



metro PLUS

THE HINDU



How not to take a selfie with an elephant, and be a responsible traveller **P2**

ADITI TURNS SINGER FOR INDEPENDENT TRACK **P4**

Chennai's ceramics community sees a new crop of creators and collectors, all enamoured with studio pottery, which blends art and functionality

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The overarching sentiment that coloured Chennai's first-ever studio potters' market was that of surprise. So much so, that an elderly gentleman loudly exclaimed, "I did not know there were so many pottery artists in Chennai!" while waiting for a set of tableware, neatly wrapped in newspaper, to take home.

Most buyers at the two-day packed market, held in Apparao Galleries last month, shared similar feelings. Spontaneous orders, and happy exchanges of business cards quickly followed.

The market, which brought 21 studio potters under one roof was a window to Chennai's burgeoning studio pottery ecosystem that has been seeing a steady rise of entrants in the last three years. While pottery is often associated with Auroville thanks to Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith's pioneering institution Golden Bridge Pottery, not too far away, Chennai is waking up to a quiet wave of creators and



Stories in clay (Clockwise from left) Rezina of PotteryKaari; Unna Annamalai's ceramic canvases and plates; square tableware set at Mandala Pottery, Auroville; from Unna's coral series. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND MARCO SAROLDI



country, enable young and upcoming artists to travel with their wares.

For most novices, the scope for play that the medium offers is the initial motivator. Gowri Natarajan of GN Studio Pottery that opened in early 2020 says, "I was working in a bank. But I really craved to create something with my hands. The first thing I had in mind was carpentry." Over the pandemic, following a personal loss, Gowri dove into the medium of clay.

"The joy of creating, and also the endless experiments one can do with clay is what keeps me interested," says the artist whose textured glazes, sometimes obtained using wood ash, in ceramic tablewares, are seeing takers. Unna Annamalai, an architect and potter who heads MudPie Pottery Studio agrees, "I feel like clay keeps one grounded. When you do anything with clay, all five elements are incorporated. I was able to connect deeper at that level."

For the last couple of years, people have been more receptive to handmade pottery, says Unna. "Now, people are really appreciating

the labour that goes into a custom handmade piece," she adds.

Adil says, "Another demographic shift that has happened since Covid is that people from all strata of society are coming to us in droves for full sets of tableware for their homes, ceramic murals for their walls, and large clay paintings. I think that eating out of plastic, melamine or steel plates, during the two to three years of lockdown has made them realise that they need beauty in their homes for themselves and not for that one guest who they invite once a year. This shift is very important to the pottery industry."

Having said that, sourcing good quality raw materials can get expensive. Most potters prefer to make their own glazes and source clay in bulk. "What you get at the store is good enough for a novice who is getting used to the craft. There are also air-dry variants that can be used for hand building and so on," says Amritha Venketakrishnan, proprietor of Chennai's Hindustan Trading Company. Which is why studio pottery's sustainability as a career option must be weighed with caution – it might take a while to break even, Gowri adds.

Most upcoming artists, since the pandemic, are taking the social media route to reach their clientele. But it is not without its pitfalls, as many receive custom requests for recreations, and not originals. "I usually turn down those orders since I am keen on not imitating anyone else's art," says Rezina Farooq of Pottery Kaari, a studio based in Porur.

This is why learning the craft first and then making it your language is the right trajectory to take for any novice, Adil continues. "The humble potter makes functional ware that you use and appreciate in your daily life. There is more snob-value being called a potter these days, as opposed to being labelled a ceramic artist."

Turn of the wheel



collectors alike. "The ceramic scene has been booming since the Covid pandemic. People who have never done pottery before, are suddenly discovering that even on a small balcony, you can set up an electric kiln, buy some clay and glazes, and make and fire pots!" says Adil

Writer, a seasoned ceramic artist and painter based in Auroville. "Everybody is riding the 'handmade' or 'Made in India' wave right now. The interest has shot up in both making and purchasing," he adds.

Scope for play Studio pottery is different from traditional pottery – while the former usually has a narrative and is experimental in outlook, traditional potters focus on utility and often come with the skills passed down generations. India has many potter communities who are



yet to break into the mainstream.

Studio pottery is now more than just a hobby coloured by the pandemic, as young artists pick up the skill in the hope of pursuing a career in clay. Sculptures, ceramic murals, and custom decor pieces, apart from functional ware are all part of their ever-evolving repertoire. Not to mention potters' markets, now common across the



Everybody is riding the 'handmade' or 'Made in India' wave right now. The interest has shot up in both making and purchasing

ADIL WRITER
Ceramic artist

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Amidst the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and croissants, fitness and cycling enthusiasts gathered at Ciclo café for a rendezvous with ultra cyclist Marko Baloh. With rapt attention, they delved into the narrative of a man, who has conquered the unfathomable: completing the legendary Race Across America (RAAM) an astounding nine times.

"I heard about RAAM in the early 1990s when I saw a documentary. When you first hear about it, you either think these people are crazy, or you think this is fun and that maybe you can do it," Marko says, laughing. Marko first attempted the ultra-distance cycling race in 2003 after facing roadblocks, which included a lack of sponsors, and a health setback.

To be able to participate in RAAM, a cyclist has to do a qualifier race. Today, there are a number of different races across the world that act as qualifiers such as the Race Across Ireland, Race Across Paris, and India's Deccan Cliffhanger. However, back then qualifying races were only held in the US. "It was expensive and time consuming, but if you qualified, you would get an



It's all about the bike

Ultra cyclist Marko Baloh, a nine-time conqueror of the Race Across America, led a 100-kilometre ride in Chennai



Spokes of change Marko Baloh's (left) 100-kilometre ride on the outskirts of Chennai. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

invitation to participate in RAAM for the next three years," he explains.

In 2006, Marko successfully completed the race as a solo rider for the first time, finishing second in the enduro category. "I thought I was done and checked it off my bucket list. I then met Tomaz Percic, and he convinced me to participate again as a two-person team. I'm from Ljubljana, Slovenia, and he was from Celje which is approximately 70 kilometres away. In preparation, we would cycle halfway to each other, meet for coffee, and then go back to work," he recalls. In 2008, Marko and Tomaz were the first team from Slovenia to participate in RAAM, and they went on to win first place in the two-person team category.

After that, Marko competed in RAAM six more times – 2009, 2011, 2013, 2016, 2017,

and in 2019, when he set the world record in the 50-59 years category. "I'm guessing 2019 was my last, but if someone would write me a cheque today and ask if I wanted to go, I would probably go," he says.

Marko's visit to Chennai was not confined to inspiring cycling enthusiasts in the city. It extended to the serene outskirts at SOL Fitness Resorts, where he conducted a three-day cycling workshop. He also led a 100-kilometre open ride with 45 other cyclists from the city.

"I cannot imagine my life without cycling. If I'm not racing, I'm following the races, supporting one of my clients, and coaching others," he says, recalling how the longest he has spent without his bike has been the two weeks he was in the Canary Islands for his honeymoon.

STEPOUT

Festival by the sea

The One People Festival is a two-day celebration of music, dance and games that will take place in Mamallapuram. With over 100 artistes performing across various stages with live art, camping, star-gazing, food trucks, art installations, flea markets, beach games, and more, the event promises to be an immersive experience for participants. Thaikudam Bridge, Gowwli, Joint by the Sea, Shrini, SZN TWO, Prithivee, Sam Shroff, V-vek, Kishy, Blwr and Eash are some of the bands that will be performing. At the venue, there will be a play zone for children where games and workshops (art, craft, skating and so on) will be conducted for free.

@Chariot Beach Resort, Mamallapuram, February 10 and 11, 10am onwards. Entry charges from ₹1,170 onwards for both days.

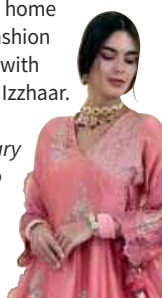
The call of spring

An array of designers from across India will participate at the Arti Bagdy Fashion Collezione (ABFC) Spring edition. ABFC has curated work by designers like Karpas Stories, 1231 Studio, and Parinie Designs. Designer Prashant Chouhan from Kolkata brings forth a harmonious blend of traditional craftsmanship and modern silhouettes. Handloom sarees by Label Gouthami Balchandra will be on display. Also, home decor becomes a fashion accessory at ABFC, with Studio Pottery and Izzhaar. @Hyatt Regency, Teynampet, February 14 and 15, 11am to 8pm. Entry is free. For details, 9841246901



Choral concert

The Emmanuel Methodist Church Alumni Choir will sing at a thanksgiving service at St Mary's church (Fort St George) at 6pm on February 11. Dr Kalyan Subramaniam will conduct the choir and Rev Cecil Clements will deliver a talk. All are invited. @Fort St George, February 11, 6pm.



A video of an elephant charging at a tourist in Kerala, has sparked off a debate on the unruly behaviour of people traversing through forests. Experts weigh in with solutions



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It happens in a matter of seconds: an elephant swiftly crosses the road, and charges at a tourist; he is under its feet for a heart-stopping moment. Then he scrambles to safety.

The viral video clip, shot recently at Muthanga in Kerala, has kick-started a conversation on the behaviour of tourists travelling through forest roads. Very often, drama unfolds along routes running through Indian forests: while some people prefer to look at wildlife from a respectful distance, others like to get close to the animal, often to take a picture, unaware of the dangers involved.

“People have no business getting off their vehicle on forest roads,” says M Ananda Kumar, a scientist with Nature Conservation Foundation, who has been working on mitigating man-elephant conflict in places such as Valparai in Tamil Nadu and Hassan in Karnataka for over a decade.

“No elephant wants to want kill people. It only does a mock

The elephant on the road

charge when they get too close to it,” he says. He adds that tourists tend to click photos of the animals they encounter. “But elephants do not like cameras. The sounds can irritate them,” he says.

Ananda Kumar says that people who enter forest areas in their vehicles should do so with a certain preparedness. “They must keep in mind that there is always a lurking danger.”

Coimbatore-based wildlife enthusiast and self-taught elephant tracker M Abraham Antony Raj, has been documenting elephants in the forests of Anaikatti, Sathyamangalam, and Kotagiri for 18 years now. “Such unruly behaviour began with the advent of mobile phones and selfies,” he says, adding that this is particularly rampant in



the forest areas around Sathyamangalam. “So many tourists try to shoot [Instagram] reels with elephants in them,” he rues.

Abraham has noticed that the behaviour of elephants tends to change due to such encounters. He particularly recalls an incident consisting a herd of four at Kotagiri. “There is a tusker among them, who

until three years ago, was quite gentle. Once, a bus driver drove up very close behind him, applying the brakes inches from him. The elephant, left without a choice, turned back to break the windshield. The driver then reversed the bus,” he says.

This action and reaction has remained with the elephant. Now, Abraham says that the tusker has routinely started attacking vehicles that come too close.

Tusker traits
What can be done to mitigate this problem? “Awareness among tourists is key,” says Abraham who volunteers in forest areas to speak with visitors on the dos and don’ts inside forests. “I’ve also created a WhatsApp group to send out informative videos,” he adds.

The Tamil Nadu Forest Department is doing its bit by deploying patrol teams at

Look out! (Clockwise from far left) An elephant crosses a road in Assam; at Thadagam, Coimbatore; a signboard on the Mettupalayam - Udhagamandalam Road. RITU RAJ KONWAR, M ABRAHAM ANTONY RAJ AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

regular intervals. Says S Ramasubramanian, Field Director of the Anamalai Tiger Reserve, “We have teams that keep a regular watch on the road leading to Valparai since there are Nilgiri tahr in the region. There are also teams at elephant crossing zones on the road leading to Munnar, as well as the road leading to Ooty that elephants sometimes tend to take.” He adds that the Department also has a camera surveillance system.

According to Raman Sukumar, an authority on Asian elephants with four decades of experience studying the animals, people entering forests should be warned against getting off their vehicles right at the entry point. He says, “NGOs can be roped in for this exercise. There should be regular patrolling by the Forest Department so that when people indulge in such behaviour, they are booked.”

Raman has travelled to sanctuaries around the world and says that tourists are more disciplined elsewhere, especially in places such as South Africa. “Elephant behaviour is largely shaped by the history of its interaction with its environment,” he says. “These are behaviours that are transmitted culturally within families. If a mother exhibits certain behaviour, her children are more likely to acquire the same.”

It all boils down to doing what is best for the animal when we are in their territory. “The most important thing is to respect the animal. They are not objects,” says Ananda. “We talk about our privacy being invaded when someone tries to take our picture, it is the same for an animal.”

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Across

- 1 Retreat (8)
- 5 Grow weary (4)
- 9 Tourist island in the Bay of Naples (5)
- 10 Winding (7)
- 11 Bramley, say (7,5)
- 13 Period of time in office (6)
- 14 Trap-spinner (6)
- 17 Permanent (12)
- 20 Boost (7)
- 21 Mousy (5)
- 22 Lowest bass wind instrument (4)
- 23 Dressy clothing (4,4)

Down

- 1 Cord in a candle (4)
- 2 Proceeding from the general to the particular (3-4)
- 3 Being behind the wheel and under the influence (5-7)
- 4 Go with (6)
- 6 Respite (3-2)
- 7 Contraptions (8)
- 8 Thwarted (12)
- 12 Most stuffy (8)



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

- 15 Mid-meal (anag) — quandary (7)
- 16 Harrowing experience (6)
- 18 Addition treatment (5)
- 19 Likelihood of something happening (4)

Solution will appear in MetroPlus dated February 15, 2024.

Solution No. 13570

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Wedding bells

At Vimoni's upcoming pop up, Hyderabad-based jewellery brand Vasundhara will showcase its collection. Vasundhara has a diverse range, which includes wedding jewellery and finely crafted pieces adorned with vibrant colours. The pop up will have a selection of high-fashion and traditional jewellery, ideal for luxurious weddings and for the festive season.

@Hyatt Regency, Teynampet, February 13, 11am to 7pm. For details, call 9820043549

Tell-tale traditions

Explore the impact of storytelling at the Chennai Storytelling Festival all month long from the comfort of your home

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Margaret Atwood, the author of the dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, said, “You’re never going to kill storytelling, because it’s built in the human plan. We come with it.” The act of telling and listening to stories has been well documented. The Vedas, the *Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Mahabharata* are a testament to this.

One such epic is the Tamil text *Silappathikaram*, which is the tragic love story of an ordinary couple, Kannagi and Kovalan, who have become larger-than-life characters in the world of Tamil culture.

“When I first came to India in 1988, I was a scholar of this epic. I went to Poompuhar and walked in the footsteps of Kannagi all the way to Madurai, then wrote a book about it and presented the first copy to late Chief Minister [MK] Karunanidhi,” says Eric Miller, founder, World Storytelling Institute.

Eric, who is originally from New York, USA, founded the storytelling institute with his wife Magdalene Jeyarathnam, director of East West Center for Counselling and Training in 2007 at Chennai. Soon after that, he began hosting storytelling workshops. The Indian Storyteller’s Network was also set up by Eric along with Geeta Ramanujam, who is the founder of Kathalaya, an academy of storytelling based in Bengaluru. The network currently has 125 members from around the country, of which 58 belong to Chennai.

In 2011, the first edition of Chennai Storytelling Festival



A sea of stories The Chennai Storytellers group with Eric Miller, founder of the World Storytelling Institute. SANGITA RAJAN

(CSF) was launched and storytellers from all over India came to attend the various sessions. “For the first seven years, the festival was held in Chennai and only a few sessions were held via video conferencing,” says Eric, adding that he was adept in introducing video conferencing since the early 1990s to include more people into this world.

The theme for this year's CSF is personal growth and maturing

The CSF has been held in February every year since 2011. Sessions have been conducted every weekend for free. Those who are interested can join via Zoom. The theme for this year’s CSF is personal growth and maturing and in line with this theme, sessions on exploring stories through a critical lens; creating songs that tell stories; ways to use a story; and storytelling to heal after the loss of a loved one; will be

held until February 25.

While most of the sessions are virtual, two storytelling sessions will be held in a hybrid mode where the audience can physically be present for a more immersive experience. The first session will be held on February 10 at Goethe Institute, Rutland Gate, Nungambakkam, and the second will be held on February 24 at East West Center for Counselling, Pycrofts Garden Road.

These sessions will play host to storytellers from different parts of the world – Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Romania, Kenya, New Zealand and more. The sessions will be followed by discussions with audience members.

The Chennai Storytelling Festival is being held through the month of February every weekend (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday). Log on to storytellinginstitute.org for the schedule and more information.

Lessons from the wild The beetle is the subtext in the story; (below) Yuvan Aves. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

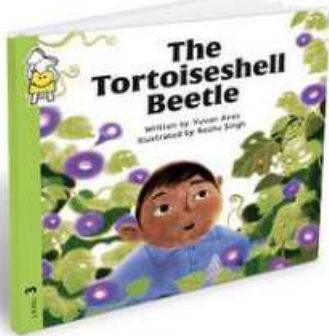
Yuvan Aves’ latest book for children, *The Tortoiseshell Beetle*, draws from Nature as a learning space like no other

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One monsoon day, Rohith goes for a walk with his teacher by a lake, near his school. She leads him into the world of ants, palm swifts, and frogs; Rohith watches, his eyes wide: for the first time, he finds something that resonates with him. This idea forms the crux of naturalist Yuvan Aves’ latest story for children, *The Tortoiseshell Beetle* (published by Pratham).

This is Yuvan’s third book for children. He is also working on a collection of essays on Nature-based learning pedagogy for teachers and parents.

“Nature is an inclusive learning space,” feels Yuvan,



who is also an educator working with five Government schools and a private Montessori school in Chennai. “Children learn in different ways: they need movement, and multiple sensorial

connections. A natural learning space frees the child by developing these innate capacities.”

In this story illustrated by Reshu Singh, a child struggles to “see the meaning of things” in a conventional schooling system. “But the natural world helps his intrinsic curiosity blossom,” Yuvan adds. The tortoiseshell beetle, which the little boy comes across, is the subtext in the story. Yuvan says that the larva of the beetle is hairy, and “can seem hideous to the human eye”. He adds, “No one can guess that it can turn into something beautiful.”



Beetles, he explains, have cases for their wings. The tortoiseshell beetle has a beautiful transparent wing case. “They look like little spaceships flying around,” Yuvan adds. He draws a parallel between these beetles and children. “When someone is young, you have no idea of the extraordinary people they’ll turn out to be.” All they need, he feels, is a space for them to blossom. “The natural world is such a space,” says Yuvan, adding that ultimately, if children grow up reading such stories, “they will stand-up for these species and the living world around them”.

The Tortoiseshell Beetle is available for reading on storyweaver.org.in. It will be available in print in April.

The silk route

Tamil Nadu State Supply and Marketing Society is organising a National Silk Expo where several varieties of handloom (silk and cotton) saris and

textiles from different weaving clusters across the country will be on display. Visitors can shop for saris, fabrics, apparel, home linen and accessories. Sequin work blouse materials, yokes for dresses and various other fashion

accessories will also be on display.

@Annai Teresa Complex, Nungambakkam. On till February 15, 11am to 9pm. Entry is free. For details call 9412258826.



A 40-foot installation modelled after a dreamcatcher at Lady Andal School melds science, art and architecture

relatable to the pedagogy as well,” adds the artist, whose penchant for dots and pixels is no news.

The scale of the installation also calls for novel ways of interpretation. “The idea is that as the students go higher up in classes, they discover something new in their dreamcatcher,” says Parvathi. Setting it up involved immense plotting, says the artist. The sizes and placement of each disc had to be carefully measured to create the complex, but meticulous web currently on display. The way sunlight hits the installation on each floor lends it a luminescent quality.

“One of my favourite discs depicts sound or water waves that originate from a single red dot,” says Parvathi.

The artist sat with the faculty before conceptualising the piece to understand the IB programme better. "It would be fun for me to sit with the teachers and discuss ways in which they can make this come alive with the students," says the artist. "The school should also be acknowledged for thinking about how art could be integrated into its architecture," says Parvathi.

Conquering the sheer scale of the artwork was challenging. “I had to think of a way that is relevant to the site, one that speaks to pedagogy, both aesthetically and physically,” continues Parvathi.

The interactivity of the structure is important to its functionality. Concludes Parvathi, “When children are exposed to the arts in their cognitive years, it changes them; it is a tool to expand their way of thinking. Art is empathetic. It encourages them to see the world in their own special way.”

Sangamam 2024 aims to spotlight ancient textile traditions, modern techniques and artistic talent

Chennai will play host to Sangamam: Revisting The Art Of Handweaving and Natural Dyeing, a global conference presented by the Women's Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (WICCI) Handloom Council on February 9 and 10.

The focus will be on sharing and gaining knowledge from heritage conservationists and practitioners of the craft of handloom and natural dyeing.

Participants will attend



Delving deep
The conference will host workshops on indigo dyeing, block printing, cotton spinning, and more. GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

interactive workshops,
panel discussions and get
hands-on experience on
natural dyeing.

Visitors can shop authentic handwoven textiles, dyed fabrics, and traditional crafts from

around the world at the
bazaar on both days.

*@Hyatt Regency, Teynampet.
February 9 and 10, 8.30am to
5pm. Entry is free. For details
call 9940665588.*

In true weekday spirit, the corridors of the new wing of the Lady Andal Venkatasubba Rao Matriculation School, built around a towering banyan tree, are alive with activity.

These corridors also lead one's eye to what seem to be circular discs with coloured dots suspended in air. A closer look takes us to a 40-foot vertical installation titled *Dreamcatcher*, by Chennai-based visual artist Parvathi Nayar.

The artwork, which climbs across four floors lends a different perspective each time one looks at it. An abstraction of the run-of-the-mill dreamcatcher, the structure comprises over 120 circular discs, each carrying the artist's interpretation of a concept or idea through colourful dots. Each disc is a puzzle in itself,

INFINITE DREAMS

and invites interaction.

The interpreted ideas are a mixture of the sciences, the arts and concepts from the IB (International Baccalaureate) programme the students are a part of. Here, everything from a contemporary take on the traditional *kolam* to the concept of recycling, renewable energy, cloud computing and even Van Gogh can be seen.

"I invite the students to open it out and see it in multiple ways. The fun thing is for

them to decode it," says the artist who has been working on the installation for eight months.

While sketching and drawing, the idea of a crocheted dreamcatcher struck the artist. The base of the structure in each floor is an abstraction of designs often found in a dreamcatcher. "Part of it is also 'form follows function'. The installation was not shoe-horned into the structure, rather space was left for it. The next question was how can I use dots in a way that is





Sankara

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Let's Start!



S SHIVA RAJ

Back at the wicket

Vishnu Vishal on starring in *Lal Salaam* and why he isn't worried about the opening-day collections of this film

Bhuvanesh Chander

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You feel a tug at your heartstrings when cricketer-turned-actor Vishnu Vishal says that he stopped watching cricket as it could trigger all that he carries for letting his dream go. “Somewhere, in a corner of my heart, it’s still there because I had invested almost

15 years of my life in cricket,” says Vishnu. It is common knowledge that Vishnu’s segue to cinema came following an injury that ended his cricketer career. Fortunately, Vishnu has made peace with how his life has turned out, and with the cricketer who still lives in him. “I believe it was the cricketer who helped the actor in me evolve. If I have survived for over 15 years in cinema, it is because of all the lessons I learnt playing

cricket. For instance, cricket teaches you how to come back from adversity because sometimes you might be on a purple patch, but lose your form all of a sudden.” He also wonders if he would have been the first choice to play a cricketer, in his upcoming political sports drama *Lal Salaam*, had he not been a cricketer to begin with. “This is also why I believe that nothing goes to waste in life provided you do it with dedication. It isn’t



Through sports, you can drive home a message in an engaging fashion. It helps if you keep sports at the centre of something and build a story around it

VISHNU VISHAL

restricted to cricket; my MBA degree has definitely helped me in administration as a producer.” *Lal Salaam*, directed by Aishwarya Rajinikanth and co-starring Vikranth, brings together both of Vishnu’s passions – cricket and cinema – to drive home a social message. “Through sports, you can drive home the message in an engaging fashion because sports itself is an engaging activity; that’s why sports dramas leave you with a high. It helps if you keep sports at the centre of something and build a story around it,” says the *Vennila Kabadi Kuzhu* actor. However, Vishnu is at such a crucial point in his career that a film being a cricket drama is not enough to convince the actor in him. A lot is riding on his shoulders already. The actor has been stressing about how he looks at this post-2022 phase as the second inning of his film career.

Step ahead

Lal Salaam is a big step forward, but the film being a dual-hero project would not have been easy for Vishnu to sign on, given his history with multi-starrers; 40 minutes of his portions were cut off from his 2021 Tamil-Telugu film, *Kaadan*. “This time, I wanted to be clear. I didn’t want to lose out on a good story just because

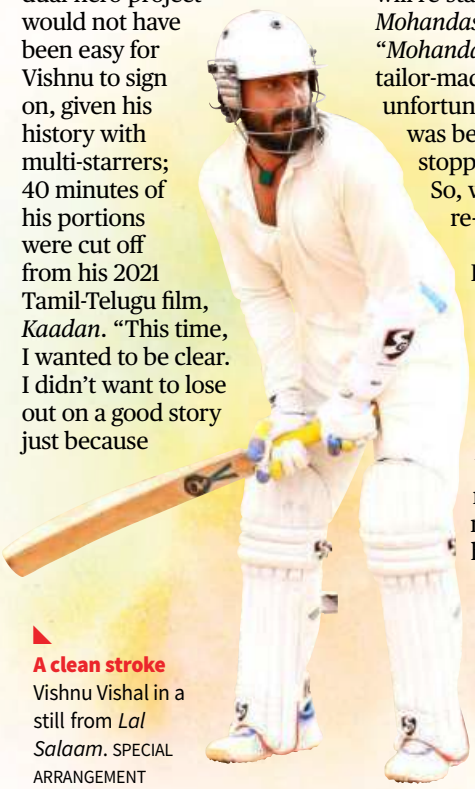
it’s a multi-starrer so I ensured that I prevented whatever went wrong in those earlier films from happening again.” However, all that said, it was not the role or the scale or cricket that made him seal the deal for *Lal Salaam*. “When they informed me that Rajinikanth sir is doing a cameo, doing *Lal Salaam* became a no-brainer. Acting with Rajini sir is a dream for many, yes, but acting as a hero under his wing was a huge opportunity that I couldn’t pass on.” Vishnu says he was eager to see how Aishwarya would bring in those ‘Rajini’ elements that fans naturally expect in his films. “Aishwarya has done a good job at that. I am very confident the film will satisfy the expectations of Rajini sir’s fans as well.”

Usually for Vishnu, on days inching towards the release of the film, anxiety tends to set in on how the film would perform on the opening day. “Throughout my career, this is how my Fridays used to be – I would get a small opening; more people would choose to go to the afternoon shows; evening shows would see more crowd and night shows would usually go full... and then we don’t have to worry about Saturdays and Sundays.” This time, he need not worry about the opening day collections. He says, “There’s a huge force that will bring in all the footfalls – Rajinikanth – so I can go to bed peacefully.”

After *Lal Salaam*, Vishnu will re-start working on *Mohandas*, a mystery thriller. “*Mohandas* was a film tailor-made for streaming but unfortunately, just as the film was being readied, OTTs stopped buying movies. So, we are now re-editing it.”

A film with Ram Kumar of *Raatsasan* fame and *Aaryan*, a cop film, are next in his line-up. Vishnu says, “These next few years will either break me or make me. I am preparing myself for the long haul; my approach has changed and I am very clear with what I want to do.”

Lal Salaam releases in theatres on February 9



A clean stroke
Vishnu Vishal in a still from *Lal Salaam*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Singing star

Aditi Rao Hydari, who will be seen in *Heeramandi* and *Lioness*, on her avatar as a singer in Tamil independent track, ‘Please Purinjukko’

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Before the Tamil film *Katru Veliyidai* hit screens in 2017, there was a lot of talk about its female protagonist Aditi Rao Hydari. Not just because of her looks or the fact that she was cast in an important Mani Ratnam film, but also due to how she attracted crowds with her voice. During the promotion of the film, she would break impromptu into the melodious ‘Vaan Varuvaan’ number, leaving quite an impression. Cut to 2023, and Aditi Rao Hydari – apart from acting in a handful of films in various languages – is also turning heads with her music.

Her latest outing as a singer, the recently-released techno-pop track ‘Please Purinjukko’, saw her teaming up with composer Sean Roldan and lyricist Vignesh Shivan for *Coke Studio Tamil* Season 2. ‘Please Purinjukko’, which mirrors the nature of relationships in today’s fast-paced world, marks Aditi’s foray into the independent music space. “When I go in to sing, I have only one request: I don’t want to be auto-tuned. I want whoever is making me sing to be happy with my delivery. I have grown up with so much good music that I feel I have cheated if

my voice has to undergo an auto-tune process.” Sean roped in Siddharth to croon a number in Tamil film *Lover* and has worked with Aditi in ‘Please Purinjukko’. Does actors lending their voice to a project add value to it? “A lot of our greatest actors can sing and dance, and every scene requires some kind of musicality. It is important that actors are complete that way. Having said that, it is not about actors massaging their ego; it’s about adding value to the film,” says Aditi. When Aditi got into movies, her scene was to work with Mani Ratnam and Sanjay Leela Bhansali. Mani roped her in in 2017 and Bhansali has cast her in upcoming web-series *Heeramandi*. “It’s a dream come true for me to be working with Sanjay Leela Bhansali, and you will know more about this project soon,” she says. Aditi also has director Kishore Belekara’s *Gandhi Talks*, a silent film that also stars Vijay Sethupathi, and director Rajesh Selva’s Tamil film, a thriller based on a female protagonist. She is looking forward to starting work on her Indo-UK co-production *Lioness*, directed by Kajri Babbar. “It’s about two women, two centuries apart and how their lives impact each other. I try to keep my work as exciting as possible.”



On song Aditi Rao Hydari. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Season of love

As Valentine’s Day draws nearer, it’s time to celebrate love. *Love Storiyaan*, a six-part chronicle of real-life love stories, conceptualised by Somen Mishra, is set to premiere on Prime Video. The stories will be directed by six directors – Akshay Indikar, Archana Phadke, Collin D’Cunha, Hardik Mehta, Shazia Iqbal, and Vivek Soni. A Dharmatic Entertainment Production, *Love Storiyaan* is inspired by stories featured on India Love Project, a social media community founded by former journalists Priya Ramani, Samar Halarnkar, and Niloufer Venkatraman.



Anurag’s new avatar

Hindi filmmaker Anurag Kashyap is set to make his Malayalam debut. He will star as the antagonist in Aashiq Abu’s *Rifle Club*. Suhas and Sharfu, who wrote the Fahadh Faasil-starrer *Varathan*, has written the screenplay along with Dileesh Karunakaran for *Rifle Club*, which has Soubin Shahir and Dileesh Pothan in lead roles. While Anurag is awaiting the theatrical release of his next directorial, *Kennedy*, Aashiq’s previous work was *Neelavelicham*, an adaptation of Vaikom Muhammad Basheer’s story.



Polls apart
Actors Jiiva and Mammootty in a still from *Yatra 2*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



The results are out

Actor Jiiva on playing Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy in Telugu film *Yatra 2*

shoot was how it all began. “A couple of years ago, I purchased new cameras and lights, and did a photoshoot, which was shared on my Instagram account. A week later, Gnanavel Raja (producer, Studio Green) got in touch. He knew Mahi V Raghav, director of *Yatra 2*. I learnt that the photographs made the director consider me in the role of YS Jagan.” Jiiva had two concerns – he did not know Telugu and was

hesitant about portraying a present-day political leader. He sought the advice of Mammootty, who had played the late Chief Minister of undivided Andhra Pradesh, YS Rajasekhara Reddy in *Yatra*. “Mammootty sir told me, ‘why not? We are actors. We might act as a politician in one film, a cop in the next and maybe a murderer in another. That does not mean we are a politician, cops or a murderer’. That took the

pressure off my shoulders.” Apart from the physicality and the language, Jiiva also had to understand the character’s psyche. The actor never met the AP Chief Minister but the ample video footage helped. “Mahi’s story is about a father, son, a promise and how people connect with both the father and the son. A predominant reference point was *The Godfather 2*, in terms of the tone of the narrative. I also

found the conflict points interesting, like in *The Godfather* series and *Thevar Magan*.” Jiiva also recently launched Deaf Frogs, which he describes as a music label and a content company that will design projects, take up marketing and promotions of films, and more. The label released its first music video last week and Jiiva says plans are on to tap emerging indie artists from South India and eventually other regions. “There are several talented artistes and Deaf

Frogs can help them make new connections. We will come up with indie music videos and promotional videos for films.” Music is the starting point for Deaf Frogs, says Jiiva. “In art, you need to begin somewhere. In Tamil cinema, I have witnessed how the making of a film used to begin with music.” Since its launch, more indie music artistes are expressing interest, says Jiiva. “This is a start and we are keen to see how things shape up.”

