



# metro PLUS

THE HINDU

**Meet the Lama family from Chennai**  
that keeps Chinese New Year traditions alive **P2**

**THIS AMERICAN SPENT 20 YEARS LEARNING TAMIL P4**



**How director Magizh Thirumeni shaped the content of Ajith's upcoming *Vidaamuyarchi***

## By time and toil

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**F**ilmmaker Magizh Thirumeni seems to have quite a time making his much-awaited film *Vidaamuyarchi*. It all began when the director, best known for making gritty action thrillers like *Thadam*, *Thadaiyara Thaakka*, *Meaghann*, and *Kalaga Thalaivan*, got his long-dreamt call to direct Ajith Kumar. "When Suresh Chandra (Ajith's manager) said I was directing sir's next film, I was stunned for a few seconds. Then I got a call from Ajith sir who in his iconic baritone voice, said



**Race on** Ajith in *Vidaamuyarchi*; (below) director Magizh Thirumeni. S SHIVA RAJ AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

something I will never forget: 'Magizh, trust me blindly.' To this moment, the trust has been intact."

Magizh's eyes light up when he explains how in a surprising turn of events, the star wished for them to collaborate on a story idea he had. So, for the first time in his career, Magizh agreed to direct a film with the agreement that he would execute somebody else's vision.

### A realistic action film

From all the speculations rife on the internet, you might suspect that the source material is the 1997 Kurt Russel-starrer *Breakdown*. While he cannot speak about the same yet, Magizh believes the two-and-a-half-hour runtime of *Vidaamuyarchi* should answer your doubts on whether they adapted the 93-minute *Breakdown*.

"There's a lot of original material in this story," he asserts. Of course, this means that the director had to have altered his ways for the film to suit Ajith Kumar's stardom, right? Magizh indicates the opposite. "While this is not a 100% Magizh Thirumeni film, it wouldn't be 100% the kind of films Ajith sir's fans are eager to see," he says.

In a move long due for Ajith, the superstar will be seen as a common man and "not a larger-than-life hero who can bash up 50 guys in an instant."

*Vidaamuyarchi*, from how he puts it, seems far removed from the traditional commercial formula. "What amazes me is that this A-lister has the guts to choose a script in which he plays a common man, tackling huge issues with common man powers and not superhero powers."

This, of course, does not mean that it is a 100% experimental film, he clarifies. "It's just that it isn't that typical mass masala film with

hero introduction shots and punch dialogues."

Ajith, Magizh adds, was opposed to making the film in the conventional commercial cinema language. "He struck down anything 'massy' and said, 'No, we are not doing that kind of a film. We are making a very sensible film.' Wishing for the audiences to enter theatres without preconceived notions, the filmmaker is confident that this is the kind of film audiences will go home and ruminate about. Magizh even hints that *Vidaamuyarchi* has Ajith questioning his own stardom. "He has challenged his larger-than-life image at every given opportunity."

But why is a superstar of his stature choosing to do this at the peak of his career? "I believe the answer lies in his respect for the audience. How long do we feed them films that are far removed



**When the film, originally slotted to release on Pongal, got pushed, Ajith told me: 'Magizh, don't feel bad. So what if our film doesn't release on a festival day? The day of our film's release will become a festive day.'**

MAGIZH THIRUMENI

from reality? They expect good, sensible movies."

The project is also Ajith's response to all the misogyny women are subjected to in our society, adds Magizh. "He said, 'All stories have been told from a masculine point of view; let's shake it up and question it.' He told all of us that this would be one of the most remarkable films in our careers."

### Coming up

Having started his career with a romance film (2010's *Mundhinam Paarthney*) and done only actioners or suspense thrillers since then, Magizh says he wishes to explore other genres. "I want to do films in all genres. Every script I write comes out with lots of humour; I then keep striking all that humour out. I also want to do a romance film. In fact, Trisha (the female lead of *Vidaamuyarchi*) was saying that I should do an out-and-out romance film," he says. Magizh adds, "Only genres that redefine themselves after a point of time survive in the long run. Action as a genre has existed right from the silent film era. In every era, an action filmmaker would redefine the genre. When people are tired of watching the same star-driven extravaganzas, a filmmaker would arise to do something innovative within that format." He hopes his next film – a commercial actioner – will show audiences that even larger-than-life extravaganzas can be realistic. "Those films are getting made in Europe and the US. Our audiences don't want mindless rehashes of age-old clichés. The audiences have evolved. It is time the filmmakers evolve as well."

*Vidaamuyarchi* hits screens on February 6



To watch video interview, scan the QR code

PHOTO: AKHILA ESWARAN

**Get, set, go!**  
A race in progress;  
flamingoes  
at the lagoon.  
B JOTHI  
RAMALINGAM  
AND SPECIAL  
ARRANGEMENT



## Call of the catamaran

**The 14th Pulicat Day celebrations will focus on creating awareness on the lagoon**

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**T**he Pulicat kattumaram is unique to the region. Made by securing four logs of wood together, it is still being used to catch crabs by people from the Enadhi tribe. Wooden catamarans, however, have long been replaced by fibreboats across the coast of Chennai. Over 45 teams from five panchayats in Pulicat are set to race on their catamarans at

the 14th Pulicat Day celebrations in the historic port town, 50 kilometres from Chennai.

Organised by the Art & Architecture Research Development & Education [AARDE] Foundation, the event is being supported by the Tamil Nadu Government's Tourism Department. "This year, the event is bigger," says Xavier Benedict, founder-trustee of the NGO that is involved in the promotion and conservation of Pulicat lagoon. Among the chief attractions of the day-long

event is the catamaran race that is set to begin at 3.30pm. Xavier says that the idea behind the race, that is held every year as part of the celebrations, is to create awareness on the condition of the lagoon.

### Call to action

"Kattumarams tend to hit the bottom since the depth of the lagoon is reducing due to sedimentation," says Xavier adding, "It will be nice to have some government action on this issue." He points out that

sedimentation is caused by man-made and natural reasons. "Three rivers join the Pulicat lagoon," he says: "Any river should meet the sea; but dams and culverts across these rivers have reduced their flow and the brackish nature of the water." Sand accumulation from villages and pollution have added to the problem. "If rivers flow continuously, the lagoon is deepened. This action, however, is not taking place, especially over the last five to six years."

Xavier says that the deeper the lagoon, the better the rains for the State from the Northeast monsoon. "Tamil Nadu depends on this monsoon," he points out. Coastal lagoons play a crucial role in attracting moisture to aid in a good monsoon. If their depth is reduced, the entire ecosystem will suffer.

This is why NGOs such as the AARDE Foundation are creating awareness on the lagoon, the second largest brackish water body in India. Activities on Pulicat Day will focus on sensitising people, especially children in and around Pulicat. There will be an eco-quiz with questions themed on the lagoon, and a folk theatre performance in the evening based on Pulicat, by students from Loyola and Pachaiyappa's colleges in Chennai.

*Pulicat Day celebrations start from 11am on January 31 with a chess tournament. The catamaran race and street play are open to the public. For details, call 9003546872.*



## Connect the spokes

The Chennai Cycling Thiruvizha celebrates the city's thriving cycling community

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**T**he Chennai Cycling Thiruvizha is a carnival dedicated to all things cycling. This annual event brings together cyclists, the general public, and businesses, creating a space to engage and learn. Organised by Chennai Cyclists, one of the largest cycling clubs in the city, the event highlights the benefits of cycling for health, fitness, and sustainable urban living.

Chennai Cyclists was founded in 2012 by a small group of five to six enthusiasts. Today, the community has grown to over 21,000 members and 16 chapters across Chennai, with daily early morning rides for both fitness seekers and leisure cyclists.

The day-long carnival features a variety of engaging activities and workshops. There will be competitions for both children and

adults, and discussions on cycling, health, and fitness led by experts. A dedicated race for children aged eight to 12 will also introduce them to the thrill of competition.

A flea market at the venue will allow participants to buy and sell old or unused bicycles, equipment, and cycling gear. Throughout the day, attendees can enjoy performances by stand-up comedians and musicians from the city at the open mic stage. A showcase of cycle brands, accessories, and essentials will also be at the venue.

Additionally, presentations will be made to city planners and policymakers, addressing ways to make Chennai's roads more cyclist-friendly.

The event is powered by *The Hindu* Made of Chennai.

*@The MCC School, Chetpet, on February 2, 9am to 5pm. Entry is free, but registration is required. To participate, register at [cct.chennaicyclists.com](http://cct.chennaicyclists.com).*



A

**Nurturing roots** Members of the Lama family celebrate Chinese New Year with several offerings at the altar including envelopes of cash. S SHIVA RAJ



## Meet the owners of Kim Ling, a

28-year-old hidden gem in Anna Nagar, among the rare few in Chennai still celebrating Chinese New Year with ancient traditions, a game of cards and varieties of dumplings

# Year of the snake

Sanjana Ganesh

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**I**t is the day before Chinese New Year and luck is in the air. Susan and Julie Lama are standing at the door behind which Kim Ling lies. At this 28-year-old restaurant on Anna Nagar's Second Avenue, they are scurrying to arrange flowers, light agarbattis and finish a small 'puja' before customers arrive. "It is the year of the snake," Julie remarks.

This entrance is full of typical

Indo-Chinese restaurant paraphernalia. There is red plastered on the walls, a large laughing Buddha, Buddhist scrolls and paper lanterns. But at the makeshift altar, where good luck is up for grabs, the two 60-something sisters of Chinese-origin are negotiating for space.

The offerings to god, all plated on small red plastic dishes, include candles, port wine, green tea, dragon fruits, a roast chicken, fish, assorted meat dripping in their own fat and juices, some dry fruits and flowers.

On the left are the coveted red envelopes which will be filled with cash soon. "We call it hóngbāo (in Mandarin). The amount does not have to be large but the money is usually considered very lucky," says Susan, lighting the incense sticks. Her brother-in-law, Peter Lama, holds the candles in his hand, signalling the beginning of the ceremony. A wish is whispered as eyes are tightly shut. The rest of the family emulates the order, praying for an auspicious year.

The first red envelope that Susan remembers receiving is from her family in Calcutta's Chinatown. After her grandparents moved with her parents from China to India in the 1930s, trying to escape two major wars, the families attempted not just to survive but to build booming businesses. They ended up entering the beauty and the

hospitality space. "My father died when I was eight so we had no choice but to begin working. We travelled all over the country – Delhi, Mumbai, Kochi – but we began building our businesses here. After our parlours were a success, we [Susan, Julie and their respective husbands Nima Lama and Peter Lama who were chefs] had saved up enough to begin a small fast food restaurant called Kim Ling in Chetpet. That was quite the hit," says Julie.

Susan adds that her husband wanted distinct names like 'Hong Kong Beauty Parlour' and 'Kim Lings' to ensure quick Chinese association. When the opportunity to expand presented itself, they moved to Anna Nagar, which was sparsely populated in 1997 and

started the first iteration of their current establishment.

"The three Buddhas on the stoop have been there since the very beginning. We only renovated once. Our customers liked rectangular instead of circular tables," says Julie at the dimly lit restaurant. The smell of kung pao chicken wafts through the air and Peter walks out with fried rice in a bamboo shoot. "We were among the first few to do this in Chennai. Our customers love the typical stuff – dragon chicken and momos. The children especially love the lollipop," Julie says.

Over the years, Chennai has drastically transformed in front of their eyes. However, the people have consistently been respectful of them. "We invited the cops at K-4 police station for the opening of our restaurant. They are still kind to us," says Susan. She adds that with the establishment of the metro, wide roads and an enthusiastic youthful population, ready to test new food, they are ready for a new audience. They are yet to be accustomed to the weather but Chennai is home, nevertheless. "I now know enough Tamil to fight with the auto drivers," says Susan, chuckling.

"Earlier, we would take the day off and go on picnics with the staff. We do not do that anymore. Nor is there the popular dragon dance. However, some traditions still exist. Tonight, we will welcome the new year with extended family at home, eating delicious dumplings [chicken, fish, pork], roast meat and merry drinks. We will play cards too. Chinese new year vazhukkal everyone!" Susan concludes.



**Wheels of time** A vintage and classic car show organised by the Historical Cars Association of India back in May 2024. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## Rolling through history

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**T**he Central Motor Vehicles Rules, 1989, classify vehicles older than 50 years as vintage. There are many collectors in India who have, over the decades, honed their skills to maintain these cars and keep them in running condition even after manufacturers stopped producing and servicing them. There are also multiple clubs, associations and museums dedicated to the preservation of these iconic mechanical wonders.

The Historical Cars Association of India (HCAI), is one such organisation that aims to bring together vintage car owners, and build a community based on this common interest. Based in Chennai, they host car rallies and meet-ups on a regular basis. The next big vintage and classic car meetup, titled Heritage Rollers will be held at the Turyaa Hotel, Perungudi, on February 2.

This is the second edition of the event with the first one held in 2023. "This time we have 70 to 80 vintage

and classic cars on display including a handful of Edwardian class cars," says Ranjit Pratap, president, HCAI. An Edwardian class car is a vintage car that was manufactured between 1905 and 1915, while any car that was manufactured after 1950 is labelled a classic car.

Heritage Rollers will display cars of various makes including Mercedes, Cadillac, Lanica, MG, Ford, Buick, Chevrolet, Studebaker and more sourced from across the country.

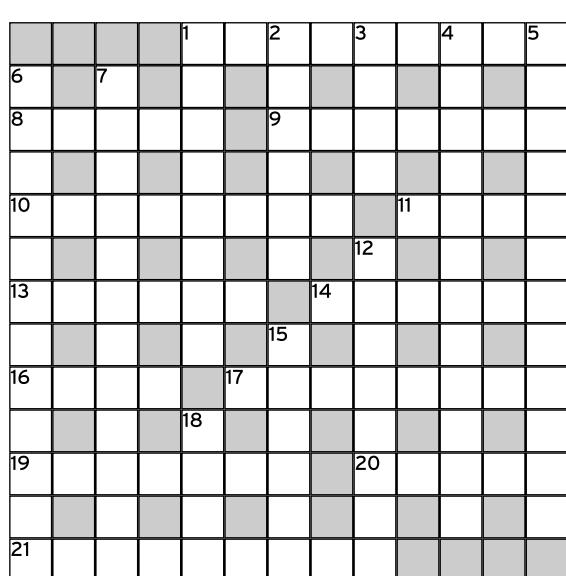
The aim of the gathering is to help car enthusiasts of this generation to embrace the technology and craftsmanship of the yesteryears, says Ranjit. "I have my own garage and I'm here to teach them. There are older mechanics who are skilled and can help as well. They just need to come forward," he adds.

After the display on Sunday, a convoy of 25 to 30 cars will be flagged off in a rally from Chennai to Puducherry on Monday morning. These cars will then be on display at the promenade and open to the public for viewing.

"My intention is to propagate this heritage legacy, because these cars have a lot of character," says Ranjit, adding, "People built them with their hands. Cars today may have a lot of comfort, but they are highly replaceable."

Heritage Rollers will be held on February 2, from 9.30am to 1.30pm at Turyaa Hotel, Perungudi. Entry is free.

### THE GUARDIAN QUICK CROSSWORD-13627



#### Across

- 1 Robert Louis Stevenson 1886 novel (9)
- 8 Pallid (5)
- 9 Cane made from a rattan palm (7)
- 10 Soundly beaten (8)
- 11 Attraction (4)
- 13 Strident (6)
- 14 Gratuitous (6)
- 16 Nautical call (4)
- 17 Glum (8)
- 19 Compartment (7)
- 20 School — entourage (5)
- 21 History of a word (9)
- Down
- 1 Compassion (8)
- 2 Curse (6)
- 3 Friend in need (4)
- 4 Cover the cost (informal) (4,2,3,3)
- 5 Sound of a working phone (8,4)
- 6 Free rein (5,7)
- 7 Have a tantrum (informal) (7)

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Solution will appear in MetroPlus dated February 6, 2025.

**Solution No. 13626**

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#### Parai pioneer

Velu Aasan has won the Padma Shri 2025. MOORTHY G

#### Parai can be played to celebrate every happy event in life, such as birth, a child's coming of age, weddings, and even at funerals

VELU AASAN

brought new life into its beats and feet movements, attracting young men and women to the art form. Today, he teaches in schools and colleges across the State, apart from performing at events and crafting the instrument himself.

His journey was not easy. "My father and uncles played parai; but even then, many relatives, including my mother, did not like to see me play," says Velu. His relatives would ask him not to come anywhere near their homes after playing it since the instrument is associated with funerals, says.

"In my younger years, my hands would keep tapping every flat surface I came across," he says. Bamboo baskets, telephone posts, his head, his tummy, water tanks, hospital stretchers... "My father Ramayya would take me to the movies to teach me the beats from songs," he recalls. "He would tap his thighs following the beats from the screen, and I would repeat after him."

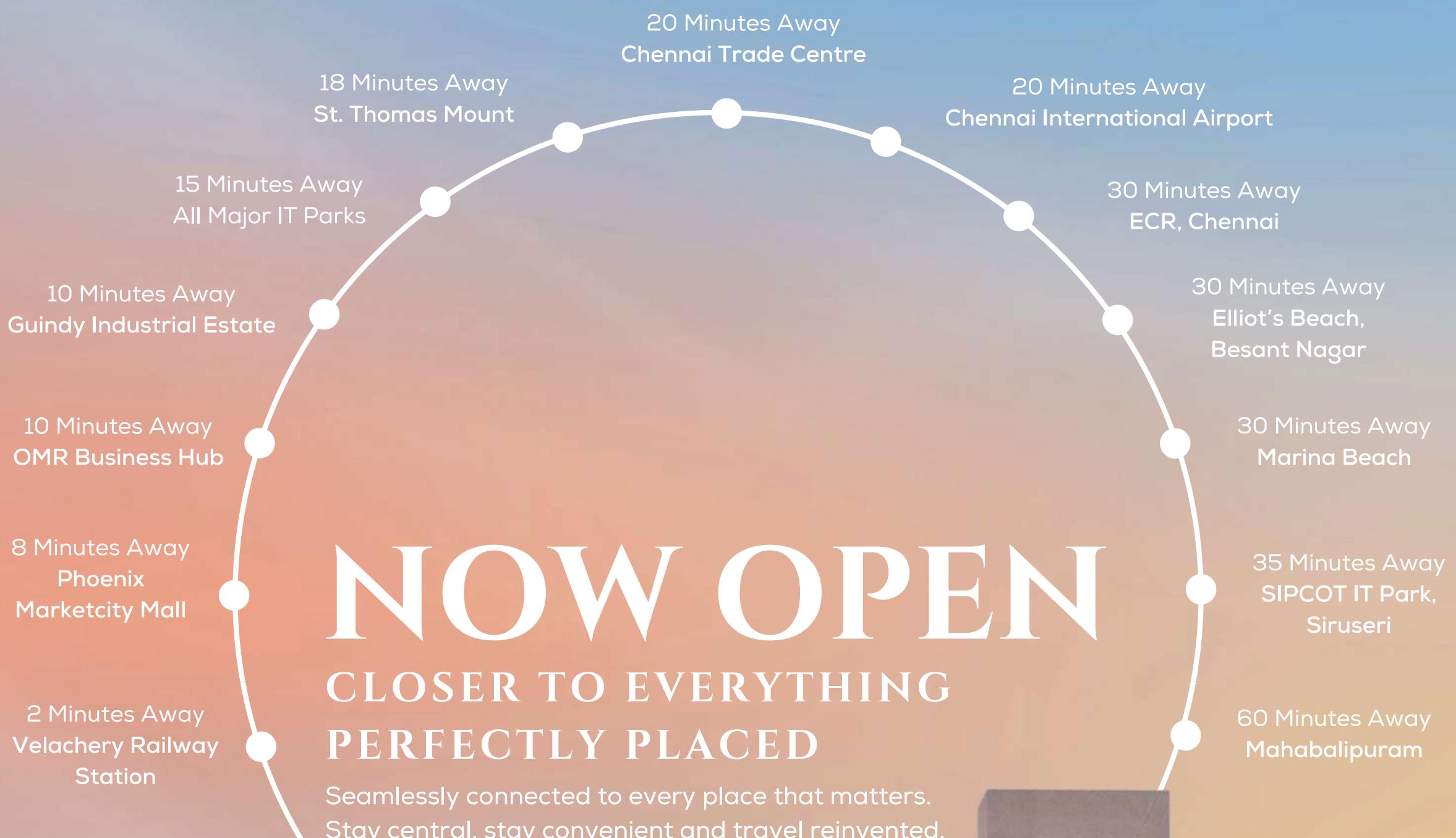
Velu picked up techniques from various vaathiars he came across. He learnt feet movements from the Kattappas in Natham, absorbed the skill of performing with a large troupe in a cramped space from Mariappan and Rasamani from Mattapari. Despite his love for the art form, life forced him to remain out of touch with it for almost eight years.

During this time, Velu did several odd jobs: he was a load man, lift operator and hospital ward boy. "I finally decided to embrace parai: I realised I was doing nothing wrong," says Velu. When Velu first started his own troupe, his chief aim was to ensure his men were paid well. He named his troupe Samar at music director Ilaiyaraaja's office in Chennai when he was there to play for a Tamil film. The parai has taken Velu places – he has played for several Tamil films such as Kumki, Kayal, and the hugely popular 'Madura kulunga' from Subramaniapuram.

Velu says that the parai holds within it, life itself. "It can be played to celebrate every happy event in life, such as birth, a child's coming of age, weddings, and even at funerals," he says. The instrument conveys every possible emotion, and continues to fascinate him with its nuances. It can resonate with joy one moment, and with the slight flick of the stick, can exude anger or even melancholy. "Parai is the air that I breathe, my life force," says Velu. Despite all these years of performing and popularising the instrument, Velu still does not earn much. However, that does not deter him. "I want to continue taking the instrument to more people," he says, adding: "The recent award is just the beginning. I now have more work to do."



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**Meet Brian Linebaugh, a data engineer from the US, who has made a documentary feature on Tamil culture and traditions**

Srinivasa Ramanujam  
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**B**rian Linebaugh pauses to think. He has just been tasked with one of the most arduous jobs ever: singing.

After a few seconds, he breaks into an impromptu rendition of 'Nenje Un Aasai', a Rajinikanth song he used to hum many years ago. Rather sheepishly, he says, "Sorry, but that's the best I can do."

Sing he might not, but speak he can. He rattles off a Thirukural with flair. He has read a bit of Subramania Bharati and even recites the popular song, 'Sentamizh Nadu'.

Brian is an American data engineer based in California. But that is not all; he has nursed a fascination for the Tamil language for two decades and has put all that down, along with visuals, in the form of a documentary titled *Beyond Words*.

#### Word by word

Brian's fascination with Tamil began when he heard the language being spoken among Indian children in his school in California. "There was something about it that drew me," he recalls. While other American children in his class would go for guitar or soccer classes, Brian would attempt to speak basic Tamil words. "I bought a few books to learn Tamil, and even learnt to say words like 'manjal' (yellow), 'sivappu' (red) and 'gnayiru' (Sunday) but I really wanted to speak it fluently. For that, I needed immersion."

So, when he was 19, Brian packed his bags, travelled alone a thousand miles and landed in Madurai. "I was just blown away by everything there," he recalls, "The sights, the sounds and...the language."

In Madurai, Brian found a retired Tamil professor to teach him the basics. Staying in his house and following the traditional guru-sishya method, Brian's mornings would be devoted to theoretical classes, right from the alphabet to sentence construction.

"But the real magic happened in the afternoons," he says, with a glint in his eye, "I'd try to mingle with the people." On some days, he would bargain for bananas at a street corner, while on other evenings, he would chat with the drivers at the nearby auto stand. "Repeating the language and observing how they reacted was critical to get to some level of competency," he says.

After a few months, Brian headed back to the US to do a Masters degree in Tamil under renowned professor George Hart at the University of California, Berkley. "It's a huge undertaking to learn both the written and spoken language. For a native



A love for language Brian Linebaugh during the shoot of his documentary.  
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT, THAMODHARAN B



To watch video interview, scan QR code

# Why I learnt Tamil

speaker, it might not be a big deal as they are similar, but for a foreigner, it is almost like learning two different languages."

#### Different aspects

All this helped Brian a great deal while filming his recent documentary, one that had him talking to over 200 people across four countries (India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore) where Tamil is spoken.

"My initial thinking with the documentary was to highlight the different spoken Tamil dialects. When we saw the footage, we realised we had more than language...the purpose of the film

**I believe that Beyond Words is a testament to the resilience and richness of Tamil culture. It fosters intercultural understanding by showcasing the beauty of Tamil traditions**

BRIAN LINEBAUGH



became a celebration of Tamil culture and arts, with participants speaking in the local dialect."

*Beyond Words - Stories from Tamil Landscapes*, by Brian and his wife Janaki Seetharaman, had a world premiere at the recent Jaipur International Film Festival and is eyeing a streaming deal. "What we bring to life are the regional arts, from *therukoothu* to *tholpavakoothu*."

If there is one aspect of Tamil culture that stands out for Brian, it is *virundhombal* (hospitality). "During the filming of the documentary, we were in a remote village in the Kongu region and wanted to interview an old woman who was making cubes of palm sugar. Every couple of minutes, she would ask us, 'oru tea vachi tharava?' (Shall I make tea for you?) or 'pasikudha? Edha tharatum?' (Shall I bring something to eat?). Here was a woman struggling to make ends meet but she embraced us like family," recalls Brian.

Though he speaks Tamil with flair, Brian is not yet confident about his conversational skills. "I've been at it for 20 years, but I still have difficulties," he says, before promising, "The next time we meet, I will speak to you entirely in Tamil." *Naanga kaathirukirom* (*We are waiting*).



#### A little more of Pushpa

Looks like *Pushpa 2: The Rule* is set to rule the smaller screens after a successful run in theatres. Netflix will be the streaming platform for the sequel, and the X profile of the streaming giant announced that the OTT version of the film will feature 23 minutes of extra footage, which was recently added to the theatre cut. *Pushpa 2: The Rule* is said to have made ₹1000 crore at the global box office in just six days from its release, making it the fastest Indian film to reach this feat. The film is a sequel to the 2021 Telugu blockbuster *Pushpa: The Rise*. Released on December 5, 2024, it features dubbed versions in Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, Bengali, and Malayalam. The film sees Allu Arjun reprise his role as Pushpa Raj, alongside Rashmika Mandanna as Srivalli and Fahadh Faasil as SP Bhanwar Singh Shekhawat.



#### The purpose of music

Get ready for some music...with a cause. Following last year's concert, Rethinking Refugees and House of T is ready with the second edition of Gig for Gaza. This time, local talents like Blues Conscience, Crimson Sands, Layavart, Ann Shirley Natasha, Sublashini, and Tarita feature as part of the line-up. Proceeds from ticket sales will go to Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP), an organisation for families impacted by the ongoing crisis in Gaza.

@The Neighborhood Bar, January 31, 7.30pm. Tickets are available on allevents.in and can also be purchased at the gate.

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#### Love and love only

Kriti Sanon has been roped in as the female lead in *Tere Ishq Mein*. Starring Dhanush, the movie is directed by Anand L Rai and has music by AR Rahman. The makers of *Tere Ishq Mein* (T-Series) announced the development by releasing the first look of Kriti from the movie. In the first glimpse video, Kriti is seen walking with a bottle of kerosene amid a riot. The actor delivers a fiery dialogue and then pours the kerosene on herself before deciding to light a cigarette. "Some souls are meant to collide. Some love stories are destined to burn brighter," reads the caption of the video. The romantic drama is set to release in theatres on November 28, 2025. Dhanush and Anand L Rai had previously worked in *Raanjhanaa* and *Atrangi Re*.