



metroPLUS

THE HINDU

Stories of bravery come alive at this exhibit on ancient hero stones of Tamil Nadu **P2**

WHY DARSHANA LOVES THE STAGE **P4**



Hitting the right notes

With *Thug Life* releasing today, we speak to singer Chinmayi, whose rendition of the ‘Mutha Mazhai’ track has gone viral

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Singer Chinmayi is back in the limelight. Her rendition of Tamil track ‘Mutha Mazhai’ at the recent *Thug Life* audio launch in Chennai is garnering a lot of praise. The interesting part is that Chinmayi has sung the Telugu and Hindi versions of this particular track composed by AR Rahman but not the Tamil version, which has been sung by singer Dhee.

“When I sang it, it was just another performance. It was just like how I perform classics of other singers; I have sung S Janaki *amma’s*, Chitra *amma’s* songs on various stages in the past. I sang the Tamil version that evening because Dhee was not available. I was a stand-in,” she explains.

That she might have been, but the version she dished out on stage, in the presence of thousands of fans and the entire cast including Kamal Haasan, Silambarasan and Trisha, has gone viral; its official recording from music label Saregama Tamil has already hit more than seven million views.

“When Dhee was chosen, I’m sure they were going for something quirky. Dhee has a special musical expression, which cannot be imitated by anybody else. This whole talk about her version versus mine... it feels like we are part of a wrestling match that we did not sign up for. As artistes, we openly admire each other’s work. It is not a competition,” she says, “I want to apologise to Dhee. She’s a young

girl. To compare the two versions is not necessary at all.”

Is Chinmayi banned?

The recent spotlight on her has not yet sunk in, she adds. “Because, in the last seven years, my DMs have been filled with abuse. Somewhere, my emotions got numb after that and now, when there is so much adulation, I’m like, ‘thank you, I guess’. While I’m truly grateful for this, I have become numb.”

Chinmayi is, of course, referring to the years since 2018, when she named influential people in the film and music industry as part of the #MeToo movement. This, she says, has made unions within the industry



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CHINMAYI
Singer

PHOTO: SR RAGHUNATHAN



Pitch perfect (Clockwise from left) Singer Chinmayi, whose performance in the audio launch of *Thug Life* is going viral; musician Dhee.



To watch the video interview, scan the QR code.

Track record

■ Chinmayi’s debut song in Tamil films, ‘Oru Deivam’ from 2002’s *Kannathil Muthamittal*, was a runaway hit. Her track in *Thug Life* marks her return to the same combination of Mani Ratnam and AR Rahman, both of whom worked on the 2002 film as well.

■ The singer is also a popular dubbing artiste; her last few outings include Tamil films *Hero* and *Leo*.

■ Since her naming of influential names in the #Metoo movement, Chimayi’s work in the Tamil film industry has come down considerably. Her recent performance at *Thug Life’s* audio launch has given rise to many music fans demanding that she be given more opportunities.

PHOTO: S SHIVARAJ



‘ban’ her, thus depriving her of singing and dubbing chances in Tamil films. “The dubbing union banned me. Director Mithran had to make me dub in secret for *Hero*. I also dubbed for *Leo*, for which they tried to track down the studio where it was worked on. When a film comes to the dubbing stage, people don’t have the bandwidth to deal with such a ‘ban’,” she says.

Facing repercussions for using her in films, many composers have opted for other available singers. “A lot of music composers tell me that they want to make me sing, but that their producers wouldn’t let them,” says Chinmayi, who describes the support of her family members and friends as her biggest asset.

Musical discoverability

Chinmayi burst into the Tamil music scene in 2002 in a film that was directed by Mani Ratnam and had music by AR Rahman. More than two decades later, her work in *Thug Life*, which is a film from the same director-composer combination, is being discussed again. How different have these two experiences been? “Nothing has changed. For *Thug Life*, Rahman sir sang a few lines, taught me, and we worked on it.” The song showcases elements of Carnatic and qawwali as well. “It showcases his creative genius; he may be given the same bag of rice, but he’ll give you an entire 15-course menu with it.”

Her performance at the *Thug Life* audio launch has, in turn, led to music fans discovering some of her older work. “This happened when I did a Twitter Spaces concert during the pandemic. A lot of people then requested some older songs of mine too and they got a new lease of life then. In general, my career is defined by tracks that people don’t know I sang. If I ever have a live concert in Chennai, I will probably name it ‘I did not know you sang that’,” she laughs.

That probably marks her musical versatility; Chinmayi sounds very different – from a melodious ‘Sara Sara’ to an energetic ‘Mayya Mayya’. “Many of my songs have been standalone hits, but listeners have not been able to make a connection and attribute it to me, though my name is in the credits,” explains Chinmayi, who is looking forward to engage more with art and music in the future.

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At the Lalit Kala Akademi where there are photographs currently adorning the gallery walls, every corner has a story to tell. There are fishermen in Vietnam standing against a stunning sunset; a military jet belly-up in air as it streaks past the blue sky; a theyyam performer playing with fire; a grizzly bear deftly catching fish jumping out of a waterfall in Alaska; and an idyllic campsite at Tapovan, with snowy peaks in the background.

These photos are currently on display as part of Confluence 2025, the Photographic Society of Madras’ annual exhibition. The society was founded in 1857 by Dr Alexander Hunter and Walter Elliot, just a few years after the very first photograph was taken. Over a century and a half later, little has changed for its current members who are united by a common passion for photography. “We currently have over 500 members



Life, in focus

A legacy organisation, the Photographic Society of Madras, established in 1857, is currently having its photo exhibition Confluence 2025

across age groups, and meet once a month. Apart from interactions and workshops by noted photographers and cinematographers, we also organise photo tours, seminars, walks and exhibitions for our members,” says president of the society, GN Ramaswami.

As part of Confluence 2025, over 230 photographs from the Photographic Society of Madras’ members are on display across seven categories comprising monochrome, landscape, street, portrait, wildlife, monuments, and open colour. Also on display are photographs from across

Picture perfect (Clockwise from left) Photos by V Mohanakrishnan, GN Ramaswami and Lakshmi Pichaimani. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



the world which have won awards at the salons conducted by the society. A member for over 10 years now, V Mohanakrishnan says being a part of the society has meant meeting many like-minded people, and a camaraderie he greatly cherishes. “Photography

has always been a great stress buster, and as an avid biker, my trips have translated into good opportunities for wildlife and Nature photography,” he says. Photographed by him is a pair of Khali pheasants with their vibrant, blue plumage. “Patience is the key to photographing wildlife and Nature,” he says of his experiences.

For S Balu, who has been interested in photography for 30 years, his interest in pictorial and Nature photography has meant planning dedicated photography trips at regular intervals. His photos on

display include the electric blue Ain Dubai ferris wheel in motion by the water, and birds including a peacock with its tail feathers unfurled and in full display.

If the vibrant wildlife and Nature photographs are fascinating to see, the monochrome photographs capture a melancholic stillness. From wooden cabins covered in snow to the stunning colours of autumn, the landscape photos on display make for a capsule trip around the world.

Ramaswami says they have been encouraging more youngsters to join in, and pick up photography as a hobby.

“We have also seen a marked rise in interest among them. After coming together, we have bettered our craft through learning and experience sharing. This exhibition is a great platform for our members to showcase their work through various themes,” he adds.

Confluence 2025 is on at Lalit Kala Akademi till June 7. Open from 11am to 7pm.

STEPOUT

Breathing it in



Villains, an immersive theatre experience, blends performance, poetry and Tamil conversation. This 90-minute production by Tale ‘O’ Meter is said to be unconventional as it places you at the heart of the narrative. The storytelling moves between Tamil and English. The experience is said to include changes in light and even the possible use of blindfolds for a textural experience. @ Medai, Alwarpet, from 6pm to 7.30pm on June 7. Tickets available on BookMyShow.

Wave that flag high

Pride month is here! Affections, a queer art festival, brings together a day of expression, celebration, and community, curated by Sunshine House. The festival invites attendees to experience queer life through a range of art forms – visual works, performances, curated talks, installations, and even food, all rooted in queer voices and perspectives. The event will be conducted in Tamil and English and welcomes anyone looking to spend a day surrounded by community. @Backyard, Adyar. June 8, 12pm to 8pm. Open to those aged 18 and above. Entry is ₹100 per person at allevents.in. Call 7305004225.



Cultural spotlight (Clockwise from below)
At the exhibition; Sudhakar Nalliyappan
(left) with members of Yaakkai Trust at a
site.

R RAVINDRAN AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

An exhibition
on the hero
stones of Tamil
Nadu reveals the
past, one discovery
at a time



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Lifestyles of the brave and famous

It is the last weekend before school begins, and Chennai's famed DakshinaChitra is crowded with families. At the Varija Art Gallery, a group of college students is putting together tactile clay objects they have helped create. Anitha Pottamkulam, director, Culture, DakshinaChitra, says, "The Immortal Valors: Hero Stones of Tamil Nadu is an extraordinary exhibition curated by DakshinaChitra in collaboration with Tamil Nadu's Department of Archaeology, Roja Muthiah Research Library and Yaakkai Heritage Trust. On these pictorial representations come alive stories etched in stone – of bravery, sacrifice and ancestral homage spanning over two millennia. It invites you to discover the fascinating world of *nadukal*, the legendary hero stones that immortalise Tamil warriors who gave their lives in war,

cattle conflicts, and protection of their villages. Museums say 'don't touch' but to bring these fascinating stories from the fringe to the mainstream, we have created tactile versions."

Ways to classify
At the inaugural event, both the chief guest R Sivanantham, Joint Director, State Archaeology Department, and K Rajan, Academic and Research Advisor to Institute of Archaeology and Museology, help the audience journey through time, throwing light on rare artefacts, sculptures and inscriptions dating from 3BC to the 19th Century to unveil secrets of ancient Tamil governance, warfare and societal values.

"There are three ways you can date an inscription," says Prof Rajan on a phone call. "The first is based on content – name of the king, regnal year... Assuming that this is not available, the content may denote the political geography of the region or the territorial division which may have emerged after a certain period (names of dynasty or names of chieftains also give clues). The third is paleography – initially *vatta ezhuthu* script and later Tamil script. The shift from the first to the second happened in the late Pallava period. In addition, sculptural representation on the stone helps date them. Early stones have shields and swords, bow and arrow, and are on cattle raids. Later ones have details

on capturing land and villages, a sign of social transformation." Hero stones populated the Tamil land "from 4BC to the 5th Century as just stones with inscriptions. Post that, figures made their appearance, from 6th Century to 9th Century – this is when most of the memorial stones were created. A new range came up after the 10th Century, not just for heroes but also on sati and sanyasis. During the Vijayanagara period, inscriptions were done away with and only sculptural representations were found. By the Colonial period, they started fading", says Rajan, adding that the oldest hero stone in India is found in Pulimankombai in Theni

district on the banks of the Vaigai. Whether the 'hero' has been buried at the scene of action or brought home and buried is a question that begs to be asked. "Only if we excavate under them and find the skeletal remains will we know. But these stones are worshipped, and out of deference to the dead, this has not been done," he adds.

Passion for history
In a land profuse with such cultural artefacts that define both time and territory, the onus of discovering, protecting and pushing for their study also falls on the citizen-historian. Which is where institutions such as the Coimbatore-based Yaakkai Heritage Trust, founded in 2017 by Sudhakar Nalliyappan to create awareness and conserve cultural heritage, step in. Sudhakar, president of Yaakkai, found his way to history through degrees in Computer Science and Tamil Studies.

"I was fond of travel and discovered hidden facets of our culture. Information was available, but scattered, and bringing this microhistory under one umbrella was our focus. Memorial stones are written in common dialects of the region. We have GPS-pinned nearly 1,200 stones. As many as 150 students intern with us. We also work to conserve prehistoric rock paintings and megalithic sites. Heritage should also be made part of CSR activity – it opens up funding. Time and knowledge investment is our biggest contribution," says Sudhakar. This knowledge now hangs on photographs with details of the memorial stones at the gallery. There are also 3D models created by the interning college students. The exhibition invites you to travel back and forth, but it follows the narrative that connects modern people with the way we were.

The exhibition is on till July 20 (10am-6pm) at DakshinaChitra, Muttukadu. Closed on Tuesdays.

Journeying on

Kulavai 2025, a two-day fest,
looks to celebrate survival and
radical vulnerabilities



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A Mangai says she only has 15 minutes for a conversation. The prominent Tamil theatre personality who has written, directed and starred in several plays; authored a book; and been an activist for years now, says that she is pressed for time because she is busy thinking about the closing of Kulavai 2025, a two-day theatre festival on June 8 and 9 in association with Marappachi, her theatre group, and the Alliance Française of Madras.

At the event, one will watch excerpts of her productions, besides two full-length plays. They will speak of Sri Lanka, Palestine, feminism, queerness, survival, liberation and the consistent, palpable poignancy through it all. Some plays that will be staged include *Avvai*, *Stree Parvam* and *Pani Thee*.

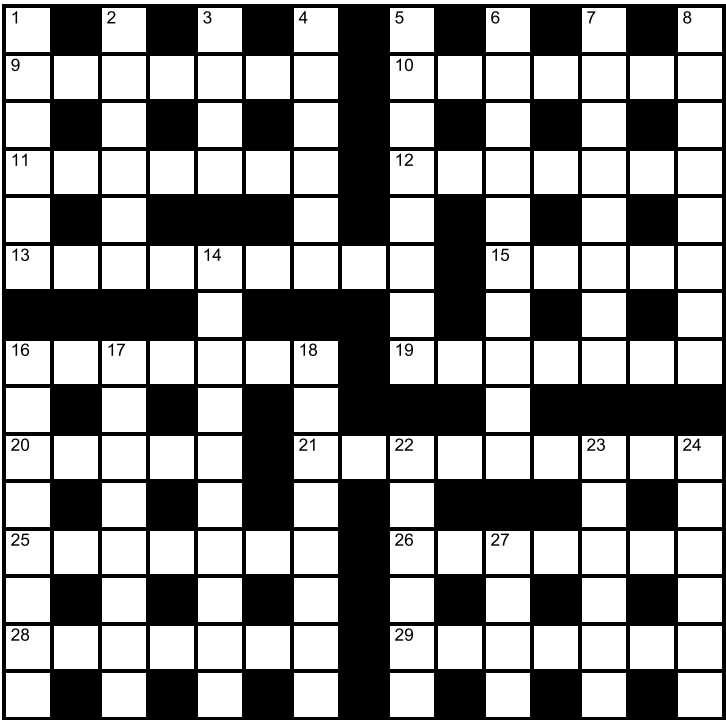
Over her career spanning 40 years, Mangai has chosen to speak of violence in the realm of caste, class, sexuality and gender. Having collaborated with a remarkable number of people across social structures, the theatre personality jumps from incidents, her origin stories, personalities she has encountered, and

progressive philosophies, over call. Most people who are associated with Mangai, including the likes of her lighting artiste M Surendar, have worked with her for at least 15 years. To him, celebrating Mangai seems obvious. "Nobody has brought in as many women artistes on stage or subverted *The Mahabharata* or other religious texts with a feminist lens like she has in Tamil and shared these stories," he says. The journey has hence veered towards ensuring that vulnerable groups find comfortable spaces on stage. Many of the theatre artistes performing on Saturday and Sunday are from the queer community. "I use the word radical vulnerabilities a lot. You know, how when people get together despite all the burdens and pass on empathy or solidarity despite the vulnerabilities," she says.

"I do not care about being palatable. I just want to raise as many uncomfortable questions as possible. Nothing else," she says.

Kulavai is on June 8 and 9 at Alliance Française of Madras, Nungambakkam between 10am and 6.30pm. On June 8, an open-mic event is scheduled. Entry is free.

METROPLUS QUICK CROSSWORD #6 (Set by Doppelganger)



Across

- 9 The concert was _____ awesome (7)
- 10 Simple and ingenious (7)
- 11 It comes before tomorrow morning (7)
- 12 A lightweight boxer is _____ than a featherweight boxer (7)
- 13 Personnel skilled at making things (9)
- 15 A legal process (5)
- 16 Brash conceited young men (7)
- 19 Moved the ball out of the defensive zone (7)
- 20 However, on the other hand ... (5)
- 21 This never strikes twice at the same spot (9)
- 25 A group of cells with a similar structure and particular function (7)
- 26 Give active approval to a theory (7)
- 28 Not manufactured by robots (3-4)
- 29 Furthest in any direction from the centre (7)

Down

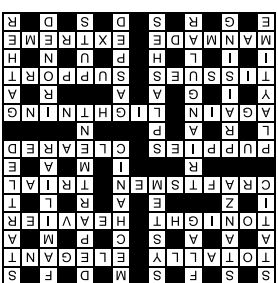
- 1 What you hear on the radio sometimes (6)
- 2 Part of a poem (6)
- 3 You can _____ down a passing car to get a lift (4)
- 4 Students need to get some _____ into their exam revision (6)
- 5 This person can repair a malfunctioning 4D (8)

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



- 6 A section of an organisation with responsibility for one particular aspect (10)
- 7 Was happy to see a _____ face in the crowd (8)
- 8 Surprised suddenly (8)
- 14 Delta shaped (10)
- 16 A period for recreation (8)
- 17 Expressing a feeling of veneration (8)
- 18 Applies patches of a contrasting colour (8)
- 22 Took a sharp breath in, through surprise (6)
- 23 Decreased (6)
- 24 Pull material into small folds (6)
- 27 It's risky when someone _____ all his eggs in one basket (4)

Solution No. 6



Prajwal Parajuly

Not very long ago, Amazon refused to deliver to Sri City. Of course, as a town grows, increasing its share of residents with disposable income, global giants come around. Colleagues often remarked how lucky I was to have mops and wipes and blenders brought to my doorstep. It hadn't been so straightforward for them. Setting up a house anywhere is hard. Do that in the middle of nowhere, and the challenge compounds. The mobile data in my apartment refused to cooperate. A teeny crumb on the floor, and an army of ants descended from hell. The campus laundromat would lose my laundry, only for it to resurface several days later. At least home deliveries made my move somewhat easier.

The first week of my new life, I had spent as much time contemplating paper towels on Amazon as I had my syllabus. For every hour dedicated to lesson plans on dialogue tags, there would be two hours of mulling over the benefits of Mr. Muscle verses some eye-wateringly expensive hipster brand. I bought spoons and plates and glasses. I ordered a steel trashcan, too. By the end of the week, I had read more reviews on hangers – apparently my choice of wooden ones was aesthetically pleasing but broke at an alarming frequency – than I had my students' writing. It didn't help that the expected packages hadn't yet materialised. Between phoning Amazon and ordering on Amazon, I was drained.

It was time for a break. And nothing screamed break louder than a jaunt in the neighborhood park. When I accepted the job at Krea University, I was given two accommodation options: a dingy flat the size of my thumb in perfectly organised Sri City proper or a light-filled place the size of France in the midst of some chaos just outside of Sri City. I selected the bigger flat despite its being farther from campus because it came with a park. Referring to it as a park was optimistic, but what else would you call an empty rectangular plot, gated and barricaded, in an area infested with mid-rises? Inside the gate was a walking track. There was an overgrown patch. There were even benches. Bangalore's

SOUTHERN LIVING

Not on the bucket list

In a town where paper towels, hangers
and mops arrive fashionably late,
salvation comes in the form of a park
and a walking track

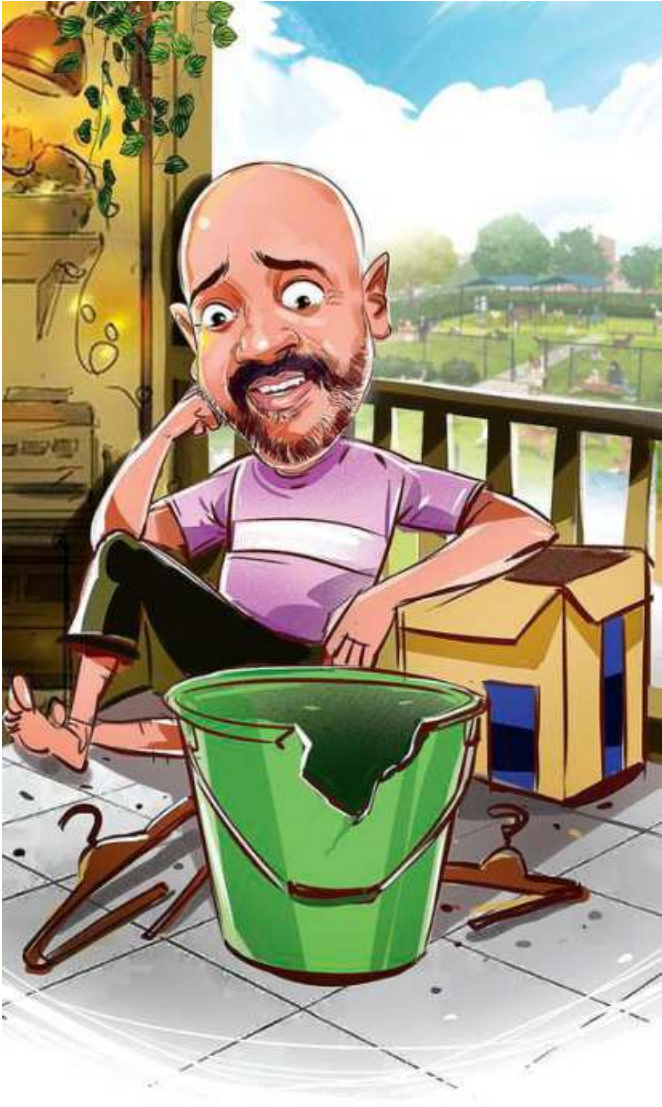


ILLUSTRATION: SAAI

Cubbon Park wouldn't hold a candle to this neighbourhood gem.

My glaze-white-tiled flat with the two bathrooms whose shared wall went only three-quarters of the way up looked out to the park. How the empty plot came to be is a mystery, but if it was the main reason I had eschewed an easier commute, I would make sure I'd use it. So far, I had been intimidated in much the way going to a new gym intimidates people. But Amazon can do funny things to your brain; I switched off my computer and made my way out.

The park was a happy place. The factory workers had returned home. Young men played cricket. Young women chatted. I traded pleasantries with visiting parents of Krea professors. I even exchanged awkward nods with the petting lovers I spied on from my balcony.

It was nice to be out in the open, far from Amazon. This was our version of forest-bathing. Sure, there was no breeze, I might have stepped on a sanitary pad and fornicating stray dogs didn't exactly provoke the same feelings that birdsong did, but an actual dedicated area for sports and walks was a blessing. I was grateful. The park had done its job.

How long would it last, though? There was rampant construction around me. Would the empty plot go the way of other empty plots? A colleague echoed my concerns. He was afraid that the park was only a placeholder for a future building. It didn't make sense for something that size to just sit there unmonetised.

But I had other issues to worry about. The Amazon packages had finally appeared. About half a dozen hangers arrived broken. The blender was reported delivered but nowhere to be seen. And the steel trashcan? Amazon replaced it with a broken green bucket. The return process was cumbersome. I'd use the green bucket as the trashcan in my balcony, the same one that overlooked the park. One stormy day, the wind almost blew it away.

Prajwal Parajuly is the author of *The Gurkha's Daughter* and *Land Where I Flee*. He loves idli, loathes naan, and is indifferent to coffee. He teaches Creative Writing at Krea University and oscillates between New York City and Sri City.



Art meets aisle (Left) Quixotic Landscape by Dimple Shah; (below) Untitled by Sooraja K S. SANGITA RAJAN



Contemplating with a Dead Tree turns inward, and focusses on decay, and the passage of time. Her third series, Quixotic Landscape, takes a more overtly critical tone, using absurd, imagined terrains to comment on ecological destruction and misuse of natural resources.

“In the broader context, art is very important to the world because it helps us understand those who are different from us. These artists have no common thread running between them. But that itself is the point. To show that we can be different, and still belong together,” says Jitha.

Aishwaryan K’s Hasta series captures hand gestures in gouache and archival ink on elephant dung paper. Each gesture, drawn from memory, ritual, or everyday experience, invites the viewer to pause and connect with moments often overlooked. They are drenched in nostalgia of a childhood that no longer exists.

There is something disarming about turning a corner in a store and finding a painted gesture waiting for you. Coalescence does not demand attention – it lingers quietly, nudging you to look, reflect, and maybe see the space, and each other, a little differently.

Coalescence is on view at The House of Klothberg, Harrington Road, till June 13.

curator Jitha Karthikeyan. To bring art to spaces that are not galleries, was the idea that fuelled this exhibition. The five participating artists, Aishwaryan K, Sooraja KS, Dimple Shah, Anitha TK, and Mibin, interpret the central theme of coalescence in their unique way. Chennai-based visual artist K S Sooraja’s collage of artworks depicting the physical and mental experiences and feelings of women, hang inches away from a display of handbags and shoes. The artworks confront the weight of physical and emotional experiences tied to womanhood, using hair as a symbol. Dimple Shah, meanwhile, presents three distinct series. Fungi Head, bursting with psychedelic colour, is a metaphor for her shifting psychological states. In contrast,

In the broader context, art is very important to the world because it helps us understand those who are different from us

JITHA KARTHIKEYAN
Curator

Shot on OnePlus

#FramesofIndia

Frame of coexistence

At The House of Klothberg in Chennai, a new exhibition titled Coalescence places contemporary art among racks of sustainable fashion

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A place for everything, and everything in its place. That is how the world makes sense. But art is meant to, and often does, defy boundaries. That defiance is what gives this art exhibition its quiet power. Rather than hang politely on white walls, the works in Coalescence inhabit a living space – nestled between racks of sustainable, vegan garments,

shelves of heels, and displays filled with straw hats and jute bags at The House of Klothberg on Harrington Road. The store and vegan cafe, with its commitment to sustainability and mindful design, is less a backdrop and more a co-curator, allowing the artworks to engage with everyday life. “Art shows are always within galleries or spaces meant for art. So, the people who walk in are art literate, and they’re coming just because they’re interested in art. So how do you make art accessible to the public?” asks

Scoop of legacy

Naturals Ice Cream arrives in Chennai with tropical flavours and a taste of nostalgia

Ikshaa J

Fruit. Sugar. Milk. That is all it takes to make good ice cream, and Mumbai’s iconic brand Naturals is testament to this. The brand that has become synonymous with time, taste, and temptation has finally opened its first store in Chennai, and it is the perfect antidote to the city’s scorching heat. What began as a fruit vendor’s curiosity to blend real fruit into ice cream has grown into a near 40-year-old legacy which now boasts 178 stores across 15 states. Nestled in KNK Road, this 1,119 sq ft store, is the brand’s 178th outlet. As I walked in, I was greeted by a fresh, fruity aroma and vibrant walls adorned with colourful murals of fruit: Mahabaleshwar strawberries, Ratnagiri mangoes, coconuts from Kerala. Being the first store in Chennai, one of the murals is of Raghunanda Kamath, founder of Naturals Ice Cream. It takes customers through the humble beginnings of the brand in 1984. With 21 flavours like tender

coconut, mango, roasted almond and more on display, the store will keep switching the seasonal flavours. Kala jamun, jackfruit, and lychee are this summer’s top sellers. Along with scoops of ice cream they also have ice cream shakes and fruit sundaes. Even the waffle cones are made from scratch, adding to the freshness of the experience. We tasted the mango sundae – a scoop of the rich and creamy malai ice cream, topped with freshly chopped Ratnagiri mangoes. The lychee ice cream was luscious and tasted just like eating the fruit. In the store, there is a wall which has stories from factory workers explaining the brand’s origin. There is a QR code that customers can scan, which lets them leave feedback, and pictures of the memories made while tasting the original. The customer images will be displayed on this wall on a rotational basis.

Naturals Ice Cream is located at new no. 10, old no. 29, Khader Nawaz Khan Road. One scoop of ice cream costs ₹90.



Sundae best Kala jamun and mango ice cream flavours from Naturals. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Chef Devagi has authored 22 cook books SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Heritage on a plate

Savour Tamil flavours from the kitchens of Singapore and Malaysia, curated by celebrated Singaporean Chef Devagi Sanmugam at Feathers Hotel

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As a Tamilian born and raised in Singapore, 69-year-old Chef Devagi Sanmugam, connects to her roots through the rich aromatic world of spices. In Chennai to curate Ayalagam, a food festival that celebrates Tamil flavours from Singapore and Malaysia, Devagi shares her culinary journey and how she blends tradition with innovation. “The title resonated with me deeply, and I could instantly connect to the theme,” she says with a smile. Her story begins with her father, Chandrakasan, who migrated to Singapore from Mayavaram in Tamil Nadu. He worked at a Tamil newspaper and later married Anjalai, whose mother, Nagammal, was raised in Indonesia. “So I became familiar with Southeast Asian cooking cultures early on in life,” says Devagi. “In Singapore we have three major ethnic groups, Chinese, Malay,

and Indian. So we grow up exposed to spices from all over Asia,” she says. Over time, these influences began to appear in Tamil cooking. “For example, we now use soy sauce in mutton and fish dishes and add Sichuan pepper to enhance heat.” Chef Devagi points out that while many spices are shared across Asian cuisines, kalpasi (black stone flower, a dry and brittle lichen), is uniquely South Indian. “It is especially prominent in Chettinad cuisine and imparts a deep, intense, smoky flavour that is hard to replicate,” she says. Another favourite is thalippu vadagam, a traditional seasoning blend made from sun-dried spices and aromatics and onions. Our meal at Sangamithrai starts with six dips accompanied by crisp rice wafers. Each dip showcases a unique flavour profile, but the standout dish is the curry leaf aioli, that lingers on the palate. A close second is the calamansi chilli sauce, which packs a tangy punch thanks to the citrusy notes of calamansi, a Southeast Asian variety of lime. With



our palates awakened by this array of flavours, we are served a refreshing pudalangai salad. Raw snake gourd is combined with cherry tomatoes and julienned carrots, tossed in a light dressing of lemon juice and ginger juice and salt, and finished with a sprinkle of fresh coconut shavings. The thenga sadham pottalam features mildly spiced coconut milk rice carefully wrapped in a banana

leaf along with chicken sambal, sweet and sour chutney, stir fried bitter gourd, fried chicken and mutton chukka. The pottalam, meaning package, is then tied with a string and grilled on a tawa, allowing the flavours to meld together. As we untie the leaf parcel, the aroma wafts up, rich with coconut milk and ghee. The interplay of bitter, sweet, sour and spicy elements make for a harmonious and visually stunning dish. It is best enjoyed the traditional way, with your fingers, no cutlery. We are then served the vendhaya chicken, a signature creation by Chef Devagi. “No one would think to throw in a handful of roasted fenugreek into a semi-gravy chicken dish,” she says with a smile, adding, “The bitter and nutty taste of the fenugreek goes well with the chicken dish made in South Indian style.” And, she is right. The roasted fenugreek adds a deep, aromatic bitterness that complements the South Indian-style chicken perfectly. Immensely impressed by the pottalam experience, we get ready for dessert: maravalli kizhangu (tapioca) halwa and pandan idiyappam with vazhai pazham sauce. While both are intriguing, it is the former that truly stands out. The tapioca halwa is comforting and nostalgic. Cooked tapioca is grated, infused with ghee and aromatic spices, then gently steamed and shaped like round cutlets. Served warm, with a generous sprinkling of fresh coconut shavings, it is delicate on the palate. With Ayalagam, Chef Devagi not only brings the tastes of her heritage to Chennai but also demonstrates how tradition can evolve without being lost. At Sangamithrai Restaurant, Feathers Hotel. On till June 8, for lunch and dinner. A vegetarian meal is ₹2,500 and a non-vegetarian meal is ₹3,000. There are five rotating menus. For reservations, call 7823977825.

A milk that is a game-changer

Amul Moti 90 DAY SHELF LIFE

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