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THE HINDU

The Nilgiris Mountain Railway completes 125 years. We go on a nostalgia-filled ride P2

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM AKSHAY'S *SARFIRA* P4

The Indian resurgence

Veteran filmmaker Shankar talks about reuniting with Kamal Haasan after 28 years for *Indian 2*, releasing this Friday

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A word that has become synonymous with director Shankar is *brahmandam* (grandeur). This extends to his office as well. Amidst the scent of candles and floor-to-ceiling windows with drapes matching the furniture around, stands a 6-foot-tall illuminated robot from *Enthiran*. Seated on a long couch is the filmmaker, visibly unperturbed with mere days left for the release of *Indian 2,* his highly-anticipated reunion with Kamal Haasan. Excerpts from an interview:

Question: *The gap between the two* Indian *films is 28 years and the first film has achieved cult status. How challenging was it to come up with a sequel?*
Answer: The challenge itself is the first part *(laughs)*. We've shown everything in the first film – how Senapathy is as a person, his background, character, his prowess over the martial art of *varma kalai*, his anger towards societal injustice and even his family. The challenge was to come up with something new for the sequel. What he deals with stays the same but the situations have changed and what he does forms the story of *Indian 2*.

Q: *Kamal made Tamil cinema's first sequel –* Japanil Kalyanaraman *and also did* Vishwaroopam 2 *recently. Those films and* Ponniyin Selvan 2 *did not get the same recognition the first part got. The* Indian *sequel is also split into two parts, so how did you go about it?*
A: *Indian 2* is a different story altogether. It's about what the character of Senapathy would do in today's modern age. The first part of the film is like Scotch whiskey. It has brewed well in our minds for a long time and no matter what fresh ideas we come up with, comparisons will be inevitable. The thought *Indian 2* carries is bigger than the first part; it's a pan-Indian thought.

Q: *Senapathy, unlike other killers, is someone who truly believes that the killings he does are for the betterment of society. How did you write his character initially and how has it evolved in the sequel?*
A: Indian *thatha* is an embodiment of anger. When I was studying, I knew the struggles and lengths I had to go to to get a birth certificate, income certificate or community certificate. So, when I became a filmmaker, I wanted to turn that into a film. It's the same sense of frustration every common man shares. Senapathy is a product of reverse engineering that anger.

The idea was to show a man who could justify the anger he carries. That's how we cracked the freedom fighter angle; he's someone who fought for the country.

Stories come from our own lives and we turn them into larger-than-life tales. We put the protagonist in a 'what if' scenario and come up with a plot. I strongly feel that films create an impact and pave the way for positive change.

Q: *The first time you worked with Kamal, it was your third film and your biggest project then. How is it to collaborate with him after all these years?*
A: Kamal sir has become more experienced and approachable. If you know you've got a valid point, you can go up to him, tell him and get the sort of performance you want. My favourite aspect of him is how more than an actor he's a movie buff; he keeps himself updated with the latest films and series. He's always on his laptop, browsing and accumulating knowledge.

Q: *You mentioned earlier how prosthetics have come a long way since you used them first in* Indian...
A: For *Indian*, we took frontal and profile photos of Kamal sir, his father and two brothers. We gave them to the art director along with the character description and story to derive the sketch of the look of Senapathy. Back then, the prosthetics were thick and when the promotional stills came out, there were talks on how it didn't look like Kamal sir. This time, the prosthetics have become advanced. Legacy Effects did the work this time; I showed them the first film's sequences and said the actor's face didn't show much because of the prosthetics. Because of how thinner prosthetics have gotten now, you can see more of Kamal sir in the sequel.

Grand vision Director Shankar with Kamal Haasan in *Indian 2*; (below) Shankar. THAMODHARAN B

Stories come from our own lives and we turn them into larger-than-life tales. We put the protagonist in a 'what if' scenario and come up with a plot

SHANKAR
Director

Q: *Technology is something you've always used as a tool in your films. How have they come in handy with* Indian 2*?*
A: Sometimes you need it for scenes, songs or even action; it depends on the script. If a scene requires a certain technique, we have to find out what it is, where we can get it, who's the expert in it and how we can access it. The same strategy works with songs as well. In *Enthiran*, I wouldn't have used CG in songs because the film is filled with CG scenes. Because I wanted it to be natural, we shot it at Machu Picchu.

In *Indian 2* we used Unreal Engine, motion capture, de-ageing and performance capturing. RK Laxman's famous character, The Common Man, has been used as a narrative tool. To do the 3D animation, we needed someone to execute the performance and motion-capturing, and Guru Somasundaram has done that. Even if he doesn't appear in the film he has done a great job with it and has even voiced that character.

Q: *Considering* Indian 3 *is also almost ready, for the first time, can we expect two films from you in the same year?*
A: If it all works out well, it will be three releases this year. *Game Changer* is also almost done; we have completed Ram Charan's portions and only about 10-15 days of shoot are left. For *Indian 3*, a few scenes and two songs remain.

Q: *With* Game Changer *you are also making your Telugu debut...*
A: My Tamil film *Gentleman's* dubbed Telugu version became a big hit and I should thank producer AM Rathnam for it. He produced *Indian* and even released the dubbed version of my films like *Mudhalvan* and *Jeans*. It was such a sight to see people's affection and how they consume our films, and I wanted to do a Telugu film. I enjoy watching mass Telugu films and I wanted to make one as well, *Game Changer* will be one such film with the elements the audience expects.

Q: *With 2024, you are stepping into your 31st year as a filmmaker. How has the journey been?*
A: I cannot believe it's 31 years *(smiles)*. It's because of the audience; if we care for them and cater to them without any gimmicks, they reciprocate with love and success. When they do, the only way we can repay them is to give something better the next time.

Mission Madras

This indie game is a love letter to Chennai

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Has driving an auto been on your bucket list? How about running on top of a local train? No matter how unrealistic something seems in real life, it is possible, and sometimes even necessary in the world of video games.

Among the numerous types of video games and the millions of worlds and fantasies available, the most interesting ones seem to be those set in locations that exist in our reality. Los Angeles (GTA V), Tokyo (Street Fighter), and London (Uncharted) are just some examples.

While there have been games set in India, there has rarely been an accurate representation because it mostly showcases a westernised perspective of an exotic tropical nation. Project Madras, an indie open world game set in the city of Chennai, comes as a breath of fresh air.

"I have always been interested in game development because I was learning VFX and video editing during college for personal projects in film making," says 25-year-old game developer Royston Ragul A, who is currently developing Project Madras, with his friends. "When Unreal Engine (a 3D computer graphics game engine and creation tool) released new features in 2020, it made game design accessible and that's when we decided to make this game."

Project Madras is a semi-linear open-world game which immerses players into the vibrant, chaotic and real streets of Chennai. For non-practising video game enthusiasts, a semi-linear game is one with a branching storyline that can be played in any order, as opposed to one mission and one path to the end. An open world game, is one where the player is free to explore the limits of the game without necessarily following a set mission.

"Back when we were filmmakers, we would think of many fun concepts and storylines that we wanted to bring to life on the screen, like shooting a chase sequence on top of a train. It is not practically possible on an independent scale," says Royston. "In a game, however, we can make a player do those things."

Pixel city A still from the gameplay video of Project Madras. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

In Project Madras, players will follow a secret spy mission while going through iconic locations like Mount Road, the LIC building, Marina beach, Napier Bridge, and more. The gameplay glimpse video shows an auto zipping through what looks like the Nochikuppam settlement near Loop Road. "The hero of the game is the city of Chennai. I'm not a native of Chennai, but I have fallen in love with it over many visits and through glimpses of it on the big screen. Our ambitious storyline suits Chennai's personality," he says. "We have recorded audio and video, taken photographs, done extensive research to replicate it in the game."

In Project Madras, players will follow a secret spy mission while going through iconic locations like Mount Road, the LIC building, Marina beach , Napier Bridge, and more

While the core storyline is still under wraps, it is evident from the gameplay video that it will be a thrilling ride of crime, adventure, and mystery.

As a part of immersing the players in the city's culture and heritage, the game's original audio is in Tamil. The characters and even the NPCs (non-player characters) will converse in Tamil by default. The game can be switched to English or Hindi, but where's the fun in that? The characters are created with an in-house technology that uses body and face scan technology.

Currently, the team of five is looking for investors who can back their ambitious research and development and help them improve every aspect of the game, right from the physics of how vehicles move, to replicating natural body movements.The game will feature a wide range of vehicles like two-wheelers, autos, buses, lorries, and even boats.

Project Madras is currently under development and the initial early access version will be released in 2025. The full version is anticipated to release in 2026.

We try the city's most expensive cocktail

Cheroot at the ITC Grand Chola has just launched Chennai's most expensive cocktail, rich with Cognac and saffron. Named Xoxo, this drink comes with peated malt infused with saffron along with a dash of *nannari*. It is served with a chocolate cigar. The drink is part of Cholatails, a new bar menu with cocktails and mocktails inspired by the Chola dynasty. Seven cocktails and five mocktails are part of the menu, each incorporating ingredients such as *nannari*, coconut water, guava, jamun, hibiscus, vettiver, tamarind, jaggery and Bovonto, Virudhunagar's pride and Tamil Nadu's answer to international cola brands. *@ITC Grand Chola, Guindy. Xoxo is priced at ₹6,000.*

Leading questions

A military history and awareness quiz for school students between classes VIII and XII by the Colours of Glory Foundation and the Russian Centre for Science and Culture will take place on July 28. Registration is free but limited to the first 100 teams of two students each. *On July 28, 10am @The Russian Centre of Science and Culture. For details, info@coloursofglory.org/ call 9444643852.*

A star of the blue hills

As the Nilgiri Mountain Railway completes 125 years, we hop on to the train and enjoy the scenery unfolding outside the window

Picturesque ride Along the valley; a file photo of Runnymede station; and K Natrajan with a silver miniature of NMR. SATHYAMOORTHY M AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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We are at Mettupalayam Railway Station at the crack of dawn, excited for the adventurous train ride ahead, which covers 16 tunnels, over 200 steep curves, and 250 bridges. It has been 125 years since the Nilgiris Mountain Railway (NMR), fondly called the Ooty toy train of the Nilgiris Railway Company, first chugged up the hills on June 15, 1899.

"A ride on the NMR is an experience," says K Natrajan, a heritage enthusiast and founder of the Heritage Steam Chariot Trust. He adds that it is not just a mode of transportation, but a throwback to a time when life was slower and travel was about the joy of the journey itself.

"As the rhythmic chugging, hissing, and whistle blowing echoes across the valley, one can sit back and soak up the sights of lush greenery, bursts of colourful blooms, and cloud-kissed mountains punctuated by the chirping of birds. The smell of steam from the engine adds to the drama," describes Natrajan.

As the train passes through several quaint towns like Adderly, Runnymede, Ketti, and Lovedale, passengers have their faces and phones glued to the windows.

"It's a proud moment for me to travel in this heritage train that has completed 125 years," says 53-year-old Vikram Nagaraj from Chennai, recalling a 'roller coaster ride' on the train during his youth. "We were a bunch of 20 boys from Guru Nanak College who played pranks along the way, only to be reined in by our stern teacher. Later, I came with my wife on our honeymoon. The journey is a good way to connect with Nature and live in the moment. It detoxes your mind from the hustle and bustle of urban life. We can go back feeling refreshed."

His brother, Venkatesh Bashyam from the US, has joined him on this trip up the slopes. "We hopped on to the toy train to relive the experience. Though it is tough to get a spot, we got our tickets. Just look out of the window and you have amazing views greeting you, what more do you need," asks Venkatesh before humming a few lines of 'Kadhalin Dheepam Ondru...', a classic Rajinikanth song shot in the Nilgiris. Another iconic song is actor Shah Rukh Khan's 'Chaiyya chaiyya' shot atop the moving train through scenic tea plantations and tunnels.

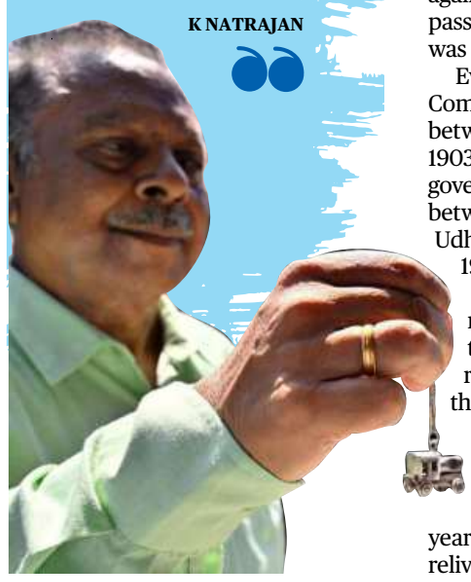
Besides the quasquicentennial milestone, of the train's journey, July 15 is the start of the 20th year of the train ride enjoying the UNESCO's World Heritage Site status. "Undoubtedly, the NMR is the most coveted legacy of the British. It is a lifeline, an integral part of our lives," says Radhakrishnan Dharmalingam, a journalist from Udhagamandalam who has covered the Nilgiris for decades.

While there was a threat of dismantling the NMR in the 1960s (as it was considered uneconomical), the heritage status fortified its continuance. "Now I can be sure my son and grandson will get to enjoy a ride," says Radhakrishnan adding that a co-ordinated effort between the Railways, district administration, and the State Government, is needed to preserve the old world charm of the train, especially the blue-and-cream wooden carriages.

Radhakrishnan adds, "During the rainy season there is the fear of boulders rolling down from the hills and blocking the railway track. This is an outcome of disturbances to the ecology with unplanned constructions. One has to look deeply into these safety aspects in the future."

Natrajan calls for improvements of important stations like Runnymede where one can see tea plantations, towering silver oak trees, and a wild stream.

> ***A ride on the NMR is an experience. The smell of steam from the engine adds to the drama***
>
> **K NATRAJAN**



While Radhakrishnan fondly recalls that every NMR ride is straight out a dream, he says there is a disconnect among the younger generation that treats it like yet another train ride. " They should be made aware of the illustrious history," he says.

Chugging by

It was in 1854, that the first plans were made to build a mountain railway line from Mettupalayam to the Nilgiris.

In 1876, Niklaus Riggenbach, a Swiss engineer and inventor of the Rigi system of mountain railways, offered to construct this line. But his proposition was turned down due to financial considerations. In 1877, an alternative project was proposed by the Duke of Buckingham, which again fell through as pulling passengers up such a steep incline, was considered hazardous.

Eventually, the Nilgiri Railway Company constructed the railway between 1886 and 1899. In January 1903, it was purchased by the government and construction between Coonoor and Udhagamandalam was completed in 1908.

The NMR is also India's only rack and pinion railway. The train has six coaches and always runs full with 180 passengers. As the train chugs past misty hills, Mohammed Ali VE, 80, from Tiruchi, a regular on NMR, is all smiles. He says, "This train's joy ride should contiue for 200 years. The next generation should relive the magic."

Artistic nuance S Sujil's art. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Worlds within

A Kerala-based artist's watercolour artworks with impressive detailing are now on show at Apparao Gallery

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Every large gouache paper spread taut on the walls of Nungambakkam's Apparao Gallery is a world in itself.

With layers of stories, each work is a burst of colour. Here, luxuriant pearl curtains marry carpets of vegetation, as your eyes are lured to a host of dancing women in the centre.

Titled Whispers of Wonder, the display is a collection of works by Sujil S, an artist from Kerala whose premeditation with the medium of watercolour is all too evident in his canvases. At Apparao , six from the 20 artworks of this series are on display.

Sujil, who originally hails from Palakkad, now practises in Thrissur. His hometown's proximity to Tamil Nadu has influenced his early work, which showcases the sights and sounds he grew up with.

"Charcoal was my preferred medium. Somewhere down the line, the shift towards watercolour happened. Sometimes, I sit with the canvas, not knowing what I will end up with – and that's the beauty of watercolour," says Sujil who calls his work "not realism but not abstract art either."

Sujil has always been drawn to warm colours – so much so that he says his room in college was inundated with art composed of warm colours.

Much of his work, he believes, is a search for his ancestry. And so, the imagery of the fading plant and flower varieties lends itself to this search. Another image that finds himself being drawn to is that of women.

"The concept of a woman as 'the one and all' led me to dances and festivals," he says. Celebratory scenes from festivals make their appearance on his canvases. One of the large works on display is a treat to the eyes – the sheer detailing in each element gives the whole scene a fine, nuanced quality.

"The stage-like setting is deliberately created to lure focus to what I wish to say; the statements I wish to make," says Sujil. And these statements are all about reminding oneself of their roots – be it documenting the fading sights, sounds and textures one grew up on, or one's larger beliefs and principles.

Whispers of Wonder is on display at Apparao Gallery, Nungambakkam, till July 13.

Dal makhni in a bistro

From dal makhni pizzas to mutton galouti tacos, the Hundreds brand now explores modern Indian cuisine in a bistro setting

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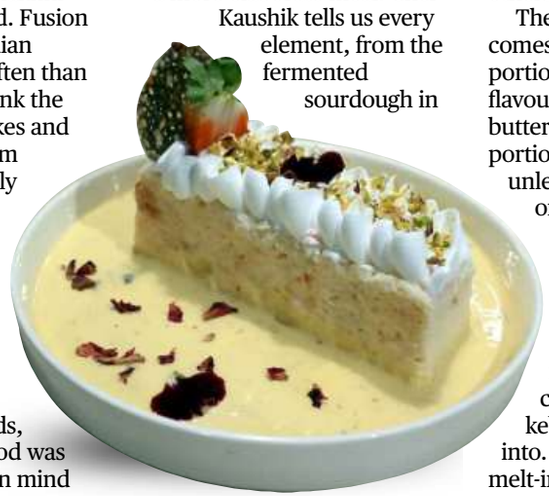
Fusion flavours Galouti kebab tacos; (below) rasamalai tres leches. THAMODHARAN B

Hundreds Bistro on Harrington Road is warmly lit, laidback, and slowly filling up with its first diners for the evening. Some tables already have cups of coffee with biscotti on the side, and at others, diners pore over the menu to weigh in on options for the night.

Muddasar Malik, one of the partners, says that this is not their first foray into the world of food. This bistro belongs to the larger 'Hundreds' group that began Vellore's first major fine-dining multi-cuisine restaurant, Hundreds Heritage. Chennai is new turf though."We want to do justice to Indian flavours here. Our Neapolitan pizzas have dal makhni, prawn hariyali, and seekh kebab, and we have brioche bun pavs with Lucknowi paneer and mutton salli to choose from," he says. Our ears perk up when the dal makhni pizza is mentioned. Fusion food involving Indian flavours is more often than not click-baity (think the mutton keema cakes and chocolate ice cream dosas you hurriedly scroll past). It is especially hard to get right.

Chef Kaushik S (aka The Mad Chef) of Eatitude consultants, who has curated the menu for Hundreds, tells us that the food was planned keeping in mind authentic Indian flavours, but with different presentations. "The dal makhni for instance, is simmered overnight on the tandoor but will be served on a pizza. There are kebabs in tacos, oven-baked kulchas and chicken wings in quintessentially Indian flavours," he says.

Keeping with the vibe of a bistro, the menu is a mix of coffees, milkshakes, pizzas, pavs, and hearty kulchas and biryanis, encouraging people to walk in any time – be it for a quick chat over a coffee, or a more elaborate meal. Chef Kaushik tells us every element, from the fermented sourdough in the sandwiches, to the berry compote in the milkshakes, the sauces, gravies and everything else are all prepared in-house.



We start off with a sweet, indulgent coco biscotti shake topped with a cloud of cream and coconut shavings in a tall glass reminiscent of Archie's Pop Tate's. Minutes later, we are more than thankful for this sweet relief after biting into a paneer cheese kebab marinated in bhut jholakia chilli. The sharp spice hit is one that spice tolerant fiends will find quite delicious and others, eye-watering.

The mutton salli pav, comes with a generous portion of mildly spiced, flavourful mince between buttery brioche buns. The portions here are big, and unless you go with a friend or two, you might not have space left for their much hyped kebabs.The mutton seekh kebabs come with a side of bone marrow butter that you can either drench your kebabs in, or simply dip into. We also sample some melt-in-your-mouth galouti kebabs, in a crunchy taco.

It is evident that the meat at Hundreds is cooked with care. The wait staff eagerly volunteers to show us how tender the mutton is in the nalli biryani, where the meat more than makes up for the flavour that the rice could have done with. The accompanying creamy raita however, feels a touch too thick and heavy.

It is only befitting that we finish the meal with a dessert heavily inspired by an Indian favourite. The rasamalai tres leches has a spongy milk cake drenched in a deliciously sweet milk concoction, and comes with a dollop of cream studded with slivers of pistachio. Make sure to scoop up all these different elements each time you dig into the dessert.

Hundreds Bistro's singular focus, on highlighting Indian flavours and opting to go the bistro route, works in its favour given that this format lends itself to an array of quicker meals like its sourdough sandwiches, pizzas and kebab starters. "When Indian flavours and cuisine seem to be travelling l across the world, it felt befitting that we explore it better here," Muddasar says.

Hundreds Bistro is at Harrington Road, Chetpet, and open from 11am to 11pm. A meal for two costs ₹2,000.

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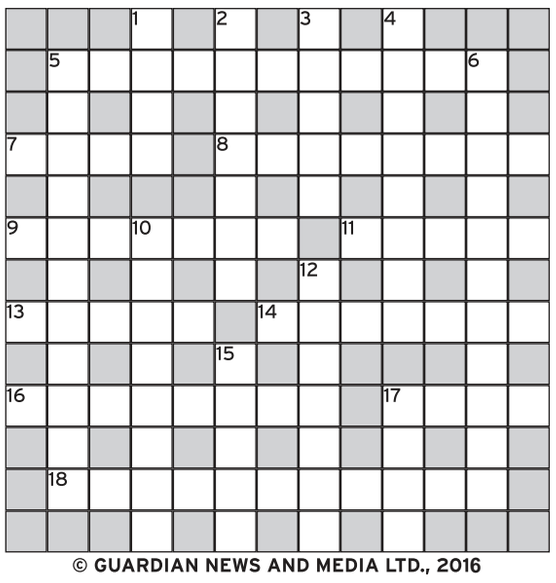

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To play The Guardian Quick Crossword, The Hindu Cryptic crossword, Sudoku & other puzzles online, scan the QR code.

Across

5 Tactic intended to confuse or obscure (11)
7 King of Mercia with a dyke to his name (4)
8 Breakfast food (in prison?) (8)
9 Rudeness (7)
11 Parent's siblings (5)
13 Web-footed bird (5)
14 Wind storm (7)
16 Anticipated (8)
17 Summit (4)
18 Interruption of a peaceful state (11)

Down

1 Concluding passage, event or section (4)
2 Let-up (7)
3 Match result (5)
4 What remains after the rest has been removed (8)
5 Progress has been satisfactory up to now (2,3,2,4)
6 Songbird (11)
10 Spread out (8)
12 Anon (2,3,2)
15 Roman counterpart of Aphrodite (5)
17 Small horse (4)

S	U	P	P	L	Y	■	D	E	C	E	I	T
T	■	R	■	I	■	■	■	M	■	R	■	H
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Solution will appear in *MetroPlus* dated July 18, 2024.
Solution No. 13592

STEPOUT

By the rivers of Babylon

How does ancient Babylon find a way back into our lives? Playwright Gowri Ramnarayan's latest, *Mathematician,* set in 500 BC, hopes to tell the story of Nikor, whose brilliance in Mathematics and statecraft, helps him attain fame and wealth as the State's chief mathematician, accountant general and keeper of the seals. Over an hour and 30 minutes, Nikor finds out what his childhood friend Salla, now the wife of a debauched prince, means to him. Through poetry and dialogue, he hopes to discover himself.
@Medai — The Stage, Alwarpet, on July 13 at 3pm and 7 pm, and on July 14 at 7pm. Tickets are priced at ₹300 and available at insider.in.

A milestone tribute

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A good calendar is more than just a compilation of pretty images; it tells a story. Sahodaran's annual calendar does this and more. The organisation, which is working with members of the LGBTQIA+ community in Chennai, showcases South Indian men, often dressed in traditional outfits featuring Gujarat's Kutch embroidery, Chanderi handlooms, and Kanjeevaram cotton, among others. These images are shot amidst Nature in locations like Hampi, parts of Kerala like Kovalam, Kolkata and more.

Each year since 2010, a different theme has been chosen, and the calendar is conceptualised and directed by founder Sunil Menon. "Our well-wishers always look forward to these calendars, and the response has been great since inception," he says.

Collector's special Stills from the calendar shoot at Hampi. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Chennai-based organisation Sahodaran, working with the LGBTQIA+ community, is back with its annual special calendar

The themes over the years have ranged from textiles, Nature and culture to specific dance forms, and musical instruments. They are professionally styled, directed and photographed. The calendar has helped raise funds for awareness and aid for HIV/AIDS-related work for the sexual minorities community.

"It was a surprise to everyone when it worked out so well in its first year itself, because we have only seen beautiful girls on calendars. Suddenly there were boys," says Sunil as he laughs.

"This year, I decided to do a tribute to everyone who has contributed towards the calendar in the last 14 years," he says, adding that he decided to compile one image from each year since the beginning, to put together a unique collector's item.

The calendar has always focussed on giving a platform to talent from southern India because Sahodaran is among the oldest organisations in the region that supports the LGBTQIA+ community. "Each of the models, the stylists, and even the photographers are all allies. They worked on the projects for free because it was for a cause,"says Sunil, adding that initially models were sceptical to be associated with Sahodaran because of the stigma attached to the community, but as the years went by, talent came forward to contribute on their own accord.

This year's calendars are available in limited numbers and in three formats – wall calendar (₹3,000), desktop (₹4,000) and easel stand (₹5,000). Contact 9444966000 to place your orders.

Man behind the bar

Have you met Chennai's Charlie in his chocolate factory? Cheers Chocolates just launched its store here

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Cheers Chocolates' newly launched outlet is like a Lego store, but for chocolates. It is a riot of colour with red, yellow, blue, and green chocolates lined up against the glass counter.

As the kitchen door opens, the rich aroma of tempered chocolate wafts out. Inside, the team fuses different confectionary components to create a finished product. There are chocolate cigars filled with gianduja and coffee, a bright red stiletto (very *The Devil Wears Prada*), a snowman, a bottle of wine... all edible.

"Chocolate making requires specific skill, temperature, the right moulds and equipment," says SSS Keshav Krishna, who launched Cheers Chocolate in 2012. The process of creating brings joy, he believes, and this is something he now wants to share with his clients and chocolate lovers. Clients walking in can try their hand at chocolate making in a short 15-minute session. They get to make their own fillings, and add sprinkles," says Keshav.

In addition, the outlet also has a dedicated space for basic, intermediate, and advanced workshops. These are around three-hours long, and cover a gamut of topics right from tempering and moulding chocolate to creating innovative recipes.

Sweet dreams (Clockwise from left) Cheers Chocolates in their signature wooden box; SSS Keshav Krishna; and confectionary with raspberry filling. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

At Cheers, they make 20 varieties of fillings which include spiced pumpkin latte, tiramisu, wasabi ganache with raspberry, banana peanut praline, apricot honey ganache and mango passionfruit. Keshav says he waited 12 years to open a store because he felt the city was not ready for the unusual flavour combinations he was creating.

The brand started off with catering to corporates and then began retailing online in 2017. During the pandemic, Keshav noticed a spike in orders from around the city and from Tirunelveli, Dindigul, and Salem. "The clientele was mostly Gen Z. They are open to new flavours and taste profiles, and I knew it was time to set up a store," says Keshav, adding that he is soon going to re-introduce a red capsicum jelly filling.

Also a cricketer, Keshav has played in the TNPL for Ruby Trichy Warriors. He now wants to make sports performance bars and protein bars. "We are planning to launch bean-to-bar chocolates and are looking at pods from all over India," he says.

For now, he procures raw material from Belgium which comes in the form of callets and bars. These are then melted, tempered and moulded here. "We also have sugar free bars and get a 60% dark chocolate from Colombia," adds the 35-year-old.

Keshav graduated from SRM University with a degree in Hotel Management, followed by a stint at Callebaut Academy in Mumbai. "I also learnt on my own, through days of trial and error. Then I did short courses in Paris, Malaysia, Dubai..." he says. Keshav says he is a first generation entrepreneur in the family, who found his passion in the kitchen, in a world of flavours and vibrant chocolates.

Cheers Chocolates is located at Shenoy Nagar. A box is priced at ₹990 for 12 chocolates.

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Flying high

Director Sudha Kongara on remaking Suriya's *Soorarai Pottru* in Bollywood as *Sarfira* with Akshay Kumar

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"Always find a unique story. Hundred years of cinema has happened. Don't give the audience the same c***."

This quote gets top spot among 24 commandments that hang tall at director Sudha Kongara's office in Chennai's Alwarpet. Armed with a few impressive feature films and a National Award in her kitty, Sudha may not perhaps read these commandments every day, but she does turn to them when confused about films. "It's just there to remind me of what to do when I'm confused. For me, an idea has to resonate."

Like it did a few years ago when she read the story of Air Deccan founder Captain Gopinath's journey, and decided to make it a film. The result was the successful Suriya-starring National Award-winning Tamil film *Soorarai Potru*, which she has now remade in Hindi with Akshay Kumar and Radhikka Madan as *Sarfira*, releasing this week. *Sarfira*, she feels, will strike a chord with audiences. "I watch my films as an audience member and I felt this was an underdog story and had universal appeal."

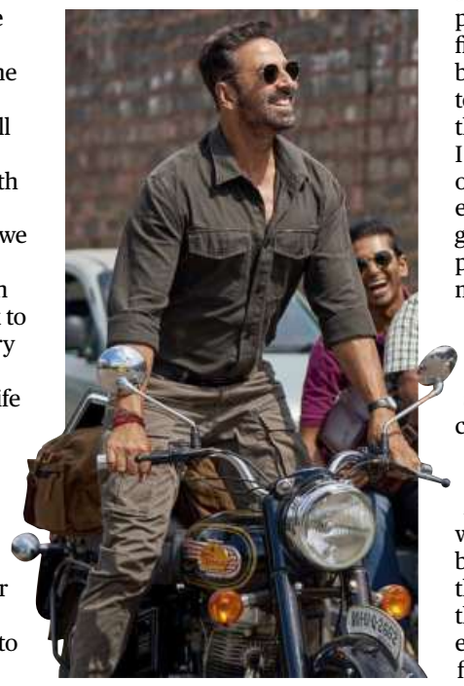
Digging deep

When *Soorarai Potru* released in 2020 directly on Prime Video, it created an impact not just in Tamil Nadu, but also across India. It was trending in Rajasthan, Chandigarh and Haryana, something that caught Sudha by surprise. "It was meant to be a Tamil film for the southern states, and here we saw it, being watched and embraced even in remote places in India."

Doesn't that pose a problem now, because *Sarfira* will be consumed on the big screen by the same audience? "I still believe there are huge pockets of people who have not watched the film. Even in Tamil Nadu, not everyone has watched *Soorarai Pottru*."

Those who have, however, still marvel at actor Suriya's performance as a young man with the dogged determination to fly high. "Before we went to shoot, we were figuring out how he could show the character's desperation on screen, and that took us back to his own days as a garment factory employee a few decades ago. He dug deep into that phase in his life to play Maara effectively."

With Akshay Kumar, the process was different. "He is an ebullient, outgoing actor. He has not lost touch with his roots and reality, despite the money he makes or how popular he is." Sudha cites one instance from a song sequence ('Dhoka') to prove her point. "We suddenly realised that he was in a fresh costume, but the portion of the song that we were shooting needed him to look a little dirty. The make-up team rushed to get some amber powder, but before they could get it, he fell on the muddy ground and rolled. He got up and asked: Is this good enough?"



Up in the air Sudha Kongara; (below) a still from *Sarfira*.
S SHIVA RAJ

Cinema for life

Sudha is a self-confessed fan of Mani Ratnam, who inspired her to take up the world of cinema. She remembers watching *Pagal Nilavu*, Mani's 1985 film, when she was in Class VIII, and then subsequently fell in love with his cinema. "In class XII, we had to relocate to Vizag; even there, we got VHS cassettes of Mani's films and watched them. I love the realness in his cinema."

Sudha also has a professional relationship with Mani, having assisted him on a number of projects before becoming a filmmaker herself. What has her biggest learning been? "He always tells us that hardwork and focus is the key. When my first film tanked, I was a mess, but still had the idea of *Irudhi Suttru* in mind. While everyone was telling me it was going to be an impossible task to pull off, it was Mani sir who told me: 'You should do it."

And she did. Not only did she go on to make the film on a boxing coach training an amateur, she also went on to contribute to the streaming space with her segments in anthologies *Putham Pudhu Kaalai* and *Paava Kadhaigal*. So, what's next? "My next project will be a Tamil film, based on an idea that has driven me crazy. I have this I-have-to-tell-this-story kind of excitement with it, and I'm looking forward to that."

The cop arrives

Telugu star Nani is once again joining hands with director Vivek Athreya for his 31st film titled *Saripodhaa Sanivaaram* and it also stars Priyanka Mohan and SJ Suryah. The first look of Priyanka was shared recently; it introduces the actor as Charulatha, a cop. *Saripodhaa Sanivaaram* will feature cinematography by Murali G, music by Jakes Bejoy and editing by Karthika Srinivas R. *Saripodhaa Sanivaaram* is scheduled to release on August 29 in Telugu along with its dubbed versions in Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada all titled *Surya's Saturday*.

A new strategy

Director R Kannan is currently working on the second part of *Ivan Thanthiran,* the Gautham Karthik-starrer that released in 2017. The sequel will feature Saran Shakthi, known for his outings in *Singam 3* and *Vada Chennai*, in the lead role. Samuthirakani, Thambi Ramaiah, Redin Kingsley, *Aadukalam* Naren, Kalairani and many others are a part of this ensemble project that has music by Thaman and cinematography by Bala Subramaniam. Meanwhile, the director has already completed his current project, *Kanthari*, starring Hansika Motwani in a dual role. The makers are planning to release this film in August.

A new tune Santhosh Narayanan; (below) a still from *Kalki 2898 AD*.
THAMODHARAN B

Sound choice

Music director Santhosh Narayanan on why the score of *Kalki 2898 AD* was a homage to veteran composers

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The road leading to Santhosh Narayanan's studio might be a rough one, but the experience inside the space is anything but. An empty patch of land opposite his house is turned into a parking spot for his boat which he got during the floods, and those who step into his studio are welcomed by his two puppers as we sit down next to his audio console to talk about *Kalki 2898 AD,* arguably his biggest project in terms of scale. Excerpts from a conversation:

Adi Tala's Adi Parva

"I think they had shot *Kalki* for almost seven to eight months before I got on board. When they got in touch, my first question was 'Why me?' and director Nag Ashwin told me he loved the album of *Cuckoo*; I was very happy to hear that. He told me he needed a soulful album and there's space for the epic-ness given the film's story. While I was given a free hand with the epic aspects of the film, the soulful parts are something that will also carry over to the sequels. The ideation process involved creating different worlds; like Kasi, Shambhala, the Lab and the Complex. I have a folder called World Boxes, and as we came up with tracks, we segregated them based on these categories. Sumathi (played by Deepika Padukone) is the central character and her theme was the first one we tried to crack. It had to share the film's epic nature while also showcasing her loneliness. Then we built a few more themes around her."

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Tunes of the past and future

"I personally wanted to add the sounds of Eighties and Nineties in *Kalki's* album. I'm a huge fan of Ilaiyaraaja sir, MSV sir and AR Rahman sir and I wanted this to be a tribute to the,. 'Bhairava Anthem' is an ode to Raja sir, the 'Veera Dheera' track you hear at the end during the big reveal is my ode to MSV sir, and it's voiced by Ananthu who did *Vada Chennai's* 'Rajan Theme'. The treatment of the Mother in the lab is my ode to Rahman sir. There are a lot of personal touches I've left in the film. The whole 'Mahabharata' area is also my tribute to SS Rajamouli *gaaru* and MM Keeravani *gaaru*."

"The film is set in the future where the remaining people are a mix of languages, cultures and communities. I wanted to bring that to the album and the score. For example, Diljit Dosanjh's Punjabi lines (in 'Bhairava Anthem') will stay so in every language. I also recorded Amitabh Bachchan sir for a song, and he has one of the greatest voices in history. He becomes a child when speaking about music and I wanted to retain his lines in Hindi across other languages. There's even a Tamil *oppari* bit that will appear so in all versions and 'Veera Dheera' will remain in Telugu. *Kalki*'s album is my ode to the multicultural identity of India."

Universal approach

"My biggest inspiration was in 2008 when Rahman sir won the Oscars for *Slumdog Millionaire*. The biggest takeaway was how he did what he does – his own original music – and the world lapped it up and loved it. He didn't have to cater to a different audience but worked to his strengths. With *Kalki*, the entire music team surrendered to the vision of the production and the director. Its success could probably become a starting point of a new wave of epic cinema."

Independent in every sense

"I've got a new company called Rakita Entertainment (based on his song from *Jagame Thandhiram*) and I want to create an ecosystem with my team that will scout for talent. My only priority at this stage is that they should be from Tamil Nadu or the Tamil-speaking diaspora from other countries. I want to identify two artistes for the first year and give them access to the studio and its facility. It will help create songs like 'Enjoy Enjaami', 'Katchi Sera' and 'Naan Kudikka Poren'. With about 10 to 15 such songs, we can create an industry and it can be as big or bigger than the film space. If we can do that, we can have something along the lines of how the Punjabi indie scene has evolved with people like Sidhu Moose Wala, Diljit Dosanjh and AP Dhillon."

A world is born

Director Nag Ashwin chats about what the recent *Kalki 2898 AD* offered and what lies ahead

The starting point Director Nag Ashwin at Shambala on the sets of *Kalki 2898 AD*.
SANGEETHA DEVI

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On the outskirts of Hyderabad, in Shankarpally, stand the sets of director Nag Ashwin's Telugu magnum opus *Kalki 2898 AD*, starring Amitabh Bachchan, Prabhas, Kamal Haasan, and Deepika Padukone. Tucked away at one end is an entrance to the mythical land of Shambala. Walking towards a flight of white stairs, Nag Ashwin says it is one of his favourite spots on the set.

Gazing at the land on which the sets of Shambala have been built, Nag Ashwin explains, "We spent a lot of time conceptualising and creating colonies for people of different nationalities and religions inside Shambala; it was like city planning." Shambala is depicted as a haven for people from varied ethnicities and religions, coming together hoping for a new dawn. "It is a microcosm of people looking for hope," he adds, referring to the characters of Rumi (Rajendra Prasad), Mariam (Shobhana), Kyra (Anna Ben), Veeran (Pasupathy) and several others.

The hidden land of Shambala or Shangrila has been a part of the lore in Tibetan and Indian culture. Impenetrable Himalayan ranges paving the way to the entrance of Shambala is an ode to this belief; for book and movie lovers, it also conjures up images of the hidden kingdom of Wakanda *(Black Panther)* coming into view or the walls of the railway station paving the way for platform number 9¾ in the *Harry Potter* series. "Some of these ideas were part of our subconscious thinking at the planning stage, because of what we have watched or read."

Kalki 2898 AD is an ambitious amalgamation of *The Mahabharata* and dystopian science fiction. An avid fan of *Star Wars*, he made *Kalki* with an intent to appeal to his 10-year-old self, but with a distinct Indian vision. "The idea of reimagining Kasi as the last surviving city was an interesting starting point."

One of the film's biggest strengths comes from the presence of Amitabh Bachchan as Ashwatthama, an imposing eight-foot-tall ancient hero. For the technical team, the task was to make it all look believable. "Good visual effects are something that should not be seen. The planning begins at the writing stage. Later, we went back and forth 20 to 30 times for some of the VFX shots for Ashwatthama and other portions."

The visual experience has come in for ample praise. Ask him how he selects his technical team, cinematographers for example, and he says, "To a large extent, it is gut instinct." Dani Sanchez-Lopez for *Mahanati* and Djordje Stojiljkovic for *Kalki* were both only on their second feature film project when they collaborated with him, Nag mentions. "Djordje is young and I felt that like Dani, he has a unique eye. We wanted to use that freshness and see what we could achieve."

Nag hopes that the storyline will make *Kalki* appeal to an international audience. "I think they would be keen to watch our stories, the way we get interested in Greek and Roman stories."

As for *Kalki* part two, the team will regroup in a few weeks to begin planning; it is poised to be bigger. "Yaskin is stepping out of his *vimanam*, so obviously it will be bigger." Part two will also introduce a fourth world, the 'Flux Lands'.

Did you know that Amitabh Bachchan's voice in the Telugu version of the film is AI-generated?