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THE HINDU

Inside the Maha Kumbh Mela: Meeting sadhus whilst camping by the Ganga P2

NESIPPAYA, AN EXPLORATION OF LOVE P4



Sons of the Soil

With Pongal just behind us, we talk to four organic farmers under 40 from across Tamil Nadu, who are forging new paths to place food on our tables

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Farmer's friend
Organic farming often requires round-the-clock work. This is apart from additional care in the form of natural inputs added to the soil to aid crop growth. V Dharani Vendham makes the process easier for farmers by concocting these soil inputs. The 33-year-old is based in Aarani in Tiruvannamalai district and has been a natural farmer since 2013. "I started out by cultivating greens," says Dharani, who eventually moved to vegetables and groundnuts. "After that, I started producing cold-pressed oils," he says. This is when he experimented by sprinkling the powdered form of dried oil cakes, a by-product, to the soil. "This enhanced crop growth," he says.

Dharani now makes a powder, that is a mix of a variety of oil cakes, selling them to people in and around his village. He has formed four groups to support farmers too. "Around 20 farmers from the district are part of these groups. I offer support during cultivation while also helping them market their produce," says Dharani. Farmers can also drop off their produce at his farm or sell directly at the market at Aarani.

I want to show that it is possible to lead a self-sustained lifestyle. I do not depend on any resources from the outside for my farm

M ASHOK KUMAR



A model farm
M Ashok Kumar lives with his wife and two children at his farm in Nagapattinam, which he calls Ashoka Vanam. Keeping them company are his four native cows and 28 goats. He starts his day at 6.30am, taking his cattle for a drink of water and then offering them fodder. He is on his feet, watering his crops and tending to their needs till 1.30pm. After this, he starts his second job: that of a mechanic.

The 35-year-old, who grows organic greens and vegetables, has chosen to live close to nature. "I want to show that it is possible to lead a self-sustained lifestyle," he says, adding that for his farm, he does not depend on any resources from the outside. "I use manure from my cattle for my crops and do not spend on anything extra," he says. "I hope mine is a model farm that other farmers can emulate."

Ashok has innovated and created several farming equipment to simplify the everyday lives of the farmer. He says that organic farming can be profitable if done right and is happy to be roped in the next generation into the field. He says, "My daughter, who is in Class II, heads straight to graze our goats as soon as she comes back from school!"

The seed collector
P Janakan gave up his job as a quality engineer in Chennai to collect seeds of native millets. He then decided to propagate them among other farmers in Tamil Nadu. "Millets did not get the importance that traditional rice varieties did," feels the 33-year-old, who is based in Rasipuram near Namakkal.

Most consumers only know of a handful of millet varieties that are in popular use. Janakan says that are several others. He has travelled across the Kolli and Javadhu hills to collect their seeds, and has given them away to farmers who were interested in cultivating them. "I felt that farmers would be keener to cultivate millets if there was the promise of buyback," he says, adding that a little over a year ago, he started Even More Foods, a brand that makes value-added products with millets such as flakes, flour and breakfast cereal. "The idea was to create fair trade through which cultivators, consumers, and I are able to benefit from," he says. Janakan supplies to organic shops and food outlets across the state, and has 35 people working at his facility at Guruvala, a village in the foothills of the Kolli hills. Over the last seven years of seed collection and working with millets, Janakan has come to understand a system that will keep the cycle of cultivation running smoothly. "We should be able to process produce right where it is grown," he says. "This will create employment opportunities for the locals, who will otherwise have to travel elsewhere for work." Although Janakan never got the chance to meet him in person, he counts organic farming pioneer the late G Nammalvar as his inspiration.

Hillside story

P Kandhavel from Oddanchatram in Dindigul district is an organic farmer who loves to experiment. The 39-year-old predominantly supplies organic cauliflower to shops across Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The vegetable which is usually grown in the hills, thrives on plains under his care. He also cultivates beetroot, which is also usually grown in the hills. "I pick up something from every farmer around me," says Kandhavel, adding that he follows YouTube videos to create natural inputs for the soil himself.

Born into an agricultural family, it was

only natural that Kandhavel took up farming. But he was sure of only adhering to organic methods. He has been on the job for 20 years now, during which he has seen plenty of ups and downs. "Losses are part of the process," he says, adding that several cultivators give up as a result. "But in farming, there are ways to make up for what we once lost," he says. "The soil will not let go of us. It will lend us a hand someday, if not today."

Constant discussions with farmers young and old, experiments with crops, and networking has ensured Kandhavel's success.



Read between the lines

Imprint, a display that celebrates the medium of paper, will take over Lady Andal School at The Hindu Lit for Life 2025

Gowri S

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Curator and gallerist Sharan Apparao has an 'unhealthy' obsession with paper. She has travelled as far as Europe in search of the odd, rare, haphazardly scribbled sketchbook, an unexpectedly beautiful pop up book, or simply a clipboard of stray sheets of paper between which lie fleeting ideas waiting to be fleshed out. She chuckles, "I am dying to open a paper shop. I must have been a paper collector in my last birth or something."

And so, it is only fitting that Sharan's rather large curation of art for *The Hindu Lit for Life 2025* (on January 18 and 19) has the medium of paper at its centre. Works of 106 artists will take over Lady Andal School over the weekend to give the festival audience a peek into the psyche of an artist on paper.

Titled *Imprint*, the display can be broadly categorised into the paper and book projects. The book project, curated by Shijo Jacob, explores books as a conceptual component of an artist's creative project. Sketchbooks, artists' books and clipboards dominate this curation that gives a glimpse of an artist's formative stages of creation. The paper project on the other hand uses paper as a medium by reimagining them into installations. The show attempts to be a reminder of paper's structural brilliance.

"The way they are different is that the book project is about the inner ruminations of an artist, a documentation of the thoughts and ideas that make their artwork. The other curation has artists who use paper to make artworks, for instance, one of them has used Rajagopalachari's *The Mahabharatha* and woven a portrait of the author. Paper is used as



Idea sheet Paper art. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

a sculptural medium," says Sharan. She points to a particular sketchbook by Tanjima Kar Sekh whose usage of Islamic calligraphy and Mughal motifs were an instant draw. Ankon Mitra, Archana Kadamb, Vasudevan Akkitham, P Suresh Kumar, Kunal Kundu, Sangeeta Kodyimala, Janaki Lele are some of the participating artists. The books will be displayed on cross-stands, while the clipboards will be on the walls. While paper artworks take over *Slate*, the arts venue inside the school campus, an earmarked outdoor space, will also show some of the rare books.

"With paper being such an integral part of our literature and media, I thought using paper here made sense," says Sharan adding, "We are very excited that we are going to get an erudite and interested audience, and a large one at that."

On view at The Hindu Lit for Life in Lady Andal School on January 18 and 19. The show will move to Apparao Galleries, Wallace Gardens, from January 22 to February 15.

Mark the season of harvest with timeless joy

Happy Pongal!

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Kumbh diaries
Luxury tents at Prayagraj, Naga sadhus and (below) a boat arriving at the Triveni Sangam.
SRINIVASA
RAMANUJAM, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Srinivasa Ramanujam

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The Ganga is everything in Prayagraj.

She flows quietly, but the banks of the river are bustling with excitement. Here, water from the river is packed in customised bottles, ready for devotees to take back to their hometowns. Priests perform pujas with reverential devotees, all set to take a holy dip, with cries of 'Ganga mata ki jai' frequently emerging from the many boats lined up here.

The Sangam – or the Triveni Sangam – is the place to be at Prayagraj. It is the confluence of three rivers – the Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati – and one has to travel quite a bit by boat from the banks to reach here. A dip here is said to cleanse one's soul and free them from rebirth.

The Triveni Sangam is a major destination for Hindu pilgrimages and more so, during this time of the year. For, it is the 2025 Maha Kumbh Mela, described as the biggest religious congregation in the world.

While the Kumbh Mela has often been associated with mammoth crowds and spiritual enlightenment, this year is all the more special due to a rare celestial alignment that occurs only once in 144 years. "While the Ardh Kumbh Mela happens every six years, the Purna Kumbh Mela happens every 12 years. But this is the Maha Kumbh Mela and that happens only every 144 years," says Vikram Rana, a certified guide with UP Tourism.

This once-in-144-years excitement is palpable on the streets of Prayagraj, formerly known as Allahabad. For this grand event, braving the bitter Uttar Pradesh winter where temperatures can dip

Join us at the 2025 Maha Kumbh Mela at Prayagraj, an event likely to see 40 crore people in attendance

The gods are here



to 7 degree celsius, devotees from across the world make a beeline to take a dip in the holy waters.

The sadhus of the Kumbh
The major attraction during the Kumbh Mela is the Akharas (or

Akhadas) – groups deeply rooted in the traditions of Hinduism. Akharas – said to be formed by Adi Shankaracharya to propagate spiritual learning and physical training – are currently 13 in number, falling under three sects or panta (the Shaivaite, Vaishnavite and the udasi).

Sadhus (ascetics) from different centres belonging to these Akharas are currently camping at Prayagraj, for the Maha Kumbh Mela, which takes place till February 26. Some of them have travelled from places like Varanasi, Haridwar, Rishikesh and Ujjain, while a few have come all the way from the Himalayas, where they spend years in meditation.

The Naga sadhus are fascinating, with their unique appearances and rituals. We meet a sadhu who, for a decade now, has not sat down or

attempted a typical sleeping position – he meditates with his arms resting on a mat. Another sadhu practises his yoga and penance with his hand tied up; his disciples say he has practised this form of hatha yoga for many years now. Another sadhu has had his left hand up in the air for many years now. Covered with ash and mostly naked, these sadhus evoke fear, admiration and respect from devotees, who seek their blessings, which also entail slapping the devotees hard on the back. "They (Naga sadhus) are the ferocious ones. They have even helped in fighting against invaders in the past," explains our guide, Vikram.

Pray, where are you?

All these fascinating elements about the 2025 Maha Kumbh has led to an economic boost in Prayagraj, which is gearing up to provide for the surge in attendees. With about 40 crore people expected to experience the Mela, Prayagraj is among the most-discussed destinations this time of the year.

Catering to this religious tourism are many travel players, who are putting together accommodation facilities for a peaceful experience of the Kumbh. Like juSTa Shivir Jhusi, in which one can book luxury tents at about ₹10,000 to ₹35,000, which provides access to the Triveni Sangam via boat from its premises, thus by-passing maddening crowds.

This 18-acre property, located on the banks of the Ganga, has 118 tents put together in the last few months specially for the Maha Kumbh 2025. "Religious tourism is an evolving market. Here at the Kumbh Mela, we

see two types of customer profile; a set that comes due to their religious inclination and another that comes to experience it as an event," describes Ashish Vohra, founder-CEO, juSTa Hotels and Resorts, adding, "Tamil Nadu is a big market for us, and at times, devotees coming from South are even bigger in numbers than the North, as they combine the visit to the Kumbh with other trips to Varanasi and Ayodhya. These events propel an economy and Prayagraj is at the centre of it right now."

It certainly is, with more than 40 crore people likely in attendance (India's population is pegged at 140 crores now). "Now it's more of a show than a kumbh," says Mahamandeshwar Ji Maharaj of the Juna Akhada, one of the most respected Hindi monastic orders. His advice to devotees: "Come without arrogance and ego because you are meeting God here."

For that, Prayagraj seems ready. Over the next 45 days, people arriving in over 13,000 trains and 250 flights from across the country will experience the largest public gathering in the world. Servicing them will be hordes of police personnel, hospital staff and specially-built pontoon bridges across the Ganga.

The evenings are cold, chilly and unsparring, even for those with layers of clothing. And yet, there is a spring in everyone's step. For, it is the Maha Kumbh Mela.

(The writer was in Prayagraj at the invitation of juSTa Shivir Jhusi)

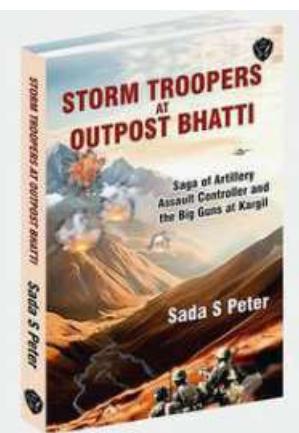


STEPOUT

Retracing India's Legacy

Colours of Glory Foundation, Chennai, is organising an event titled Trek Through India's History 1940-1990s. Veteran freedom fighter, Lakshminathan Bharathi will talk on Indian Constitution and Gandhism: A perspective. The book *Storm Troopers at Outpost Bhatti*, by Kargil war veteran Lieutenant Colonel Sada Peter will also be launched at the event. The book gives rare insights into a war that defined India's military potential of the 1990s.

@Edouard Michelin Auditorium, Alliance Française of Madras, Nungambakkam, January 19 at 10am. For details, contact 9444643852.



Sundowner beats

At Circle of Love and Surf Turf's All Stars Sundowner, enjoy an evening of live music and electronic performances featuring artistes from diverse genres. The lineup includes JBABE, an alternative R&B and anti-pop artiste with a distinctive style; Manny, a progressive house DJ delivering a dynamic set, Gooth, returning to the stage with a special electronic performance, and Marc & Eden, Pondicherry-based artistes known for their versatile electronic sets.

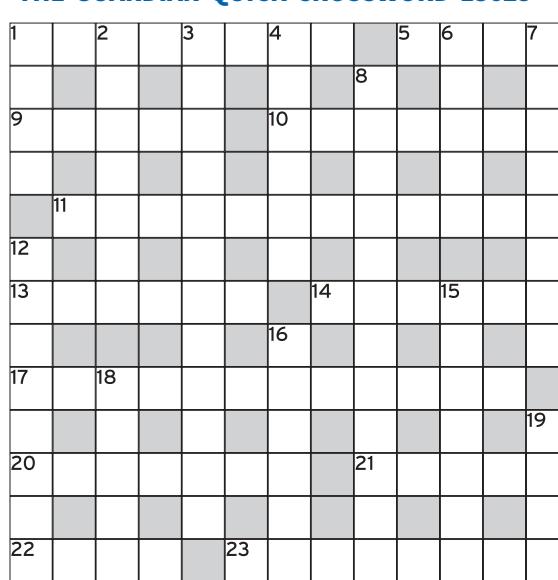
@Surf Turf, ECR, on January 18, starting at sundown. Entry is priced at ₹1,000, redeemable against food and drinks.



Across

- 1 Most angry (8)
- 5 Begin to wake (4)
- 9 Excessive flattery (5)
- 10 Utmost (7)
- 11 Traditional (4-8)
- 13 Melt away (6)
- 14 Starchy food (6)
- 17 Laundry rack (7,5)
- 20 Freezing (in Alex?) (3-4)
- 21 Astound (5)
- 22 Prying (4)
- 23 Items not meant to be kept (8)
- Down
- 1 Turning point (4)
- 2 Public address (7)
- 3 Extra educational session between academic years (6,6)
- 4 Character with a conventional significance (6)
- 6 Person with a stopwatch? (5)
- 7 Cures (8)
- 8 Outrageously expensive (12)
- 12 Action to remove an occupant (8)
- 15 Sickness (7)
- 16 Spent (4,2)
- 18 Takes the lid off (5)
- 19 Greek cheese (4)

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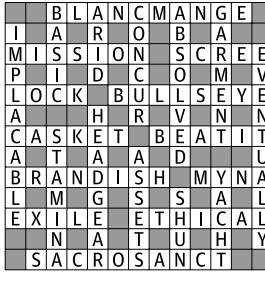


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Solution will appear in MetroPlus dated January 23, 2025.

Solution No. 13624



Stepping it up

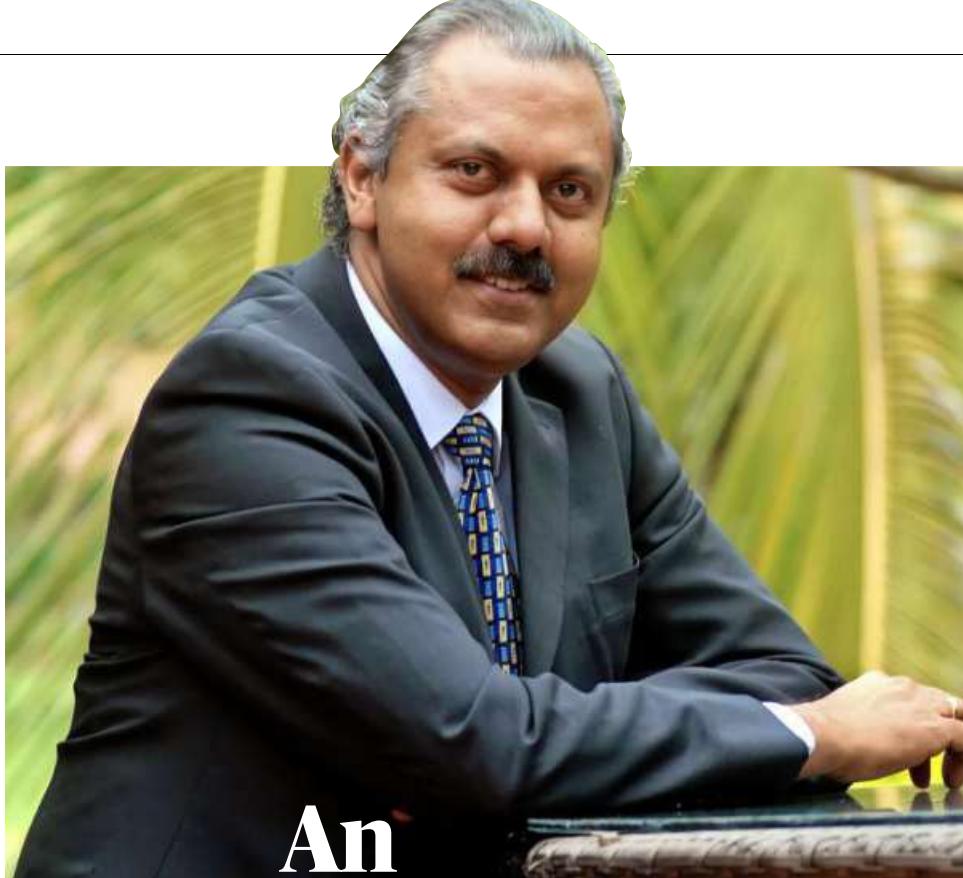
Festive notes

(Clockwise from right)
Amit Trivedi on Pop Night; The Hindu's newspaper quiz at Saarang; Music director Ilaiyaraaja at the inauguration of the festival; folk dance performance on day zero; and EDM Night. B VELANKANNI RAJ/SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



IIT MADRAS
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Health
matters
Dr Issac
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ARRANGEMENT

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In his career spanning decades, Dr Issac Mathai has seen patients from across the world, both at his facility SOUKYA, an international holistic health centre in Bengaluru, and as a visiting consultant in several holistic health centres in the UK, Europe and the US.

It is this global perspective, and the importance of holistic healthcare and integrative medicine that he will be highlighting, at *The Hindu Lit for Life* 2025, in session with Dr E S Krishnamoorthy, founder of Buddha Clinic, and Vasudha Rai, author.

"The future of medicine is combining western and traditional systems of medicine. India is especially lucky to have all these systems and government policies that support it. It is important here to understand that the focus is on better healthcare, and not being against any particular system," Dr Issac

An integrated approach

At *The Hindu Lit for Life*, Dr Issac Mathai will be in conversation with Dr E S Krishnamoorthy and Vasudha Rai

says. With holistic health being a subject close to his heart, Dr Issac has authored two books – *Dr Mathai's Holistic Health Guide for Women*, and *Holistic Healing*. "During the pandemic, I worked on my third book, *Dr Mathai's ABC to Health*. Post the pandemic, people are much more aware of the importance of their immune system, and are eager to do things to improve their health," he says.

While their facility in Bengaluru has seen a number of visitors from across the globe

including King Charles III and Queen Camilla who were last there for a three-day rejuvenation retreat in October 2024, SOUKYA is also expanding internationally and has announced its first international centre in Portugal. Dr Issac has also been working on making complete health care accessible to all through holistic and integrative medicine through the SOUKYA foundation, and the Dr Mathai's Rural Holistic Health Centre (DMRC) also provides healthcare for free to people in over 150 villages across the country.

On his current reading pile are *Lifestyle as Medicine* by Dr Alexander Thomas, Samuel Hansdak, Divya Alexander, and Herbert Giebel, and *Spiritual Healing* by Dora Kunz. "I am fascinated by Manu Pillai's *Gods, Guns and Missionaries*, and how it presents history," he adds.

The *Hindu Lit for Life* is presented by

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confidence and lyrical humour. Did the contestants deliver? Jords thinks so.

This display of skill and passion reflected a larger trend in Chennai's artistic landscape. Hip-hop is finding a strong foothold in the city.

SKA, a postgraduate from Belgium loves the opportunities that one gets while rapping in Chennai. "In Belgium only Dutch rap is given importance, which remains a language barrier for me. Here, when I visit during my holidays, I get rap any kind of way," he says. Leo XMD, the winner in the Tamil rap category, says that although there is a steady uptick in the number of Tamil rappers going global, there is a need for more platforms to support this artform.

"The one thing I love about rap is that even if someone fumbles their lines, the others are readily waiting to encourage and lift them up," says a spectator. Semi-finalist Unibrow, says that rapping in Chennai feels like "a phenomenon with a lot of life inside it."

When the beat drops

Rappers full of banter and confidence shine at *The Hindu Lit for Life* Rap Battle finale

Mridula PM

Forget polite introductions and friendly banter. At the rap battle conducted on January 12 by *The Hindu* in the run-up to its annual *Lit for Life* literature festival (on January 18 and 19), the only language spoken was that of rhyme. The only goal – to out-rap the opponent.

At Brigade Xanadu, the finale of the rap battle demonstrated its power to bridge cultural divides through lyrical expression, in both English and Tamil.

"What I cannot say to people's faces, I say through rap," said Reuben Joy, runner-up in the Tamil rap category. On stage, this self-expression transformed into a powerful duel. But as the timer slowed down, the fire-y lyrics gave way to warmth, with rivals embracing in a show of mutual respect.

Jords, a British singer and rapper who judged the English rap contest, said that he was looking for easy



Verse is king
A scene from the finale of the Rap Battle.
M VEDHAN



On-ground fun

As the dates for *The Hindu Lit for Life* 2025 draw near, an exciting line-up of workshops await participants. Hosted at the Annexe inside Lady Andal School, these sessions will explore everything from stress management to creative writing, and traditional games to Mughal art. To register for the workshop, scan the QR Code.



New kid on the block (Clockwise from left) Interiors of F Bar Anna Nagar; bourbon cocktail Avant-grade; thin-crust pizza. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Joseph Praveen.

After sampling a few cordials like fig and cinnamon, green apple, plum, and apricot, we move on to the F-tinis, which are the bar's take on martinis. The Ruffle, made with gin, three-citrus cordial, and Thai bitters is strong and punchy.

The food menu, at first glance, appears simple and straightforward, featuring the usual suspects like chicken tikka, malai broccoli, beer-battered calamari, paneer tikka, fries, and wontons. Upon closer inspection, however, we find intriguing dishes like the cream of popcorn soup, corn ribs, gochujang shrimp, nandu puttu, dan dan paneer, and more.

We try the cream of popcorn soup, mimicking the buttery, cheesy popcorn of every multiplex. It is also served with a chicken roulade. The Korean cauliflower, crispy and spicy, and pineapple sticks make for perfect bar snacks in bite-sized pieces. However, the chicken tikka bites served for the launch lacked flavour and depth. The bar also has a wide array of freshly baked thin-crust pizzas.

"The food might look regular on the menu, but we try to put a small twist on all dishes by using unique ingredients and flavour combinations," says head chef, Siva Kumar.

While the tikkas are not charred and smoky due to the lack of a real tandoor, the chef is planning to install one along with a wood-fired pizza oven in a future expansion to make F Bar a rooftop club. "For now, we are running this race among other horses in the area and making our presence felt," concludes Remus.

Cocktails and couture

Where high fashion meets bold cocktails, F TV's F Bar in Anna Nagar brings a glamorous twist to Chennai's nightlife

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In the up-and-coming party central of Chennai, Anna Nagar, a new racehorse has entered. With a touch of global glamour, Fashion TV's F Bar brings an experience that intertwines the high-energy allure of a nightclub with the sophistication of a luxury lounge.

Upon entering the first floor of the bar, one plunges straight into an energy-filled nightclub. The seating areas are decorated in black and gold with red accent lights. Golden Oscar-like statues are dotted across the restaurant, and Fashion TV is streaming on every screen.

"When we got the franchise, we wanted to go above and beyond their expectations, so we got them to agree to the food and drink menus curated by us instead of going with the ones they suggested," says Remus Yuvraj, head of operations. Their attention to detail comes through on the bar menu. The first drink



we try is the signature cocktail Purple Heart, made with blue pea gin and a pandan-infused cordial. The fruity and floral notes are well-balanced with the bitters. "We make all our cordials in-house from scratch on a regular basis and batch the cocktails so we can be quick with service," says head mixologist, Remus.

F Bar by F TV is at 11th Main Road, AE Block, Anna Nagar; A meal for two costs ₹2,500

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A little romance

Director Vishnu Varadhan on returning to Tamil cinema with the recently-released *Nesippaya*

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After making a stellar debut in Bollywood with *Shershaah* (2021), filmmaker Vishnu Varadhan is back on his home turf. The recently-released *Nesippaya* marks his return to Tamil cinema after a decade. "Yenge suthi ponalam, inge dhaan thirumbe varuven (no matter where I go, I always come back here). This is my base," says Vishnu Varadhan, whose Hindi film got several accolades including a National Award. Excerpts from a conversation:

Question: What was it about *Nesippaya* that intrigued you?
Answer: It's a fictional story inspired by many real-life events. After *Shershaah*, there were a lot of biopics and military film ideas that came but I wanted to explore something new. Working on a film like *Nesippaya* after *Shershaah* was never on the radar. When I saw Akash (late actor Murali's second son), my producer (Sneha) and I wanted to do a film with him and made this story. I like a lot of drama in my films and in *Nesippaya*, you



Q: Your initial films starred actors like Arya and Bharath who were also in their nascent stages. What's it like working with a bunch of newbies, 22 years after your debut?

A: It doesn't matter if I'm working with newbies or big-league actors; it's the film you want to make. The fact that I'm launching a new actor is more exciting because there are no expectations. It gives me an adrenaline rush as a director.

What I go through, how I feel, what I see and what I am in today's time is how Akash's character would react. It's fascinating to write a character who is stuck in a situation and his ideologies, without being judgemental. And when you club that with a female character who differs from that, that's where you get to play with conflict. These things are purely based on my understanding of love.

Q: At a time when filmmakers want to be affiliated with a genre or a



When I saw Akash (late actor Murali's second son), my producer, Sneha, and I wanted to do a film with him and made this story. In *Nesippaya*, there is heavy-duty drama than just love

VISHNU VARADHAN, DIRECTOR

style of storytelling, it's hard to box a filmmaker like you – who gave a Sarvam after *Billa* or Yatchan after *Arrambam* – within a specific category...

A: I see it as a plus for myself because I get to feel excited whenever someone comes up to me with a new idea. The idea of probably doing a sci-fi excites me. I would never do horror because that genre scares me (smiles). It's about pushing boundaries and exploring yourself without being boxed; I feel that's how you keep identifying yourself. When *Billa* worked, I could have stuck to that formula of doing a stylish action film but my survival would have been short-lived. As someone who doesn't know what my next film would be about, being calculative isn't possible.

I've gone through a rough patch through which I felt like I stopped exploring. When I retrospect, the question that lingers is why I got into this profession in the first place. I soon discovered that I did it for the joy of making films.

Q: Your films are known for being sleek and stylish. At what part of the script do you zero in on the aesthetics?

A: They happen at the very core of the idea. Every scene has its mood and it dictates camera movements, while locations dictate the colour tones. I nail my colours and look and never change them, irrespective of what may occur during the shoot. I fear changing them during shoot would dilute the content.

I do a lot of prep and edit my script before shooting. That's how I was able to finish *Shershaah* in 60 days, including its war sequences, and it's almost the same for *Nesippaya*. When you do the prep work, you go in with full clarity. I have already shot the scene in my head before going to shoot. When you are prepared like that, there's no space for chaos and filmmaking turns fun. There's no pressure, only pleasure.



It's time to say 'Hukum'

Superstar Rajinikanth and director Nelson have teamed up for *Jailer 2*. Bankrolled by Sun Pictures, the film is a sequel to *Jailer*, the hit 2023 movie. Nelson had opened up about the sequel at an event in 2024. The makers officially announced the sequel with a video on the occasion of Pongal, which reveals a mystery man, who is none other than 'Tiger' Muthuvel Pandian, the retired jailer with a dangerous reputation across the country. Anirudh will compose music director for the movie, produced by Kalanithi Maran. *Jailer*, Nelson's first collaboration with Rajinikanth, had hit the screens on August 10, 2023, and went on to become the highest-grossing Tamil film of the year.



On the fast lane

All eyes are on Ajith Kumar. The actor, who made heads turn as a racer in the 24H Dubai 2025 competition, has revealed that he will not be signing any films until the racing season ends. Known to be a star who rarely gives interviews, the actor has recently indicated that he actively plans to pursue his passion, motorsports. "I don't need to be told what to do or what not to do. So, for now, as I plan to pursue motorsports not just as a driver but as a team owner as well...until the racing season is on, I won't be signing films. And probably between October and March, before the racing season commences, I will probably do films." On the work front, Ajith has *Vidaayamarchi* all set for release. The film, which was originally scheduled for January 10, has been postponed due to unforeseen circumstances and a new release date is yet to be announced. The actor also has *Good Bad Ugly* with director Adhik Ravichandran which is slated for release on April 10.

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Madras bound

Malayalam star Shane Nigam, who made his Tamil debut recently, on how he wishes to shape his career

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Malayalam star Shane Nigam is taking his first bow in Tamil with *Madraskaaran*, which released for Pongal. The film, co-starring Kalaiyaran and Niharika Konidela, is undoubtedly the next logical step for the actor who has enjoyed quite some attention from Tamil audiences, especially on social media.

"I have always felt this love from Tamil Nadu, right from *Parava* days. But RDX was special; only after that, offers for the main lead came my way, and *Madraskaaran* too happened because of that," he confesses. Excerpts from a chat:

Question: When did you discover Tamil cinema?

Answer: In my childhood! My mother used to recollect how when I was in kindergarten, whenever a Rajinikanth song was playing on the jukebox, I used to run into my room, wear a Rajinikanth costume, and come out only to find that the song was over. Then a Hrithik Roshan song would play, and I would repeat the same. I used to go to theatres to watch Tamil movies.

Q: With *Madraskaaran*, you are taking a plunge into an all-new world. Did you analyse the kind of films coming out in Tamil to calculate how you can go about it?

A: I don't feel like that. I am just doing whatever I have done so far. From the preparations to shooting and now to the promotions, everything feels the same. At this time, any movie in the world can become popular if it is good.

Q: Do people come to you with opinions on the kind of roles you need to be doing now?
A: Nobody says anything to me; not even my mom. I follow my instincts. I don't see how other heroes are going about their careers because their lives are entirely different from mine. I don't live like an actor.

The conviction to do *Madraskaaran* came from the script that director Vaali Mohan Das had written. I would have done this script no matter which language it was to be made in because there's a haunting element to it.

Q: Looking back, your turn in *Bhoothakaalam* is one of your finest yet. What did that film do to you as an actor?

A: It wasn't an easy role. With *Bhoothakaalam*, I was the first person to listen to that script. It was during the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdown and I was eagerly waiting to do an OTT film. I listened to many scripts but this was quite convenient because it didn't need many locations.

Moreover, I understood that Rahul Sadasivan had a unique perspective on horror.

Q: What are your upcoming projects?

A: In Malayalam, I have finished *Haal*. I am currently doing a movie on Kabaddi set in Palakkad. It's a Tamil-Malayalam bilingual featuring Selvaraghavan as an antagonist. Alphonse Puthren and Shanthnu Bhagyaraj play pivotal roles.

