



# metro PLUS

THE HINDU

**At Heritage Rollers**, Chennai's vintage cars take a drive down the coast **P3**

**DEVAYANI TURNS DIRECTOR, HELMS SHORT FILM** **P4**



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**D**espite a particularly unforgiving downpour in Singapore last month, I was determined to meet Vasunthara Ramasamy, a former *MasterChef Singapore* season two contestant who, since 2021, has been offering a private dining experience called Cutlery Optional in her Ang Mo Kio home situated in central Singapore. Her culinary offerings are deeply influenced by her rich heritage and the diverse cultures she was exposed to growing up.

Vasunthara's paternal grandparents were of Indian origin with roots in Coimbatore but were born in Malaysia, and her maternal grandmother, of Chinese descent, was adopted by a Malaysian-Indian lady in Singapore. Raised in Joo Chiat, a predominantly Chinese neighbourhood adjacent to Geylang Serai, she was immersed in a tapestry of cultures from an early age. This upbringing introduced her to a myriad of flavours, shaping her personal approach to food.

At Cutlery Optional, Vasunthara delves into the lesser-known depths of South Indian and Sri Lankan culinary traditions, moving beyond the typical associations of Tamil cuisine. For lunch, I was served thosai (which is fermented for 16 hours) accompanied by a rich peanut podi and a prawn pulao. The meal concluded with *kueh* – small cakes typically made from tapioca flour and natural flavouring.

"I'm a feeder!" quips Vasunthara, who also shares, "Joo Chiat where I grew up is renowned for its Peranakan Chinese community, and visits to the local market introduced me to many Malays, given its Malay neighbourhood heritage. Within my own family, South Indian traditions were deeply ingrained. My grandparents, for instance, sold thosai to make ends meet." Vasunthara's maternal grandfather hailed from Thanjavur but moved to Singapore in the early 20th Century.

As she established her own home, a desire to cook emerged. "I yearned for my grandmother's cooking, particularly as she was battling Alzheimer's at the time. Like many Indian cooks, she seldom provided precise instructions, which spurred me to recreate the flavours of my childhood," she says, adding, "Engaging with food has offered insights into my heritage and identity," she says.

**Cultural re-engagement**  
First-generation Singaporean rapper Yung Raja's Indian-Mexican eatery The Maha Co. may be far removed from what Vasunthara is trying to accomplish with his culinary

## A taste of home

**From thosai tacos to spiced cocktails** – the bold flavours of Tamil Nadu are being reimagined in Singapore by locals rediscovering their South Indian roots



(Clockwise from above) Yung Raja; Vasunthara Ramasamy; Yugas 'Yuga' Susela; Vijay Mudaliar; and the Peranakan cocktail at Native. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

His father, Yousuf Rowther Rajid Ahamed, is a published Tamil poet and the founder of the Tamil Debate Association in Singapore, while his elder sister is a Tamil teacher. "I've never seen my Tamil identity as something to be muted. It's always been my biggest asset," he says.

Beyond music, Raja's love for

**Tamil flavours** (From left) Vasunthara's take on paniyarams; Pandan cocktail at Native; and, the egg burji thosai taco at The Maha Co. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

South Indian food, particularly the comfort of his mother's home-cooked thosai, led to the creation of The Maha Co., which he claims does the world's first thosai taco, which comes with fillings like an egg burji, a prawn curry and even mutton. The restaurant's signature thosai tacos reflect his creative ethos – taking something deeply familiar and reimagine it in a way that remains respectful to its origins.

"One of my strongest memories is watching my mum and grandma hand-grind thosai batter on a stone grinder. It was a weekly ritual. We use her recipe to make the thosai," says Raja.

**Drink up**  
In the heart of Singapore's vibrant cocktail scene stands Native, a bar that has garnered international acclaim for its innovative approach to mixology. At its helm is Vijay Mudaliar, who has woven his Tamil heritage into the fabric of his creations. Born and raised in Singapore, Vijay co-founded Native in 2016. He says, "My journey into mixology didn't begin behind a fancy bar – it started in my home kitchen. I started playing around with what I could find locally, foraging ingredients that most people walk past without a second thought."

Vijay often incorporates traditional South Indian ingredients, offering a fresh perspective on familiar flavours. For instance, the 'Peranakan' cocktail is a harmonious blend of Indian rum, galangal, laksa leaves, tamarind, dried pandan, candlenut, and gula melaka, capturing the essence of regional tastes.

**For the culture**  
Tucked away in Singapore's Chinatown, The Elephant Room is not just a cocktail bar – it is a love letter to Indian culture, particularly the sights, sounds, and flavours of Little India. Founded by Yugne 'Yugi' Susela, a bartender with deep Tamil roots (his family hails from the Chettinad region), here, the cocktails are more than just drinks. "I was always fascinated by the depth of flavours in Indian cuisine and I wanted to see how they could be reimagined in cocktails," he says.

The bar sources most of its ingredients straight from Tekka Market, the bustling heart of Little India. Each cocktail pays tribute to a flavour, a dish, or a cultural reference that feels familiar yet reimagined. A standout on the menu is the Champa Fizz, a floral cocktail inspired by the champaca flower, often used in South Indian temple offerings.

Yugi's vision for The Elephant Room goes beyond serving great drinks. "Everything has to be deeply personal," he says, and through his cocktails, he is making sure those stories are heard, tasted, and remembered.

## Be Batman this weekend

With creators and comedy, Comic Con India is back

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**W**hat brings Vecna from *Stranger Things*, Batman, Goku from *Dragonball Z*, and several katana or sword-wielding Japanese warriors all under the same roof, in Chennai?

In its first edition in Chennai last year, Comic Con had plenty of this. Children, teens, and adults all decked up in their cosplay finest, came together to explore merchandise stalls, meet creators from India and abroad, and queue up to meet artists who had worked on their favourite characters and books. "Despite it being the first edition, we were overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the community here. It made me wonder why I took this long to bring Comic Con to Chennai," says Jatin Varma, founder.

In its second edition set to take place on February 8 and 9 at the Chennai Trade Centre in Nandambakkam, there are several things specially planned for the city. Every visitor who walks in will get a

**Character study** Cosplayers at Chennai Comic Con in 2024. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

special number 1 issue of *Radiant Black*, Image Comics' superhero comic book series. "Fans can meet Kyle Higgins, artists Marcelo Costa and Eduardo Ferigato, all of whom have worked on the *Radiant Black* series as well as illustrator and graphic designer Kelly McMahon," Jatin says.

The slew of experiences include gaming, a cosplay competition, panel discussions, artist signings, and stand up comedy. Bringing together art and laughs, comedians Rohan Joshi and Sahil Shah will pack humour and art into a Doodle Duel session on stage, and the Hysterical Comedy Collaborative will partner with caricaturist Kannan, as they describe people from the crowd and get Kannan to draw them without seeing them.

"We cannot have a convention without homegrown creators and have a dedicated creator space. Many of these artists travel with us from city to

On February 8 and 9 at Chennai Trade Centre, Nandambakkam. For tickets, visit [insider.in](#)

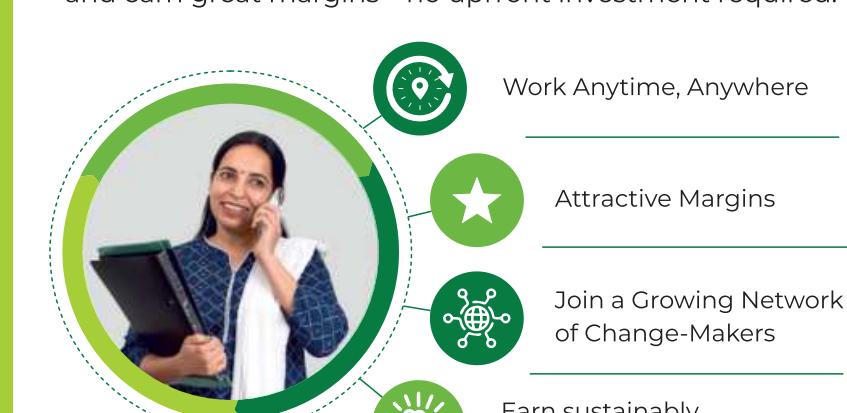


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**Take a history class at Gedung Sate building**

The iconic Gedung Sate building in Bandung is a blend of Neoclassical architecture, Indonesian designs and Dutch East Indies styles. The iconic building, designed by Dutch architect J Gerber, was used for housing Dutch East Indies State-owned enterprises in 1924. The interactive museum in the basement of the building gives historical insights about Indonesia's long colonial history. The building also signifies the cultural diversity of Indonesia and influences of Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and Christian identities. At present, the building is used as the official building of the Governor of West Java.



**Unexplored gem** (Clockwise from right) Saung Udjо Cultural Centre; Asian-African Conference Museum; a dish from Sultan Agung; rattan products in Cirebon; Kawah Putih lake and Gedang Sate building. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**Dance at Saung Angklung Udjo**

Expect the unexpected at Angklung. Located East of Bandung, the SAU cultural centre, established in 1966, is the cornerstone of cultural tourism in West Java. It offers a musical masterclass experience featuring the unique angklung, a bamboo instrument. The venue's setting provides visitors an opportunity to engage in interactive performances. Saung Angklung Udjo, besides being a tourist attraction, is also used to educate people about Sundanese culture and traditions. The Centre is a sign of West Java's rich cultural identity and passion to preserve the same.

# Fly me to West Java

**Explore Kawah Putih lake**

Kawah Putih, the white crater lake with turquoise waters, is a must-see. Kawah is about 45 kilometres from Bandung. There are ample transport facilities available ensuring easy connectivity. Once there, do not miss a photo opportunity in the backdrop of the bluish-green waters of the lake with Mount Patuh in the vicinity and the walk way. The resort town also has plenty of restaurants to try out local cuisine. At Glamping Lakeside, a resort, step farming slopes are dotted with camping tents. Also check out a restaurant shaped like a gigantic ship nearby. The famous Rancaupas Deer Conservation Center adjoining Rancabali tea plantations is right next door. Here, you can feed the deer carrots.

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**F**lying from Singapore to Kertajati is an experience: from the aircraft's window, one can see the Indonesian sea dotted with numerous islands. The breathtaking non-metro destinations of West Java now witness an enhanced flow of tourists thanks to the newly-added Embraer flights from Scoot, the affordable carrier of Singapore Airlines. From September last year, Scoot's carriers are being scheduled twice a week from Singapore to Kertajati in Greater Bandung.

The demand for Scoot flights from India is robust due to an increase in demand for leisure holidays to Southeast Asia. Scoot operates over 40 weekly flights from six cities in India, including Chennai, Coimbatore, Tiruchirappalli, Thiruvananthapuram, Vishakhapatnam and Amritsar.

West Java is ideal for people looking for a one week or two-week long vacation. The region is host to pristine locations that are not as explored as those in East Indonesia such as Bali. Kertajati International Airport, 188 kilometres from the Indonesian capital Jakarta, situated in the Majalengka Regency of West Java, connects Bandung, the flower city located 750 metres above sea level, that abounds with structures of cultural legacy and natural landscapes.

What should you do once you get there?

*The writer was in Kertajati (Greater Bandung), Indonesia on the invitation of Scoot.*

**The newly-added Embraer flights from Scoot** are scheduled twice a week from Singapore to Kertajati in Greater Bandung. Here is an itinerary of what you can do and see

**Get a history lesson at the Asian-African Conference Museum - Gedung Merdeka**

Given its historical significance, the Asian-African Conference (1955) Museum in Bandung draws people from across the world. Named Gedung Merdeka, meaning 'freedom hall', the museum displays replicas and country profiles from the Bandung Conference. In a bid to promote non-alignment post-Cold War, leaders from Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Burma and Pakistan organised the first Asian African Conference in 1955. The 29 participating countries unanimously declared the non-aligned third block. The life-size profiles of prominent leaders, library, audio visuals and communication equipment representing the socio-economic and political context of the conference and the times are special features of the museum run by the Foreign Ministry of Indonesia.

**Shop for rattan**

Another striking and all-pervasive feature of Bandung and the nearby Cirebon city is rattan furniture. Mantera rattan workshop and manufacturing unit in Cirebon makes an array of home furniture, handbags, and gift articles with rattan sourced from the forests of Sumatra and Sulawesi. The products, crafted by local artisans, are reasonably priced, and are exported to many places across Europe and the US. Visitors can pick them up from the spacious workshop.

**Eat cookies at Bandung**

Bandung is a haven for food lovers. Paskal Food Market is a spectacular semi open-air space that boasts of over 1,000 varieties of dishes. At Iga Bakar Si Jangkung, for instance, try the lamb sizzler with vegetables tossed with kecap manis, a spicy tomato soya sauce. Oyen, a dessert made of tender coconut, slivers of jackfruit, avocado, and dates, served with coconut milk and shaved ice, is yet another must-try.

While Sultan Agung serves traditional Dutch food, Soeji Dining in Chanaya Resort pampers visitors with typical Indonesian food. While there, do visit Kartika Sari and Bolu Susu Lembang. Kartika is ideal for souvenir-shopping, and is popular for a variety of cookies and chocolate hampers. Bolu Susu Lembang, a manufacturer and seller of dairy products, whips up some great pastries and cheesecakes.



## Boots, bags, and beyond



**The 38th Leather Fashion Show in Chennai** showcased footwear and apparel, highlighting trends like athleisure and classic business wear

**Functional fashion**  
Models at the Leather Fashion Show at ITC Chola, in Chennai. R RAVINDRAN

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In this year's Union Budget, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a focus product scheme for the footwear and leather sectors. *The Hindu* reported that this will generate a turnover of ₹4 lakh crore, and exports of more than ₹1 lakh crore, generating employment for 22 lakh people.

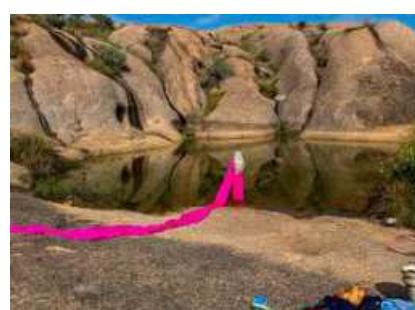
On the cusp of this announcement, the Indian Finished Leather Manufacturers and Exporters Association (IFLMEA) hosted the 38th Leather Fashion Show at ITC Grand Chola, Chennai.

This year's display focussed on athleisure, along with office and travel accessories, biker jackets, belts, wallets, shoes, boots, and bags for every occasion. Major leather exporter Yavar Dhala said that the show has been held since the early 1950s and made predictions for the upcoming year. "Athleisure seems to be making big waves, but I also see the traditional black and brown business shoes making a comeback," he said, adding that the State has the highest number of women employees in the leather industry. "Leather is being used even in

casual shoes now. It is no longer just synthetic; it is a combination of both. The removal of import duty is going to be very helpful. It is a welcome move by the Government as it brings a lot of foreign investment to Tamil Nadu," said KR Vijayan, chairman, IFLMEA.

The show began with a kids' footwear display by Tata International featuring boys', girls', and toddler shoes in stylish leather finish, and then moved on to adult footwear from Langue. This showcase also featured the highlight of the fashion show – a puppy carried in a bag! "I wanted the puppy to walk on the runway, but we weren't permitted to do that," said Bhaskaran Chandra Sekhar, director of the fashion show, adding that this year's show pushed the boundaries of possibilities by bringing in luxury cars and motorbikes to the show.

According to AR Senthil Kumar, convenor of the show, this is Asia's largest such event. The evening saw 70 impeccably styled models, including children and 10 showstoppers, donning leather garments and accessories from 11 brands – Tata International, Langue, Tohl, Vista, Z-Aglet, Perf, Toni Rossi, Tritan, Aks & Ad, Kompanero, and Ramjee Leather.

**For the love of...**

A cascade of loose silver hair, gently caressed by a passing gust of wind. The fluttering pallu of a bright purple sari with a life of its own. Homes and walls that carry stories of a childhood, sometimes deprived. In a series of exceptional photographs by artist Cop Shiva, a mother's vibrant sari collection becomes a celebration of her desires, and an act of avenging a life spent devoid of small joys. Juxtaposed alongside these frames stands South Korean photographer Lim

Si Sook's series Chaekgado, still life photographs of 'books and things'. He believes that an individual's bookshelf is a mirror to their personality. South Korean author and recipient of the 2024 Nobel Prize in Literature Han Kang's book shelf is one of them, as are many libraries adorned with glittering trophies and medals. Though both bodies of work are starkly complementary to each other, they meet at being an exploration of identity and how it ties to material possessions or the absence of it. @Gallery, InKo Centre. On till February 22.

## The contemporary arts takeover



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If you are a lover of the arts, there is no better time to be in Chennai. As the all-encompassing ode to classical arts – the Margazhi season – came to an end, contemporary arts started taking over white cubes, museums campuses, shopping malls, and (soon) MRT stations, much to the small but steadily growing art community's delight.

Today, Chennai has the option to gallery-hop through the day, and savour frames pleasing to the eye and mind, from across the world. We pick five shows, part of Chennai Photo Biennale, currently on in the city that could be worth your time.

**The Sunil Gupta retrospective: Love and Light**

The mighty trees at the Egmore Museum campus today are witness to huge portraits and smaller narrative frames that make one pause and ponder. Veteran photographer Sunil Gupta, through his life's work, explores how the camera shaped his identity as a gay man in the 1970s. Frames snaking through the open premises near Museum Theatre, and lodged on the steps of the Open Air Theatre document his friends, lovers and family. From his time in Montreal, where he was an active part of the gay liberation movement, his move to New

York and London, and to India in the '80s where he documented people who lived secret lives, and his battle with HIV/AIDS in the '90s, all make way into this rather vast display. While you are at the Museum premises, walk by the National Art Gallery, to catch What Makes Me Click, a compendium of photographs clicked by children from around the world laid out like a play area replete with poles to hang from, curated by Children's Photography Archive in UK, and CPB.

@Government Museum, Egmore. On till March 15.

**An Enduring Legacy: Lalit Mohan Sen**

For veteran artist and printmaker Lalit Mohan Sen (1898-1954), photography was not more than a hobby. He largely considered it a leisure sport, by experimenting with the analogue medium during his extensive travels, armed with a sketchbook and a camera. Today at Alliance Francaise of Madras'



Espace24 gallery, everything from rippling waters and delightful and defiant frames of women caught mid-laugh or mid-puff, and portraits of indigenous people and places mostly from the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand, all make for a great show. The never-seen-before photographs on this display are from the last decade of his life.

@Espace24 Gallery, Alliance Francaise of Madras, On till February 15



## Crave

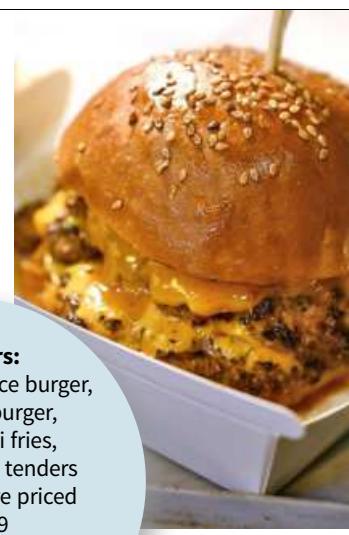
Crave quickly gained popularity, after opening in September 2024 on Mount Road, opposite the LIC building. Run by brothers Mohamed Wajid and Mohammed Aslam, the location is a major draw. "From students to IT professionals, doctors, and families, everyone comes for our burgers. This area stays active late into the night, so we operate

from 5pm to 2am," says Wajid.

Having worked in burger establishments in the United Kingdom, Wajid says he developed the recipes through trial and error. "Our Nashville flavour blends spice mixes with rich chilli oil. Similarly, our Korean flavour is our own sweet-and-spicy recipe, not traditional gochujang.

**Bestsellers:**  
Crave's masterpiece burger, Filet mignon burger, Loaded kimchi fries, Oriental chicken tenders  
**Cost:** Burgers are priced from ₹279

**Location:** LIC Metro station B3 entrance, opposite LIC Building



Oriental, Korean, and Nashville are our bestsellers across burgers, fries, and wings," he adds.

With just eight fryers and a griddle in a small kiosk, the team of 11 often struggles to keep up with demand. "Word of mouth has been fantastic for us. But since our burgers are best enjoyed fresh, we don't cater to deliveries," Wajid says.

# Total smash down

**Chennai's burger scene** expands as the dish becomes a popular grab-and-go option. We pick our favourites

Ananya Desikan

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## Le Smash

In 2024, Nasar opened another burger joint, this time with friends. "High Joint has been franchised, but I wanted to work on burgers again. This time, I decided it wouldn't expand into many branches, but remain a quaint, stand-alone spot

serving hearty burgers," he shares. As the name suggests, beef smash burgers are the highlight. Popular options include the chilli cheese smash and PB&J (peanut butter and blueberry jam) smash. However, the Oklahoma smash is the favourite. "We char the onions with the beef on the griddle and smash it. This way, the caramelised onions get embedded in the patty, giving it an incredible flavour. It comes with our signature smash sauce. We use chuck and brisket cuts with a 90:10 meat-to-fat ratio for a tender, flavoursome patty," Nasar adds.

**Bestsellers:**  
Loaded animal style fries, Classic smash burger, Oklahoma smash burger  
**Cost:** Burgers are priced from ₹280

**Location:** 69, Sterling Road, Seetha Nagar, Nungambakkam

## Soul by Dair

Friends Mohammed Irbaz S and A Syed Danish, despite having no culinary background, ventured into the food business in 2023. Inspired by the growth of the burger segment, they launched Soul, a kiosk on Khader Nawaz Khan Road, operating from 5pm to midnight.

Starting small, the duo experimented with flavours

and techniques, fine-tuning their recipes. "The first few months gave us a chance to interact with customers and improve," Danish explains. Soul offers chicken, beef, and vegetarian burgers. Their Nashville Hot Fried Chicken Burger is a bestseller.

"Nashville as a flavour is popular now. Our recipe features our signature hot oil.

It was very spicy initially, but we've perfected it," Irbaz says.



Nashville fried chicken burger, Shrimply the best pops, Korean fried chicken burger, The Steakhouse supreme, Cookies

**Cost:** Burgers are priced from ₹219

**Location:** 9, Oyster Building, Khader Nawaz Khan Road, near Roll Baby Roll

## Bestsellers:

Nashville fried chicken burger, Shrimply the best pops, Korean fried chicken burger, The Steakhouse supreme, Cookies

**Cost:** Burgers are priced from ₹219

**Location:** 9, Oyster Building, Khader Nawaz Khan Road, near Roll Baby Roll

## Louis Burger and Nashville Fried Chicken

Zorawar Kalra introduced Louis Burger and Nashville Fried Chicken as cloud kitchens in 2023 and 2024, respectively. "Through Louis, we learned that Chennai is a great market for burgers. After

researching popular flavours,

we created the menu," shares Zorawar. Louis

Burger offers lamb and beef options, while NFC focusses on chicken.

Louis Burger also introduced Slims

Burger for diet-conscious eaters. "It offers the same taste as the regular Louis Burger but with half the calories," Zorawar adds.

## Bestsellers at Louis Burger:

The Louis Fried chicken burger, Monster cheeseburger, Korean fried chicken burger

**Cost:** Burgers are priced from ₹219

## Bestsellers at NFC:

Nashville style chicken burger, Chilli garlic chicken pop corn, Hot N Spicy fried chicken

**Cost:** Burgers are priced from ₹189



## Catch TM Krishna live

The Art in Prison initiative will launch a photography exhibition by Sumanasa Foundation and Project 39A, NLU Delhi. On February 8, musician TM Krishna will perform in an unplugged live format, on February 15, a musical play titled Sangeetha Paitham will be staged. On March 1, a parai, gaana and light music performance will be held.

The exhibition opens on February 8 at the Madras Literary Society from 11am

## Stories, songs, and connections

"Oru Tea Sapdalam?" is an event for story lovers, where like-minded individuals come together to share stories, poetry, and connect through words. The goal is simple – to come with one story and leave with many more. Hosted by Ezhuthupizhai in collaboration with Backyard, this event offers a space for everyone to enjoy Tamil storytelling, songs and networking.

@Backyard, Adyar.

February 8, 4.30pm to 7.30pm. Tickets, priced at ₹230 at instamojo. For details call 7358458117.

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Cars on display in Puducherry



for a drive," said Damani. The Lal Pari is a famous car known for the journey it made from Gujarat to England.

To be able to pull off a long ride, HCAI founder-secretary VS Kylas Swaminathan had to meticulously plan and predict the unpredictable. "This is very taxing for us because we don't know what to expect. We have two to four restorers who have come along the cars for backup support, and have to be prepared for breakdowns and issues," he said.

The ride ended on Promenade Beach in Puducherry, where all the cars were lined up right in front of the beach, ready for the last show of Heritage Rollers before they all went back home for a much deserved rest.

# License to thrill

A convoy of 40 vintage and classic cars took a morning drive from Chennai to Puducherry, bringing history to life

Shahed Musa Sait, as two motorbikes drove past waving, cheering and complimenting the car with thumbs up and wide grins.

The 138-kilometre journey to Puducherry from Chennai began at 8am, but the real journey started weeks in advance. "We do test drives in the mornings on Sundays invariably. It is a part of our routine. But for a ride like this, we prepare two or three weeks

in advance – revving up the engines, checking oil, greasing the parts, and checking meters," said Ramya Rajesh, a Palakkad-based vintage car restorer.

After journeying for 80-odd kilometres, the convoy stopped to give the cars a break, and I bid goodbye to the Austin 8 and hopped on a 50s MG YT from Gujarat, nicknamed Lal Pari. Daman Thakore, a second generation owner spoke of how

keeping it running felt like preserving a piece of family history. "One memory that everyone who has been in touch with this car has, is that they had to push it at some point when we had taken it out

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15 Guard around fireplace (6)  
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Solution will appear in MetroPlus dated February 13, 2025.

**Solution No. 13627**

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# Queen of dreams

A new foray  
Devayani; (below) a still from *Kaikuttai Rani*.  
S SHIVA RAJ



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**Popular Tamil actress Devayani, who turned director recently, has helmed a short film on children titled *Kaikuttai Rani***

**Srinivasa Ramanujam**  
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**D**evasyani went to get her daughter admitted in college. She ended up enrolling there instead.

"Yes, that's exactly how it happened," laughs Devayani, a well-known face for fans of Tamil cinema and TV serials over three decades in the industry.

"My daughter wanted to join the LV Prasad Academy for a short-term 15-week editing course on the weekends. I had accompanied her to enquire about course details and class structure. However, she could not pursue it – as college worked some of those Saturdays and she had other extra-curricular activities too."

But Devayani was interested. It was at that time that she had written a script and was looking to direct it herself.

"I figured a course would help. I do have a lot of experience in front of the camera, but direction is a different ball game."

So, Devayani – wife of popular director Rajakumaran

and mother to two daughters – would trudge along every day to class to learn the nuances of direction and world cinema. She was the only woman in a class of eight, some of them students and all from varied backgrounds.

The process of learning was beautiful. I would spend my weekends there, learning a lot about direction and cinema. I would even pack lunch and go," she giggles, almost like she was recalling a memorable school picnic.

**The little joys**  
The lessons learnt during that 15-week course and her desire

to see her story seen widely led to *Kaikuttai Rani*, which marks her directorial debut. With a runtime of 20 minutes, *Kaikuttai Rani* explores the emotional journey of a six-year-old girl who faces various challenges because her father works in a distant city.

So, what sowed the seeds of the film in her? "It's from my life experience. My father had gone away to Saudi for a long time. Though my mother was around, I used to miss him a lot."

She believes that it will be relatable to audiences. "In most households these days, children miss quality time with their

parents. It's a feel-good story."

The presence of illustrious names like music composer Ilaiyaraaja and editor Lenin gives an extra boost to *Kaikuttai Rani*. "That was a huge blessing. Ten minutes after Ilaiyaraaja sir watched the footage, he started scoring music for it. Just sitting next to him and watching him compose was very special."

*Kaikuttai Rani*, featuring Niharika VK and Naveen N, bagged the Best Short Film for Children award at the recent 17th Jaipur International Film Festival.

A beaming Devayani says, "I have been in the film industry for 30 years, but none of my films has ever gone to a film festival. That my debut directorial was winning an award gave me great joy. I would love to do more films for children, because other genres are already covered extensively," says Devayani, who adds that the short film is currently doing the rounds on the festival circuit and will be out for public viewing soon.

**The TV serial craze**  
Devayani has starred in several superhit Tamil films like *Surya*

**People still shower love on me for my TV serial, *Kolangal*. They loved Abi, the character I played in it. Though cinema gave me a lot of fame, *Kolangal* took me to everybody's house**

DEVAYANI

Vamsam, Kadhal Kottai, Ninaithen Vandhai, Tenali and Panchathanthiram, to name a few. Some of these movies still play regularly on Tamil TV channels and have an active audience base, despite the influx of multiple OTT players in recent times.

Does she like tuning in to her old superhits? "Oh yes. I never feel, 'Ayo, why did I do this?' Whenever I see my earlier work, I take pride in it," says Devayani, who is still actively taking on roles in Tamil cinema.

Despite her filmstar status, what made Devayani a household name was when she played Abi in her 2003 debut Tamil TV serial *Kolangal*. Aired on Sun TV, *Kolangal* helped her reach a wider set of audiences. "Everyone loved Abi. *Kolangal* did more for me than cinema."

Some of her lines in that serial, including the popular 'I won brother, I won', are in circulation in social media even today. "I'm lucky that I worked in the golden era of television. In those days, people had to assemble in front of the TV set at a particular time to watch a serial they liked, unlike today, where you can watch it anytime."

## Golden touch

**All about recent Malayalam film *Ponman*, directed by Jothish Shankar**



Basil Joseph and Jothish Shankar. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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**W**hen *Ponman* reached theatres last week, it was a dream come true for Jothish Shankar. The ace art director is elated that his directorial debut is being talked about.

"I entered the industry to become a director. The plan was to assist a filmmaker. But I got the opportunity to assist an art director [in *Thanthonni*] and I took it up," says Jothish. It was the right decision since he went on to work in some of the pathbreaking movies in the Malayalam industry and bagged two State awards – in 2019 for *Kumbalangi Nights* and *Android Kunjappan Version 5.25* and in 2022 for *Nna Thaan Case Kodu*.

His recent release, *Ponman*, is a critique on dowry and addresses it through a practice in some

parts of Kerala, in which agents arrange for gold jewellery on the condition that whatever amount the bride's family receives as gifts during the wedding should go towards the cost of the gold.

In *Ponman*, the bride is Stephy (Lijomol Jose) whose marriage is fixed with Mariyano (Sajin Gopu) and the dowry fixed is 25 sovereigns of gold. PP Ajesh (Basil Joseph) is the agent who arranges the jewellery (therefore the title *Ponman*, which means the guy who deals with pon or gold). "The film is based on an incident that happened with a friend when his sister got married," he says, adding, "The message the team wants to give against dowry is loud and clear. We are speaking for scores of women and their families, who go through a lot to raise money as dowry. I am happy that people from all walks of life have connected with the subject."



### The name is STR

Silambarasan aka STR is in the limelight again. In an announcement, the actor recently revealed that he will be producing his 50th film under his own banner, Atman Cine Arts. "I believe this film will reach great heights," said STR in a press statement about the film, to be directed by Desingh Periyasamy. Apart from this, he has an exciting line-up for the coming years. He stars in Mani Ratnam's *Thug Life*, featuring Kamal Haasan, apart from teaming up with *Parking* director Ramkumar Balakrishnan for a project. The actor has also signed up a fantasy-themed film with director Ashwath Marimuthu.



# Let there be light

**Cinematographer-filmmaker Ravi Varman, recently inducted into the ASC, hopes his story will inspire younger generations to go after their dreams**

**The right shot**  
Ravi Varman. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

ace cinematographer-filmmaker Ravi Varman orchestrating his team of cameramen with zen-like focus.

Fame sits lightly on his frame. Even giving interviews, he believes, is pointless in a world so consumed by pride.

"Because what do I talk about? There's so much negativity

around us, and people have become quite self-oriented. So one doesn't feel like talking much anymore."

#### A huge honour

This week, however, Ravi must endure the limelight shining bright on him. Just days ago, the American Society of Cinematographers (ASC), the world's leading cinematographers' organisation housing the greatest of greats in the field, announced Ravi's induction as a member.

You find a sense of validation when he explains how an induction into the ASC happens entirely on the merit of one's body of work. "ASC is an exclusive organisation to which one cannot just apply and join; they need to invite you after seeing your work."

Meeting fellow members at the organisation changed something in Ravi. "It was a pleasant surprise to know that some of them were already familiar with my work. Some even asked, 'Were you the one who did *Barfi!*?' Did you do *Ram-Leela*? You shot *Tamasha* also? So it was you behind all of these images?' That's when I thought I had to be more humane, and help others in whatever capacity I could."

An induction into ASC opens international avenues, but Ravi, once again, asserts that he does not want to make this about himself.

"I want this to inspire the younger generation of people. They should know that, no matter where you come from, you can

achieve your dreams through dedication and passion for the craft."

#### Light and beyond

In his formative years, Ravi was hugely inspired by the works of renowned painters like Rembrandt and Pablo Picasso. Among contemporary artists, unfortunately, nobody's work has come close to what he felt for such masterpieces, says Ravi. Even amongst other filmmakers and cinematographers – while he is happy that most of them are producing noteworthy work – he finds a displeasing sense of monotony.

"Most films have the same voice; they are all of the same genre. Earlier, we had a Balachander, a Bali Mahendra, a Bharathiraja, a Mahendran, an SP Muthuraman, or a T Rajendar. There were commercial, classical, contemporary, and old-world films. However, now, if a commercial film works, we get 15-20 films in that same pattern."

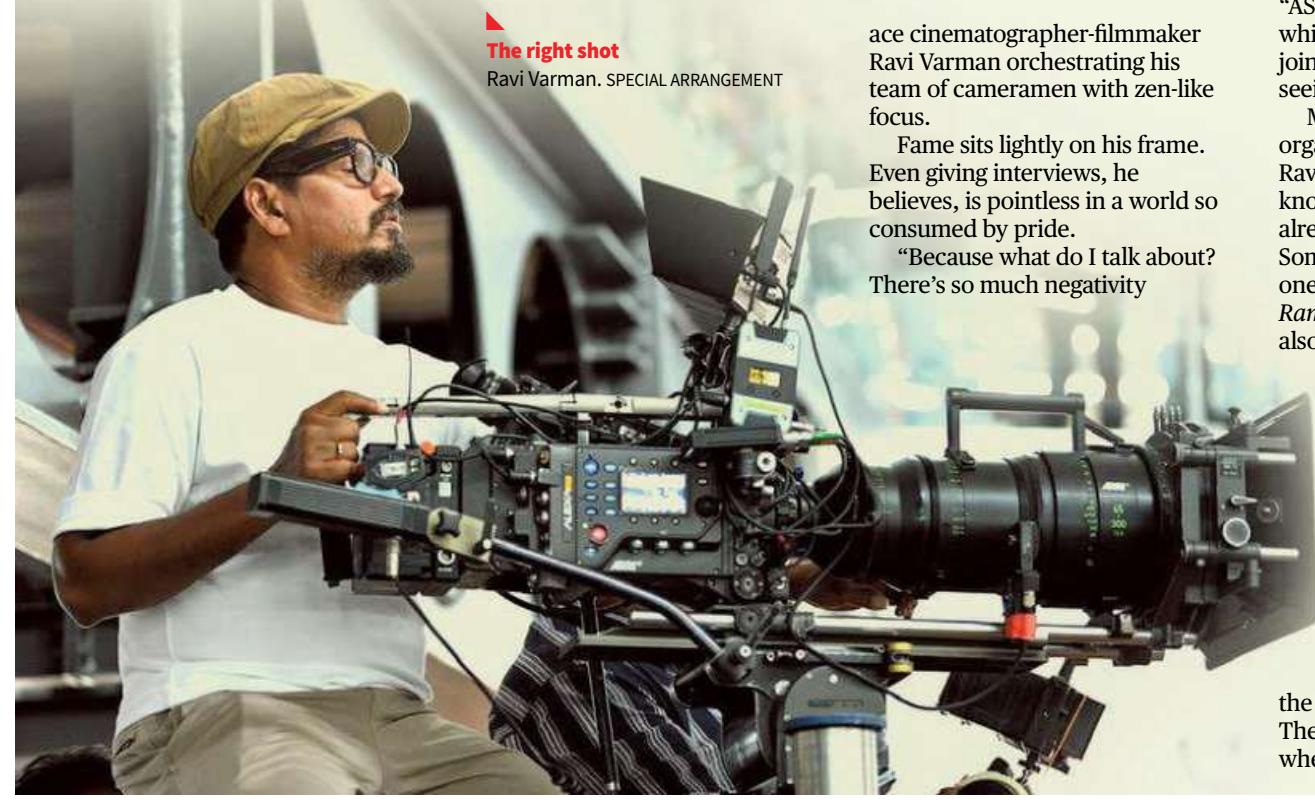
Over the last few years, film discourses have noted the diminishing attention spans among post-pandemic audiences as a concerning sign. Films sometimes get re-engineered to cater to this attention-deficiency. A cinematographer must be worried

as well, right? After all, he sculpts a frame for the audience to pause and relish the beauty of it. Ravi seems unfazed. "If you see the list of films contending for the Oscars, most aren't those fast-paced films. After every technology boom, drastic changes would occur, but things eventually stabilise. Once monotony sets in, audiences would start enjoying the process. Now we have OTT; audiences can revisit a film." He takes the case of a fan who told him how he was mesmerised by 2017's *Kaatru Veliyidai*, not on the first watch, but on the fifth watch. "Good work will get its due somehow."

It's typical to analyse your career as a stepping ladder to the next level. Not Ravi Varman. "I just want to be happy. I don't focus too much on fulfilling my desires because desires can make you greedy. After you die, people will forget you in five or six years. Why fight for all such materialistic things?"

For now, he seems to be at peace, shooting films and finding enough time to indulge in his many other interests. "I write lyrics, and I record songs for a music director friend. I have started reading the books I bought long ago; I am currently reading UV Swaminatha Iyer's *Kamba Ramayanam*."

Would he attempt film direction again? He had made 2010's *Moscowin Kavery*, starring Rahul Ravindran and Samantha Ruth Prabhu. "Of course, I have lost once, isn't it? I like failures because when we fail, we start focussing on how to better it the next time." Again, he does not say when this project will materialise. "I never plan anything in life. I like to be in the present."



**Ravi Varman is currently working with director Vignesh Shivan on Love Insurance Kompany, featuring Pradeep Ranganathan and Krithi Shetty**