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Get your biriyani fix this party season from businesses that pack flavour in every bite **P4**

**WHAT ARUN VIJAY LIKED
ABOUT RETTA THALA P6**



Yuletide, Chennai edition

Sangita Rajan
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Forget what Christmas is supposed to look like. In Chennai, it smells of the sea, plum cake, and hot chocolate. Here are 12 ways the city keeps the season merry

Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the city, there was a pause. The airport rush has thinned and Chennai slips back into its chaotic rhythm. Christmas here does not arrive with snow-laden streets or orchestral excess; it unfolds through glowing windows, busy kitchens, and bakeries running low on plum cake. By evening, stretches like Santhome High Road and Cathedral Road are filled with churchgoers, traffic slowing to a crawl as bells mark the hours. Fairy lights flicker across neighbourhoods and evenings stretch outdoors, with just enough of a chill to justify the thickest cardigan you own. The sea breeze carries through it all, grounding the day in a sense of familiarity. It is a celebration shaped by traditions and rituals, by food shared and time slowed. For those who stayed back, for those who never left, the city is very much in the mood to celebrate. Here are 12 things to do today and over this joyous weekend that will make your days jolly.

**CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 2**



Jingle all the way People dressed as Santa Claus gather during an event held ahead of Christmas. JOTHI RAMALINGAM B



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Go Christmas tree hopping:

Beyond churches, Christmas trees across Chennai take on many forms. Hotels and malls across the city put up their own interpretations each year, often tying them to craft or sustainability. At ITC Grand Chola, the tree brings to life an indigenous art form from the Nilgiris, while Hyatt Regency has a 20-foot tree made of fabric dolls woven by artisans from the same region.

Le Royal Mérédien has taken a different route, constructing its tree using 854 kilograms of repurposed hotel linen. These are just a few – how many others can you spot across the city?

**Jingle bells:**

Christmas music usually comes with carols and church bells. This year, try something different. On December 25, Beachville Coffee Roasters in Alwarpet is hosting a Carnatic jazz concert as part of the Margazhi season. The afternoon performance features Vishnu R on the Navtar – a nine-string instrument he designed, alongside tabla and world percussion by Muthu Kumar. Titled Raga, Roots & Jazz, the concert blends Indian classical forms with contemporary sounds, offering a fresh way to mark Christmas Day.

December 25, 3pm, Beachville Coffee Roasters, St Mary's Road. For tickets, visit @beachvillecoffee on Instagram.

**Festive snacking:**

Christmas brings with it plum cakes, panettone, stollen and a season-long excuse to snack. Pick up goods from speciality bakeries such as Pumpkin Tales, Amethyst, Brod Bakery, Ajantha Bakers or Glen's Bakehouse, and take it outdoors to a park or the beach, while the weather is still outdoor friendly. For something warm to sip, cafés across the city are serving hot chocolate, and peppermint lattes, with spots like Bask by Coffee?, Ciclo, Brew Room and Café Ave leaning into the season. Where do you go for your Christmas bake fix?

**Not the last supper:**

If snacking is not your style, Christmas Day in Chennai offers plenty of sit-down options, from brunches to leisurely dinners. The Park's 601 is hosting a Christmas feast and buffet dinner (for reservations, call 044 42676000), while The Flying Elephant at Park Hyatt is running its festive brunch with live music (for reservations, call 893871128). Taj Coromandel is laying out an indulgent festive Christmas Day brunch at Prego (for reservations, call 7824862310).

Beach Terrace rounds it off with a Christmas Day lunch by the sea (for reservations, call 7550036697). Whatever your mood, the city has a table waiting.

Yuletide, Chennai edition



CONTINUED FROM
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Last minute solutions:

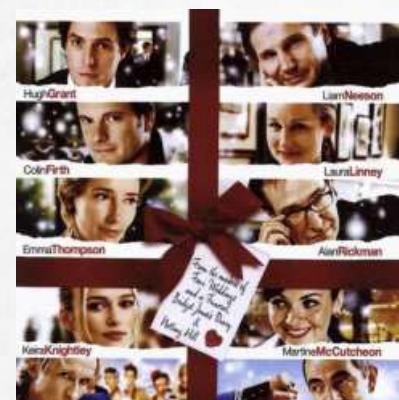
Christmas gift shopping has a way of sneaking up on you. If you are still ticking names off your list on Christmas Day, shopping physically is your best bet. Kaili in Nungambakkam is packed with local brands and playful finds that work well as thoughtful, last-minute gifts. For something more traditional – from Christmas cards to faith-based gifts, the Evangelical Literature Service stores across the city are a reliable stop.

**Run towards joy:**

Christmas Day feels like a good moment to pause, reset, and move a little. Cloka Run Club's resolution run offers a thoughtful way to do just that. The community-led initiative brings together members for a five-kilometre run, followed by an informal hangout where runners reflect on the year gone by and set personal resolutions for the year ahead. These goals are not just talked about and forgotten. You log them on their website, turning a passing resolution into something you are publicly accountable for. It is less about quick fitness wins and more about building habits that last. [Register on cloka.in](http://register.on.cloka.in).

12 pubs of Christmas:

Bring a little Irish cheer to Chennai, by gathering your friends to make your own pub crawl. The 12 pubs of Christmas tradition has as many or as few rules as you would like, but here are the non-negotiables: Wear Christmas colours, have the same type of drink at each place, use public transport or walk, and speak in an accent! Have fun with your crawl but do not linger for long in one place. Some bars to include on this fun adventure are – MadCo, Sundays, Secret Story, Radio Room, Sin & Tonic, No Name, Black Orchid, and Madras Taproom. Just narrow down 12 pubs and commemorate each pub with a picture. And remember to never drink and drive!

**Movie marathon:**

There cannot be a Christmas evening without either Jude Law or Hugh Grant gracing your screens. So huddle up your friends and family and binge on one, or three classic Christmas movies. And yes, *Die Hard* is a Christmas movie, so cue the movie marathon. You can keep it classic with *Home Alone* and *Jingle All The Way*, or lean into newer comfort watches like *Last Christmas*, *Christmas Heist* and *Champagne Problems*. Snacks mandatory, judgment optional. Merry Christmas!

**Trip to the North Pole:**

If Christmas still means Santa Claus, Santa Stores in Adyar is leaning fully into the spirit of the season. The store is hosting a meet-and-greet where families and children can spend time with Santa, share their Christmas wishes, and pose for festive photographs. The space will be decked out in holiday decor. Known across the city for its Christmas trees, ornaments and festive accessories, Santa Stores turns into a bright, buzzy hub of Christmas cheer.

December 25, Santa Stores, Indira Nagar, Adyar. Entry free.

**Attend a mass at Santhome Cathedral:**

Christmas in Chennai truly announces itself at Santhome. On Christmas Day, the cathedral hosts holy masses and the pews fill with families, regulars, and once-a-year churchgoers alike. Built over the tomb of St Thomas the Apostle, it remains one of the city's most recognisable places to mark the day. This year, as always, the church also features one of the city's tallest Christmas trees, standing at 30 feet, that is lit up after dark, making an evening visit a particularly festive way to experience the space.

**Use your hands:**

Christmas is also a good time to gather friends and family to do something hands-on. While this might also be a great time to start fermenting your grapes for next year's homemade wine, the city is hosting a range of creative, festive workshops. Third Wave Coffee is hosting three such sessions over the weekend – Christmas tree decoration, candle making and cookie decoration, offering a relaxed, social way to spend a few hours together. Organised by Social Sailor, the workshops are being held in multiple slots across the weekend. *December 27 and 28. Tickets available on BookMyShow at ₹1,499.*



Merry shopping spree: Make a visit to this cosy Christmas market set up as an evening hangout with fairy lights, live acoustic music and café specials. The event features performances by Bun Butter Jam, a karaoke session, and a curated market. There are interactive touches too like a Christmas confession wall, and a Letters to Santa post box, and a pop-up photo corner, alongside games, shared tables and easy conversation. *December 28, 5pm, Backyard, Chennai. Tickets at ₹250 on Bookmyshow.*

Let the drum roll

Margazhiyil Makkal Isai, a cultural movement showcasing music like gaana and political rap is set to return for its sixth edition

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For five editions now, Tamil cinema director Pa Ranjith's Neelam Cultural Centre has hosted Margazhiyil Makkal Isai, a celebration and a cultural movement, wrapped in one joyous garb. Through its very existence, the annual event has challenged the kind of art that is performed at sabhas across the states. Here, art forms like Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music, perceived as 'cultural' and usually highbrow, have only historically found space.

Over five years though, the Centre's curation has allowed city folk to listen to the music of the people. Festive gaana performances, rap songs with sick beats, politically charged folk music, mellifluous bands and oppari music have found deep resonance with the people, so much so that over 12,000 people registered to watch the final day's events last year in 2024.

In its sixth edition between



To the beat of the parai A performance from previous years. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

December 26 and 28, the festival now moves to the ground at Pachaiyappa's College, a new, large venue. Bands including Viduthali Kural Kalaikuzhu, Wild Wild Women, Dhamma The Band, and Dabba Beats will be part of the line-up. Look out for artists like Paal Dabba, Gana Poomani, Sithan Jeyamoorthy, and Anthakudi Ilayaraja too. At a press meet held on

December 23, director Ranjith said that reality TV shows that are music-focussed now ensure that a gana or folk music performer is surely represented on stage. "After the festival captured the kind of talent and the sway the performers have with the people, television channels had no choice but to showcase this music and its capable performers. The

channels also get a far wider reach when these kinds of performances occur on stage. Many people follow their journey both online and on TV," he said.

Vasuki Bhaskar, editor, Neelam Publications, and one of the organisers of the event, has more to add to this. He says that popularity through TV has led to huge crowds surging their venues. "There has also been an active attempt at bringing several different kinds of artists to the fore. Last year, some Malayali performers who had sung music in their language, found deep resonance among the audience even though we were unfamiliar with the words. This year, we have Marathi artists performing. Rap artists too, from Tamil Nadu and elsewhere, are ready to be part of the roster. In a way, it is protest music. It is the music of the Black people who have been subject to racism. Marginalised folk have hence taken to this art form," he says. He adds that it is going to be nothing short of joyous splendour, a celebration over the weekend.

Margazhiyil Makkal Isai - Season 6, will be held between December 26 and 28 at Pachaiyappa's College, Poonamallee High Road starting at 2pm. The event is free to the public but registration is must at kynhood.com

Sari on the centre court

World Sari Day brought women of all ages together, blending tradition and sport and on the pickleball court

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In a pickleball court in Chennai, saris swirled alongside swift volleys, quietly challenging the idea of what sport and sporting attire should look like. At the heart of this scene was Poornima Kumar Chinnam, who, along with her husband Surendra Kumar, in their 60s and 70s, has turned pickleball into the centrepiece of their next chapter. The couple converted the garden of their Ashok Nagar residence into a pickleball court, now known as Pickleball Point, envisioning it as a lively space where people from all age groups could gather and play.

To mark World Sari Day, on December 21, Poornima organised a pickleball event, called Pickleball in Sari where women arrived draped in saris, paddles in hand. "Seeing pickleball played in saris shows that the sari is no impediment to the game at all," says Poornima. "It makes me especially happy to see so many senior women join in too," she adds.

A testament to the sporting spirit on display was 76-year-old Mala Subramanian draped in an orange sari from the United States, who is currently visiting India. A long-time member of the



In six yards Mala Subramanian playing pickleball. AKHILA EASWARAN

Ashok Nagar Ladies Club, Mala was quick to embrace pickleball when Poornima introduced it to the community. "I found the game enjoyable and not too fast-paced," she says, adding that playing alongside friends made the experience even more special.

At Pickleball Point, tradition did not sit on the sidelines; it moved, served, and volleyed its way into the game.

To book the court, call 8122060311.



Double dipping An assortment of bread and dips and pictures of the Interiors at Atlas House. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



insider says that ever since Khader Nawaz Khan Road's frankly upsetting state that prevents any and all serious vehicular movement, Alwarpet has become 'the spot' for Instagramable cafes and restaurants.

At Atlas House, a meal for two, is likely to cost you ₹2,000. Most ingredients, including olives [there's green, Italian, and Spanish], rice, and spices, are imported. You can tell.

"Chennai does Middle Eastern really well, but Mediterranean is a whole different ball game. Most restaurants stick to either European or Middle Eastern versions of this vast cuisine, rarely exploring other important players. Our food has influences from Greece, Iran, North Africa, Southern Italy, France and Lebanon," he says. With no investors or private equity institutions to answer to, Sandesh says that he truly feels free to do as he pleases. "My hummus is hence not particularly cost-effective. We use great quality Egyptian tahini and olive oil," he says.

At this restaurant, do not miss the dips. The labneh with crisp onions, garlic and cherry tomatoes, is another great addition to your order. There are pieces of mint that tend to elevate this simple dip made of Greek yoghurt. The muhammara made of red bell peppers and molasses, and a yoghurt dip topped with hot honey, tend to lean towards the sweet side, making for a milder accompaniment to a choice of freshly baked breads.

There's French baguettes, garlic focaccia, a solid bun, and pita to choose from.

The four-cheese fried

pockets of ravioli, served on a bed of spicy tomato marinara, burst with the warm, ooey-gooey goodness of cheese, butter, and flour – ingredients that guarantee success. The Persian beef kotleti, spicy, with minced meat, is a delightful choice to order too. "I'd suggest that people who come here order an assortment of appetisers. Our sambusas with chicken and olives, and our fried oyster mushroom dish are great orders too," Sandesh says.

Atlas House has a crumbly salt baked-fish dish that melts in one's mouth, and an Iranian version of chicken pilaf, where the chicken is so tender that it literally falls off the bone. Full of mild, wonderful flavours from onions, raisins and chicken stock, this pilaf is a must-try. Sandesh says that the vegetarian version is just as good, perhaps even better. "This cuisine really lends itself to vegan versions of dishes," he says.

If I were you, I would ask for the rice pudding, with a bruleed sugary top and a biscuit layer at the base, sans the raspberry and blueberry compote. The tart berry stands out too starkly against the comfort that the warm rice pudding provides.

If you are looking to enjoy a Mediterranean meal without just the shawarmas being the centre of your plate, Atlas House is an essential add to your eat list.

"The idea is not to be just another cafe," Sandesh says.



Atlas House is at 12/23, Bawa Road, Abhiramapuram. A meal for two costs ₹2,000. Contact them @atlashousechennai on Instagram.

What in the kalamata

Atlas House is the city's latest addition to the world of Mediterranean cuisine. We find out whether this restaurant deserves to be on your eat list

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No two hummus' are ever the same. The one that is served at Atlas House, the city's newest Mediterranean restaurant, topped with a hint of red sumac is particularly distinct.

Blended into a smooth paste with imported tahini, this hummus is topped off with a chilli oil made of

paprika, garlic, and olive oil. One slides into the dish with pita folded roti-style, and exits this short yet steady culinary adventure with a smile. "It's my top recommendation from here," says Sandesh Reddy, proprietor.

Opening doors on December 19, Atlas House fills the gap in Sandesh's restaurant portfolio but also adds to Alwarpet's burgeoning slate of restaurants.

What about other areas, you ask. Great question. A sceptical industry

+



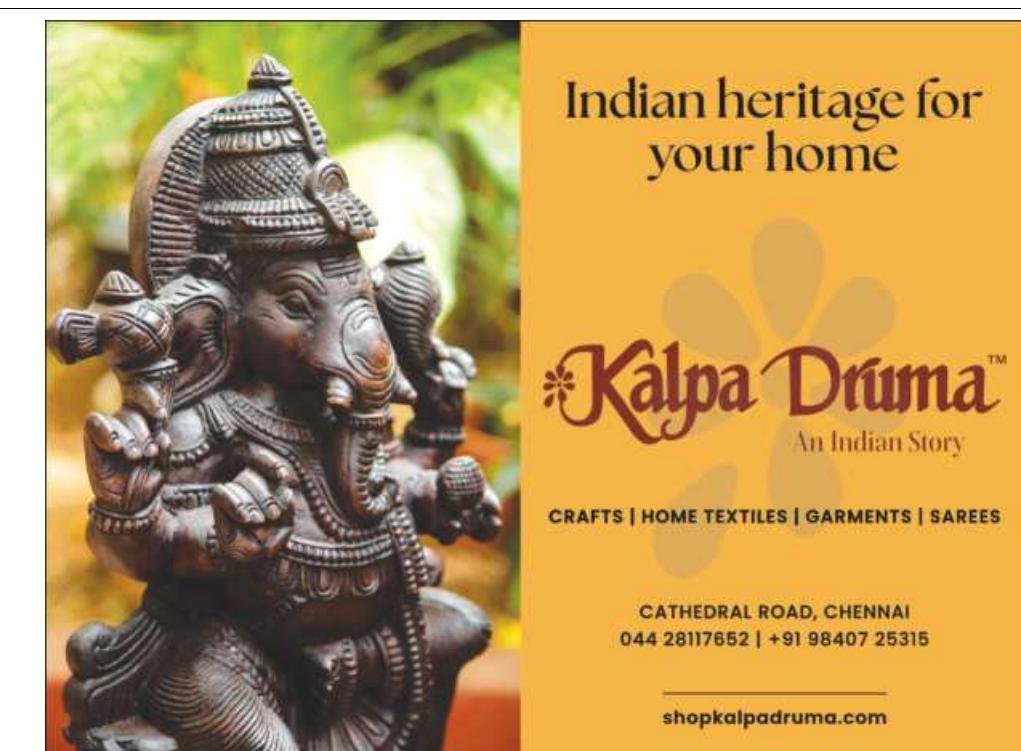
Rock nostalgia, live in Chennai

The Blue Birds, among India's oldest rock bands, bring their legacy spanning 55 years, to Chennai, with a special tribute to The Beatles and The Rolling Stones on December 26. Founded in Madurai in 1969, the band is known for its authentic renditions of classic rock from the 1960s to the 1980s. Led by veteran vocalist Rajashekaran, often called the "Mick Jagger of India," the evening will feature timeless hits alongside select original music. Expect a high-energy, nostalgia-filled night of rock and roll. @Bay146, Hotel Saverा, Mylapore. December 26, 8.30pm onwards. Tickets available on District. For details, call 9710976876



From saris to stories

Palam Silks has unveiled Thoughtloom, a cultural and experiential space within its Mylapore boutique space on Oliver Road. The venue blends sarees, stories, art, music, and entrepreneurial energy, breaking traditional retail boundaries. Evolving from an open, touch-and-feel boutique to a concept space, Thoughtloom will host invite-only events, book readings, music, art showcases, and exhibitions spotlighting young entrepreneurs. The initiative reflects Palam Silks' vision of creating immersive experiences that celebrate India's arts and culture beyond silk, with curated cultural conversations, chamber concerts, and showcases for emerging creators. @Palam Silks, Oliver Road, Mylapore. For details, call 91501 54105



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Drawing the raga

Rag Rekha by Jayakrishnan Unni brings the expressions of India's classical masters, from the concert hall to the gallery wall



In tune A portrait of musician Kalpagam Swaminathan by Jayakrishnan Unni. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

from that sense of gratitude," he adds.

Unni's returned to pencil sketching came during the pandemic, after more than a decade of working with acrylic and oil. "My first sketch was of my guru, Sangita Kalanidhi Neyveli R Santhanagopalan and Sangita Kalacharya Padmasri awardee Prof. S R Janakiraman," he says.

The exhibition is accompanied by four concerts over three days. The inaugural evening will feature an address by mridangam maestro Umayapuram Sivaraman, followed by performances by vocalist Sooryagayathri and vocalist Kalyanapuram S Aravind.

Concerts by Jayakrishnan Unni and vocalist Siranjani Tapasya Santhanagopalan follow over the weekend.

Together, the sketches and performances invite viewers to look into the inner world of artists who have shaped India's classical soundscape.

Rag Rekha will take place from December 26 to 28 at CP Art Centre, Mylapore. Entry is free



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Anna Nagar: D. K. Kalyana Mandapam, W-114, 3rd Avenue, Near Round Thana - 600040
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Party flavours

With the party season in full swing this December and January, Chennai's best biryani hotspots are ready to serve up their delicious specialties, offering customisable flavours and options for celebrations

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NSK Biryani, T Nagar and Ambattur

In 1999, Mohammed Asique and his friend stepped into the food business in Melapalayam, Tirunelveli. Within weeks, they launched Nanbargal Samayal Kuzhu (NSK), and their biryani quickly became a sensation. Soon, weddings across the region were booking them.

Kaja Mydeen, Mohammed's brother, explains that the family of five brothers runs NSK together, each handling a specific responsibility. "We were trained by our late father, and for 25 years we've worked hard to make our mark in large-scale wedding catering," he says. NSK has now teamed up with Chennai-based KGA Foods to bring their famed Tirunelveli-style biryani to Chennai.



SHB Biryani, Triplicane

The proprietor, Syed Fazal Basha, and his brother, Syed Sadik Basha, work round the clock, along with their team preparing quality biryani for weddings and small gatherings. Known for customising their dishes to suit client preferences – whether it is seeraga samba or

basmati rice – it is the flavour and consistency of their preparation that keeps customers coming back. "We make Chennai-style basmati dum biryani, and whether it's a small party of 10 or a wedding feast for 2,000, we take orders. We also run a small retail outlet in Triplicane where we sell biryani every day." A bucket of mutton biryani is priced at ₹2,200 (chicken at ₹1,400). A highlight here is the range of desserts; far beyond the usual bread halwa. Syed's boat ka halwa, made with almonds, cashews, khoa, sugar, saffron and ghee, is a top seller. All orders are home delivered all over Chennai. To pre-book, call 9840027868.



Earlier, their biryani was available only at weddings; today, thanks to this partnership, it is retailed fresh every day. The NSK brothers are celebrated for their aromatic ghee rice – something rarely found in the city. Vegetarian diners can choose from ghee rice, vegetable biryani, gobi 65 and paneer 65.

NSK's retail outlet is in T Nagar, Iiam to 11pm. To pre-order, call 9500795009.



Yousuf's Kitchen, Royapettah

Mohammed Yousuf Khan was barely 20 when he began working with McRennett in Nungambakkam. In 1996, Alliance Française of Madras invited the brand to run a cafeteria on their campus, and Yousuf was put in charge of the small space. "Those days, I served freshly made lemon tea, donuts, cutlets and chocolate cake. The crowd was mostly elite, and later, as French MNCs came into the city, more students joined the institute to learn French," recalls Yousuf, now 50.

When the institute shut during the pandemic, Yousuf launched his home-based catering service, Yousuf's Kitchen, from Royapettah. "I take pre-orders for chicken, mutton and vegetable biryani and ghee rice. Orders start from one kilo, and I offer a selection of vegetarian gravies and starters," says Yousuf. Beyond biryani, he is known for his mutton and chicken cutlets and samosas. All orders are home delivered across Chennai. For party orders, call 9840082252.



The Bhai Friend Biryani, Perambur

Ashwanth Kumar is a young entrepreneur who has been running a vegetarian catering service, Pankajam Catering, since 2019 – named in memory of his grandmother. Soon after, he expanded into biryani with The Bhai Friend Biryani.

To build the brand, Ashwanth brought in master cooks specialising in Ambur-style wedding biryani. He says the rice-to-meat ratio is what makes their biryani stand out. "For every kilo of rice, we use 1.5 kilos of meat to ensure rich flavour. We cook the biryani on woodfire

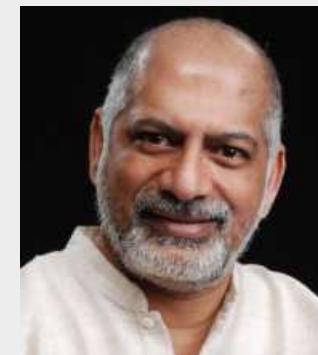
and also customise the preparation to suit customer preferences," he explains.

Their signature is the Ambur wedding biryani (also known as Vadi biryani or Tamil Muslim biryani), lightly tweaked to appeal to a wider palate. This style uses dry red chillies paste, and the rice and meat are cooked separately before being layered and placed on dum for slow cooking.

All orders are home delivered all over Chennai. To pre-order, call 9080462428.

Poetry as a quiet reckoning

TT Srinath's new book of poems invite readers to reconsider the way they live



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rather than a craft he claims ownership over. "Some people sing, some paint, I write." It is an art form he believes he has been entrusted with by a higher power, one that is meant to be in the service of others.

One of the book's key aspects is its accessibility. For readers who often find poetry to be intimidating, his work offers a relief. He consciously avoids complexity, using vocabulary that repeats across poems. "I am uncomfortable reading convoluted poetry myself," he admits. "My basic premise was, if I were the reader, would I understand this?" For him, empathy governs his style, and that is what makes the book relatable to people from all age groups.

Srinath also spoke about the social and political impact of poetry and how the multi-layered nature of poetry allows people to broaden their thinking. He points out that from Tamil Nadu's political tradition to border cultural movements, poetry always had a deep impact in shaping the ideas of the population.

In a rushing world, Srinath's book becomes less a compilation of poems, more an invitation to live a slower life with compassion, kindness, and gratitude.



Writing for him is a gift

Between the slices (left) A focaccia panini; (inset) chocodelizia. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT.

Toast to lunch

Elba Trading Company now gives its daytime hours a separate identity, opening as Presto Panini for weekday lunches built around focaccia sandwiches and salads



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Solution No. 33

S	Y	Y	H	P	O
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8	A	R	A	R	E
9	R	E	A	D	S
10	E	A	P	A	M
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12	T	U	N	A	N
13	N	K	E	R	E
14	G	E	R	E	N
15	D	E	A	E	N
16	G	E	A	E	N
17	D	E	A	E	N
18	G	E	A	E	N
19	D	E	A	E	N
20	G	E	A	E	N
21	D	E	A	E	N
22	G	E	A	E	N
23	D	E	A	E	N

For the last two years, the walls of Elba Trading Company (ETC) have told a certain story – one that involves dramatic photographs of a seaside village on the island of Elba, pasta being rolled and cut by hand, fresh black truffles being picked and shaved, and a neatly illustrated guide to pasta shapes. That language is now shifting at lunchtime. Some of these frames are now being quietly turned around at noon, to reveal cross-sections of focaccia panini with layers of bread, fillings, cheese and sauces.

The pasta guide, too, has been replaced to make the division explicit. One reads 'Elba Trading Company', illustrating the anatomy of a well-made pasta: tomato sauce, garlic, olive oil, chillies. The other reads 'Presto Panini', breaking down the elements of its focaccia sandwiches: chicken,

mushrooms, tomatoes, mozzarella.

After operating as a dinner-only restaurant for a year, ETC tentatively opened itself up to the daytime earlier this year, introducing weekend brunch. The offering leaned familiar with eggs, charcuterie, pasta, and a free flow of coffee, tea, and juices.

Presto Panini marks a more decisive shift. Launched for weekday lunches, it runs on a completely separate menu, even though it occupies the same space. "We really wanted to launch a lunch menu, so we thought we should do it as a new brand rather than just an additional menu," says Anand Madhan, managing partner, Elba Trading Company.

We begin with the salads. The melon prosciutto with chunks of musk melons, and thinly sliced prosciutto, strikes a neat balance between savoury and sweet, finished with a generous drizzle of balsamic. The tomato bocconcini is a refreshing opener, while the classic Caesar is well-dressed, though it would benefit from croutons



with a little more crunch. The salads add an acidic kick to the meal, that is otherwise bread and cheese heavy.

Before moving on to the centrepiece of the menu, we try the sweet potato fries – double-fried, well-seasoned, and best eaten hot with the in-house

sauce. They arrive as a prelude of sorts. As we keep picking at them, two loaded focaccia panini are set down on the table. The loaded mushroom sandwich layers creamy mushrooms with fried oyster mushrooms, truffle cream and arugula. It is deeply savoury, driven by umami from both the mushrooms and the truffle, with a peppery finish from the greens. The braised beef panini on the other hand is filled with a slow-cooked beef, slathered with onion pecorino cream and layered with fresh tomatoes and arugula.

What anchors both sandwiches, however, is the bread. The focaccia, baked in-house with onion and cheese, sprinkled with kalonji seeds, is cut thick and toasted before assembly. "What the toasting does is keep it crisp on the outside for longer. That way, the sandwich is crisp until the last bite," says Anand.

While there are a couple of hand-made pastas on the menu, that experience is better saved for after dark, when Elba Trading Company returns in full form – with generous shavings of truffle, milk buns, and truffle butter.

The dessert menu at Presto includes two tiramisu options – classic and Nutella. For something different, the chocodelizia is the more compelling choice. Condensed milk ice cream is sandwiched between choux pastry and finished with a pour of house-made hot chocolate. It is rich and sweet without overwhelming the bitter notes of the chocolate. The menu also features a lemon gelato and a pistachio panna cotta that make for great endings to a working-day lunch.

Presto works because it offers a focussed, well-considered lunch that is comforting and indulgent within a space that has been thoughtfully designed to shift with the hour. Presto deserves to be on your working-day lunch radar.

Presto Panini is at Ground Floor, Door No 99, Vidhya Theertha Nagar, St Mary's Road, Alwarpet. Open only from Monday to Friday 11am to 4pm. A meal for two costs ₹1,200.



What's your melody?
Here is an opportunity for music enthusiasts to attend a Margazhi evening. Guests can listen to Carnatic vocal duo the Trichur Brothers, Srikrishna Mohan and Ramkumar Mohan's musical journey, followed by high tea. @Prego, Taj Coromandel, Nungambakkam. December 26, at 4pm. Tickets priced at ₹1,950 plus taxes per person. For reservations, call 9282234711.



Vivek MV
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Mark my words

Sudeep on teaming up with director Vijay on his latest film, releasing today

Sudeep unleashed a storm in Sandalwood with his recent statement in Hubballi. During a promotional event in the city, the actor said his followers will "begin a war" when his movie *Mark* hits the screens on December 25, 2025.

Fans and a section of the media felt that Sudeep was taking a dig at Darshan, who is currently in prison in the murder case of Chitradurga resident Renukaswamy.

Sudeep has chosen to end fan wars and speculations about his statement. "I was talking about fighting piracy by waging a war against it. Why should people think I was targeting a certain somebody when I didn't name them?" he asks.

"Since *Pailwaan* (2019), my films have been facing the issue of piracy. Back then, we weren't equipped to fight it. But today, I want to warn those who want to tamper with my movies that they will face merciless legal action."

Mark is Sudeep's second straight film with director Vijay Kartikeyaa after *Max*, the blockbuster action thriller. *Mark* is set to hit the screens just six months after it went on floors in June, and Sudeep credits Vijay's "incredible planning" for the swift completion of the project. Sudeep plays a cop, named Ajay Markandaya a.k.a. Mark, who sets out to save 18 children kidnapped by a mysterious gang.

"On most of the occasions, we stuck to plan A. There were only a few instances where we had to choose an alternative option, and thanks to our talented art director

Shivakumar, we were able to adapt to new sets."

He adds, "Vijay is a great visualiser, and he executes his ideas just like he imagines. The producers (Senthil Thyagarajan and Arjun Thyagarajan) were saying that nobody has shown Thoothukudi in films like Vijay has. On some days, when I would walk into the sets, I would be a bit apprehensive about the location, but after seeing the compositions of the shots and scene constructions, I realised he knew what he was doing," explains Sudeep.

The actor delves into forming a successful combination with Vijay, who hails from Tamil Nadu. "Vijay was naive about the Kannada market and the functioning of the industry. He knew I was a popular name, but beyond that,

he didn't know much about me. For *Max*, we put some effort into making him understand what my audience wants. The day the movie released, Vijay learnt about the expectations from my films. So when he wrote *Mark*, he had written exactly what the audience wanted."

After *Mark*, Sudeep returns to the romantic-comedy zone. It's a genre he aced with movies such as *Just Maath Maathali* (2010) and *Mussanjematu* (2008). "I am collaborating with a filmmaker who has assisted ace Telugu director Sukumar. It's a beautiful story, and I will be shooting it simultaneously in Telugu and Kannada."

The actor is also set to resume his ambitious project *Billa Ranga Baasha*, directed by Anup Bhandari. Bankrolled by Hanuman producers, it is said to be a period action drama. "We aim to release it by the end of next year."



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A new mix

Music composer Dharan's peppy independent single 'Yelakka', released earlier this year, has got a fresh reboot: with its recent Dolby Atmos mix. Dharan says, "As sound keeps evolving, it pushes you to keep learning and keep creating. For me, sound should touch the heart first. Even today, people tag me in tracks I composed more than 15 years ago, telling me how deeply they connect with it. That's when I know the sound has done its job."

Music buffs recently experienced a live in-car demonstration of his track, 'Yelakka', inside a Mahindra XUV 3XO car, thus showcasing how music can be enriched during everyday driving.

Back to the Sixties

Bhuvanesh Chandar

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Is it possible to travel back in time to the mid-1960s, to a Tamil Nadu of the past? The only medium with a transporting power that comes close to the magic of a time machine is cinema. And it is this quality of the art form that the makers of upcoming Tamil period action drama *Parasakthi* have tapped into. The makers of the Sivakarthikeyan-starrer have put out a grand exhibition at Valluvar Kottam in Chennai that displays the many period sets that were created for the film.

The team had recreated props and sets from the 1960s, some of which have now been recreated or rescaled as installations in the exhibition. From a radio station and



Old is gold The team of *Parasakthi* checks out a vintage car at the exhibition.

a vintage car to a makeshift police station and a steam locomotive, the installations promise to offer visitors a chance to relive life in a bygone era.

One of its major highlights is a special behind-the-scenes video narrating how the many looks and costumes of the lead characters were designed – visitors can exclusively watch this at a tentkotta-style traditional movie theatre at the exhibition.

Parasakthi, which is slated to release on January 10, is said to capture a historical student movement that changed the political fabric of Tamil Nadu. Directed by Sudha Kongara and with music by GV Prakash, the film also stars Ravi Mohan, Atharvaa, and Sreeleela.

The exhibition is open for public viewing at Valluvar Kottam today, from 12pm to 10pm.

MALE INFERTILITY

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Innearly 40–50% of couples seeking fertility treatment, the male partner is either exclusively responsible or contributes significantly to the difficulty in conceiving.

Hormones play a vital role. The delicate balance of FSH, LH, and testosterone drives normal sperm development.

Male infertility arises from a spectrum of problems, and shows up as one or more abnormalities, such as **low sperm count**, **poor sperm motility** (slow or weak movement) or **morphological defects** (abnormal sperm shape).

Causes of Male Infertility

Anatomical concerns like undescended testes, blockages in the reproductive ducts, or conditions such as retrograde ejaculation can impair sperm release

or production, resulting in very low counts—or even azoospermia, where sperm are absent altogether.

lifestyle. Smoking, excessive alcohol intake, prolonged sedentary behaviour, chronic sleeplessness, high stress levels, and years of night-shift work induce oxidative stress in the testes, damaging sperm at a molecular level.

This leads to **sperm DNA fragmentation**.

When the DNA inside the sperm breaks due to oxidative stress, the sperm may look normal under a microscope but lack the integrity needed to create a healthy embryo. High DNA fragmentation often results in failed fertility treatments, poor embryo development, and even recurrent miscarriages. However, if we address the DNA fragmentation issue prior to

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Arun Vijay on performing a dual role in *Retta Thala*, which hits screens today

Double impact

Bhuvanesh Chandar
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Arjun Vijay looks exhausted after a long day of promotions for his upcoming film, *Retta Thala*. "We've been doing back-to-back promotions. The film has come out really well," he informs us, as he sits down for a chat.

Before we delve into his *Retta Thala*, I ask him about a tweet that had gone viral post the release of Dhanush's *Idli Kadai*, in which Arun featured as the antagonist. The tweet was a clip of the actor's 'Dilruba Dilruba' song from his sophomore film *Priyam* (1996). Looking back at his 19-year-old self, Arun reminisces about the long journey he has had. "What strikes me is the fact that I no longer get such dance numbers, especially because my choice of scripts has evolved to suit what the audiences want. And they no longer want unnecessary



songs that distract them," he says with a grin. "In fact, I want to do a light-hearted film with songs and comedy next."

Over the last three decades, Arun has proved his

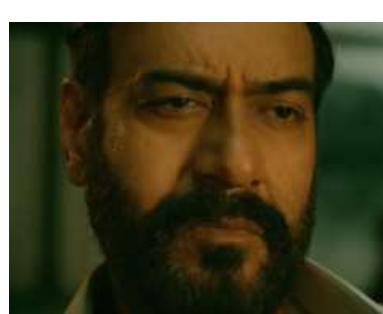
I like action when it is propelled by emotion. A punch gets its value only when the audiences anticipate it to be delivered at that precise moment

ARUN VIJAY

allow a project the time it demands, and that quality is more important than quantity."

Action is often trivialised as a shallow, pulp genre that doesn't offer enough depth to its actors. So one wishes to ask Arun if he has ever been able to dig deeper into his character and if he has carried them beyond the scenes. "Of course. When I did *Vanangaan*, for instance, I couldn't come out of that zone for about three months. Some things, like the experience of spending those days with children with disabilities, remain etched in my mind."

After *Retta Thala*, the actor has his long-delayed action film *Borrder* in the pipeline. "I am also in talks with director Magizh Thirumeni for a film," he says.



Truth be told

Ajay Devgn's *Drishyam 3* will hit screens on October 2, 2026. A short announcement video, shared by the makers, features a voice over of Ajay giving a context of events that followed in the previous parts. "What everyone perceives as truth is different. My truth is my family," he says, adding, "The story is not over yet; the last part is remaining." Directed by Abhishek Pathak, the mystery-thriller also stars Tabu and Shriya Saran in pivotal roles. Released in 2015, *Drishyam*, a remake of the Mohanlal starrer Malayalam film, told the story of an ordinary man who gets embroiled in a murder investigation along with his family. A sequel, *Drishyam 2*, set seven years after the events of the first film, was released in 2022. Meanwhile, Jeethu Joseph, the director of the original Malayalam films, had confirmed previously that discussions were underway to release *Drishyam 3* simultaneously in Malayalam, Hindi, and Telugu. It was announced earlier this month that Mohanlal has completed shooting for the Malayalam version of the film.

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Changing times
Arun Vijay; (below) a still from *Retta Thala*.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

merit as a serious actor thanks to many noteworthy turns in action films such as *Thadam*, *Kuttram 23*, *Yennai Arindhaal*, and *Thadaiyara Thaakkka*. He stresses there is no set mantra behind his longevity. "The audiences know that Arun Vijay selects good scripts; I have created that confidence in them. So it's important to keep doing that, and then it's about how uniquely you cater to the audiences," he adds, stating the ability to adapt to changing times is the key.

He seems quite excited about his upcoming film, *Retta Thala*, which, he adds, has an engaging screenplay packed with twists and turns at the right junctures. The film will see Arun play dual roles for the second time after Magizh Thirumeni's 2019 thriller *Thadam*. "In most films, the dual roles would be of a pair of twins who share some similarities between them. When it comes to *Retta Thala*, these are two very different characters. So, cracking their respective looks, dialogue delivery and body language was quite tricky but exciting," he says, adding that he had liked how the film's director Kris Thirukumaran presented the characters (Upendra from Goa and Kaali from Puducherry) to him.

While he has been a fan of double-action films of Kamal Haasan and MG Ramachandran, Arun, be it for *Thadam* or *Retta Thala*, chose not to look into how other actors have performed dual roles. "I wanted to do it without any influence. Only then can we produce something entirely new. I just go with what the director says, the characters' backstories, where they come from and so on. I take these, and I extend upon them with my own imagination."

One thing led to another, and after a few conversations, the two got together to croon a track on young love. Titled 'Baala Kaale', which means 'the times when we were young', the romantic duet is

Life in melody

Singer Tanvi Shah's comeback song, 'Baala Kaale', is in Sinhalese — and it came after a life-changing year



On track
Tanvi Shah and Jo Perera during the song recording.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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Singer Tanvi Shah is getting used to greeting people with 'Ayubowan', the Sinhalese word to welcome someone. Post a major health setback after getting diagnosed with breast cancer in 2023-2024, the *Jai Ho* singer has now made a quiet comeback: with a Sinhalese track, titled 'Baala Kaale'.

"I did not think I would ever get into the studio and sing again," she says. "But it is happening, and I'm going with the flow."

The first Indian woman to win a Grammy, Tanvi's latest song was born during a chance meeting with Sri Lankan musical artiste Jo Perera in June 2025. "He was shocked that I had heard some of their Sinhalese tracks," she grins. "They were fun and Gen-Zish."

One thing led to another, and after a few conversations, the two got together to croon a track on young love. Titled 'Baala Kaale', which means 'the times when we were young', the romantic duet is

produced by Dilru Costa (Cozy) and has lyrics by Jeeewaka Weerasinghe, with backup vocals and harmonies by Samcy Philip. "It talks about two people who realised that they were in love all along, despite having drifted apart after childhood," she explains.

While Tanvi is no stranger to studio sessions — thanks to her popular songs with multiple Indian music composers including AR Rahman and Yuvan Shankar Raja — 'Baala Kaale'

presented three sets of challenges: a different language, a scale and genre she was not used to, and her post-cancer anxiety. "I kept thinking, 'Will I be able to do this?'" she recalls. "I needed to change my entire thought process to deliver it, but I was thoroughly happy doing it, and that's what really matters."

Tanvi Shah went through a rough health patch in 2023-24 when she was diagnosed with breast cancer, which led to months of surgery, chemotherapy and radiation sessions. During this phase, she also had second-degree burns and hair loss due to radiation. What helped her stay with the times was actively listening to her favourite musicians. Her current playlist is diverse, filled with the tracks of Spanish musician Pablo Alboran, Brazilian singer Mari Foes and British singer-songwriter Olivia Dean, apart from Indian singing sensation Arijit Singh.

With another track up her sleeve, Tanvi is slowly, but surely, eyeing a comeback to the music scene. She is also keeping herself busy by teaching children vocal therapy. "Being with children helped me. When they ask me questions related to music, it helps me stay sharp and connected," she says, "I feel this is a new life I've got, and I am trying to make the best of it."



Action mode

Sigma, which marks the directorial debut of actor Vijay's son, Jason Sanjay, is generating some buzz. Its teaser was released recently. With music by Thaman S, the film stars Sundeep Kishan, Faria Abdullah, Raju Sundaram and Sampath Raj in key roles. The actioner, shot by Krishnan Vasant and edited by Praveen KL, has been produced by Subaskaran's Lyca Productions. Jason Sanjay's foray into direction was announced in August 2023. Sanjay completed his schooling in Chennai and then pursued a Film Production Diploma at Toronto Film School, followed by a BA (Hons) in Screenwriting in London. Meanwhile, Vijay is gearing up for the release of *Jananayagan* which will hit the screens on January 9, 2026.

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