmed Alraeesi got his car to race on two wheels, Sebastian Westberg, Vivian Ganther and Thomas Wirsberger revved their freestyle motocross bikes to perform stunts in the air, much to the delight of the spectators.



I'm happy to introduce drifting to new countries. While the weather might not be too ideal, the passion for motorsports in this part of the country is amazing

ABDO FEGHALI, Rally champion



Among the many firsts that this motorsport spectacle threw up were Lebanon-based Abdo Feghali's stunts using drifting, a driving technique where a car is made to slide sideways, and Lithuania-based Arunas Gibieza's (Aras) stunts on his Triumph Street triple stunt bike.

Aras is no stranger to Chennai, having performed earlier in shows and college events. He started off with a gentle wheelie but soon, came into his own when he stood on the bike, even as the vehicle kept moving forward. Aras recalls, "When I was four, I was at a friend's place, having dinner, when the TV showcased a race. The guy who finished the race was crossing the finish line in style. I said, 'Wow, I want to do that.'"

He did exactly that in Moto Jam, while Chennai looked on in awe. Aras, dreaming to soon get a Guinness Record for the longest no-hands motorcycle wheelie, a record he held not long ago, is thrilled at the public support he got in India. "This will go a long way in spreading the word about motorsports in the country, and I hope it inspires many people to take it up, with appropriate safety precautions."